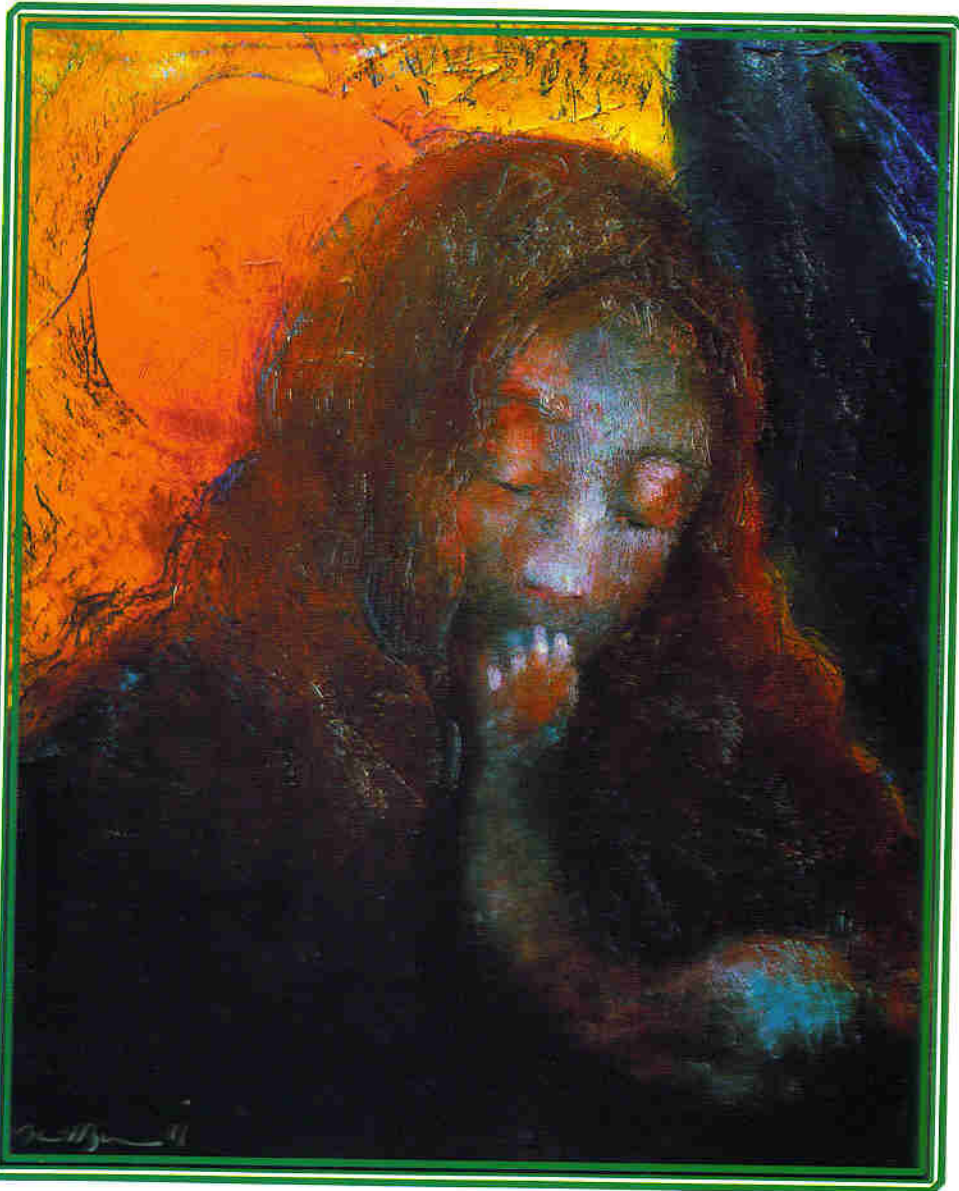


THE WAY

of ST. FRANCIS



The Crooked Lines of Christmas

By Larry Webber, OFM Cap.

“God works in strange ways!” How many times in my life have I said that as I reflect on coincidences that appear almost as grace—or a type of miracle. God seems to work that way often in my life. It’s one of the ways He reminds me that He’s around.

There is another dictum about God that we seem to reaffirm over and over in our lives: “God writes straight with crooked lines.” I think one could well describe the Christmas mystery in those terms. No one in the Jewish nation, I think it is safe to say, was expecting the Messiah to be born in a stable, in poverty, of two humble and simple folk from Nazareth—one a virgin and the other a poor carpenter who, it turns out, is not the father after all. That certainly sounds like the way God usually works in my life! You need some time and space to see His handwriting in it all.

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Christmas, these days, seems to be surrounded with more expectations and customs than most of us can keep up with: Christmas cards, gifts, decorations, baking and cooking, where and with whom you spend Christmas Eve and then Christmas Day.... In the midst of it all, not a few of us hit moments of exasperation. There can often be moments of impatience and frustration when expectations, customs—and reality—clash. But even in the midst of those unpleasant moments and experiences, (I would even dare to say *especially* in the midst of those moments) God who is “one like us,” “Emanuel,” is revealed.

In Spanish there is another saying: “No hay mal que por bien no venga.” (“There is nothing so bad that some good cannot

come out of it.”) An experience I had one Christmas Eve a few years ago is a perfect example of that—and has been a source of nourishment for my Christmas reflections ever since.

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I arrived in the Novitiate here in Honduras in June of that year, after finishing my Doctoral work. I had been with the group of nineteen

novices for only one week in February when, to my surprise, my superiors named me to head up the Novitiate team responsible for their Capuchin formation. They were a lively group, and by June, when I returned, they had already become accustomed to a few things that I did not see as particularly helpful for their Capuchin formation. One of them was in the area of expectations around food. They seemed quite demanding to me—and expected meat on the table almost every day—and sometimes twice a day. I quickly questioned that along with some other culinary customs which, in dialogue with the other members of the formation team who had been accompanying them, led to changes, and quickly became one of the sources of tension in the year.

The issue for me was the fact that we are literally surrounded by families for whom the question is not if they will have *meat* or not—but if they will have *food* or not. For not a few of these families, meat is a delicacy they may have once a month, if that often. I quickly became familiar with the families living near us because, daily, they were at our door asking for leftovers. I came to know more than one family where the parents gave up eating one or more meals in the day so that their children would have something to eat. A good number of the nineteen novices came from families who lived in similar circumstances.

I did not want to form young religious who saw our life as nothing more than the gateway to privilege and abundance, desensitizing themselves to the Gospel imperative to find Christ in the poor, the hungry, the naked, the homeless and all those most in need.

And so we spent those first months tussling between their expectations and ours as a formation team—what they had become accustomed to and what we wanted to accustom them to. And we kept struggling with it right up to Christmas.

Saint Francis was abstemious in his eating habits, but for Christmas he threw all care to the wind. Celebrating the Incarnation, the mystery of God's being one like us, was perhaps his favorite feast. On that day, he said to the brothers, there should be abundant feasting, and the walls should be painted with meat (figuratively speaking of course.) Well, our dear novices decided to paint the walls with three coats.

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It was Christmas, and I wanted them to celebrate it happily—so I didn't get too involved in the kitchen details. I gave them a free hand in planning the menu and the celebration. I did, however, hope and expect that the prayerful moments of Vespers and Eucharist on Christmas Eve would receive priority. Once again, however, my expectations and theirs clashed.

Two of the cooks were too busy with the meal preparations to make it to Vespers.

I was disgusted and frustrated, and while I didn't say that on leaving Vespers, it was easily noted in my silence and seriousness. I wasn't talking much, nor animating the celebration with any "Merry Christmas's." We celebrated Christmas Eve Mass at ten o'clock in the evening. It was to be followed by the big Christmas meal. It is traditional here to eat the big meal at Midnight.

There were literally three types of meat, and so much abundance of food that it didn't all fit on the table. My anger grew. I hardly put anything on my plate to eat, and soon I realized that almost no one else did either. I think the late hour, and the fact that between

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Vespers and Mass, finger food was put out, had reduced people's appetites. But my silence and obvious displeasure was also, I felt,

putting cold water on the feast. Novices get nervous when the Novice Master isn't pleased.

Seeing all the food, some of it untouched, I started to worry about where they were going to keep it so it wouldn't spoil. There wouldn't have been enough room in the refrigerator. Suddenly, like the light from the Angels who announced the good news to the Shepherds, I was illuminated. The idea gave rise to a joyful hope in me. With as much fraternal love and charity as I could muster, I went into the kitchen and found the two main cooks. I thanked them for all their work, but noted to them that I was concerned about all the food that was left over. What would they think about going around to the poorest families around us and sharing it with them? It was now almost one o'clock in the morning, but I suspected that many of the families would still be up celebrating Christmas in one way or another. They thought it was a good idea, and were probably a bit relieved because they were feeling a bit unsettled about all the food that was left over. I shared the idea with the rest of the brothers at the table, and we all agreed it was the best thing to do.

My disgust changed to joy, and even the cooks were getting animated. I quickly got out the pick-up, and we put the food in. I started at the house of a young man whom I've known since he was about twelve years old. He has had a hard life, and now has two young children. He smelled the food in the kitchen that afternoon, and joked with me about sending him some of it. I found him awake, and we gave him a whole baked chicken with all the trimmings. He helped me find the families around him that would most appreciate the food.

We started knocking on doors, and in less than fifteen minutes, had shared almost everything. My young friend asked us to save some food for an elderly man and the family taking care of him,

We had to drive the pickup further into the neighborhood, to a point where we could drive no farther, and had to carry the food from there. We went down to the darkened house, and knocked on the door. My friend called to the family, and suddenly the lady of the house, Helen, opened the door. She saw the food and was overwhelmed. She found every pot and dish that she could, and we left her and her family with everything we still had—which was quite a bit. I entered the dirt-floor house with cardboard wall dividers to visit the elderly man. Gilberto is about seventy-eight and blind. He helped raise Helen, but in his later years had nowhere to go. Helen took him in to live with her and her six children. He received me with graciousness and dignity, as he pulled his ear away from the little transistor radio on which he was listening to a Christmas Mass. We prayed with him, and he thanked us for the visit.

We left that family and the others we had visited, and returned to the Novitiate excitedly talking about how providential it was to have made so much food, and how great it was to be able to share it with those families who really had nothing with which to celebrate the feast. For me, it redeemed the whole feast. God indeed had worked in a strange and mysterious way—even through the imprudence of the cooks and my displeasure.

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But the mysterious ways of God didn't stop there. We had been His instruments in ways we never imagined.

Three months later, in April, Helen came to the Novitiate to ask us a favor. She had found work, but didn't feel she could leave Gilberto all day with her young children still at home, the oldest of whom is twelve. She asked me if I could talk with the Sisters who run a type of nursing home for the sick and the elderly here in town. I spoke with the Sisters, and we agreed to bring Gilberto over on a Sunday afternoon to see if he liked the environment and would want to stay.

We put Gilberto in the car, along with Helen, and on the short ride over to the nursing home they reminded us of their Christmas Eve feast. It turned out that there had been no food in the house for any kind of feast, and nothing special to give the children to celebrate Christmas. So Gilberto and Helen decided to put the children to bed early. "Tomorrow morning when you get up" she said to them "we're going to have a feast—all kinds of food." "Where will it come from?" Fabian, the youngest one, asked. "The child God will bring it while you're asleep," Gilberto had responded to him. Here in Honduras, it is customary to call "baby Jesus" the "child God." In reality, both Helen and Gilberto had gone to bed not knowing where they would find food for the next day.

Our visit to them that Christmas night had been so quick, and their astonishment so great, that we never realized that we were there as Angels sent by the "child God" to do his bidding. The next morning, the children had woken up and discovered more food in their kitchen than they had ever seen. Gilberto said to Fabian "You see what I said, the child God came and left us a feast last night."

There are cultures where "Santa Claus" is a myth which parents nourish in their children until they can't hide it from them anymore. That Christmas, here in Honduras, there was a child named Fabian who came to believe in the "child God," tasting and seeing that His loving providence is no myth.

And there was a fraternity of Capuchin Novices and their formators who, in astonishment before his "mysterious ways," came to believe in Him even more.



Larry Webber is an ordained friar of the Capuchin Franciscans, and has worked for the last twenty-five years in a variety of services in the six countries of Central America. For the last year and a half he has been helping to set up the new Parish of San Padre Pio on the outskirts of Panama City, Panama. You can contact him through **The Way**.