

Home for the Holidays

The four of us walked down Main Street, enjoying the Christmas hustle and bustle. It was a strange thing, being together. We hadn't really seen each other much since our high school graduation more than three years ago, but we were all home from college for the holidays and Julia said we should walk Main Street and see the decorations together. We were having a good time, but the ice had definitely not broken. You go away to college and you change, and your friends aren't sure who you are anymore; heck, maybe you aren't sure.

Even if none of us had changed, I wonder if we could have had the same experience on Main Street. Julia is the sweetest person you could ever meet, but she's agnostic, not sure about God and religion, and I doubt she saw nativity scenes and Christmas lights the same way I did as a Roman Catholic.

"Look at that guy in a Santa suit," Wesley interrupted my musing, his pale blue eyes narrowed under blond bangs. "What a crock!"

At least Julia could enjoy Christmas in an open, care-free way. Wesley comes from a very serious Christian family that actually left their previous church because they didn't believe celebrating Christmas is biblical. Wesley likes a winter party as much as the next guy, but he's constantly torn between indignation at the whole idea of a Christian takeover of pagan customs on the one hand and scorn on the other hand for the secular "Happy Holidays" phenomenon that takes the Christ out of Christmas. At any rate, a Salvation Army guy wearing a Santa suit offered a clear outlet for frustration.

"Is that a crock or is that more of a pot?" Steven asked, feigning innocence as he contemplated Santa's collection basket. He furrowed his bushy black eyebrows. "I've always wondered about the difference." Steven, always the comedian. He puzzled me even more than the others. Steven is a Roman Catholic too, or least he was before college, or at least he used to go to Mass on Sundays. But it didn't seem to mean the same thing for him as for me, and his constant stream of jokes was a kind of mask that kept anyone from seeing what he really thought. "But 'Santa' means 'saint,'" Steven continued in a mock-professorial voice, "and thou shalt not speak evil of saints."

"Aaaa, you don't know the first thing about Christmas, you papist," Wesley said, a sharp edge beneath his joking tone. "Where was Christ born?"

"Um, Philadelphia?" Steven pondered, scratching his chin dramatically.

"Wrong, try again."

"Pittsburgh!" Steven was playing dense.

"No, you doofus," Wesley reprimanded him, wagging a finger, "it was Bethlehem!"

"Well, I *knew* it was *somewhere* in Pennsylvania," Steven defended himself.

"Bethlehem, right: Isn't that where Mary and Joseph had to come back to their census?"

Julia rolled her eyes, and I began to think the evening would turn out badly. Maybe the ice was just too thick for us to recover whatever it was that had brought us together years ago.

"Yes it is," Wesley replied, ignoring the pun for the chance to show off some biblical knowledge. "A decree had gone out that all the world should be taxed—"

"Damn democrats," Steven muttered.

“Hey, this is fun!” Julia interrupted, trying to save the conversation, and maybe trying to make things feel fun by saying they were. She threw up her petite hands in a gesture of amazement: “It’s crazy we haven’t gotten together before. You guys wanna go see the riverfront sometime? We could go Christmas Eve.”

Wesley lit up: “Yeah, that would be great!” I’m guessing Christmas Eve with his folks is kind of dismal; they’re probably careful *not* to have fun that night.

“Sure,” Steven chimed in, “I’ll be Adam, and I’ll say to my wife, ‘It’s Christmas, Eve!’”

“Great!” Julia smiled, sweetly ignoring the joke as she turned to me. “How about you?”

“Oh, it sounds like a lot of fun,” I said apologetically, “but I always go to the Christmas Eve vigil Mass with my family.” Wesley snorted and looked away while Steven feigned catastrophic disappointment. “Hey,” I added, feeling like I might chicken out on some kind of witness here, “it’s important to worship together.”

Julia was oil on the waters, like always. “That’s beautiful, how you all go together,” she answered, smiling. Then she frowned. *Shoot*, I thought: I forgot about her family situation—not a happy thing. But her frown was a thoughtful one: “You know, that’s something I’ve always wondered about: Isn’t worship something spiritual, something interior? I mean, I would say I’m a spiritual person, but it’s not something I wear on the outside. Why is Catholic worship an outward, visible thing?”

“I know what you mean,” I said, hoping I really did. **“SHORT ANSWER 1.”**

Julia squinted, trying to understand. “That’s pretty deep stuff,” she said, “but I didn’t really follow what you said about the ‘mystical body of Christ.’ What do you mean by ‘mystical’?”

I dug back in memory to my Theology 401 class, trying to buy time by pretending to window shop. “It’s a way of contrasting the Church with other kinds of bodies. **SHORT ANSWER 2.**”

“That’s an amazing idea!” Julia seemed really into this, in whatever meditative, zen-like way she understood what I had said. “So what does it take to be a ‘member’ of this ‘body’? I mean, what does it take to be one-hundred percent, all the way ‘in’?”

Wesley was listening intently. Even if he’s combative about it, he really is serious about his faith, and my Roman Catholic answers were probably not like anything he had heard at home. Hoping he wasn’t fuming, I took a deep breath and said, **“SHORT ANSWER 3.”**

By this point, Wesley was oblivious to the hustle and bustle around us, totally focused on the conversation. “When you say, ‘government,’ you mean things like the pope and the bishops and stuff, right?” he asked, pronouncing the word “pope” almost as though it were in scare quotes. “How does that system work? How does the pope relate to the bishops?”

Steven stepped in to take some of the pressure off me. “Well, it’s the same way that a bishop relates to his priests,” he said, sounding serious for once. “It’s kind of like a CEO and his employees.”

“Sort of,” I said, grateful to Steven for sharing the hot seat with me but reluctant to leave Wesley with the wrong idea. “The way the pope relates to bishops is actually pretty different from the way a bishop relates to his priests. **SHORT ANSWER 4.**”

By now I had realized that Julia had started asking me questions just to get us all talking together, and she had happily backed out when Wesley and Steven got going. But now she was enjoying herself, and she gently teased me, “Wow, the way you describe priests and bishops it sounds like this ‘sacrament of holy orders’ turns them into supermen. What all powers does this ‘sacrament’ give them?”

Steven struck a liturgical pose with his hands extended over the bread in a bakery window and intoned, mock-seriously, “Hocus pocus filiokus!”

Julia had been teasing, but Steven’s parody took things so far it felt vaguely disrespectful, especially since Steven is—was—sort of—Catholic. As awkward as it felt, I decided to take Julia’s question seriously. “Well, holy orders does give bishops and priests some pretty awesome powers. **SHORT ANSWER 5.**”

Wesley was definitely taking the question seriously. “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” he said, emphasizing how certain he felt by speaking as calmly and matter-of-factly as possible. “The First Letter of Peter, chapter two, verse ten says ‘But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation.’ According to Scripture, *all* Christians are priests, not just a few supermen.”

I was not about to get into a Bible quotation battle with Wesley. That guy knows his Bible backward and forward, and he can usually cite it verbatim. But I could at least explain what Catholics believe, so I did my best while not sounding confrontational about it. “You’re right,” I said, “every Christian is baptized, and baptism also gives us some pretty amazing powers. **SHORT ANSWER 6.**”

Wesley still looked smugly doubtful, but he was definitely listening. “Sure, but it’s like Steven was doing: you think that special ‘priests’ can zappo ordinary bread into the body of Christ. You’ve gotta admit that’s a bunch of medieval nonsense, right? Nobody thought that until the pope made it up so everyone would think his priests were super-important.”

Walking through John 6 and 1Corinthians 10 would have been good, but I didn’t want to drag Julia and Steven through it all, and anyway I wasn’t sure I could remember the exact phrasing of the texts. So I decided to stick to the witness of the early Church: “Actually, **SHORT ANSWER 7.**”

Steven jumped in, but I wasn’t sure if he was trying to distract Wesley or just be goofy. “Yeah, the Eucharist is really confusing,” he said in a kind of comic dead-pan. “Sometimes I’m about to receive communion and the priest breaks the host in half, and I’m like, ‘Oh man, did I just get half a Jesus? What a rip-off!’”

Wesley snorted, and I felt irritated at Steven. Being some kind of Catholic at least, it seemed like he could have helped me out instead of raising more questions. Keeping in mind how Julia and Wesley would hear me, I pretended I was talking to Steven: “**SHORT ANSWER 8.**”

But Wesley was not about to be distracted by Steven’s jokes or my metaphysical niceties: he took the conversation straight back to the Bible. “Look, when you were talking about priests you said that the Mass is a ‘sacrifice’ offered to God. Hebrews 10:12 says that Jesus ‘offered one sacrifice for sins forever,’ so I don’t see how a Catholic Mass can be a real sacrifice—or if it is, then you must think what Jesus did was not enough somehow. Isn’t that right?” He looked intense, but not angry or even scornful. I hadn’t convinced him I was right, but maybe I had started to convince him that I was thoughtful about my faith.

“Catholics believe the Mass is really a sacrifice,” I said, “but that may not mean what you think. **SHORT ANSWER 9.**”

“That makes a lot of sense of what the priest is doing, but I wonder about the rest of us,” Steven commented. To my surprise, he sounded completely serious, even reflective; the mask was down for a moment. “It’s always seemed to me like the Mass is a kind of show the priest puts on. He’s up there in the fancy clothes with the microphone, and we mostly just listen. He gives people lots of jobs so we won’t feel bad, you know, like reading the readings and bringing up the gifts and distributing communion and all kinds of things, but when you get right down to

the center of it we all shut up and kneel down while he does the real action.” Steven glanced at Julia and Wesley apologetically and smiled, like maybe it wasn’t polite to talk Catholic frustration in front of people who hadn’t had the experience. “Do you think the people in the pews are offering the sacrifice somehow? Or are we just spectators?”

I was actually glad I could say more about the priesthood of all believers, for Wesley’s sake. “I know what you mean, but actually all baptized Christians offer the sacrifice of the Mass. **SHORT ANSWER 10.** If you really get that, you’ll see why the Mass is so important for Catholics.” Mimicking Wesley’s verbatim-Bible-citation tone, I continued, “As Vatican II’s *Sacrosanctum concilium* says in paragraph 10, ‘The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows.’”

“What does that mean?” Wesley asked. It seemed like he really wanted to know.

“Um,” I stalled, dismayed. How did I keep getting myself into these long answers?

“**ESSAY.**”

Wesley and Steven were quiet and thoughtful, but Julia’s eyes were twinkling. “OK,” she said, poking me gently with her elbow, “so you really should go to the Christmas Eve vigil Mass.”

I could tell she meant it. I smiled back. “Wanna come?” She smiled, thought, and nodded. “How about you, Steven?” I asked, grinning. “It’s a great show, and our priest is quite a performer. And I could probably get you in for free!”

“Oh, sure thing!” Steven said, layering mock enthusiasm on top of real enthusiasm. “I’m all about the vigil. I’ve been to that show so many times I genuflect in movie theatres. If I were a bug, you know what I would be? Vigil ant. That’s what Christmas is all about!”

“Aaaa, you don’t know the first thing about Christmas,” Wesley sneered cheerfully, his voice all play. He pointed at a nativity scene: “You probably don’t even know why Jesus was born in a manger.”

“Sure I do,” Steven objected, “his parents were on Obamacare.”

While they went at it, I thought to myself that it sure was neat to see old friends. Crazy that we hadn’t thought to do this before. It was great to be home for the holy days.