We Are All Called to Be Saints

In his book *Saints, Angels, & Demons: An A-to-Z Guide to the Holy and the Damned,* Gary Jansen highlights the heroism and character of a multitude of saints, but he also makes it clear they were "imperfect individuals."

During a *Christopher Closeup* interview, Gary observed, "I loved seeing the trajectory of the saints' lives because, in many ways, they're just like you and me…They have foibles, they make mistakes. Sometimes they're plagued with touches of arrogance—or more than touches of arrogance."

"Through living life, they gain wisdom, they gain spiritual insight. As much as sometimes I could think of our canonized saints as the superheroes of the faith, it was important for me to try and get across the humanity of these folks…It helps us to think…we can be saints, too."

"There are more than 10,000 who have been called to the big sainthood, of the capital 'S'…But we're all called to holiness…We're called to be saints. By our very existence, we're sacred. And so, we're all little saints in the faith."

You are no longer strangers...but you are fellow citizens with the saints. (Ephesians 2:19)

Remind me to strive for sainthood, Savior.

Prayers for the Forgotten

"No one should leave this world without someone praying for them." So says Peggy Keene about her work with the 70-year-old Ladies of Charity initiative, the Society for the Unclaimed Dead.

As reported in the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, the group's work began in the 1950s when Margaret O'Konski entered her parish church while a funeral was taking place for a woman named Anna. There were no mourners, only the priest saying the Mass.

Heartbroken by this sight, O'Konski felt Jesus calling her to do something for these forgotten souls. She then "organized a group of women to go to funeral services for those who had no family or friends who could attend. This simple yet powerful act of compassion led to the formal establishment of the Ladies of Charity in the Diocese of Pittsburgh in 1959."

Today, members donate money for Masses to be held for the unclaimed dead, while also supporting emergency help for the elderly, visiting the homebound and those in nursing homes, collecting school supplies for children, and more.

We have not ceased praying for you. (Colossians 1:9)

Lord, welcome those who are alone and forgotten here on earth into Your heavenly kingdom.

A Reward for Good Grades

At Zack's Finest Deli & Grocery in Staten Island, New York, owner Wail Alselwi—nicknamed "Wally"—is serving up more than sliced meats. He's dishing out encouraging words to students everywhere—along with an abundance of free snacks!

As reported on *Majically.com,* it began three years ago. There was a sixth grader named Zamier Davis in the neighborhood, and he "couldn't quite crack the honor roll, despite his best efforts." That was when Wally came up with a brilliant idea to help motivate him: "good grades = free snacks."

The higher Zamier's grades, the more food he was entitled to take home with him. It wasn't long before Zamier made the honor roll, and the celebratory video Wally shared of him on TikTok went viral, bringing even more students to his store for help and rewards. A GoFundMe was established to help Wally keep this effort going.

"I got my own kids back home [in Yemen]," Wally concluded, "and I miss them, so it makes me happy to see other kids happy…The most important thing is you celebrate them, and…show them that you really care about their hard work."

Consider how to provoke…good deeds. (Hebrews 10:24)

Abba, may we encourage our youth towards greatness.

Caregiving for My Hero, Part 1

When Steve Guttenberg's father, Stan, was diagnosed with kidney failure requiring dialysis, the actor started driving 400 miles from Los Angeles to Phoenix every week to be with him during his treatments. Steve's devotion to his dad stemmed from a lifetime of love and wisdom, which he shared in his Christopher Award-winning memoir *Time to Thank: Caregiving for My Hero.*

"My dad…loved to be with his family," Steve recalled on *Christopher Closeup*. "At the end of the day, he left the office and came home, never went out with the boys. [He was] a guy who was always there for me, who was very gentle in his discipline, but firm. I was in love with my dad. He was my best friend."

Steve believes that he was able to make it in Hollywood without losing his soul due to his parents' influence. He explained, "Your values create your behavior. Then your behavior creates your habits, your habits become your destiny. So, I was lucky to have a great mom and dad who taught me, at our kitchen table, how to swim the river of life."

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when old, they will not stray. (Proverbs 22:6)

Help parents model good values to their children, Abba.

Caregiving for My Hero, Part 2

Steve Guttenberg grew up in a Jewish family that accepted God and the importance of faith. He noted, "I'm Jewish, and I'm quite religious. I think about God all the time…and I believe that God has a lot to do with my success."

Though Steve treasures his acting career, it will always come in second when the needs of family arise. That's why he did not hesitate to make the long weekly trip to his father's side when he fell ill. "What I [and my family] went through with my dad," Steve reflected, "taught us about love."

"Love is the most powerful form of integrity in the universe…So, when you love somebody or somebody loves you…you can stay up and show up more than you ever thought you could. When someone you love calls out, how can you not run down the hall to them? My running down the hall was 400 miles, but it was an easy trip."

"My dad also had a great line that he learned from Joel Osteen. He said, 'Don't walk a mile for someone who won't cross the street for you, but walk 10,000 miles through a hurricane for one minute with someone you love.'"

Love bears all things. (1 Corinthians 13:7)

May love give me strength to care for others, Yahweh.

Caregiving for My Hero, Part 3

As heartbreaking as it was for actor Steve Guttenberg to relive the events around his father's illness and death in writing *Time to Thank: Caregiving for My Hero,* it was also energizing and joyful to think back on all the wonderful moments they shared over the years. He hopes that readers take an important message from this Christopher Award-winning memoir.

Steve concluded, "I'm so honored because the Christopher Awards are really about books, art that expands the consciousness and creates a place where you can learn about people and incidents that you never knew existed."

"What I would love people to take away from my book…is that if you are called and you're able to, don't run from the [challenging] situation. Run toward the situation, and see what you can do and what you can contribute. There are two types of people in this world: the givers and the takers. And believe me, the givers are the winners."

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Hebrews 13:16)

When difficult situations arise for my loved ones or even strangers, Lord, give me the grace to rise to the occasion and help them.

A Heart of Love for Foster Children

When Emma Patterson's children were in high school, they would often ask her to give their friends some needed advice or even a place to stay when their parents kicked them out. The single mom always rose to the occasion.

In light of these positive experiences, Patterson became a foster parent after her kids grew up and moved out. For the next 20 years, she took in dozens of children, who often remained with her until they graduated high school or college.

Today, Patterson is 88 and living in a retirement community. But she recalled her days as a foster parent fondly for *AARP: The Magazine:* "Whenever a child needed a dress to wear to the prom, I would sew it for her. If someone needed money for an after-school activity, I took it from my savings."

"I never wanted them to feel different from the kids in biological families. I consider every single one of these children to be a member of my family. I pray for my kids every night. I ask God to keep them safe and watch over them because they all turned out to be really nice men and women."

Whoever welcomes one such child in My name welcomes Me. (Mark 9:37)

May families open their homes to foster children, Abba.

Icons and Acting Can Inspire the Spirit

In Gary Jansen's book *Saints, Angels, & Demons,* illustrator Katie Ponder brings the right balance of reverence and freshness to her images of holy figures. Gary noted that iconography is important to him "in terms of being able to communicate and pray. Being able to focus on icons, on images, on classical…or modern paintings, that inspires the spirit."

An acting performance can also inspire the spirit. St. Catherine of Siena's profile, for instance, includes an unexpected modern reference: her connection to actor Bill Murray. St. Catherine is known for helping to heal the western schism and convincing Pope Gregory XI to return from Avignon to Rome.

"Bill Murray's sister is a nun," Gary explained, "and they grew up in Chicago. She has been doing for a number of years now—I don't know if she's still doing it—a one-woman play called 'Catherine of Siena: A Woman for our Time.' So, she got bit by the acting bug as well. Her name is Nancy Murray, and she's a Dominican nun."

It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.
(Romans 8:16)

Creator, help me to see Your divine spirit in the people, images, and world around me.

Hot Air Balloon to Freedom

In mid-September of 1979, eight people comprising two families—four adults and four children—fled communist East Germany in a hot air balloon in pursuit of freedom. The escapees fashioned the balloon from curtains and bedsheets sewn together over a period of months.

It was a dangerous endeavor since none of the members of the Strelzyk and Wetzel families had ballooning experience. In addition, the daring flight was undertaken at night with the eight passengers crowded together on a small, sideless platform that measured four and a half by four and a half feet.

At times during the shaky 30-minute ride over minefields, barbed wire and sentry-guarded outposts, the balloon was 2,200 feet in the air. "There was no other possibility of escaping," said 31-year-old Hans-Peter Strelzyk. "And we wanted to be free."

When they finally landed, they were thrilled to discover they had made it to West Germany and freedom. And 10 years later, they happily watched the Berlin Wall fall on TV.

Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. (Galatians 5:13)

Jesus, guide us to be good citizens and use our freedom responsibly.

A Chaplain's Death...or Not

In 1918, the mother of Father Edward Wallace, a priest from the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, received word that her son had died in France while serving as a chaplain during World War I. Obituaries were written, and memorial services were held, for this beloved priest.

An article in the veterans' magazine *The Service* said of Father Wallace, "He was always to be found [at the front] giving comfort to the dying, burying the dead, sending last messages to the fathers and mothers back home, and not asking whether this man was a Jew, Protestant, or Catholic."

The report of Father Wallace's death, however, turned out to be a mistake, as it was a different Father Edward Wallace who had been killed. On receiving news that her son was still alive, his mother rejoiced! Father Wallace returned home and lived a long, happy life, dying in 1970 at age 85.

In 1968, he spoke with *The Tablet,* looking back with humor on his brief stint in the grave. Regarding his memorial service, Father Wallace quipped, "My undertaker said it was a beautiful thing…What more could anyone ask for?"

I shall not die, but I shall live. (Psalm 118:17)

Father, bless all chaplains in their important work.

High Schooler Lauds Greatest Generation

When Rishi Sharma was a junior in high school, he dedicated his time to recording the past. Rishi traveled around the U.S. interviewing World War II combat veterans who risked so much for future generations.

"It's amazing how much history and knowledge is encased in each one of these individuals and how much is lost when one of them dies without sharing their story," Rishi told *CBS News*.

Now 20 years old, Rishi has interviewed more than 850 veterans across 40 states, and he's not stopping. He talks to the men for hours, listening to their stories, thanking them for their service, and giving the recordings to their families.

Rishi's parents immigrated to the U.S. from India, so they don't have a direct connection to "the greatest generation." Still, the young man feels committed to preserving their stories of heroism. He told one veteran, "It means a great deal to me that you were willing to endure all that so that I could be here today."

Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people. (Nehemiah 5:19)

Thank You, Lord, for the bravery of our soldiers and for all those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Please watch over their souls forever at peace in Your heavenly arms.

Ladies' Chainsaw Unit Serves God

Arkansas Baptist Disaster Relief (ABDR) was looking for volunteers to help with various projects. That's what led six women from the Russellville area to answer the call. Together, they formed the nonprofit's first ladies' chainsaw unit.

Janet Fryar, who helped create the group, told the *Baptist Press,* "Everywhere we went, everybody was super enthusiastic about the women's chainsaw team…We were able to bless a lot of people."

Randy Garrett, ABDR's Director, added, "These ladies chose to do this, and they are all good friends…Just because they are ladies doesn't mean they can't get out with a chainsaw and work."

ABDR volunteers offer Christ-like love to survivors of disasters. From running a chainsaw to picking up tree limbs to being a chaplain, there are many opportunities to serve.

Fryar said, "When a person is in need and you are meeting a need for them, they are willing to talk with you. That is the reason that we go—to share Christ everywhere we go."

A skilled woodcutter may saw down a tree easy to handle. (Wisdom 13:11)

Loving God, help me to share Christ everywhere I go.

Help in a Heartbeat

57-year-old Ken Jeffries of Jacksonville, Florida, was at Charlotte Douglas International Airport waiting for a flight headed to Knoxville, Tennessee. Claire Cerbie, a registered nurse, was headed to the same destination. Little did these two strangers realize their lives were about to intersect in an unforgettable way.

As reported by *WBTV,* Cerbie first noticed Jeffries because he began displaying visible signs of having a heart attack. She immediately jumped into nurse mode, recruiting others at the airport to help—and utilizing her CPR skills and a defibrillator to save his life.

The heart surgeon who operated on Jeffries said that without Cerbie, his patient would not be alive today. "I'm very glad I was there that day," Cerbie humbly stated. "I'd obviously do it again in a heartbeat."

"A 'thank you' is not enough, Claire," Jeffries, seated next to his wife, told his medical savior, his voice thick with emotion and unshed tears. "I am so appreciative and indebted to you."

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the spring of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

Lord, thank You for the medical heroes among us.

Act of Kindness Produces Ripple Effect

At a convenience store in Douglasville, Georgia, businessman Casey Marlow was waiting in line to buy a drink when he realized he had left his wallet in his truck. Before he could leave the line to retrieve it, the man behind him offered to pay for his drink. Grateful for the help, Marlow struck up a conversation with this gentleman, whose name was Mario.

Marlow was impressed by Mario's generosity, especially after learning that he and his family had recently "been evicted from their home" and were residing in a motel.

Determined to help his new friend, Marlow took to social media to share his story, with the hope that "even small amounts would add up to make a difference." Within 24 hours, a whopping $35,000 was raised, which Casey was thrilled to present to Mario in person.

As cited on *Faithpot.com,* Mario thanked Marlow over the phone as well, saying, "Casey, I knew God would provide for us…God provided for us back then and…He would provide again when the time was right."

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord… to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

Lord, may we trust in the wisdom of Your divine timing.

Xavier Society's Faith-Building Mission

For the past 125 years, the Xavier Society for the Blind has created resources for generations of Catholics who are either blind or vision impaired. The organization was founded in 1900 in New York City by a blind teacher, Margaret Coffey, and a priest, Jesuit Father Joseph Stadelman.

The Xavier Society became the only Catholic publishing house to create free resources for the blind and visually impaired. These resources now include more than 1,000 braille titles, books on spiritual and religious topics (including The Christophers' *Three Minutes a Day* books), and audio books.

Malachy Fallon, the Society's executive director, told *OSV News* that they provide services to 700 people per week. The works they offer in braille are helping this community worship, with some even being able to serve as lectors during Mass.

Fallon's mission is to make more people aware of the crucial services that his organization provides so that it can continue to help this community thrive in faith for years to come.

You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. (Leviticus 19:14)

Jesus, bless all those who are blind and worship in Your name.

Protecting the Immunocompromised

Sometimes, wearing a mask can be an act of love. That is especially true for those who have loved ones with chronic illnesses. While many people have put the COVID pandemic behind them, those with compromised immune systems don't necessarily have that option.

For instance, Bazia Zebrowski, age 61, suffers from a condition that "causes inflammation, immune system problems, fatigue, and pain," reported *The Associated Press*. She noted that her fear of COVID is not "unreasonable" because it would seriously damage her well-being. As a result, her husband wears a mask while at work to lessen chances of getting sick.

There's also 29-year-old Kira Levin, who cares for her 98-year-old grandmother and doesn't want to compromise her health. When Levin served as a bridesmaid at a friend's wedding, she was the only person who wore an N-95 mask covered by a decorative mask to match the bridesmaids' dresses. "I didn't take off the mask for pictures, and nobody asked me to," she noted. "I felt incredibly grateful for that."

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4)

Abba, may we be sensitive to the medical needs of others.

From Basketball to Books

Back in 1963, George Harvey used a basketball to accomplish what the schools in Brooklyn hadn't been able to do. He got 12 sports-loving African American youngsters to fall in love with books.

Harvey, a city engineer, told members of the church basketball team he coached that if they wanted to play for him, they had to read one book a week. Beginning with easy-to-read popular books, he led his charges to devour works by such authors as Arthur Miller and T.S. Eliot. Later, young women were invited to the weekly discussions.

"A lot of us went to college because of George," said one of his early students. "He taught us how to read a book, how to report on what it holds. He never talked down to us."

The George Harveys of this world are the unsung heroes. They see a need and quietly go about meeting it. Anything you do to interest a young person in the joys and depths of good literature will enrich him or her for the rest of their lives.

Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill. (Proverbs 1:5)

Holy Spirit, help us to nurture the life of the mind in young people.

The School of Duane, Part 1

Maureen Swinger knows there are people who question whether her brother Duane's life had any meaning or value. Born with a rare form of epilepsy that resulted in grand mal seizures, Duane couldn't speak, required helpers to move from his bed to his wheelchair, and needed care at all hours of the day and night.

"But talk to anyone who spent time with him," Maureen wrote in *Plough,* "and none of them will mention this. Because that wasn't essential to who he was…He derived enormous satisfaction from the little things that made up his day. You earned a huge smile just for shifting him to a more comfortable position. Kids fiddling with the knobs on his chair were enough to bring on the giggles."

Maureen, her three able-bodied siblings, and their parents cared for Duane despite all the difficulties. They received help from the Bruderhof community in which they lived, which is committed to living out Jesus' call for us to love and support one another. This didn't erase suffering from the Swingers' lives, but it gave them a new perspective on it. More tomorrow….

The Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His suffering ones. (Isaiah 49:13)

Lord, sustain families raising their disabled children.

The School of Duane, Part 2

Despite his extreme form of epilepsy, Duane Swinger was welcomed at the Bruderhof Children's Center to spend time with his peers. As a teen, he attended a special needs school outside of the community. The bulk of caregiving, however, still fell to his parents and four siblings, wrote his sister Maureen for *Plough*.

She reflected, "In retrospect, I see how much our family, all rather stubborn individualists, benefited from those often-strenuous years. Would we ever have become a team if we hadn't been tested? We discovered that love is action—often the same action over and over. We learned that prayer had better come before any action."

Despite her love for Duane, Maureen bristled when a well-intentioned fellow Christian called him "a gift." That word seemed to downplay the difficulties of his condition. Still, she appreciated those who reached out to Duane, noting, "This was the form of love that we learned to value: someone showing up to take Duane on a walk. Someone hosting a fireworks show for his birthday. Someone looking him in the eye and saying, 'How's it going?' without worrying about getting an answer."

Let us love...in truth and action. (1 John 3:18)

Help me to practice generous, selfless love, Lord.

The School of Duane, Part 3

Richard Scott, the Bruderhof community's pastor, realized that Duane was "a teacher without any students." Scott also recognized that the community's young men had heard messages about dedication and service all their lives, but never had to practice those ideals in a real way. Without that commitment, they would never be able to see humanity as Christ does.

This led to Bruderhof's young men volunteering to be Duane's caregivers for periods of time. Students in the "School of Duane," as Maureen called it, would push his tricycle for hours, "massage his legs to relieve muscle cramps," and more.

But the hardest lesson required no action: standing by quietly when Duane had a seizure and making sure he didn't hurt himself. "Then he will fall asleep for hours," Maureen wrote at *Plough,* "leaving you with another assignment—the lesson of quiet. Life is not always a party…There must also be hours when you weep for lost chances and lost people and lost time. In turn, those hours can give way to a silence in which you begin to hear God's hope for your life. Duane could take people there."

[God] will not overlook...the love that you showed for His sake. (Hebrews 6:10)

Let selfless service reveal Your hopes for my life, Lord.

The School of Duane, Part 4

Because of his rare and extreme form of epilepsy, doctors predicted that Duane Swinger wouldn't make it to his first birthday. Confounding them all, he lived to age 31. And despite what some would view as a life devoid of meaning, Duane contributed to this world in his own way.

Writing for *Plough,* his sister, Maureen, recalled a letter her family received from a member of the Bruderhof community who had served as one of Duane's caregivers years earlier. It read, "During my early twenties, my life was fraught with struggle and confusion, till I got the chance to care for Duane…He taught me that I really didn't know it all, that I had to start caring for others first…that perfection and strength as God sees them were utterly different from my previous strivings for those qualities. I don't know where I'd be without having known him."

Maureen herself saw the presence of Christ in Duane's life and the way her family cared for him. She shared his story in the hopes that others might learn from it as well, noting, "To crack a cold heart, to train it in love, is the most liberating service any person can do for another."

A new heart I will give…a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26)

Jesus, train my heart in love through liberating service.

'The Best Amazon Driver in the World'

For Amazon deliveryman Steven Cash, it was just another day making the rounds. But one "quiet act of kindness caught on camera" brought an unexpected reward!

A viral video showed Cash picking up a Ring camera off the floor outside a home and taking several minutes to hang it back up. The apartment with the fallen camera was not on his route (he was delivering next door), but he lent a hand anyway.

More than a month after this footage was released, Ryan Wolf of *Fox San Antonio News* tracked Cash down, eager to shake hands with "the best Amazon driver in the world." Wolf recorded Steven's meeting with Kate Rufsvold, the lady whose camera he fixed. Then, Wolf told him, "I have a program on *Fox SA*—it's called *Cash for Kindness*. We reward people who do things without expecting anything in return."

The Amazon driver was humbled to be presented with $1,000, in gratitude for his thoughtful gesture. "I'm just glad I was able to do something that paid off," Cash concluded. "Now, my son's going to see the benefits."

Give...in secret...your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2,4)

God, may we take every opportunity to "pay it forward."

The Key to Successful Small Talk

If you feel uncomfortable in social situations where you have to make small talk, John C. Maxwell offers this suggestion: "Within the first 30 seconds of a conversation, say something encouraging to a person."

The founder of the Maxwell Leadership Foundation notes that your compliment needs to be sincere so you don't come off as phony or condescending. "Those who add to us, draw us to them. Those who subtract, cause us to withdraw," he observed.

Writing at *Upworthy,* Tod Perry explained, "Studies have shown that when people hear words of encouragement, they feel good and have a burst of energy…Ultimately, a direct connection exists between being likable and being genuinely interested in other people. [As] William King said, 'A gossip is one who talks to you about other people. A bore is one who talks to you about himself. And a brilliant conversationalist is one who talks to you about yourself.'"

In a nutshell, taking a genuine interest in other people can lead to them taking a genuine interest in you.

Let your speech always be gracious. (Colossians 4:6)

May my words always be uplifting, Word of God.

A Curbside Christmas Miracle

For many years, Helen Bressler and her husband, Tony, decorated their lawn for Christmas with an outdoor Nativity set, which they had received as a gift from Tony's mom. But the only figures in the set were Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. They had always thought about adding the other characters as well, but since lawn ornaments are expensive, they stuck with the basics.

A few days before Thanksgiving, Helen and Tony were out for an afternoon drive when they spotted a house with large lawn ornaments outside, as if they were being sold at a tag sale. There were three wise men, a drummer boy, a cow, and a donkey, recalled Helen for *Guideposts.* The couple knocked on the homeowner's door and asked about buying the figures. The owner said they were free. Helen and Tony could just take them.

When the couple set up the new pieces on their lawn a couple of weeks later, Tony lamented that the only figure missing was an angel. Helen responded that an unseen angel was there: "Who else could have guided us to the right place at the right time that autumn afternoon? The angel I'd always imagined had shown herself to me in our curbside Christmas miracle."

A good angel will accompany him. (Tobit 5:22)

Lord, open my eyes to the everyday miracles around me.

'God Has a Plan'

"God has a plan." That's what Crystal Wolfe told herself after the newspaper reporter job, for which she moved to New York City, fell through at the last minute. To survive, she began working at a catering company that handled Wall Street events.

As a Catholic focused on serving those in need, Wolfe asked her boss if the leftover food from their events could be donated to the homeless instead of thrown away. He responded that it could not because if someone gets sick from eating it, the catering company could get sued. Wolfe learned that this problem could be worked around if a church or food pantry picked up the food themselves, so she created a nonprofit and website called The Solution to Hunger.

As reported by *The Tablet's* Paula Katinas, "The website allows restaurants that have food to give away to register to see if there are any food pantries in their community in need. Conversely, food pantries looking for food can see if there are restaurants in their area giving away food." The project continues to grow and feed more people's bodies and souls.

Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. (Proverbs 16:3)

Help me to be creative in meeting people's needs, Messiah.

Reward Points Bring Happy Thanksgiving

In the fall of 2024, Greenwood, South Carolina, was still recovering from the destruction wrought by Hurricane Helene. In the face of such devastation, reported *WYFF News,* Jay and Judy Brissey found an interesting way to aid their community—and utilize their accumulated Chick-fil-A points at the same time!

The couple had frequented this restaurant so often over the previous eight years that they had racked up a whopping "202,000…reward points." So, that Thanksgiving, they decided to redeem half their points to treat the residents of the local Burton Center for Disability and Special Needs to free lunches.

Judy, an educator, remembered teaching many of these residents at the local school and was moved to be able to reunite with them during this special time of year.

"I don't do it for the recognition," she insisted, adding that she and her husband planned to give the remainder of their reward points to a children's home the following month. "The only one I want to get recognition is God."

Your great generosity...will produce thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:11)

God, may every act of kindness serve to further glorify You.

Beat Holiday Blues with Faith Traditions

For some people, the days between Thanksgiving and New Year can bring about the holiday blues or worsen existing mental health issues. Religious communities that engage in their faith traditions may help ease those struggles.

As reported by Audrey Thibert of *Religion News Service,* churches often become more active than usual during this time, engaging in "lessons and carols," food drives, and special services.

Rev. Sarah Lund, from the United Church of Christ, explained why such programs can be a balm for the spirit: "We don't realize what a gift it is to be connected to each other and to have weekly gatherings where we share space, share community, break bread together, have friendships and build relationships through prayer, through Bible study and through worship."

Lisa Miller, a professor of psychology and education at Columbia University, added, "During the holidays, we are practicing relational spirituality…We are actually showing up for one another to be loving, to be holding, to be guiding, and never leave anyone alone."

Let us…provoke one another to love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10:24)

Help the lonely find belonging, Messiah.

Saving Opal

As she watched her house burn to the ground, Samantha James only had one terrifying thought: one of her twin daughters, Opal, was still trapped inside. As reported by Ohio's *WKYC News,* at that moment, a "guardian angel" appeared on the scene in the form of 62-year-old John Stickovich.

Driving past Samantha's block on his way to work, John pulled over when he noticed the young mom "screaming for her baby…who was still inside." The Army veteran then dove into this raging inferno, not once, but twice to retrieve Opal who, James said, was behind the baby gate in their kitchen.

"I felt the baby gate, but it was really getting bad," Stickovich recalled. "When I heard the cry, I jumped forward, and my arm went over the baby's leg…I'm sure God had something to do with it…If I wasn't guided while I was in that smoke, I never would have made it."

"He came out carrying my baby that I never thought I was going to see again," James said in a reunion three days later, as her husband, their twins, Opal and Lotus, and Stickovich stood nearby. "He's our guardian angel, for sure."

He brought me out...He delivered me.
(Psalm 18:19)

Lord, grant us courage to save those in need.

Dark Skies, Bright Lights

Katie Glenn Brown understands why people lament the 4:15 p.m. sunsets we experience this time of year. However, she also recalls the awe she felt at seeing the Milky Way for the first time while on a rural shore in Rhode Island. "This magnificent view of God's glorious creation is only possible in darkness," she wrote in *America Magazine*.

It is often the people who have experienced the most darkness who are best able to appreciate the light that Christ brings us. And sometimes, for our own good, we need to sit in that darkness for a while rather than try to diminish it through "artificial light," such as alcohol, shopping, social media, etc.

Brown recalled sitting in a darkened church as one person lit the candle of another and another, eventually illuminating the entire space. This beauty was only made visible due to the initial darkness. Brown concluded, "May we…courageously and creatively confront the darkness, and do so in community with a spirit of radical love and hope, much like Christ Himself. For that is the path to the kind of light reflected in the stars against the darkest of skies—the authentic, transformative light of God."

The light shines in the darkness. (John 1:5)

Transform me with Your light, Christ Jesus.

Holiday Joy for Lonely Seniors

For 94-year-old Sadie Lloyd of Long Island, New York, the volunteers and workers with the Family & Children's Association (FCA) serve as angels on earth. As reported by Bahar Ostadan in *Newsday,* "FCA is a nonprofit organization that connects seniors, children, and families with health, educational, and other services."

Lloyd's husband suffered from Alzheimer's, so she cared for him in their home until his death in 2011. Her family, who lives in the Midwest, pleaded with her to move to them, but she didn't want to leave the place she has lived since 1962. As a result, people from FCA have become a lifeline to Lloyd.

After Lloyd suffered a heart attack, an FCA volunteer signed her out of the hospital and brought her food when she couldn't cook. Another person got her a heating oil refill for her house on a frigid day. And during the holiday season, volunteers dropped off reheatable meals (such as turkey, stuffing, vegetables) and gifts. Lloyd is just one of many recipients of this kindness, but like the rest, she is profoundly grateful.

Give graciously to all the living; do not withhold kindness even from the dead.
(Sirach 7:33)

May I act lovingly to those without family, Father.