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ETP: The Magazine

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Thomas Griffin is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project. He is the chair of the religion department at a Catholic high school on Long Island where he lives with his wife and son.



THE MISSION *AND* A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

The Mission:

Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine exists to bring the reality and power of the empty tomb to as many people as possible. We are convinced that if practicing Catholics, and fallen away Catholics alike, encounter Jesus as a real living person their lives will be radically changed.

We are a Catholic magazine that desires to bring relevant cultural and spiritual topics to our readers in an honest and fresh manner. We dive into topics that truly matter to people, themes that are brought up in people's homes as well as in church circles. We desire to bring uniformity in message and an increase in inspiration to Catholics across Long Island.

Along with providing the most dynamic content we are committed to producing a product that is beautifully captivating to the eye. To do so we will always rely on the best Catholic designers (StartUpCatholic) so that the content can be amplified by the aesthetics of the magazine.

In order to reach as many people as possible with the critically important message of Christ we rely on donors in order to grow the mission and impact of our magazine. This will allow us to remain free and ensure that anyone who desires to meet Jesus today will have that opportunity. If you feel called to support us, please reach out to me via email: EmptyTombProject@gmail.com and join us in the mission!

Editor's Note:

Our December issue is filled with ways to prepare for and celebrate Christmas. The birth of God among us should always amaze us and show us that God enters into the life of ordinary people every single day.

Christmas Blessings from the entire Empty Tomb Team!

Thomas Griffin is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine.

MAJOR HEADLINE:

It's a Wonderful (*And True*) Life

By Thomas Griffin

So many watch the 1946 classic *It's a Wonderful Life* each year during the Christmas season. For my family's first year with our son Benedict we will start the tradition of watching it on Christmas Day. What is it about this movie which remains timeless even though it still appears in black and white and has old-fashioned mannerisms and phrases sewn throughout? Most simply we know the theme makes contact with something real about humanity, but a closer investigation shows that it was and is both true and very real.

George Bailey's character (played by the famous Jimmy Stewart) has a failed suicide attempt which maps out the trajectory for the entire film which journeys through despair, tears, triumphs, and arrives at the proper perspective found in the simplicity of love in life. It is often the transition between the authentic desperation of cliff-hanging moments to true solutions and honest transformation which set the stage for the success or failure for any film. The key to the success of Bailey's character is owed, in large part, to Stewart's time in World War II serving in the Army Air Corps.

He was home for only a short time before starring in the film and this was Jimmy's first acting job since before the war. The war impacted all the men who served, but especially the younger generations. We know now that the quantity in loss of life and the first hand accounts of the evil which war brings about leave scars and cast doubts in the minds of the strongest men and women. For Stewart this applied as well.

There are several moments in the film which stand as defining scenes in the roadmap of the script. A keen observer and repeat viewer can pick up the fact that these moments all entail some form of intense frustration or doubt about the goodness of George (his self-esteem), the meaning of life, or the virtue found in the world. There are no greater characteristics in the human psyche which must be reflected on than these three arenas: self-worth, the reason for our existence and the goodness of humanity.

The term "unprecedented" has been attached to 2020 and 2021 in an inescapable manner because of the coronavirus. The fact of the matter is that there has never been a time in human history where the entire globe of nearly seven billion people have all been contemplating possible illness and death simultaneously. The last few years have been very tough. With quarantines, job-loss, lack of human contact, and experiencing the deaths of loved ones it is easy to question the reason for life; with the way people have treated each other in our streets it is easy to question whether human dignity is still a universal; with the manner in which politics is played out it is easy to question whether humanity's goodness is in a nose-dive.



People, in general, can feel as if there is not much logic or good going around these days. All of these contemporary thoughts and fears can be summarized by George Bailey's exclamation: "I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope." Every person who is honest with themselves will recall that they once said something similar at a time when they were massively struggling.

The beauty of the masterpiece that has become *It's a Wonderful Life* is that it does not only tell a powerful story, but that the main actor was not really acting. Stewart really did doubt God and whether life was worth living after such a horrendous war. Humanity connects to this timeless film because it confronts the most human questions with the light and truth of hope.

Christmas is the time to come to grips with the fact that there is much wrong in this world and that life has its major and profound challenges. However, the answer is in the one born in a stable - the one who shouts out to the world that there is good in the world worth fighting for and that the meaning of life is found in relationship with God and those who surround us, especially during this time of year.

So, watch the wonderful true life of George Bailey and be engaged in the common struggles of humanity while always counting on the fact that God is listening. Hard times befall all of us, but the true meaning of life is found in how we view our troubling times.

Thomas Griffin is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine.

Catholic Commentary: The Need for the Holy Family

By Theresa Marino

For Catholics, Advent is the time to meditate on Jesus, Mary and Joseph as a family - The Holy Family - since they jointly are the ones who put Christmas on the map for the world. But what does it mean to be holy, and what does it mean to be a family? The first word is not in the lexicon of the ordinary 21st Century person. The second word would be defined differently by anyone you might ask. Simply put, to be holy means to be like God, which is also to say; set apart from the world. And family is the community God chooses for us in which to practice holiness.

As an educator, I attend conferences and professional workshops often. Recently I participated in one which focused on Catholic Anthropology, with topics spanning from creation and human dignity, to relationships and families. Since it was a Catholic conference, the Holy Family was referenced many times. Towards the end of the event the floor was opened to participants for comments and questions. One school principal raised his hand to offer a comment that while he loved the Holy Family, perhaps it was not helpful or realistic any longer to hold them as the model for our students since the way they experience family is so very different from the father/mother/child model which existed in ancient times. His suggestion was to adjust the approach by which we deliver the message of holiness in families as Catholics, since modern students largely don't have families which look like the Holy Family anymore.

Any person with their eyes open to the state of modernity would grant this man his first point. The Holy Family model is certainly no longer the norm that our children are seeing lived out by adults in our culture. It is quite counter-cultural, in fact, to find a joyful union between one man and one woman whose first priority is serving God, who remain open to bringing children into the world even in unplanned circumstances, who humbly carry out their daily duties without complaint, and who remain faithful to their marital vows until death parts them.

To his second point about modifying the model in order to meet the students where they are at, I remain unconvinced. The question is; can we make the case in truth that the "new norm" which we have provided our children in recent years better serves their personhood? More broadly, is the "new norm" serving humanity as a whole? If we are being intellectually honest, the answer would have to be a clear and resounding "No." There has been an increase in suicide, depression, divorce, poverty, abortion, substance abuse, unemployment... since the de-emphasis on traditional nuclear homes came in vogue. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts research to measure just such things and the 2022 reports back this up.

By all measures, life is hard and uncertain. Family dynamics do not fit neatly into a sparkly box with a ribbon. Perhaps this fact is the biggest takeaway from that Principal's comment at my recent conference. And perhaps it is also the best reason to uphold the Holy Family in modernity as the model for how to come together in the face of life's unavoidable plot-twists. The life of the Holy Family was anything but mundane, as they endured no less than the following tragedies in their short span together on earth...



Unplanned crisis pregnancy. Government tyranny and political oppression. Fleeing from homeland as refugees with a newborn in tow. Poverty and destitution. Early death of a father. Single mothering. Multiple murder attempts on innocent man's life during professional career. Political corruption and unjust arrest. Betrayal and abandonment by close friends. Unfair trial and gruesome torture despite innocence. Public murder of an innocent man before the eyes of his own mother (and the whole rest of the city).

This is all not to mention how hard life was in ancient times for ordinary people to simply survive before the advent of basic technologies. Many of us will not experience one of these trials in modern times, let alone all of them. How presumptuous of us to say that we cannot relate to the lives of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, because their lives were too clean cut! If we cannot relate to them for any reason, it is because they have endured more between the three of them than we could think, dream or imagine. This is not a metaphor or fable to teach us a lesson about families. This is a historical account of a real family, which happened in a real time and place.

Emmanuel means "God with us." This Advent season, the Holy Family reminds us that by all measures, life is perilous. It is complicated. It is met with unexpected challenges. It is met with every test to our will and values. It is met with suffering and unjust persecution. It is met with upsets to our personal desires and plans. But it is also met with God's real and true presence. It is met with His own light in the darkest nights seasons of what we face. It is met with Hallelujahs from angels and priceless gifts from strangers. It is met with the gentle touch of mothers, the protection of fathers, the innocence of children. It is met with joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries. And our Emmanuel overwhelms all the other factors of our lives, when only we humble ourselves to see what He can offer us. It is precisely the Holy Family who show us how best this is done.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Pray for Us!

Theresa Marino is a New York native who has served the Catholic Church throughout her twenties in various ministry capacities. Currently a middle school Religion Teacher, she has also worked in high school campus ministry, music ministry, mission work and parish settings.

Elf: A Story of Our Need for the Father

by Thomas Griffin

David Breenbaum was the screenwriter for the now Christmas classic, *Elf*, starring Will Ferrell as an elf named Buddy. Recently, a Netflix documentary “The Christmas Movies That Made Us” was released which captured amazing footage and backstories concerning the production of the film. Similar to so many mainstream cinematic masterpieces, *Elf* is really a story about our desire for God and his desire for us. The movie is completely concerned about a man’s search for his father. The Christian undertones and themes are indisputable.

We know this movie for its hilarious scenes with Ferrell and James Caan (playing Walter, the father of Buddy) along with its sentimental scenes regarding family and the complexities of life. The mixture and dance between comedy and seriousness makes it truly unique. This is truly a mission for Buddy to find his dad and the gap in his life without him.

Breenbaum actually lost his father at a young age and always struggled with the pain of that loss. He notes, “My father passed away when I was younger. So the emotional drive of the movie is really searching for the father, and I knew telling the story that I could connect to it on that level. I knew that's the journey I wanted Buddy to go on.” Ultimately, that is the voyage we are all moving towards.

The Christmas season is truly about the entrance of God in time and space who is born as a child. God is three in one and God the Father sends God the Son into the world on a rescue mission for our souls. We all have gone astray, like a sheep without a shepherd or children without a father. Christmas commemorates the celebration of our reunion with and renewal of our relationship with God the Father who stops at nothing to find us. The missing link in so many people’s lives is their relationship with God the Father which is personified in their relationship with their own dad.

So many families live on with the broken relationship of their father and mother or the difficulties that arise in the relationship’s between father’s and their children when a father and mother remain married. Most dad’s work tremendously long hours and become physically, emotionally, and spiritually absent from their children in their desire to provide for their families. During the holiday season, this is amplified because the family is made to be together, especially for this time of year.

Elf serves as a challenge and a reminder for both parents and children to focus on what is most important in life: relationship with each other and with God. For better or worse, the relationship we have with our parents and especially our father’s impact us in profound ways that are often overlooked. Human fatherhood is always imperfect and flawed, but if we have neglected our relationship with God the Father, we will always be unsatisfied and experience a sense of loss. Our heavenly Father wants to wrap us up in his love.

While *Elf* the movie has served as a cornerstone tradition for many families because of its wit and humor, this year might be the best time to focus on the profound message that lies beneath the surface of the laughter. As individuals and as a country we depend on God, and when we run from Him we are running from our own identity. The search for pleasure or wealth or power is really our hearts desire for the divine. Christmas is the time to recognize this and channel our needs correctly.

For David Breenbaum, the final scene of the movie, which has Buddy and Walter embracing each other, summarized the entire goal of the film. He wanted to portray the search for the Father and the final coming to his side. However, he also desired to show that simply because we are with our human father’s or occasionally pray to God the Father does not mean that our relationship with them is where it is meant to be.

Elf is a call to go deeper in our relationship’s. Let us accept the invitation and let us move towards a more profound encounter with our dad’s and with God this Christmas, and every day of our lives.

Thomas Griffin is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine.

The Grandeur in the Hay

By David G. Bonagura, Jr.

Imagine standing before God in His infinite splendor, majesty, and power. We would cower in fear, hide our faces from the awesome sight, beg for mercy. God is infinite, and infinitely other than what we are. On our own power we could not approach Him. Babies, by contrast, are the most approachable, most inviting creatures on earth. We instinctively smile when we see them, and often we draw closer to gaze at their tiny faces without thinking.

At Christmas we celebrate God deigning to bridge the infinite abyss, to draw us to Himself through the incarnation of the Son. We approach the manger in Bethlehem with curiosity, with eagerness, with wonder. There is a baby in there to see. Yet He is a child like no other. We can only approach because the child has concealed His grandeur by taking on human flesh. Unveiled, His almighty power would melt us into dust. Veiled, we can sing with confidence, “O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.”

But how do we know that this child is the child, the one, the only savior of the world?

From the start, there were revelations about Him at His birth: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!’” (Luke 2:13-14). Shepherds, quickened by this awesome sight, hurried to the manger and found the child lying in the hay between Mary and Joseph. They saw what we see when we see any other infant.

But they believed what had been revealed, even though they could not see it plainly: this child is the Son of God, the one foretold, the one without whom life lacks the fullness of purpose and love.

The shepherds were so overcome with joy and so convinced of the child’s divinity that they could not keep the good news to themselves. “[W]hen they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them” (Luke 2:17-18).

Year after year, the Christ child calls us through intermediaries as He called the shepherds to Himself two millennia ago. Like the shepherds, we must trust the signs that have been reported to us by eyewitnesses—the angels singing, the miracles Christ later performed, His unprecedented

teachings, His resurrection from the dead. These are not the works of an ordinary man. They are the grandeur of God emanating from the Son who became man.

This Christmas let us take time for some quiet moments before the Christ child lying in the creche. Let us allow ourselves to be as amazed as the shepherds were at the wondrous sign in front of us: that infinity has dwindled to infancy, that infinite power has become powerless, that infinite love beckons us to be loved. The whole possibility of the incarnation occurring in this manner defies all human notions. That fact alone ought to bring us to our knees in belief.

In this wonder let us thank God for allowing us to approach Him, touch Him, see Him, love Him. The incarnation takes away our timidity—God wants us to draw near so we can not only know His love but feel it. In this love we have peace of soul because God has called each one of us to into communion with Him. Together with Zechariah we are able to pray, “Through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79).

The task of the shepherds is our own: to believe in the Christ child and to spread the news of His birth to others. If we allow the Christ child to kindle our joy, then, as we extend our Christmas greetings to others, they, like the shepherds’ friends, can wonder at the good news we tell them.

David G. Bonagura, Jr. is the author of *Steadfast in Faith and Staying with the Catholic Church*.



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2. Reflect on the Manger.
3. We Need the Holy Family.
4. Elf Shows Our Need for the Father.



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