

CHRISTMAS IN IDAHO:
BOOK INTERVIEW WITH RAY DOWNING

Hi everyone. My name is Fr. Michael Denk, and I'm so blessed and pleased to interview Ray Downing, who sent me just a beautiful book. It's called, ***Christmas in Idaho***. I was delighted, first of all, when I got this package. I got it when I had COVID, and it just brought me so much joy. When I opened the book, it was absolutely spectacular! It is just such a beautiful book, and this would be a wonderful Christmas gift. I know it's always hard to find people a Christmas gift, but as you'll see as we talk through this book how beautiful it is. I think you might be encouraged to have this Christmas gift.

So, Ray, tell us a little bit about your experience here. I also wanted to just show that you won a number of awards for this, too, so, congratulations.

Ray Downing: The words came from many different places, places that have really no interest in religious places that are specifically interested in religious works, and so we are very gratified that we had a huge audience. You send the book to these people, and they read it. They have thousands of books, but they're looking at it, you looked at it, you feel encouraged that they put value to what you did. It makes you feel happy.

Fr. Michael: I want to start with, I was reading up after this, but your experience with the Shroud of Turin. I think it will be fascinating to our readers as we begin because anytime I ever saw the Shroud Turin online it didn't, I didn't really see anything. It didn't make sense to me. I finally saw a replica of it in the Holy Land. They have a replica of it there, and when I saw it, I could see Jesus so clearly. It was amazing. I know that most people will never get to see the real Shroud of Turin because it's being preserved. You got to see it for quite some time.

Ray Downing: Well, I saw it basically through very, very, high resolution digital images because that's what I work with. They don't let you near the Shroud itself. A couple of people have been allowed to do it in 1978. Really nobody's had that kind of access since. The Vatican now owns it. Probably it was owned by a family in Italy, and now the Vatican owns it. They've done testing on it themselves. Nothing's been published but I happen to know that they have tested it since that group of scientists went and did what the church did, the investigation of it.

Fr. Michael: So, you did the 3D imagery. I'm now in hindsight realizing, I remember seeing that they had recreated a statue from that. You're the one that actually did the 3D imagery and kind of composition of that.

Ray Downing: It was a sort of natural fit because I'm a 3D artist. I work in 3D computer graphics. I have an Emmy in that for individual achievement and a craft, which is something I'm really proud of because a lot of people are doing it these days. What happened is, I had done a show on Abraham Lincoln where I wanted to have Abraham Lincoln come to life, almost alive again, experience you know, and come to life and walk around the screen. There was a documentary being made by the History Channel so I said, "This is what I've got." I showed them pictures, the first pictures of Abraham Lincoln taken since his assassination. Him walking down the street and going upstairs, that kind of thing. They loved it. They just came out of all the offices and said, "Look what this guy did!" So, what I really had in mind was to do Jesus. This is my segue into that. After that show was a success and I got an Emmy, somebody from the History Channel, an executive, came over and said, "What else you got? What are you doing?" I said, "I'm working on Jesus." And he was like, "What!", and I said, "Well this is the Shroud of Turin and it has 3D information encoded in it. It's virtually the only image that has that type of information, and I'm using that information to see if I can get a face associated with the Shroud of Turin. Now nobody knows if the Shroud of Turin is the actual burial cloth of Jesus or not, but that information is there. I could use that, interpolate it, and go as far as I could in making it look like a real person." That was a major hit for the History Channel.

Fr. Michael: I remember that. That just got a lot of press and was fascinating, but I didn't know until watching your YouTube stuff now. As you say, "the 3D imagery was built into that." Tell us, tell our viewers what that means. How is that different than a normal image?

Ray Downing: Good question. Most of the images, photographs, paintings, that we see are 2D. That means you could look at the Mona Lisa, which is a 2D image, and no matter where you move, you're never going to see the back of her head. It doesn't have that information there. It's a presentation of what you look at one moment in time, and that's all you get. If you look at a statue you can walk around and see the back of the head, know if the person has something on their back or not. That's 3D. It means that you have a degree of freedom to observe from different angles. The Shroud of Turin is a 2D image. You look at it, you see the face of Jesus. He's naked, he's got his hands in front; it's got the back to it as well, but if you take that into a computer and you say to the computer, anything that's dark I want to have recede and anything that's light I want to have come forward; it becomes 3D. Amazingly, it has the proportions of a human being. It actually doesn't make nonsense. A photograph will typically just make nonsense. It just looks awful and distorted. This actually has the proportions of a real human being in 3D. Now, you've got to tell one thing about it, that it doesn't give you a statue, just something like

the relief of a coin. It's a low 3D, if you bring it up too much it gets distorted. It gives you what they call a relief, same thing you look at with Lincoln on a coin or George Washington. That's the extent of the 3D information you can get out of it. There's a reason for that, and the reason is that the cloth, which supposedly laid over the body, there is only a little distance between the cloth and the body. You're not measuring from some distant object. You're measuring from something very close, which wraps around, so that distance information is the 3D part of it. So, what you have to do is interpolate that in terms of the way it was made. You have to have the shape of the draping cloth and subtract that information from it. As if Jesus was covered with saran wrap and inhaled. It clings to his face and gives you that extra feeling of who he is. Like if you saw a body with a cloth draped over it, you don't know who that is. There is not enough features there, but if it was inhalable that you could inhale and bring it close to your face you might be able to say, oh that's my wife, oh that's my brother, or something like that. That's essentially what we did. We did that inside a computer using 3D.

Fr. Michael: It's so amazing. Is there anything different about the Shroud than another image? I've heard things that the light came through, that it was almost like a reverse image as opposed to being like just the blood that left the marks there?

Ray Downing: Yes, it's not the blood. There is blood stains on the shroud but the image is a separate image from blood. We actually separated the two. We actually ripped the blood out of the Shroud, as a separate image, and then the body shape as another image. But what you're referring to is that it has a negative property to it. That, in my opinion, and people make much of that, as if there was some sign of the miracle. Having a negative is just not a sign of any miracle. It just happens to be with how the image came to be on the cloth, but we don't know how it came to be on the cloth. We don't know if it was radiation. We know there's not a lot of paint on it that could make the image. It's just like the fibers of the image are aged, that they've gotten not quite burnt but sort of aged by exposure to heat. Much like if you put too much bleach on a cloth, it'll eventually yellow on the cloth, and everybody who does laundry knows that, that over time white things become more yellow. With that kind of effect. But the fact that happens to be negative is entirely accidental. It has to do with the process that made the image, and what was the process, I don't know, and nobody else does, even though they tell you. And nobody knows if this is the actual burial cloth of Jesus or isn't. There are people who like to pretend like they know, but if I don't know, nobody knows, and if the Vatican doesn't know. They have full access to it. They would have come out and announced it, and they haven't done it because they don't know. I think the best and safest thing is to just say this is a strange thing. I've never seen

anything like this and I'm an image expert. I mean, I was called when it was the attempted assassination on Ronald Reagan because they had pictures that they needed to clarify. They didn't go to anybody, they went to some artist guy who had demonstrated skills at analyzing images, and that happened to have happened to me. So, when I tell you I don't know what this is, I cannot tell you what the Shroud of Turin is, I think you have to rely on that, because if I could tell you I would. I'd love it if it was authentic. I don't know.

Fr. Michael: It remains a mystery.

Ray Downing: I can tell you as an inspirational image, it's fabulous. I mean it tells you the whole story of the crucifixion and resurrection in very real terms. If it was created by a person, that person is some kind of genius. It's just an amazing image, and I think we can take inspiration from it and wonder about what it actually is.

Fr. Michael: How does it tell you the whole story?

Ray Downing: Well, it's got it's got the scourge marks. I'll mention one thing that people don't realize. The gospels don't tell you that Jesus was nailed to a cross, they didn't tell you. It's people that interpolate that information from something that happens with Thomas. Thomas wasn't there when Jesus first appeared. He says, "Unless I put my fingers into the holes." That's the only reference to holes in the crucified Lord. It's an interpolation of what Thomas said, but it never tells you he was nailed to the cross. When you look at the Shroud you see the nail wounds, you see the mark of the spear in the side, you see the beating, you see a swollen cheek from falling down. It tells the whole story. Then what happens in the gospels, Jesus isn't there. The tomb is empty. The Shroud of Turin depicts the empty tomb. Whose burial shroud is around without the body in it? Where is the body? It's the empty tomb scenario. It's a very, very beautiful metaphor if it isn't real, and if it is real, it's extraordinary. The cloth is mentioned in the gospels because it's what convinces the apostles on Easter morning that something extraordinary had happened. Seeing the cloth, they believed.

Fr. Michael: Yeah.

Ray Downing: What did they say? They don't tell you. There's a lot of things the gospels don't tell you, by the way, which they should. There are good reasons why they don't tell you having to do with the audience they're speaking to because they wouldn't understand it. But it has all those qualities into one image. They could come out tomorrow and say we now know it's not authentic. I would still be fascinated by it. I think it's the greatest depictions of that part of the story that I've ever seen, including the stuff I've done.

Fr. Michael: Excellent. Thank you. You can find more about that online. That's on your website? I know I found it on YouTube.

Ray Downing: Yeah, it's on our website. It's on YouTube, raydowning.com and raydowning.com has all that information and imagery and a lot of the story in the blogs.

Fr. Michael: Good. We'll move into the other mystery of the Incarnation. We'll talk about as we go through the book, that you tie this together so beautifully at the end of the book. The Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, and, also, the suffering, death and resurrection come into this book. It's a beautiful story. It starts off with the very kind of traditional Christmasy wonderland. It begins with a snowman out in a children's front yard. It was interesting that you wrote this because it's so beautiful and poetic. When I found out you were a 3D computer imagery artist, usually those two things don't come together. You are definitely a wonderful illustrator with your words and poetry.

Ray Downing: Thank you. I've been an illustrator my whole life. It's what I've done for a living. As the technology has changed, I was doing paint. I was doing big tempera paintings in the beginning. That dates back to the pre-Middle Ages. There's Roman egg tempera paintings. As the technology changed and the demands change, I would change with it, and wound up being a 3D computer graphics animator. Animation is different than illustration in that you add time to. Illustration stays like it is. That's illustration. When that illustration moves and does stuff, that's animation. With computers you can do both from one set of images, from one set of data, that you create. In terms of writing, I got into writing very late as I started doing more video, and people wouldn't know how to write scripts. I would come in and write the script and then animate it, and I went to paint the whole thing. That's what led me to start exploring writing as an outlet.

Fr. Michael: I just want to read the first paragraph of the forward. *"The first snows of winter are the magical ones. The restlessness of dusty autumn gives way to the peaceful tinkle of the first flakes which drift down and light upon the carpet of dry leaves. The air is filled with the feeling of anticipation and the season is driven by the winds of inevitability. Christmas is coming and the earth greets it with snow-covered rooftops and crystal lace tree bows. You sense it physically, but deep in the recesses of your consciousness there is something more, an intangible thing which pulls then vanishes. There is a feeling never fully realized which will fade with the season, be stowed away in the attic and imprisoned in time until the calendar flips to the next December."* It was so cool for me to read early on in Advent and just enter into the wonder. I struggle a lot with darkness, and I probably have seasonal affective disorder. I just love the sun. Reading this helped me want to enter into the snow and the season of

Christmas. From the first paragraph that I read I was entrapped. As I started to read it, I realized that you had also sent me the CD. I put the audio CD in and then I was even more blown away. The narrator that you have is just so good. And the music, this beautiful classic Christmas music goes along very, it's very choreographed to what's happening in the book. For me it just totally set the mood of Christmas, kind of the traditional nostalgic Christmas that we have. Then it enters into the real reason of Christmas towards the end of it. Tell us about that process of production.

Ray Downing: One of the things that was driving me is, I feel like Christians need to take back Christmas, that it's being lost, becoming so secular that the reason for the season, as they say, is gone. It's anything but Christ, a, b, c, anything but Christ will go. It can be about your dollar, it can be about a romance, it could be about anything, as long as Christ doesn't come into it. It's almost like, they say that they love the fruit but hate the tree. Get rid of him. My motivation for doing this book to say, "No, I can keep all the good parts and I can have Christ at the center of it." That's what drove me with it and where I say, the feelings of Christmas fade with the season and are stowed away in an attic, because when you have a secular Christmas, nothing comes of it. You go in it, you come out a little poorer and no better, because something is missing from it, and that's the reason for it. That's a recent phenomenon. That's only since the 1900s, that that started and continued into this. So much so that 93% of Americans celebrate Christmas. How many of those people admit to being Christian? It's dropped from 2010 to 2020 by 20%. You keep that up and Christianity is a thing of the past.

Fr. Michael: Yeah.

Ray Downing: And Christmas means nothing, and you're the same. You don't benefit from it. This is something, Christmas, Christ's coming, is of cosmic importance. This is not just an historical event, It's an historical intervention. It's in the history of humanity, a deity right? And they want to dump that? We can see today what comes with dumping that, what kind of people you have, what kind of atrocities are committed. It's, why is this happening? You don't have to guess. You don't have to look too far. We're losing that one thing we had going for us which took us from mortal beings to something more than that. That's in the gospels, and that the spirit of God dwells within you. Being lost. So, my motivation in doing this is I want to keep all the cool stuff, all the good stuff, but I want Christ right back in the middle of it. I developed a writing style. I wanted not to be too descriptive. I wanted declarative sentences and understated so that the mind fills in the blanks, because that's much more engaging than spelling everything out to people. They participate in the creation of the book as they read it.

Fr. Michael: That's very much what you did, it is my imagination. I teach how to pray with your imagination and enter into the scripture passage. With this book, as I was reading through it, was just so cool to enter into these scenes to experience. We'll talk the snowman, what's his name I forget?

Ray Downing: Idaho.

Fr. Michael: The name of the book, yeah. He's given this old potato bag that he has, but the image of him looking into this house and wanting to be part of a family, it was just spectacular to enter into the beauty of this. You use images of angels, of snowmen, of children, all of these things that we associate with the secular Christmas, and they're not. Snowmen are but angels aren't. But you use all of these images that are on our mind in American Christmas. But as you said, as it goes through, you kind of surprise us with Christ at the end.

Ray Downing: Yes, absolutely. One of the things about the notion of time, it is one of the things that goes throughout the book as a subtext because there's great mysteries associated with time. As it happens with Idaho, the snowman, Idaho comes to Christmas as it is now, and he experiences the celebration now. He has no idea what it's about so it's backward in time. Then he goes back and along the way discovers what it was about from the beginning. So, it's a reverse time story, and that gives a little extra bit of interest to it because you're seeing it through the eyes of a snowman who doesn't have any yesterday. It just came into being on Christmas Eve just like Jesus. He's coming from that same position and learning about Jesus just like Jesus as a baby developed similarly about himself as a man. It's a neat little tie in, and we get all new again through the eyes of the snowman.

Fr. Michael: Beautiful. *“Christmas Joy: The night was growing colder, and Idaho's need to know overtook his shy and cautious nature. It must be added that the growling in his stomach and his recollection of the family dinner added impetus to his decision. Idaho found himself slowly lifting the latch and leaning into the front door, the door moaned. And, carefully, silently, he closed it behind him. The stairway to upstairs was behind him and just to the side a short hallway. Idaho could see some light in the room beyond. He was there in an instant and poked his head through the doorway. The Christmas tree glowed in the corner and flowered couch sat across from it.”* We have this beautiful image of the Christmas tree which, again, we're all very familiar with. His encounter with the tree, I don't know if I'm reading into this but I couldn't help but think of the end when we see the wood of the cross as being tied to the Christmas tree. That, for me, was just a kind of a profound thing. When I look at a Christmas tree now, I will probably think of the cross.

Ray Downing: That's a metaphor that I played throughout. It goes from the mullions on the windows as he looking through the window observing this

family's Christmas, those cross shapes reflect on him and interfere with his vision, to some extent. And then that other tree, the tree beyond it which is the Christmas tree, when he was just seeing the house from the window there, and then it occurs at the end as well. That connection between the tree and this horrible tree used for this awful purpose of crucifixion play against each other. It's just part of the imagery and the literary nature of the story.

Fr. Michael: I thought this part was really good, too, I think, for anyone that's struggling with loss during this time. You have Chapter 6, which is about the darkness within and him realizing his own mortality as a snowman. I think this plays into the paschal mystery of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, but also the paschal mystery of each and every one of our own lives. Talk a little bit about that dealing with darkness at a time where this is supposed to be joyful.

Ray Downing: Well, Idaho goes into the house and the experiences Christmas and all the wonders of it, the food and the drink. Everything's cool, everything's wonderful until he opens a book about a snowman, Frosty the Snowman, and sees that he's warm. Frosty melts. Idaho didn't think of that. Now he realizes that no matter how cool, how wonderful, joyous everything is, he's warm. That's the very problem Jesus was sent for. People who lose track of that, that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is a demonstration, a scientific demonstration of what is possible. It doesn't seem possible and atheists don't believe it was possible and believers believe it's possible. Idaho is now motivated to learn something more about the world around him and his relationship to it because of his mortality. That's what should be with us and the hope, the only hope. Nobody gets out of here alive. I'm fond of saying, nobody gets out of here alive. Only one person survived and that was Jesus. Unless you're part of that, you're done. The hope that comes from Christmas, Jesus coming into the world, is a hope of immortality. You can't disassociate Christianity from immortality. It's not just "don't hit your sister" and "be nice", it's something more than that. It's trying to save your own life, and Jesus demonstrated the possibility of that. There's a connection, by the way, for believers with atheists, a real intimate connection. Atheists, no matter what they say, they're not profound philosophical arguments. No matter what they say, they come down to criticizing specific religions, Christianity being a big target. What they don't say is, it's just impossible, the whole thing is impossible. The miracles are impossible, the resurrection impossible, walking on water is impossible, it's all impossible. That's why we don't believe it. That's pretty honest. So, why do Christians believe it? Because Jesus demonstrated who he was by doing the impossible, and we believe that that demonstration is sufficient cause to put our faith in him. Does it come down to, were the evangelists who wrote the gospels, telling the truth or not, because it just

comes down to that? You have to completely rely on what these folks said? No, you don't, because you can have a personal experience of it. That's what you bring up with prayer and making a relationship with God. On an even different level, you can actually do scientific research which bases what you think the construction of the world is based on what Jesus demonstrated. In other words, if these things are true, it's like discovering something in space that you go, eh. It's just an object, that quasar shouldn't be doing that. It's the wrong color, it's periodic. Our theory, our standard theory, doesn't account for that phenomenon. Then, what do you do? Do you go and throw out the data, you throw out the information? No, you amend what you think, you amend your theory to include that. Jesus is a phenomenon. These things happened, and if they happened, they had to be real events, and they were. If you had scientific tools there, and Jesus did one of his miracles, what would the temperature of the person that he cured be before, what would it be after? What would the blood count be on the lady who had an issue of blood? What was her blood count before and what was it after? We don't have those tools, okay, but you can say, to make this possible, what would we have to say about the nature of the physical world? Do a phenomenological study of the Jesus phenomenon and use that as the basis for theorizing the nature of the world and their relationship to it. You know who's done that? Nobody. Nobody's done it. All the believers and all the believers who happen to be scientists, there's not one of them since Kepler, I guess, that actually did that type of study, something I've been working on for the past 40 years. I have absolute faith in it. I think the predictions are real, and that is the second part of this journey. That is going to be a second book as a follow up to this, which tells you what's under the surface of this book and what I found. I have a feeling it's not going to be just written by me. I'm probably going to pull some of my scientific, which are world class physicists, by the way, because I've had relationships and conversations with people at the highest level of theoretical physics. I'm going to invite them to come in and comment. If they can shoot me down, well. If they can't, then you have to pay attention to it. I think Christ is pivotal in science, in our lives, and in our eventual salvation from death. It's not just salvation from sin because all of us sin. You can't help but do it, it's part of the world we live in. I think our association with the world we live in is a sin. Jesus is the only one who offers the promise of eternal life and there is part of us that doesn't want to die. That seed that's within us. It's not like an animal, you know. We anticipate it, we fear it and we don't want to go along with it. I certainly don't.

Fr. Michael: So, Idaho goes on this journey. Once he realizes he's mortal and going to die, he goes on this journey. While he's walking through the woods he finds a dead rabbit, and I think he's even more than confronted with this idea of death. What's the significance of that?

Ray Downing: Well, the robin is in Christmas mythology because of the red chest. People have been telling stories about how a robin was there at the time of the crucifixion. So, I felt it was a nice thing to keep that kind of imagery within the book. It shows you that Idaho is learning from his experience in the world. He's starting to believe in his mortality. He read it in a book about Frosty the Snowman. Now he's seen it. That bird is dead. Its feathers are just randomly moving in the breezes, and it's limp. Its head is broken, and now there's no question. Idaho knows that what he read and what he has seen is true, but what he hasn't seen is somebody overcome that. That's what we're just talking about.

Fr. Michael: Yeah, and I think that this part really hit me, for people that may be grieving the loss of a loved one and how to how to process that at a time where sentiments are so heightened. This will especially be a time when people will come to see me as a priest because everybody wants Christmas to be perfect and beautiful. Sometimes there is heartache and difficulties. So, he's walking through the snow and he sees this little town. He's looking over the edge; he sees this beautiful church in the distance. I just want to show you some of the graphics here. This is where the story begins to take on this religious understanding where he approaches the church. You mentioned, again, there was a Christmas tree. *"There were Christmas trees surrounding the stable and farm animals resting near the manger. Idaho glanced down at his cap which he held in front of him, and caught sight of the robin. It was so silent and peaceful in that stable. Idaho tore a piece of burlap from his tattered vest and wrapped it around the robin. He lovingly placed the dead bird on a patch of straw near the baby surrounded by the other animals. Idaho was glad that he had not abandoned the robin in the dark and angry woods. This was a peaceful place, and they could stay there. Idaho took a seat in the first row pew close to the Manger and studied the baby whose arms were stretched out towards him. 'You, see I'm a snowman,' He composed a short speech of introduction in his mind. 'and, babies don't melt, but you see snowmen do, and this is my birthday, too.' He collected himself and continued, 'You see, I started out fat and round. But I'm planning on losing weight soon, but when I lose it, I'll lose it all.'* Idaho shook with emotion and slumped back on the bench unable to go on. He had not uttered a single word but his hands gestured with each and every sentence he had intended to deliver." So, he has this glimpse of a real family in the home, and now he sees this image of the Manger, and he sees this image of the Holy Family with the infant stretching out his hands to him. Give us some background on that scene, how you transition to that.

Ray Downing: Exactly what you're indicating, it's making a parallel between the beginning of the book and now he's beginning a new segment of his book. He's seen Jesus. He's introduced to the notion of Jesus. He doesn't know the

resolution to his quandary about mortality. He doesn't know any of that. He's going from one family to an additional family. Interestingly enough, that vision of Christmas trees surrounding the stable is something I remember from a Catholic Church, St. Jerome's in Brooklyn, that I used to go to as a child. They had, they must have had like a dozen Christmas trees, small ones, surrounding this stable. I loved it. You could smell them, you know? I said, 'I'm going to use that image because that meant so much to me.' So I start the scene with that image at the stable surrounded with Christmas trees. Connecting to now, Idaho is beginning to find a new family, a family that he can relate to, which is ultimately going to be the solution to his problem, his dilemma, that he's going to melt. No way out of it, you're going to melt, and he's attracted to this scene and being invited by those hands outstretched toward them.

Fr. Michael: When I was a child, I used to love setting up the Manger scene under my parents Christmas tree, and I would just spend hours there in wonder, just contemplating that scene. I always encourage the people that are growing in their prayer life, at some point before Christmas, to really spend some time meditating on the Nativity because he's inviting you, too. He's inviting all of us to come to him, to enter into this mystery of Christmas. and I think to come as we are, in whatever brokenness, that we have fear of. Our own death, if we're going through illness, if we're struggling with some great sin, if we feel broken, if we aren't able to feel God's presence, to come to him and just meditate on that beautiful scene of the incarnation. I think St. Francis gave us such a gift when he introduced that to the world. It's kind of cool having the Idaho the snowman in reverence, just in awe before the Christmas scene.

Ray Downing: I have seen images of sculptures, you know Christmas knickknacks where they have Santa Claus kneeling in front of the Manger, and I'm sure that was in my mind, to some extent, that Idaho has to do that, too, because it's poignant and it's true, everything, bend the knee in front of this scene of this family. For people who are grieving, I believe this story has an offering for them, too. There's a lot of reasons to not want to participate in Christmas. It stirs up an emotional state. No matter what beats you down, there's hope coming from Christmas, from the original Christmas.

Fr. Michael: What is that emotional state or what what's behind the emotion that you're feeling?

Ray Downing: I think it's just what I poured into the book. It's just that the book is really an outpouring of everything I know and my understanding of it. It's saying okay, this is where I'm coming from. If you see value in it, that's great. There is a real problem here and there is a real issue. No matter how you

get beat down by death, or this or that, your own death or sickness or whatever, there's hope.

Fr. Michael: I think that's why I was so moved by the book and am moved by the book. I just want to share it with my viewers because it allows us to come into this story in our present state of life, and, just like you said, with Santa kneeling, Idaho kneeling in reverence before the Holy Family. To come as we are with whatever thoughts we have of Christmas and bring all that before him. When we come to him and discover that mystery of God becoming flesh in the incarnation, giving himself to us as this child, a child that will never hurt you, a child that just wants to receive you. There's such a warmth and a safety there that dispels all the darkness and all the suffering and all the difficulty. But as we're as he's gazing upon this nativity scene so beautifully, he notices something behind it. This chapter is called, "The Deadly Silence." *"The snow man's eyes set steadily on the stable, and for the first time he noticed the Angel who hovered above it. Idaho was glad to see its graceful female form again, and his mind recalled the tree in the house where the children lived. Then, just for a moment, Idaho's weary mind got the impression he was back at the children's house seeing that window with its wooden mullions crisscrossing his field of view and seeing the tree. It seemed like it was there just behind the stable and the church wall. Idaho was mistaken, and as his vision refocused on that back wall Idaho realized, he was seeing a tree, but it was not a Christmas tree. It was a tree fashioned by the hand of a man a hideous mullion upon which a young man was hung. Two iron nails were driven through his hands to the accursed wooden horizontal axis and another nail pierced his feet holding them to the vertical member. The young man's eyes were fixed upon Idaho and Idaho felt a lump in his throat as he stared back. Idaho's heart owned such a sorrow that he thought it would break. This was what had become of that infant, loved and adored at birth, stripped and affixed to a cross unable to detach himself and murdered. Idaho's mind went blank. He could barely see and yet, somehow, he found his way to the foot of the cross."* He sees right there, in Catholic imagery and iconography too, the wood of the Manger has always seemed to be a close connection with the wood of the cross, that from the very point of his incarnation, his purpose would be to come to suffer and to die for us. We shift to this horror of the scene, for a moment, until there's some glory. Why introduce horror into this Christmas story?

Ray Downing: Because people become numb, especially in the world you live in. You live in churches and these crucifixes are all over the place, and the horror of it, because you were introduced from the get-go to it. This is a person that somebody chose to end his life and nailed him to a, my God! But you become numb to it because it becomes just a fixture on a wall. Here I wanted to make it real and say, "wait a minute take a look at that again." Realize what

this is depicting. It's people doing this to another innocent person. The fact that people still do this kind of thing is amazing. It's almost like there's no hope for us. In the book of hope, I want to present that hopeless situation for the savior. You think you're in trouble. Take a look at this. Look at it. This is real. It relates back to the Shroud of Turin. Don't forget the cross as a symbol in science and mathematics is the cartesian two-dimensional coordinate system, which is the coordinate system between flat paintings. They remade the car, eventually made it three-dimensional, which is what I use to create the artwork that you're seeing here, too. That integral is the story of the shroud, three-dimensional in a two-dimensional way, and Jesus nailed on the cross, unable to move off that two-dimensional axis until he finally does it in an impossible direction. You can take that as being imagery and flowery, and that has nothing to do with the reality of story. I think it has everything to do with the reality of story. I think Jesus orchestrated the whole thing. I think he knew what he was doing. Did Jesus know how he performed his miracles? Or was he like Superman, he took three bounds and was flying through the air. Did he know what he was talking about? Did he know what he was doing? Is there a mechanism of action underlying the Jesus phenomenon? I think there is. I think he knew what he was doing. He's talking to people from 2000 years ago. How specific could it be about what's going on? He left us evidence and it is for us to figure it out. I think there's a lot of information to be learned. I keep trying to do that. Two-dimensional fixture across is three-dimensional. We're told we live in a four-dimensional spacetime continuum. It's not true, isn't true. That's what the next book is going to show you. There's a mistake being made. People know it's a mistake. Know it's not true. Einstein knew it wasn't true and rejected it. He died refusing medical attention, and this is what was bothering him. It's wrong. We don't think we have in the world around us what we've been told we have. It's not true. It's been fudged. The world is a simpler thing than you take it for. It's getting a lot of its attributes from you, you're enabling it. That's what Jesus is demonstrating. Do the worst. Give me everything you got, and I'll show you guys. That's just the way I view the resurrection. That's why in a Christmas book, you have the birth, and you have the crucifixion, and you have the resurrection. It's the gospel, the book I wrote is the gospel. We have to come to grips with it, like you say, including the horror of crucifixion, but don't get numb to it. Look at it for what it is.

Fr. Michael: Yeah, and this is where I like, too, that Idaho has this experience of compassion. He begins to see what has happened to him, and I think, momentarily, maybe forgets about his own mortality, but sees this, *"And a snowflake teardrop fell into Idaho's open palms as he knelt shaken and motionless before the crucifix.* He could no more abandon this broken and bleeding figure than he could have left the Robin in the dark woods. And then, where in this young man's tragic fate seemed not to matter, *'I am here now,' the*

snowman thought, *'and I don't want to leave you hanging there alone, back then.'* So, he has this beautiful moment of compassion. The teardrop falls, and we learned that that becomes snowflakes. *"Suddenly, while he's kneeling and praying in adoration, holding that snowflake in his hand, there is a single word spoken, 'Idaho'."* That word, of course, is Jesus, the resurrected Christ, speaking his name. We always hold our names to be something so important. When we baptize somebody, they're given a name. Many, when they enter a religious order, they're given a new name. For us to be called by name by God is something so beautiful. "So, Idaho hears his name called," and this chapter is, "The Impossible Encounter". *"Idaho jumped to his feet. He turned toward the door of the church, but it remained shut. No one stood in the aisle. His eyes quickly searched the pews of the church, but the pews were dark and empty. He looked up at the ceiling. His eyes scanned the wooden beams and stained- glass windows. Nothing. The church organ sat quiet and still in the corner. The bells and the belfry remained motionless. Idaho turned and once again faced the crucifix, which hung on the wall in the still darkness of that church and fell to his knees. He was gone. The trap was empty. Two wooden sticks hanging on the wall. He hears his name again, 'Idaho'. Idaho's lips trembled, and he was about to cry when he felt two hands take hold of his hands and lift him to his feet as if by a gentle breeze. Idaho could see bloody holes in the wrist of those hands where the skin was torn and bruised. Idaho momentarily glanced back at the empty cross. In his mind the wonders, joys and terrors of that night had all collided and distilled into this single impossible moment. In bewilderment the snowman's gaze turn once again to the figure. The shyly, slowly eyes drifted upward, and for the first time he beheld that face."* We have this image of Jesus now coming to Idaho in the resurrected form. All of these sweeping different emotions that he's had, the warmth, the family, the Nativity, the robin, the suffering, seeing Christ crucified, all of a sudden, there's this clarity of Jesus' face. *"Spontaneously, Idaho reaches out his stout arms to embrace the young man, and, miraculously, he did."* We have this image of this embrace as the two come together. What I think is so beautiful is that Idaho melts away into Jesus, into that embrace, and the two become one. Very much a mystical experience of the incarnation, that Jesus wants to become one in our flesh, to take upon all of our sorrows, our struggles, and also lead us into this Pascal mystery ourselves, where we enter into this story of his birth, suffering, death, resurrection. So powerful.

Ray Downing: Yes, I think the point I'm trying to drive home there is there is one survivor. There's only one. There's no other way. Unless you are part of that, like Idaho becomes part of that, you have no chance. You've got to be that survivor, and that survivor is Jesus, the only person in history that has beaten death down and overcome.

Fr. Michael: It's easy to see for Idaho, he's going to die he's a snowman, right? I think you've made it so clear that we all are. If we can encounter him, if he can encounter us, we can experience that salvation. Wonderful book, again. Thank you so much. Anything else you wanted to say to our viewers?

Ray Downing: No, just, if you if you can, you can buy the book and several forms, as an audio book, as the hardcover, which is really the best. It has an audio CD included.

Fr. Michael: So beautiful, yeah.

Ray Downing: I hope you take a chance and buy it.

Fr. Michael: Yeah, the book itself is beautiful, the story is beautiful, the illustrations are beautiful, the audio CD. I mean, it just kept getting better and better for me. It was just a great Christmas gift for me. It is a story that I love. It continues to, I can't get it out of my mind. I just keep thinking about it and entering back into. It's really brought a lot of mystery to my season of Advent. I want to thank you personally for this book.

Ray Downing: Thank you. It's pretty encouraging to have somebody who's got some depth to them and can appreciate what I put into it. That's really cool.

Fr. Michael: Thank you. Again, Ray Downing. You can visit him online. Learn more about Christmas in Idaho. You can order the book there as well. Check it out. Get the book for sure, get it quickly so you can get it in time for Christmas. It could be your Christmas gift to everybody that you know. Thank you so much, Ray, for your time. I really appreciate it. Thank you for the wonderful gift that you have given to me and to all of us. I look forward to what more is to come with you.

Ray Downing: Thank you, Fr. Michael.

Fr. Michael: Would you mind if I gave you and my viewers a blessing?

Ray Downing: Please.

Fr. Michael: The Lord be with you. Heavenly Father, we bless everybody that watches this, that they may be drawn into the mystery of your suffering, death, and resurrection, and that this may truly be a wonderful Advent season of longing and waiting, and a beautiful Christmas where they will be consoled that you have given us a savior. May Almighty God bless all of you, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.