NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Julie Andrews and the foundation of faith

Robert McClory | Jan. 9, 2014 NCR Today

I was watching "The Sound of Music" (the original movie version) on TV just before Christmas, and there was Julie Andrews, declaring her love for Captain Von Trapp. In the midst of her admission, she sings, "Nothing comes from nothing; nothing ever could." Those words hit me with a powerful force. She was proclaiming in lyrical form the foundation of the Thomistic argument for the existence of God. I thought, Yes, she is right. This is what I think, too. Good for you, Julie.

During the Christmas season, when belief is so essential, I think many of us find ourselves struggling to hang onto the meaning of the words we hear. Our religious experience is not like it was a long time ago, when we took the whole Christmas story literally, along with almost everything else in the Bible. Now we know too much; we're too full of doubt about so many things close to our religious belief. Did the Christmas story really happen or is it a fable written for our edification? Were the census and the stable and the manger birth and the shepherds and that star that moved through the sky all part of a beautiful story meant to solidify faith? The same questions arise for so much in our Scriptures: the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the miracles Jesus performed, even (dare I say it) his Resurrection from the dead.

I listen to the readings at Mass, trying to grasp the spiritual message, but my brain keeps interrupting me. Did these things really happen or were they composed 30, 40, 50 years or more after events by writers determined to pass on their faith? Eyewitnesses they were not. So I wonder which are the very words of Jesus? Which are the real miracles of healing he performed? And which are the things we would like him to have said? And which are the wonders we would like him to have performed? I know what the Scripture scholars say about all this, and I'm not totally reassured.

Talk about the leap of faith! In the old days, I had no trouble with that. It was a reasonable jump of about 3 feet. Now there's an incredible chasm to get across. And I believe a lot of us have to pole vault our way from doubt to belief.

Of course in the old days, we were comforted and supported by our respect for the Magisterium, the church's teaching authority, guaranteed through the presence of the Holy Spirit: If the church says these stories are credible, then they're credible. If the church says Jesus performed marvels and wonders we say, Amen! But that vaunted authority of the Roman Catholic church has taken numerous body blows and suffered serious destabilization, especially in the last 12 years because of a series of missteps, gaffes and revelations of hypocrisy, many connected with the priest abuse crisis. So it's hard to stay calm and just entrust our insecurities to those in charge.

To put it another way, we were once comfortable in our deck chairs on the great barque of Peter, enjoying the warm sun and gentle breezes on our voyage through life. To be sure, some are still lounging comfortably on the big ship, confident that the captain and his staff on the bridge are in control. But many have gone below decks, worrying if the ship is on the right course -- or any course, for that matter -- while still others have lost so much confidence they've abandoned ship and are adrift in lifeboats, wondering when the next storm will come up. Some, too, are so disenchanted they're in the water hanging on for dear life on the side of a lifeboat or just

drifting out to sea.

So I'm looking for something solid to hang onto in this age of uncertainty. I've read a lot on the scientific underpinnings of belief. Last year, I devoured *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* *[1]*. It's a fascinating search, with author Jim Holt looking for some big answers to big questions. He travels around the world interviewing philosophers and scientists. He discusses with them all kinds of theories as to why there is anything at all. Some have elaborate, mathematical explanations, some of which I was able to connect with only dimly. Some of the experts seem uninterested that any seeker should want to go beyond the Big Bang as an explanation for everything. I had great hopes for Holt's Thomistic expert, but he was little help. As to the theory that nothing comes from nothing (and therefore there must exist a necessary, eternal entity), some scientists claimed that something *can* come from nothing. They had created inside a large container an absolute vacuum, so secure that nothing could possibly get in or get out. And eureka! They discovered after some time little specks of matter floating in this perfect vacuum. Their conclusion: Something had come from nothing. My conclusion: These bits of reality were in the container undetected all along or their vacuum wasn't as absolute as they thought it to be.

So I cling (as to a lifeboat) to Thomas Aquinas' old answer. From nothing comes nothing. Every effect has a cause, and no matter how far back you go in the material world (even before the Big Bang) there is a something, a cause, until at some point you encounter an uncaused cause, a self-existing reality. We can't picture that, and we can hardly even imagine it. It is a mystery, but it's the mystery we Christians call God.

If I can find some security in that abstract, mysteriously reasonable beginning and source of everything that exists, I'm better prepared to wrestle with all those matters of belief that aren't so easily settled -- from Adam and Eve to the divine nature of Jesus. Knowing there is a creator-God above and beyond it all, I can rest more firmly in the astounding message of Jesus, even if he didn't say everything attributed to him. Pope Francis says, "If one has answers to all the questions -- that is proof God is not with him." He urges us to be like Moses and "leave room for doubt." This I do. Still, I have confidence in that firm starting point, the uncaused cause whom we worship and who was proclaimed so lovingly by Julie Andrews in the midst of "The Sound of Music."

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Why-Does-World-Exist-Existential/dp/0871403595