

Stirred up: A reflection on decades at the Christian Century

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

We have relegated to the “remember when” columns all resistance to the updating of Thanksgiving Day to lengthen time for Christmas shopping. This year it was a September Saturday when the first school boy (“Earn \$50 this easy way!”) came to our door to sell us greeting cards. Now, finally, almost anachronistically, Advent announces itself as the beginning of preparation for the Nativity.

Since the sixth century Christians must have recognized the need for retreat from the stir of the season, for by then already observance of Advent was widespread. But the centuries-old prayer for the First Sunday of the new season did not sound retreat. It called for more stir: Excita, Domine . . . “Stir up thy power, O Lord, and come!” What sounds like a lumbering anthropomorphism addressed to the Lord of Hosts turns out to be a personal appeal to the Incarnate Lord. Must he be excited into bestirring himself to climax the rhythm of the church’s year? What is properly enjoined to men (the Epistle for the day says, in brief, “Wake up!”) sounds like effrontery when spoken to the Lord.

Still, the cry is strangely in place. Ours is not the first age that has been distracted by the stir of lesser beings into a quest for a dramatic seal of His coming. Perhaps that is why, now as then, this prayer begins the season less with a call for contemplative preparation than with a cry of desperation: “Stir up, we beseech thee, thy power, O Lord, and come; that by thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins, and saved by thy mighty deliverance . . .”

—from an unsigned editorial

in the *Christian Century*, November 28, 1956

That unsigned editorial was the first of many hundreds or thousands of my writings, unsigned and signed, published in this magazine. Two weeks after it appeared I received my doctorate at the University of Chicago, which permitted me to

moonlight here, as did the parish at which I was beginning work. It was a very good year.

Dean Jerald C. Brauer, my mentor and friend who recruited me to the university as a student in 1954 and as a professor in 1963, joined other faculty in commending me to Harold Fey at this magazine. Returning Fey's invitational call, I called him "Fay." He signed me on anyhow on November 1, the birth date of our second son, John, to whose mother the staff sent flowers. As I said, it was a very good year.

Novelist Georges Bernanos caught the spirit of what I am trying to capture of young adulthood when he recalled his vivid experience of childhood: "What does my life matter? I just want it to be faithful, to the end, to the child I used to be. Yes, what honor I have, and my bit of courage, I inherit from the little creature, so mysterious to me now, scuttling through the September rain across streaming meadows." He remembered too that the boy's heart was "heavy at the thought of going back to school."

I think I was still, naively, a "little creature, so mysterious" at 28, but without a heavy heart as once a week for decades I would "scuttle" off the el, ride the elevator at the Old Colony Building, enter our offices, greet colleagues, tear open book packages, read the releases and other magazines, meet guests, and write.

I was stirred by this *Christian Century* venture at 28 and remain so at 78.