

IDEAS

The miracles you can find at Christmas

Even for a nearly lapsed Catholic like me, the holiday is suffused with the possibility of transcendence.

By **Stephen O'Connor** Updated December 22, 2025, 3:00 a.m.



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[Stephen O'Connor](#) is a writer from Lowell.

Sister Bernard St. Joseph directed the little children's Christmas choir at St. Margaret's in Lowell that year, and we got to go up into the choir loft and see the familiar church from a whole new perspective, like the very angels looking down on the congregation. It was strange how none of us alone was a great singer but together we created something that was thrilling to be part of.

Sister Bernard was a hardworking soul. She pushed back the sleeves of her habit, blew a D on her pitch pipe, and began to direct us with large, sweeping motions of her arms. Sometimes, she would tap her heart with the little finger of her right hand, which meant that we should sing with more feeling. Other times, she seemed to be throwing imaginary handfuls of feathers up into the air. That meant to sing louder. Sister Bernard loved Italian musical terms: “Fortissimo,” she’d growl. Or she might raise her palms toward us as if gently pushing our voices back: “Dolce, dolce!” She gave us phonetic Latin for “Gloria in excelsis Deo”: “Think of eggshells,” she’d say, “Gloria in eggshells sees deo!”

Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. The church was overflowing. The stained-glass windows were strangely dark; the altar candles and the star above the oversized manger burned more brightly than they could during the day. Peace spread her wings over all the world, or at least over all our world, as we stood in our special perch, so close to the great church organ that its vibrations resounded in our own suspended hearts. I think it was my best pal, Dan Webster, who nudged me and nodded down toward the back of the congregation. A middle-aged man in a long winter coat, his scarf hanging out of his sleeve, stood in the aisle swaying like a willow in a gale. Danny whispered, “Drunk as a skunk.” Sister Frances spotted him, too, and soon she and Father Cedrone were leading him out of the church to the rectory where presumably he would be plied with coffee while someone called his next of kin. We sang all our well-rehearsed carols, our eyes fixed on the face and hands of Sister Bernard, gratified that she seemed pleased. At the end of Mass, Father Walsh blessed the congregation and said, “A great miracle has happened. Christus est natus. Christ is born. A Merry Christmas to all of you.”

Many years later, I spent Christmas Eve in the tiny village of St. Pierre de Colombiere, lost in the French mountains of the Ardèche. I went to Midnight Mass in a stone chapel with French friends I’d met working on the grape harvest in the Beaujolais region. Another country, another time, another culture and language, and yet it was all strangely familiar — the ritual of the Mass, the miracle of the night. There was even a farmer who arrived late and had to be reminded to take off his cap. He stood gripping the pew in front of him, swaying like a willow in a gale, and I heard someone say, “Il est ronde

comme un queue de pelle,” which I couldn’t figure out because it means he’s as round as the end of a shovel, but which I found out later meant, “He’s as drunk as a skunk.” There was no choir, but the villagers sang with such gusto that none was necessary. And as the Mass concluded, a little girl dressed as an angel came up the center aisle and placed the porcelain Baby Jesus in the manger, under the loving gaze of Joseph the carpenter and Mary mild.

I remember as we left the church that night, there were shooting stars streaking across the dark frozen sky above the mountains, and anyone with a Catholic school upbringing might well wonder whether there was not another miracle afoot, some augury, a divine proclamation of the arrival of the King of Angels, written in the heavens. Call me foolish or sentimental or what you like, but I do believe in the magic of Christmas, a magic so powerful that we can believe that all the people in Bedford Falls might rally to save George Bailey from ruin, or that soldiers in the trenches of World War I would cross the cratered no-man’s-land to sing carols with the enemies of their state, or even that a shepherd watching his flock might see an angel incarnate in the air, bringing tidings of great joy.

I sometimes wonder why I have these feelings at all. The truth is, I’m a lousy Catholic. I’m not much for dogma these days. My wife once told me I was a bad example to the children for reading a small volume of Keats during a long-winded sermon. Still, I think there’s a human need to transcend the mundane and approach whatever it is that we sometimes sense beyond this world we inhabit — Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality,” the mysterious, the spiritual, the mythic, who knows, maybe the divine — and share as fragile, mortal humans in some miraculous event that gives meaning to it all. And no matter what you believe, the message is right: *Peace on earth and good will to men*. Wouldn’t that be a miracle worth seeing?

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