

Whatever happened to the gold the wise men gave baby Jesus?

"Sister's Christmas Catechism" tackles age-old question in a fun look at the basics of Catholicism

December 10, 2009 3:00 PM

[Bernie Petit](#)

JMJ.

Even a Protestant feels compelled to use the blessed initials of Jesus-Mary-Joseph as the lead in a story about "Sister's Christmas Catechism," which runs at the Booth Playhouse in Charlotte through Dec. 20. Members of the Gaston Choral Society will be featured singers at the show Friday.

Back in the day, teaching nuns required their students to place the initials on the top of everything they turned in. But while Sister (played marvelously by Mary Zentmyer) may be just a tad more lax in this holiday performance, school is still in session in this one-woman show, the third in a series revolving around a no-nonsense nun who teaches the basics of Catholicism to adults.

Sister uses her own "Forensic Files" and "CSI"-inspired tools to try to solve a mystery that has stumped historians throughout the ages: Whatever happened to the gold the wise men gave to baby Jesus to mark the occasion?

"We know that Mary used the frankincense and myrrh as a sort of potpourri – they were in the barn after all," Sister tells the audience.

To get to the bottom of the crime, she recreates a living Nativity by coaxing willing (and some not-so-willing) participants from the audience and dressing them in makeshift costumes cobbled from donations to the poor. One big piece of advice if you go – take a camera.

But before she gets to the Bethlehem crime scene investigation, which takes place in the second act, Sister instructs the audience on the Christmas season. She explains why candy canes are red and white, makes the connection between Santa Claus and Jesus and joyfully lectures on Mary's life before she gave birth to Jesus.

There's plenty of audience participation throughout. If you go, just be sure that your cell phones are turned off and you swallow your gum before class starts or you might be mildly embarrassed by Sister. Don't worry, though. Sister's teasing is never mean-spirited and is always in good fun, said Zentmyer, an Irish-Catholic from Chicago.

"Sister is never mean. She's stern and strict, but never mean," she said. "Once you realize it's not threatening, sometimes I'll have people running up on stage to volunteer."

And while the show has a special appeal to Catholics, especially those who grew up with nuns as teachers, it's broad and funny enough to have folks not fortunate enough to attend Catholic school laughing out loud. "The Christmas story is the same no matter who you are," Zentmyer said, "and everybody's had a strict teacher at some point in their life."

School is in Session!