

## TRUE MEANING

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of the 1980s who appeared regularly opposite Meg Ryan in "As the World Turns," now develops one-man religious plays featuring many interactive moments with the audience. "The 3 1/2 Stories of Christmas," which he has performed for nearly 10 years, is about a comical angel-in-training with a Brooklyn accent who comes to understand the deeper aspects of Christianity, including Christ's birth.

"That's one of the things the angel talks about — what is the meaning beneath the giving of presents? The meaning behind it is the gift that God gave," said Runyeon, 51, who has bachelor's and master's degrees in religion (from Princeton University and General Theological Seminary, respectively) and is in the process of becoming a Catholic.

Runyeon said he devised "The 3 1/2 Stories of Christmas" because even such time-honored classics such as Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" avoid mentioning Christ's birth. "I got tired of taking my kids to a play about ghosts in chains to celebrate Christmas. As much as I like 'A Christmas Carol,' it isn't Christmas," the Los Angeles resident explained.

Through his acting, Runyeon also strives to set the record straight on

the advertising world's version of Christmas.

"What happens in a democracy, in a free market, is the merchants define the holidays. We can't talk about the religious meaning," Runyeon said. "We don't understand the deep story because it hasn't been told. It just becomes a superficial holiday ... the story of Christmas obviously has become a way to sell things."

### ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Runyeon's concerns are shared by folks who gathered Oct. 24 at Cayuga County's Scipioville Presbyterian Church for a discussion on the theme "Getting Ready for Christmas." The ecumenical event brought together several denominations including Good Shepherd Catholic Community.

Tom Parsnick, a Good Shepherd parishioner, said he had raised the theme last spring among the Cayuga churches, which meet regularly and call themselves "The Wider Parish."

"I kind of proposed an exchange of ideas — how we could insulate ourselves against the secularism, so to speak," Parsnick said. "Sometimes we need help, and getting together with other Christian groups is nice. They have the same problems, and together you can find a solution."

Parsnick feels that too often, fellow Catholics fall prey to the busyness of the Christmas season. "We think we have all the good intentions,

but you get caught up in it," he said, adding that Catholics could stand to learn from Quakers involved in The Wider Parish. "Just listening to them, they're more religiously focused. I guess you might say that the idea of presents is kind of minimized," he said.

Also on Oct. 24, the Cayuga group explored creative ideas for gift giving, such as purchasing items from Third-World countries and buying greeting cards that clearly depict Christmas. "My complaint is that you've got some nice-looking cards out there, but they don't have the word 'Christmas' on them," Parsnick said.

Another socially conscious gift-giving event, a first-time "Alternative Christmas Bazaar," took place Oct. 31 at St. Anthony's Parish Center in Elmira. Such sale items as coffee, chocolate and crafts all supported farmers and craft makers in developing countries. The sale, organized by the St. Anthony/St. Patrick cluster's social-ministry committee, was designed to help "put 'Christ' back into Christmas," according to a promotional flyer.

"It was a start in the direction of trying to make us think differently. There has to be a better way of celebrating Christmas than getting all stressed out about what you're going to get for somebody, getting to the store on time and buying products from companies that don't have a good track record for social justice," said Michael Lavarnway, St. Anthony/St. Patrick social-ministry chair.

"Basically, these are gifts that we can feel good about giving," Lavarnway added, noting that the bazaar also served to "set aside some need

that television said we should have."

### QUIET TIME

Along with some of these creative approaches to Christmas, Parsnick recommends traditional concerts and prayer services — "just nice events, getting away from all the Santa and the glitz," he said.

Father Bonacci observed that silent reflection is also important during Advent. He noted a story about Cistercian monks at Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard, Livingston County, as described in Father Henri Nouwen's book *The Genesee Diary*, which recounts the author's seven-month stay there. The book describes the monks' pleasure in putting up Christmas decorations, but notes that "a couple of hours before midnight Mass, everything went quiet," Father Bonacci said.

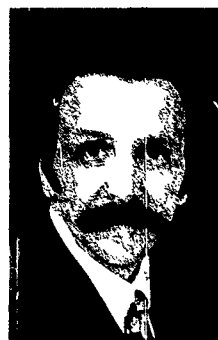
Drawing on this example, Father Bonacci asks his Schuyler Catholic Community parishioners to spend even just five minutes on Christmas Eve to reflect on the meaning of Christmas.

"Before you bundle the kids in the car to go to Christmas Eve Mass, take a few minutes at home. Or, take a few minutes if you're leaving a party, or before going to midnight Mass," Father Bonacci suggested. "Or, before opening the presents Christmas morning, gather the kids around the manger scene and just sit around it."

And don't forget that you can still catch Linus and the rest of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" on prime-time TV, even in an era of political correctness that leans toward removing the word "Christmas" from public places.

"You can try to neutralize, desensitize, sterilize Christmas all you want. But the only reason we have Christmas is because it's the birth of Christ," Father Bonacci said.

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