

# **Homily**

## **Christmas – A**

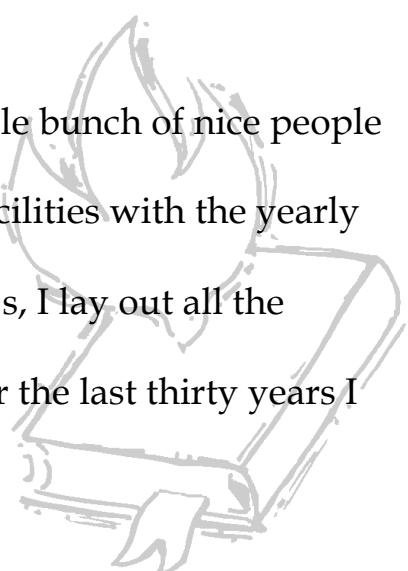
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski  
December 25, 2025

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Each year after Thanksgiving Day, I ask members of our parishes to help set up the decorations in both rectories in which I live to commemorate Advent for Christmas. Towards this end, we put up our trees, and string our lights. We decorate the church early so I can celebrate our Online Masses that you can access at our “Border Town Parishes” YouTube site as well as our parish website (almost nine hundred videos and five hundred fifty subscribers!). With the decorations, we try to put ourselves into that “Christmas Spirit, to get ourselves prepared properly for the commemoration of our Lord’s coming, his incarnation into the world.

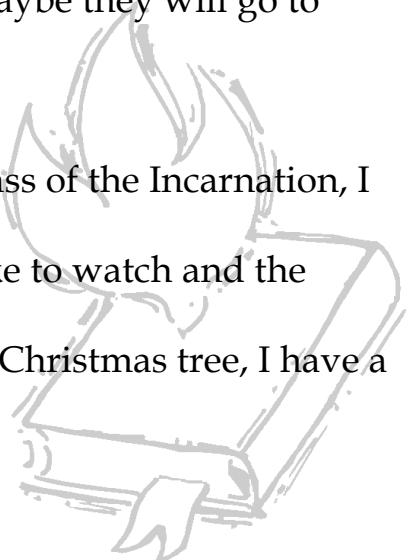
Over both rectories, churches and halls, a whole bunch of nice people clean the buildings, set up the trees, adorn our facilities with the yearly Christmas decorations. In my office at St. Patrick’s, I lay out all the Christmas gifts and decorations afforded me over the last thirty years I





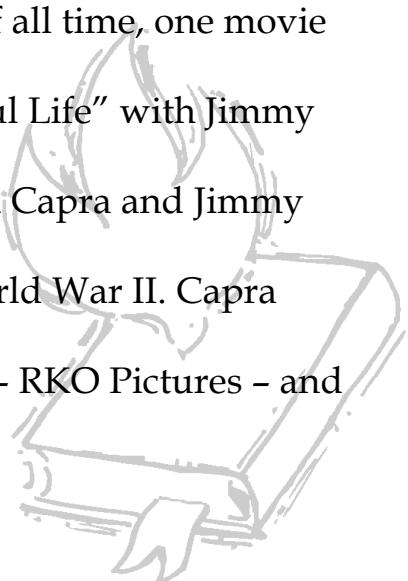
have been a priest. Folks have been nice enough to gift me with toys of the Grinch, the Heat Miser and the Snow Miser and all those Rankin Bass cartoons based on Christmas themes (I like Yukon Cornelius myself). In addition, I also have put up my annual Chicago Cubs tree which was given to me at my last parish from a bunch of second graders who gifted me with this most impressive present (someone online doctored the tree with a little AI and turned it into a St. Louis Cardinals tree - that person will need two our fathers and a Hail Mary and exorcism and maybe they will go to heaven).

So, as I am getting ready for this particular Mass of the Incarnation, I usually upload the various Christmas videos I like to watch and the music I embraced in my childhood. Now, on my Christmas tree, I have a



Hallmark ornament that someone gave me. I cannot stand Hallmark Christmas stories because they're all about the same.. two people meet cute, they fall in love, they have their conflict, Christmastime comes, everyone is happy, they reconcile and live happily ever after. To me, I enjoy the Rankin Bass Christmas stop-motion animation, the movie, "A Christmas Carol" with Alister Sim (I also found a TV version of this show starring Basil Rathbone - Sherlock Holmes and the Four Lads... does any one remember "The Four Lads?"). I enjoy the many versions of "A Christmas Carol," from the one with George C. Scott and Reginald Owen - forget Patrick Stewart and Bill Murray. When I retire in the evening during this Advent Season, I often will watch these movies until I fall asleep - for me, the movies are nostalgic and get me into the Christmas spirit even more.

When critics rank the top Christmas movies of all time, one movie often stands out above the rest - "It's a Wonderful Life" with Jimmy Stewart. As the story is told about the film, Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart returned home from seeing action in World War II. Capra decided to establish a new production company - RKO Pictures - and



this was the film that would make the studio famous, so he thought.. It was 1946 – a time Capra thought would bring the good feeling of Christmas into the households, possibly as a yearly tradition.

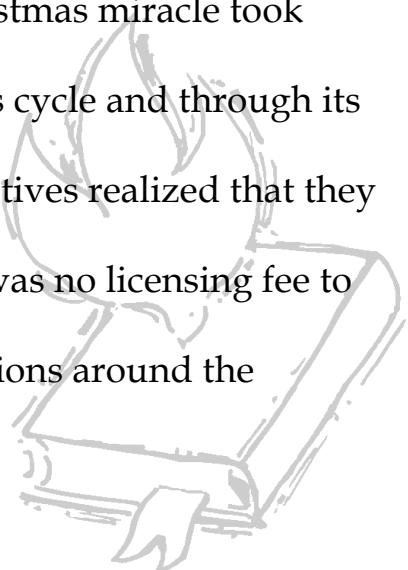
Alas, Capra was proven wrong in 1946 – few went to see the movie at the time and “It’s a Wonderful Life” failed miserably at the box office. Capra tried to make the movie a spectacular one. He brought in Donna Reed to star in her first film role; he hired Lionel Barrymore, a popular actor who, at the time, was wheelchair bound towards the end of his life but was a big star of the day. Finally, he was able to lasso (pun intended) Mr., Jimmy Stewart, who had flown in World War II, had seen a great deal of action and left the war with great case of PTSD – he was shell-shocked after what he experienced during the war.

During the filming of this picture, Stewart had a lot of heaviness weighing on his soul after the war and found it very difficult playing a lighter character in a “feel – good” movie. Nevertheless, Frank Capra hired him because Jimmy Stewart had that “every person quality” that all of us should possess, especially during the months leading up to Christmas. When Stewart felt the pains of the war while filming the

picture, Lionel Barrymore, “Mr. Potter” himself, would pull him aside to encourage him to “lighten up” – what they were doing was to bring entertainment to a people that needed a good message to get them through the season. “We are trying to raise people’s spirits,” Barrymore would tell Stewart – “Mr. Potter”. understood exactly what Capra was trying to convey in this film.

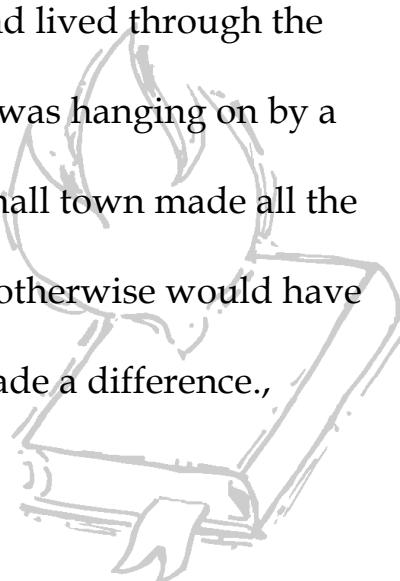
Alas, when the film was released back in 1946, the critics loved the film but few others did. The movie was not a box office hit; it was a bomb. People did not go to see the film and, as a result, RKO Pictures collapsed because of it. Because the movie was a failure, Frank Capra was somewhat distraught – he thought he lost his “magic touch.” Capra had put a lot of resources into this movie, into this film. The film inevitably languished in the RKO vaults, supposedly never to be seen again.

Then, like the movie portrayed, a type of Christmas miracle took place for the film. After the movie ran through its cycle and through its copyright, the next generation of television executives realized that they could broadcast the film for free because there was no licensing fee to play the movie. Suddenly, a good number of stations around the



country began to play this film *over and over and over again*. A successive generation of viewers embraced a movie that their parents and grandparents did not. As a result, stations today often replay this movie every year, even though the Hallmark Channel etc. keep making new Christmas movies that pale in comparison to this one. Along Rudolph and Frosty and the Grinch, “It’s a Wonderful Life” has become a symbol of inspiration for those who understand its meaning. What once was considered a failure became one of the most popular, if the most popular film of all time rated by the critics, even in today’s age.

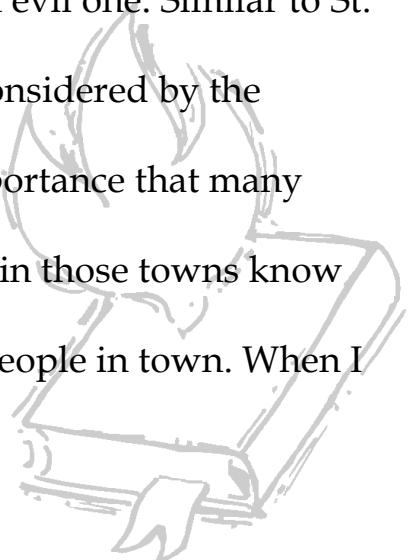
The reason I mention all of this is because in this film, critics would say that there were all kinds of characters that symbolized a redeeming quality that all of us can embrace. Obviously, George Bailey, the one who would not leave the small town to take over his father’s business to make the business prosper, stayed in the town and lived through the trials of life and holding a business together that was hanging on by a thread, coming to realize that what he did in a small town made all the difference in the world to a group of people that otherwise would have been neglected – one person in this case really made a difference.,



Perhaps one might think that Clarence the Angel was the key figure, the one who wanted to win those wings, who wanted to help George Bailey see that he really did have a wonderful life.

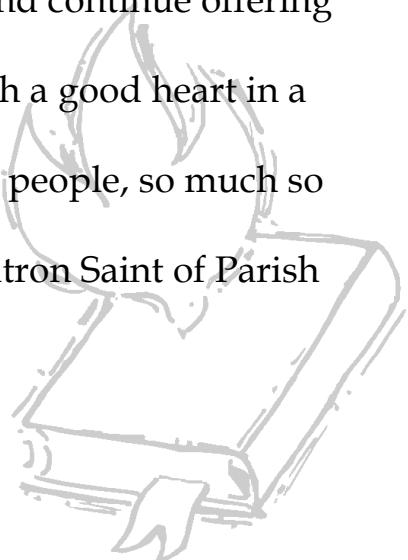
Some people would say the redeeming character was George's wife Mary, who would not leave this small town because she fell in love with a man who did not realize how good his heart really was. at an early age, who did not want to give up and did not want fame and fortune. Played by Donna Reed, all this innocent woman wanted was to move into a dilapidated house that she could rebuild, marry the love of her life and raise a family in the dilapidated house that she kept improving.

For me, the thing about that movie that really affects me and which is why I choose to stay in Momence and St. Anne as a priest is because the movie took place in a city called Bedford Falls (not Pottersville) where the spirit of a good man overcame the spirit of an evil one. Similar to St. Anne and St. Patrick's, Bedford Falls would be considered by the outside a type of nondescript city of no great importance that many would remember, even though the people living in those towns know how really special these villages are. except the people in town. When I



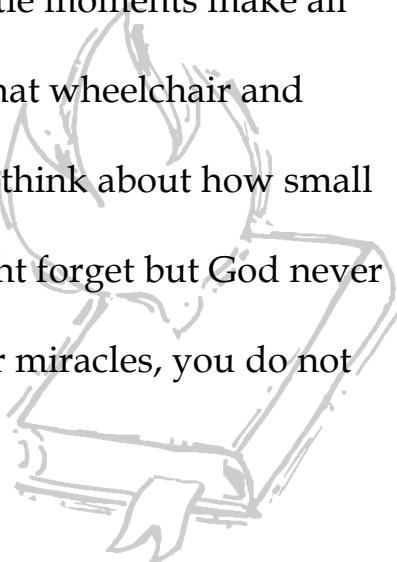
reflect on what St. Anne's and St. Patrick's mean to me, I think about St. John Vianney, a nineteenth century priest from France who was also considered a failure by his classmates and by his seminary professors. As that story goes, his local bishop took pity on a seminarian who could not pass his seminary classes but had a really good heart (kind of like Clarence the Angel). As a result, the bishop placed Fr. Vianney in a similar nondescript town of Ars in France, a village which is not much bigger than St. Anne's itself.

What seminary professors and students considered a failure God did not. Because of his good heart, St. John Vianney made an enormous difference to the people in that small town and beyond, hearing the confessions of the faithful for 10, 12, 14 hours a day. Fr. Vianney experienced his own "dark nights of the soul" and, as a result, kept running away from his ministry, only to return and continue offering grace for those in need. The failure of a priest with a good heart in a small turned out to be an inspiration for so many people, so much so that the leaders of the Church called him "The Patron Saint of Parish Priests.



When I get nostalgic and reflect on small towns and forgotten people by the world at large (and you know that no matter how popular you might be, five minutes after you leave the earth you will pretty much be forgotten by the masses), I thought about that in the stories and the places that I have visited, the small things and forgotten people of life who have a story to tell. For me, no matter what basilicas or cathedrals adorn any given diocese, the miracles I experience in my faith come from small towns and intimate surroundings. Mary's annunciation took place in a small house; Jesus' birth took place in a hole in a rock. Jesus' suffering and burial took place in small, enclosed locations that often get surrounded by large basilicas that do not reflect the intimate grace that is housed within.

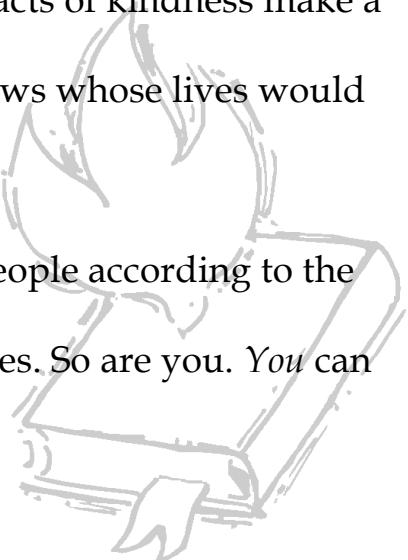
To me, the miracles of life often happen in small towns like St. Anne and Momence. To me, those little places, those little moments make all the difference in the world. Every time I look at that wheelchair and those crutches in the back of St. Anne's Church, I think about how small miracles affected so many people that others might forget but God never does. I often reflect on this – if you are looking for miracles, you do not



have to go that far. Go to St. Anne and look what adorns the back of the church. Go to St. Pat's and one of the most beautifully hidden churches in the diocese. Look at the good people who populate these villages and small towns who experience the big miracle. Look at here at St. Patrick's where less than fifteen people attended any Sunday or weekday Mass in 2019 but now is full of life

Many people do not know that the little towns, the little kind gestures, the little acts of kindness make all the big difference in the world. In my experience, the best fundraiser we have is a smile is a kind word is a kind action towards one another not to tear people down, but to build people up, to tell people they are loved (as a result, Nick Skokna drove to Momence today to drop off a large van of fruits, vegetables and other foods for the needy of the area). Like George Bailey in the movie "It is a Wonderful Life," these little acts of kindness make a HUGE difference to the people sitting in these pews whose lives would have been desolate without his help.

Little actions, little words, little smiles, little people according to the rest of the world are sometimes huge in God's eyes. So are you. You can



make a difference. You *have* made a difference. You have inspired me to stay here to take care of you were other people would not because this small town has made a difference on one person, me. And hopefully I can do the same for you by serving you, by loving you, by staying in these small towns with these small gestures of love and telling you how much I love you as well as every single person that I meet in God's name. Merry Christmas and God bless all of you. This is our prayer.

