

Diabolical sentimentality

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [February 16, 2000](#) issue

Ever since I was a child, my mother has observed the season of Christmas in the same way. Some time around Thanksgiving she begins shaking her head, looking disgusted and sighing, “Oh Lordy, Lordy; it’s almost Christmas and I haven’t done a thing!” Then come four intense weeks of shopping, baking and Christmas card writing. These activities are accompanied by a strange combination of anxiety (“Am I going to be ready this year?”) and cozy stories of happy Christmases in the past. Christmas Day itself is the biggest, most exhausting cooking and cleaning-up-afterwards day of the year. Then comes December 26, which my mother celebrates as the welcome end of the Christmas season.

This past year was no exception. Mama phoned me on the evening of December 26. “Well,” she said, sighing her inimitable sigh of relief after we had exchanged greetings, “Thank goodness Christmas is over. Now all we have left to get through is New Year’s Day!” Though she would like to do it on the stroke of midnight on December 25, New Year’s has traditionally been the day when the tree is taken down, the ornaments put away and the chaos and sentimentality and memories of Christmas past packed away or swept up in the vacuum cleaner.

I have had my own set of problems with the liturgical celebration of Christmas. Mama starts early but can barely let the babe of Bethlehem lie down in the manger before she throws him out of it and puts away his bedding for the year. I’m the opposite. With all the chores of finishing up a semester and getting out-of-town packages in the mail, I am never able to celebrate Advent well. But that’s not all. I just can’t seem to find the motivation or energy to reflect on and pray through the great themes that provide a preparation for Christmas.

Liturgically speaking, my prayer and theological reflection for the combined seasons of Advent and Christmas begin around December 20th and last until the end of January. When it comes to the calendar, I seem to be out of sync with the rest of Christendom. This is why I’m sharing my Christmas thoughts now, after we are well into the new year.

This season I think about my friend who recently learned that she is pregnant with a Down's Syndrome baby. Her situation doesn't fit the images of family that seem to dominate Christmas in our churches as well as the wider culture. Secular images of the "normal" family playing in the snow, eating, talking on the phone to one another, and shopping happily together are everywhere. Religious pictures of a calm, peaceful and innocently happy Mary, Joseph and Jesus are ubiquitous, working hand-in-hand as they do with the secular images of the season. These images suggest that people ought to have simple, uncomplicated, harmonious, loving, even grief-free families. The use of Jesus's birth to support such a suggestion seems almost diabolical.

The word *diabolical* is a strong one, and I don't want you to get me wrong. I am in favor of happy, uncomplicated families. I am in favor of simplicity, harmony and health. It is certainly important to work at family life and to be as good at parenting as we can. I'm sure Mary and Joseph were conscientious, loving and careful—at least when they weren't leaving their child in Jerusalem by mistake!

What worries me is the demoralizing way in which these images suggest, even to Christian sufferers, not only that the uncomplicated and pain-free family should be the rule, but that the only theological explanation for the existence of troubled families is the presence of sin.

Don't we want to hold up Jesus as a normative model for human life? Isn't sin at the root of all unhappiness? I'm afraid I have to answer a qualified yes to the first of these two questions and no to the second.

Yes, Jesus is indeed our model for the Christian life. But if we look at the stories told in the Gospels about the conception and birth of Jesus, what we find is far from simple or unproblematic. Mary's unmarried state when she conceives, Joseph's painful doubts, the nightmare trip to Bethlehem when Mary is nine months pregnant, the birth outdoors and without help, the crowds of people, strange visitors—not even the most conservative reading of these texts can put a calm and peaceful face on these events.

If the Jesus we meet in scripture is our model, we ought not to give ourselves or others such a hard time when we find ourselves or others wrestling with griefs and troubles: out-of-wedlock pregnancy, mental illness, alcoholism, debt, divorce, long-term memories of wounds, homosexuality, estrangement, someone in jail,

debilitating grief, Alzheimer's disease, unemployment, major or chronic illness, financial difficulties, conflict with a child. It is the rare family that doesn't struggle sooner or later with at least one of these situations.

And no, I don't believe that sin is the only theological explanation for why this is so. Of course sin is real; we really hurt ourselves and each other. But as Julian of Norwich, the late medieval theologian and teacher, reminds us repeatedly in her "Showings," perhaps sin is a good deal more complicated, and a good deal less blameworthy from God's perspective, than we often want to think it is. All of us are mortal, limited and complex—this should not make us failures in our own or in each other's eyes. This is the way God has deliberately made us.

Sin, as I said, is real, but God supplies real forgiveness for the damage our sin causes. God knows we have no need to use false images of Christmas to demoralize and wound ourselves and each other with unreal, sentimental images of family life.