

## **Mary and Joseph and the Baby (11/7/2000)**

I don't think they had come for the baptism. In fact, I know they hadn't. But I met them for the first time on the day of the baptism of baby Madeline (little "Maddie"), on November 28, 1999.

The first and strongest impression was the overwhelming stench. I've done thousands of baptisms - in Europe, in Africa and in the USA, but I've never been so overcome by the smell of urine at any other baptism. It seems as if she were an instantaneous converter of all liquids into a heavy ammonia-filled odor. It was hard to stay focussed on the ceremony. I could see and hear people shifting uncomfortably in their seats. It was going to be a long morning. As I poured the water over "Maddie's" forehead, she cooed delightedly - and her parents, godparents and grandparents forgot the odor and smiled in return.

Now, in case you're thinking that little Maddie was the source of the stench or the urine, let me hasten to assure you that she wasn't. She smelled of Talcum powder and clean new clothes. The smell was coming from Lucille, who was sitting in the very last pew (aptly named), just near the exit. She was in her thirties, obese, retarded and homeless. And she plied herself with Pepsi, all the better to keep the "converter" running. Beside her sat Donnie - also homeless and, it became obvious during the course of the day, utterly devoted to Lucille. She might as well have been a movie star in elegant apparel and sprinkled with costly fragrances. He explained apologetically to me that she was incontinent and that they just needed someplace to rest awhile and then they'd be on their way.

Sometimes it's really hard to see beyond the spacesuit and the costume to the ancient, eternal spirit-being inside. It was easy to do it with little Maddie but not so easy with Lucille and Donnie. It was all I could do to not wrinkle my nose as I hugged her during the sign of peace. My vestments stank for the remainder of the mass.

I only saw them once ever again, on El Camino Real near a burritoria on Showers Drive in Mountain View. With one hand he was pushing a Safeway cart that contained all their earthly possessions. The other arm was wrapped protectively around Lucille's shoulders as she trundled along leaving a trail of wetness in her wake, and nursing her ubiquitous Pepsi. They didn't see me and I didn't call out to them. If it were little Maddie and her parents, I'd have honked and waved enthusiastically. But it was only Donnie and Lucille, so I stayed quiet until they had passed. An incontinent Mary, and a toothless Joseph guiding their steel, four-wheeled donkey towards Bethlehem.

Mea culpa!