

Century Marks

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Coming of age in church: Novelist Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*) gives an account of his youth group experience at First Congregational Church in Webster Groves, Missouri, that is more about the awkwardness of adolescence than about God, spirituality or discipleship (*New Yorker*, June 6). His youth pastor, a student at Eden Theological Seminary, was “part Godfather and part Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” and “was mobbed by troubled kids who couldn’t tolerate their parents but still needed an adult in their lives.” The ethos of the group seemed to be shaped by the sensitivity movement of the time. “Everybody and his brother were doing drugs,” and six youths were called on the carpet during a service trip for drug use. Franzen describes himself as a nerdy kid on the fringe of the crowd, but by the time he was a sophomore he was chosen to serve on the group’s highly regarded advisory council. It struck him as “odd that a group offering refuge from the cliquishness of high school, a group devoted to service to the marginalized, made such a huge deal” over anointing “precisely the smartest and most confident kinds . . . as leaders.”

Principled action: When Camilo Mejia was on a two-week leave from military duty in Iraq, he had time to think about what he had experienced. He remembered seeing a young Iraqi dragged by his armpits through his own blood and an innocent man decapitated by U.S. machine gun fire. He realized too that none of the reasons given for the war turned out to be true. So he refused to go back to Iraq, for which he was incarcerated for one year for desertion. While in prison he wrote that the people who called him a coward were partly right: he was afraid of killing innocent people or putting himself in a position in which he would have to kill others in order to survive. He feared waking up one morning to realize he had abandoned his humanity. He had been afraid to refuse and resist this war in the first place and to stand up to the government and the army. To the Iraqi people he writes: “I am sorry for the curfews, for the raids, for the killings,” and adds: “May they find it in their hearts to forgive me” (*Catholic Worker*, May).

First impressions: Malcolm Gladwell, author of the popular book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, was born in Canada to an English

father and a Jamaican mother. He did not look black until he let his hair grow out Afro-style. With the Afro he started getting “stopped and frisked on the streets of America for no other reason than looking like a black American.” This experience of racial profiling was the inspiration for his most recent book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, which delves into the psychology of the “unconscious mental processes we all use to size up a person or a situation with just a few telling details” (*Black Issues Book Review*, July-August).

Rehabilitating Judas: For his betrayal of Jesus and for taking his own life Judas is usually portrayed as the most despicable of biblical characters. But David A. Reed suggests that much of Christian tradition has gotten Judas wrong. We might look at Judas’s suicide in light of the example of Samson: after Samson’s enemies shamed him by shaving off his hair, he pulled down the temple, killing himself and them. Samson’s act was noble and heroic; sometimes the Christian tradition has even viewed it as a symbolic foreshadowing of Christ’s self-sacrifice. Reed argues that in the first century Judas’s act of suicide could have been understood as a calculated attempt to shame the Jewish leaders for crucifying Jesus and for refusing to take back the money they paid Judas for betraying Jesus, as well as a means of atoning for his own sin of betraying Jesus. “Like many figures in the Hebrew Bible, he has experienced atonement in the best sense of the word, though it shocks us that his atonement came about by suicide” (*Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 35).

Explore the Qur’an: Since the Council on American-Islamic Relations began offering free Qur’ans in May (www.explorethequran.org), it has received 12,000 requests. The highest number have come from California (10 percent), followed by Texas (8 percent) and Florida (7 percent).

Altar call: While the Reverend Bryan Akker was performing a marriage at Christ Family Church in Davenport, Iowa, the groom received a call on his cell phone. Turning away from the congregation, the groom took the call, then reported to those gathered: “You won’t believe it, but it was my insurance man. He heard I was getting married and wanted to know if I wanted to upgrade my policy.”

Sins of the parents: The pastor of a Catholic church on Staten Island has started kicking children out of religious education classes because their families aren’t coming to mass. The priest uses the families’ bar-coded offering envelopes to track attendance. Said one parent: “I’ve just never heard of a church kicking you out. They should be more welcoming and sensitive.” But the priest defends his stance, saying

attending mass is an essential part of the Catholic tradition (*Daily News*, June 27).

Ten bloggers (Luke 17:11-18 RSV): And it came to pass, as they were reloading the Jerusalem home page, that in his RSS reader he noticed the suspicious URLs of Samaria.com and Galilee.com. And as he opened a certain Web site, there met him ten bloggers with viruses in their hard drive and they messaged him, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." And when he saw them, he said unto them, "Go and show your template html unto the Programmers." And it came to pass, as they went, their viruses were erased. And one of them, when he saw that his html was restored, pinged back, with a bold trackback glorifying God; and he uploaded a huge blog post of appreciation: and he was not logged in as a member. And Jesus answering said, "Did not the ten bloggers get cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there none found that pinged a trackback to God, except this non-cookied non-logged non-member?" And he said unto him, "Boot up, load up and blog on: your faith has made your code whole" (vaughnthompson.com).