

THE CHRISTMAS COVER-UP

Mike Daley

GET READY. Here it comes—the annual onslaught of Christmas catalogues. I saw one the other day which stopped me in my tracks. On the cover was a young man emerging from what looked to be a snowy forest. His hair was nicely coiffured, and he had a smile which began at one cheek and finished at the other. Behind him he was dragging an evergreen tree. You could almost feel the freshly cut tree's sticky sap, and smell its pine needles. To top it off, in front of him on a leash was his pampered pup, wearing a winter sweater. It was the picture of holiday bliss.

Many more catalogues have arrived on our doorstep with their cheery images: dogs nestled in their basket asleep by the fire; Christmas cards lining the fireplace; children building their first snowman; quaint New England villages decked out for the holidays. Everything looks so perfect and peaceful, like a Norman Rockwell painting. Impulsively, I want to buy what they're selling—not the products inside the catalogues, but the images on their covers. They're so deceptive, yet so inviting at the same time. In order for me to get my picture-perfect Christmas, though, I'm told I shall have to buy quite a few of the products from the catalogues first.

As I try to resist, I must admit that I've already fallen victim to images. My wife and I recently decided upon our Christmas card. It was no easy task to choose the perfect picture. There, in angelic pose, are our two elder children, Cara and Brendan, sitting on a swing. (If only they had known at the time that they would find themselves decorating refrigerators and desks across the country.) They are dressed up to the nines, and the picture communicates class and sophistication. From the outside, people would think that our family had its act together.

Little do they know. Beneath the gloss the blemishes are not hard to miss. As with all children, best clothes are quickly stained. One



moment the two of them are calm and properly seated; the next they have disappeared. The affection between sister and brother inevitably transforms into sibling rivalry of one sort or another.

On a more serious note, my own blemishes also surface. As a child of divorced parents, I struggle over whether this will be the Christmas when I'll finally get together with my dad. It's always been easy in the past to come up with other plans. I think about my distant relationships with my brothers: what will it take to bridge the gap? Petty jealousy and suppressed envy become all the more ugly in the face of the abundant gifts that I see all around me. There is always more beneath the surface. If only I could get beyond the superficial. But I want that cover image too much.

As the season of Advent comes ever closer, I'm drawn to the image of the Holy Family. Whether they're pictured en route to Bethlehem,

or huddled around the manger with the infant Jesus, it has become all too romantic for me, too picture-perfect. The actual historical context of the nativity escapes us. The joy in the cards on our mantelpieces masks the fear and exhaustion on the faces of Mary and Joseph. The quaint inn or cosy cave where Jesus will be born has the makings of a nice holiday home; but in fact the Holy Family are displaced and homeless. In the shadows behind the adoring shepherds and gift-bearing magi, a duplicitous and bloodthirsty king is bent on retaining his power.

This is the reality that the catalogues and the cards overlook. So many of us, myself included, would rather hide this side of the story. Yet, the mystery of the Incarnation maintains the opposite. Our God, the God of Jesus the Christ, doesn't cover up our blemishes, but rather reveals who we are, and who we are called to become, through them. For this reason our tradition rightly celebrates that our salvation is to be found in the midst of the mess, chaos and shadows of the holidays. For surely only through these will the days to come be holy ones.

Mike Daley is a writer and teacher. His work has appeared in a variety of journals including *America*, *Spirituality*, *National Catholic Reporter* and *US Catholic*. He recently co-edited, with Bill Madges, *Vatican II: Forty Personal Stories* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2003). With June, his wife, he has three children: Cara, Brendan and Nora.