EDITORIAL

And Who is Jesus, Really?
By I. Rhonda King, Editor In Chief

The once beautiful, baby-pink cover has faded to a dingy grey with brownish spots from mildew and insect droppings. “Our Baby, A Catholic Record,” the title of this book, is still clearly visible; an indelible imprint of a rose pink rosary hangs from a white and pink rose bush with its forever green foliage spanning the front cover. The details of the first six years of my life are recorded between these covers: time, year, location, country of my birth, administering nurse and doctor, weight, height and length; the spaces for circumference of head neck and shoulders were never filled in, the family tree—mostly filled in. Baptism and birth certificates had their spaces too but have since been removed, only the tape stains show that they were once affixed. First photographs, visitor list, finger and foot prints, record of growth, doctor and dentist visits, birthdays, parties, attendees and the gifts received, my first sentence, first drawing and so on.

According to this record, I first “celebrated the Birthday of our little Jesus when eight months old.” I said my first prayer: “Gentle Jesus meek and mild / Look upon a little child, and make me a good child” with my mother’s help when 21 months old. And I first “visited Jesus in His house at the Methodist Church” just before that. I was “aware of family prayers” at the age of three and joined in at four. As with most of these books the enthusiasm for filling in the spaces waned after the sixth year, so the spaces on the last four or five pages remain blank—the dates for First Confession, First Communion, Beginning the Study of Religion and Confirmation have not been entered. But rest assured the activities were completed.

So began my indoctrination in the Christianized society into which I was born. And so it is with most of us; how we respond to the Beyond in Our Midst is rarely a choice, it is framed early—indoctrination by omission or commission and location, location, location. That we all respond (in the broadest terms) seems to be a given. As I journeyed through life, as I moved beyond my sect, as I studied, read and traveled more, I was introduced to other ideas. I learnt that my customs were indeed not the laws of nature and I was free to deselect some, modify others and replace many with what now made more sense to me. What has not changed—if anything it has increased—is the desire/need to contemplate the Beyond in Our Midst.

And who is Jesus, really? Or perhaps more appropriately, how do I understand him now? Who is Jesus to me, is the question I am attempting to treat. It is a big question given the important place he still holds in the world and the myriad responses to his name. My understanding is captured in a slightly modified story once told by the late Anthony de Mello, an East Indian Jesuit priest. My version goes like this:

There once was a fire maker who traveled from village to village teaching people how to make fire. Gradually throngs of people gathered to learn his fire-making techniques. But as his popularity grew, so too grew his disaffection among the priests, who were jealous of the numbers he drew. They killed him. After his death his former students thought of ways to venerate the great fire maker so they made a picture of him, built an altar, hung his picture above it and placed all the fire making tools on it. This was followed by the
development of liturgies and rites in his name; worship has continued for centuries but there has been no fire since.

(The protagonist in de Mello's version was also the inventor of fire. I have elected to portray him simply as a fire maker because it remains unclear to me that he was the inventor since it would appear that other methods and techniques for fire-making were employed in other areas.)

I have come to understand Jesus as one who came to point the way (or a way) but instead of contemplating beyond the finger with which he pointed we have enshrined it. This, I know, will elicit a visceral response from many followers of Jesus. We are deeply divided about what he meant and what it means to follow him: Many followers of Jesus oppose evolution and defend the literal-factual truth of the Bible's stories of creation, in alarming numbers. Yet others were the first to reconcile evolution with the Bible by understanding the Genesis stories as a metaphorical interpretation of the creation story. Followers of Jesus are among the strongest opponents of gay marriage. Followers of Jesus are among the strongest advocates. The examples are numerous. And I turn once again to a little story entitled, "The Guru's Cat," told too by Anthony de Mello. This time I tell it verbatim:

When the guru sat down to worship each evening the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshippers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. / After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat expired, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. / Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed. Taken from "The Song of the Bird"

Superstition is the word often used pejoratively to describe the irrational beliefs of others. To medieval scholars it was a word used to describe beliefs outside of or in opposition to Christianity. It does however refer to any and all notions or beliefs that are not based in knowledge or reason. Still, there is space for rational thinkers to engage that which is not always rational and often cannot be explained, we see that in the great numbers of learned people who remain in the fold of contemplatives of the Beyond in Our Midst, whatever the banner under which it is done.

Over the next two months I will share my exploration of this topic as I look at the various roles of Jesus: social activist and critic, magician or miracle worker, teacher, God; and the bigger picture that often escapes us.