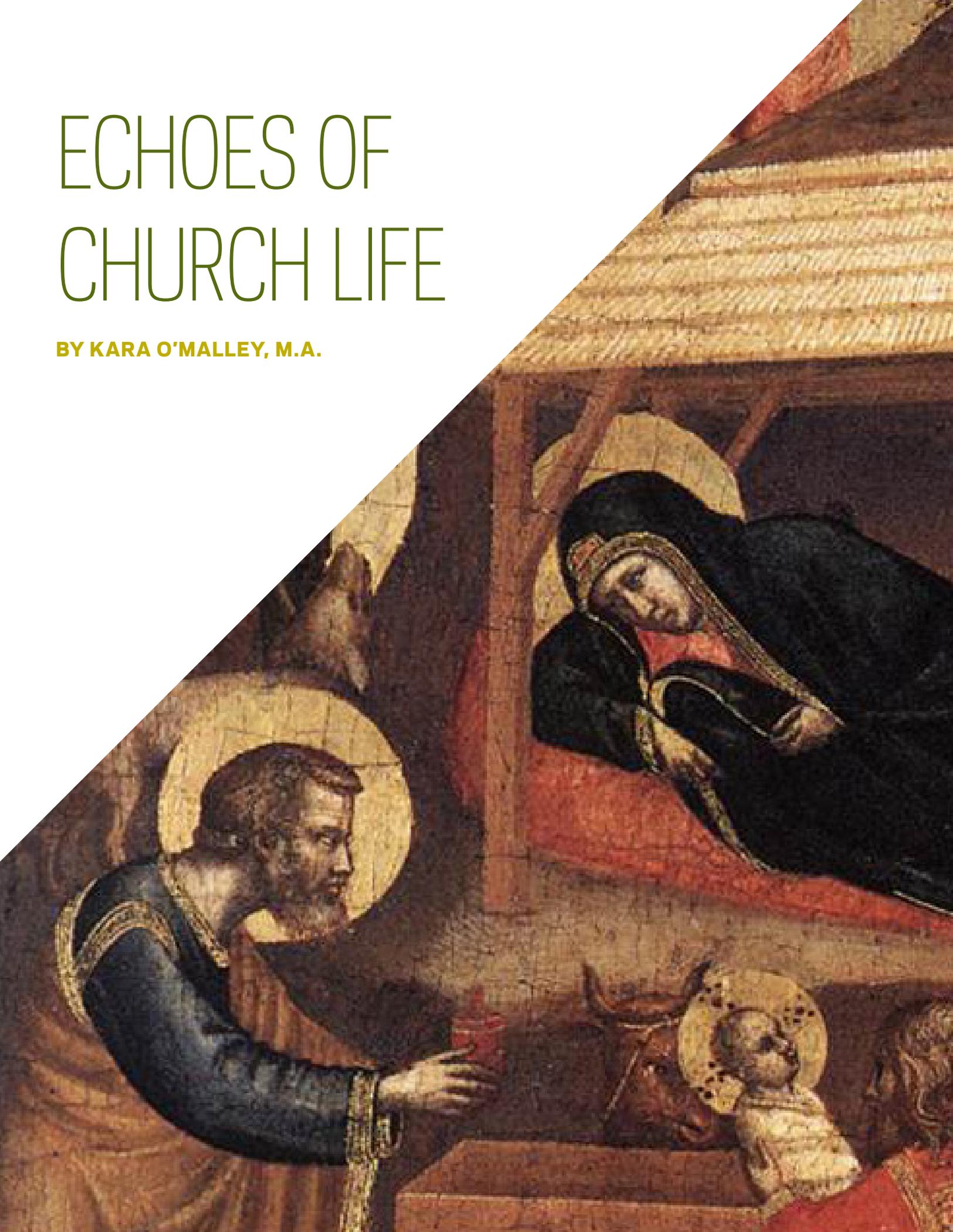
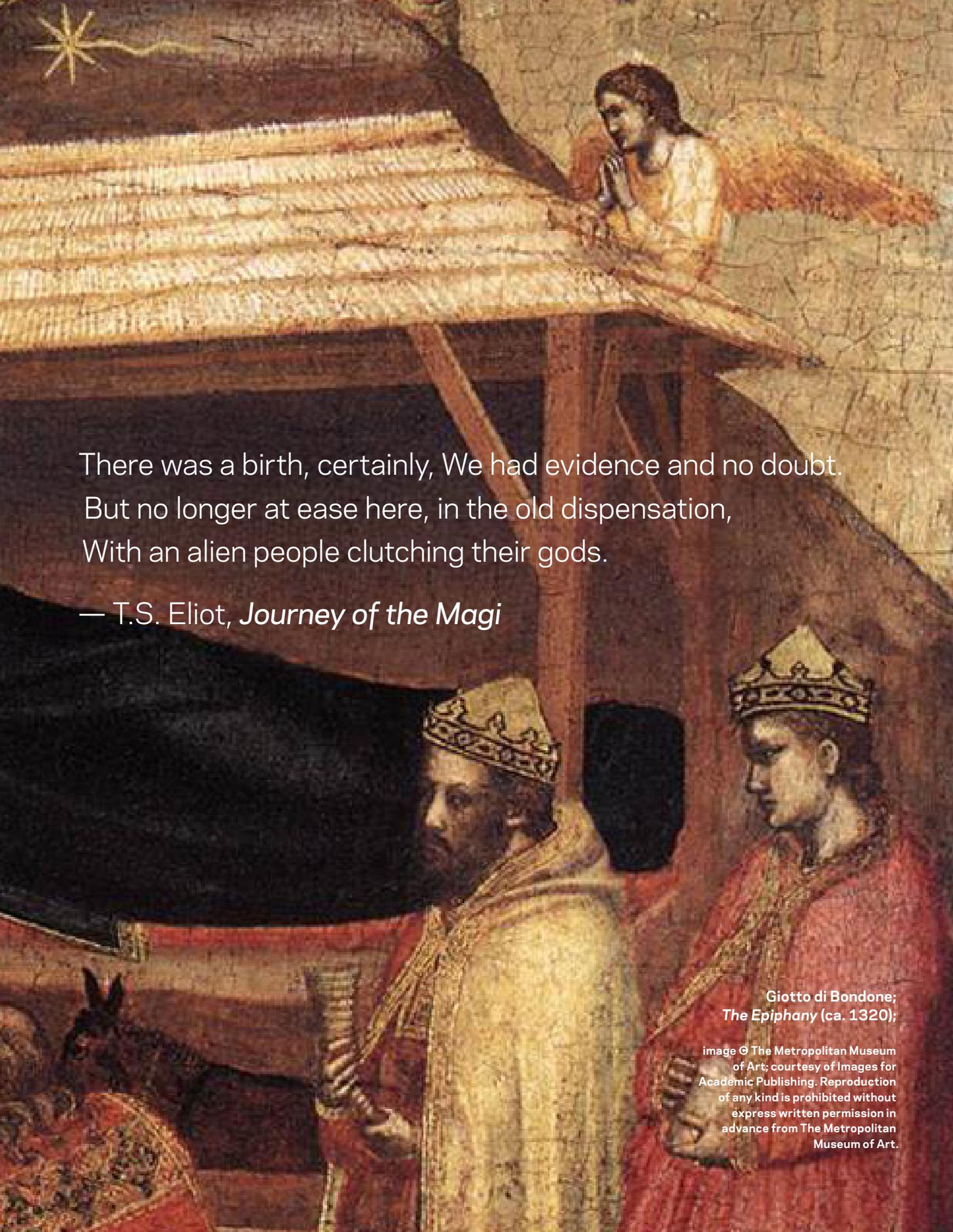


ECHOES OF CHURCH LIFE

BY KARA O'MALLEY, M.A.



A detail from Giotto's fresco 'The Epiphany' (ca. 1320). The scene is set in a stable with a thatched roof. In the upper right, the infant Jesus is shown in a white and gold robe, looking towards the left. Below him, two Magi are depicted in profile, facing left. The Magi on the left wears a gold crown and a gold and red robe. The Magi on the right wears a red crown and a red robe. The background shows the wooden structure of the stable and a dark opening. A golden star is visible in the upper left corner of the image.

There was a birth, certainly, We had evidence and no doubt.
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.

— T.S. Eliot, *Journey of the Magi*

Giotto di Bondone;
The Epiphany (ca. 1320);

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I went back to work six days after my son came home from the hospital.

We were in the midst of an unusual situation—my husband and I were adopting Tommy, and had learned of his arrival in our lives only two weeks before he was born. Lacking the nine month buffer to prepare and make plans, we had to improvise ways in which we could incorporate this little guy into our already scheduled and committed lives while we discerned what would be best for our family life in the long run.

And so I found myself at a First Reconciliation Parents Meeting early in January. I had always thought that a career in ministry would be a good fit with parenthood—I would have flexibility to adjust my hours to his schedule, the capacity to potentially bring him in to the office with me at times, and an understanding boss and coworkers. My expectations were not belied: my pastor was kind enough to let me mainly work from home in Tommy's early infancy, and I would indeed trundle my baby over to the office a couple of times a week. Tommy came with me to a family movie I was coordinating, and to a Confirmation retreat I helped to run. He attended the Easter Vigil, and gamely made it through the entire three hour liturgy (well, he slept for much of it). It all went according to plan.

But something I had not accounted for had happened. As T.S. Eliot put it, I was “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.” My entire world had changed: an earthquake had realigned the landscape so that even familiar things looked fundamentally different. I was not just “adding something in,” as I had previously imagined, I was facing a radical shift in my priorities, my current desires, and my future hopes. While I had endlessly imagined my life with a child, I had not known what it would be for this person to become flesh, to be dramatically and fully present, in my life.

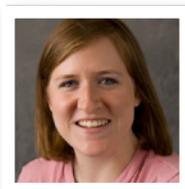
I have pondered the mystery of the Word made flesh many times, in the course of my prayer, and in my work. But I wondered at it anew as I was faced with this mystery of my son mysteriously and wondrously entering my life. The incarnation, the “enfleshment,” of Tommy meant a radical transformation of who I am and what I hope for. It caused me to reevaluate every aspect of my life and of my relationships, of the people and things I give myself over to.

And yet this transformation of life is only a shadow, a reflection of the transformation that has occurred and continues to occur with the incarnation of God in this world, and in my life. My expectations and desires, my hopes and dreams, my words and actions and relationships—all are tempered and formed by the *God-with-us*, who is not a dream or a vision but flesh and blood.

“He by whom all things were made was made one of all things. The Son of God by the Father without a mother became the Son of man by a mother without a father. The Word who is God before all time became flesh at the appointed time. The maker of the sun was made under the sun. He who fills the world lays in a manger, great in the form of God but tiny in the form of a servant; this was in such a way that neither was His greatness diminished by His tininess, nor was His tininess overcome by His greatness.”
(St. Augustine, Sermon 187)

It is wondrous indeed that God chose to take on the flesh of a tiny baby. For who else is more loveable, more worthy of adoration? Is there any other being in life that is so instantly and irrevocably loved than a tiny child? And how capably does the infant teach us about love, through his own unswerving and simple acts of love and trust? Tommy has been a revelation of love in my life, and his presence for me helps me to be a better, kinder, more generous person for others. He has pushed me deeper in to the mystery of Love at the heart of incarnation, the Love that pushes us out of comfort and ease, and into a new life lived for others.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, says John: and we learn, and learn again . . . to hear in that great and simple statement all the glory of the new world, with its new possibilities: new life in Mary’s womb, new life within the increasingly dangerous public world which does its best to squash the rumor, and new life, please God, in our own hearts and lives and families and work.” (N.T. Wright, Sermon Christmas 2007) *And the Word became flesh and lived among us.* This is the new and ongoing reality which changes things, takes us out of our old comfortable dispensation, and plants us right into the heart of God’s creative work. The love of the Word made flesh is an earthquake in each of our lives, a realignment of who we are and what we hope for. Let us open ourselves up to this transformation.



Kara O'Malley is a graduate of Echo 1, a stay-at-home mother, and formerly a youth minister and director of Christian education at parishes in Boston and South Bend.