A YEAR OF CHANGES

New churches, parish closings highlight 2017

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

The past year was one of transition, new beginnings and saying farewell for the Diocese of Baton Rouge, with two church parishes unveiling stunning new structures, three parishes closing and Bishop Robert W. Muench, as required by canon law, submitting his letter of resignation to the Vatican on Dec. 28, the day of his 75th birthday.

It was also a year the diocese welcomed two new priests and seven deacons, one of whom is scheduled to be ordained a priest in May. Eight new principals also stepped into their roles at the beginning of the school year.

A safe haven for young victims of human trafficking also opened in the Baton Rouge area and is being staffed by the Hospitaler nuns.

St. George in Baton Rouge and St. John the Baptist in Zachary drew the curtain on their new churches within weeks of each other in the spring. St. George’s church is more of a contemporary design, and St. John the Baptist is a traditional style structure. Style notwithstanding, each of the churches drew widely enthusiastic responses from parishioners.

No fear for Holy Land pilgrims

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

President Donald Trump’s recent announcement that the intended to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the U.S. Embassy there from Tel Aviv came when 35 pilgrims from the Diocese of Baton Rouge were on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. “I was just a little annoyed because it was such a beautiful, once in a lifetime trip,” said Mary Acosta, adding that the group never felt threatened throughout the trip. Photo provided by Mary Acosta

A peace that can only be experienced walking in the foot steps of Jesus was pierced on the morning of Dec. 7 for Mary Acosta and 35 other pilgrims from the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

Upon awakening in their hotel room in Jerusalem, where they were in the fourth day of a 10-day pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the group heard the news that President Donald Trump announced his intention to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel as well as move the U.S. Embassy there from Tel Aviv. Not only did Trump’s pronouncement inflame tensions in an already delicate region and jeopardize future prospects for peace, Trump’s announcement also reversed nearly 70 years of U.S. policy.

Responding to Trump’s policy shift, State Department officials issued travel restrictions to certain parts of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, fearing that the predicted protests would turn violent.

“I was just a little annoyed because it was such a beautiful, once in a lifetime trip,” said Acosta, who was making her first visit to the Holy Land.

Father Matt Lorrain, pastor at St. John the Baptist Church in Brusly, said he was a “little bit concerned” at first because of the uncertainty.

“But we had total trust in our guides,” added Father Lorrain, who was also on his maiden journey to the Holy Land. “We felt safe in all of the situations.”

As the news broke, Tammy Abshire, director of stewardship for the diocese and who organized the pilgrimage, said she immediately huddled with the owner of the travel agency and the guide. She said they discussed any potential hot spots and where the threats of protests might be greatest.

Based on the guide’s recommendations, who has years of experience leading pilgrimages, a decision was made to eliminate a visit to Bethany, which was scheduled for later that day.
Forget the diet ... for now

The zaniness of the holidays is silenced, normalcy just around the corner, and gifts unwrapped although January’s reality that comes with the credit card bill might dim the sparkle a of the Christmas glow.

One might also think it’s time to address that pesky, burgeoning waistline, fueled by the past month of a steady diet of over indulgence of fine dining and spirits. But as we in south Louisiana are blissfully aware, the culmination of the Christmas season is merely a segue into another culinary feast.

You guessed it, king cake season has officially begun, so scrap those diet plans for the near future. The delectable, sugar-laden delicacy that does nothing to tame ever expanding hips and belly will be a staple of our diet until Rex and Comus meet on Mardi Gras night, drawing the curtain on the Carnival season.

But if it’s any comfort, as if we really need an excuse to delve into one of our favorite comfort foods, the king cake has Biblical roots. Also known as the king’s cake, this treat has long been associated with the feast of the Epiphany on Jan. 6, when the Magi arrived in Bethlehem and presented gifts to the baby Jesus on the 12th night after his birth. In south Louisiana, Epiphany is also the kickoff of the Mardi Gras season, which marks the unofficial launch of the king cake season.

Although the tradition of the cake is traced to the Epiphany, some proffer that its roots actually go back to an ancient pagan festival in the Roman Empire. During those times, the annual Saturnalia, which honored Saturn, the god of agriculture, was celebrated. Cakes were made to celebrate the harvest, with fava beans actually being baked into the roll.

It should be noted that fava beans were not only believed to be magical but also used for voting, which, given Louisiana’s throrny political legacy, could add a new dimension to our voting booths.

According to tradition, it was during the Middle Ages when the king cake began to be associated with the Epiphany. The conflation of Saturnalia/Epiphany sparked a rampage of debauchery, including boozing, dancing, masquerading and gambling, with a splash of religion tossed in before the solemnity of Lent began. Sound familiar?

Back then, the tradition of baking a bean into the cake continued, but, of course, that has now transitioned into the plastic baby, which represents the baby Jesus.

In France, the original cake was a dry French bread type dough with sugar on top and the bean on the inside. History tells us that tradition was brought to Louisiana by French-Canadian explorer Pierre La Moyne, Sieur d’Iberville, who is regarded as one of the fathers of New Orleans.

Through the years, bakers have added their own touches to the traditional king cake, including a multitude of flavors and fillings. Of course, one’s favorite depends on one’s taste, but certainly a popular option is a king cake that is nothing more than a giant donut baked in the shape of a king cake with even more sugar added on top. Eat at your own risk.

And don’t forget, it’s unacceptable, bordering on a cultural felony, to getting the baby and not revealing it to others, thereby shirking on your responsibility to buy the next king cake. Remember, baby Jesus is watching. Happy Epiphany!
**Donations increase during #iGiveCatholic day**

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

Momentum continued to build in the second year of the Diocese of Baton Rouge's participation in the #iGiveCatholic fundraising day.

Not only did the revenue generated among the diocesan agencies and church parishes increase, so did the total number of donors.

Combined, diocesan agencies raised $49,675 as compared to $44,920 a year ago. Additionally, the total number of donors to diocesan agencies and parishes totaled 476, nearly a six percent increase from 2016.

“What’s important to remember is the funds generated by #iGiveCatholic is new money to the parish or organization,” she added. “It can be used for a specific project, a ministerial program or just helping secure the financial stability of an organization.”

Overall, $64,955 was raised in the diocese, as compared to $89,000 in 2016, the first year in which the diocese participated. However, the total decrease can be attributed to a drop in donations to Women’s New Life Center in Baton Rouge, which fell from $41,500 in 2016 to $15,280 in 2017.

It should also be noted that Women’s New Life Center’s marketing efforts are combined with Women’s New Life Center in New Orleans.

Leading the way among diocesan agencies and parishes was St. Mary of False River Church in New Roads, which raised $8,045. Perhaps even more impressive was this was St. Mary’s first year of participation.

“What (St. Mary) did was truly amazing,” Abshire said. “It’s very apparent the pride the people of New Roads have for their church community. Their love of church really was on display.”

Abshire said the effort was likely fueled by the fact the money raised is going toward replacing the sound system in the St. Francis Chapel. She noted that campaigns with a specific project traditionally are more successful.

St. Jean Vianney Church in Baton Rouge was second among agencies and parishes, raising $7,285, nearly a 14 percent increase from 2016. Also, the number of St. Jean donors showed a dramatic increase from 47 to 736.

Most Blessed Sacrament Church and School and St. Thomas More School, both in Baton Rouge, showed the largest percentage increases that participated in 2016. Most Blessed Sacrament’s donations rose from $2,250 to $4,340.

Donations at St. Thomas More rose from $500 in 2016 to $3,730.

First time participant St. Vincent de Paul Society raised $3,275. St. George in Baton Rouge totaled $2,625 and the Martin Luther King Student Center on the campus of Southern University checked in with $2,585. Both St. George and the Martin Luther King Student Center were first-time participants.

“Overall, I am pleased and unequivocally encouraged regarding the future,” Abshire said. “This is a worthy program that will only continue to grow and expand.”

“What’s important to remember is the funds generated by #iGiveCatholic is new money to the parish or organization,” she added. “It can be used for a specific project, a ministerial program or just helping secure the financial stability of an organization.”

The program was originally launched by the Archdiocese of New Orleans in 2015, and is scheduled from midnight to 11:59 p.m. It is held in conjunction with Giving Tuesday, where numerous secular non-profit organizations and even communities join together for the day.

A CHRISTMAS DINNER – The East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff’s Department teamed with the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank to distribute more than 1,000 meals to the Hispanic community and others as well at St. Pius Church X in Baton Rouge on Dec. 21. Officials of the Hispanic Apostolate said more than 200 Hispanic families left with all of the ingredients for a full Christmas dinner, complete with a turkey, dressing mix, fresh vegetables and even dessert. EBRSO officials said the day was part of a larger effort for their officers to become more involved in individual communities, especially among the Hispanic population. Photo by Richard Meek | The Catholic Commentator

ST. NICK SMILE – Bishop Robert W. Muench, as St. Nicholas, was all smiles as he distributed gifts donated to Society of St. Vincent de Paul for children of families in need at the SVPD Dining Room on Dec. 23. People were lined up around the block to receive the gifts. SVPD President and CEO Michael Acaldo expressed his appreciation to the bishop, who sent in his obligatory letter offering resignation from his office to Pope Francis on his 75th birthday Dec. 28. Acaldo said the Christmas gift distribution was one of the first things the bishop put on his calendar at the beginning of the year. Photo by Debbie Shelley | The Catholic Commentator
VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Pope Francis spent much of 2017 preaching and teaching about the need to value differences rather than fear them, and he adopted legislation that would allow more room for diversity within the Catholic Church.

In his frequent comments about migration and on most of his foreign trips, the pope also tried to convince political, civic and religious leaders that being welcoming, respecting differences and being willing to listen to another’s point of view and experience actually enrich a society.

From his trips to Egypt, where anti-Christian violence has sorely tried Christian-Muslim relations, to Colombia, which is recovering from a civil war, and most recently to Myanmar and Bangladesh, Pope Francis tried to convince people that peaceful coexistence and even unity do not require the erasing of all differences. In fact, during his trip to the two Asian nations, he defined as “ideological and cultural colonization” the political and social pressures to homogenize society.

“From the trips to Egypt, where anti-Christian violence has sorely tried Christian-Muslim relations, to Colombia, which is recovering from a civil war, and most recently to Myanmar and Bangladesh, Pope Francis tried to convince people that peaceful coexistence and even unity do not require the erasing of all differences. In fact, during his trip to the two Asian nations, he defined as “ideological and cultural colonization” the political and social pressures to homogenize society.

“The unity we share and celebrate is born of diversity,” he told the bishops of Myanmar Nov. 29. “Never forget this – it is born of diversity! It values people’s differences as a source of mutual enrichment and growth. It invites people to come together in a culture of encounter and solidarity.”

Pope Francis gave legislative weight to that view in October when he created two new eparchies, or dioceses, for the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in India and extended the boundaries of two others. In a letter to all of the country’s bishops, Latin- and Eastern-rite, he said the presence of two Catholic rites, each with their own bishop in the same territory, should not be seen as a sign of disunity, but of the richness of the one faith.

The other legislative decision that potentially could lead to greater diversity in the church was contained in Pope Francis’ document, “Magnum Principium” (“The Great Principle”). It included changes to the Code of Canon Law to give national bishops’ conferences greater responsibility in the process of translating liturgical texts into local languages. The document was published Sept. 9 and went into effect Oct. 1.

In a letter giving further explanation three weeks later, Pope Francis said that while in the past “the judgment regarding the fidelity to the Latin and the eventual corrections necessary was the task of the Congregation (for Divine Worship),” the new norms give “episcopal conferences the faculty of judging the worth and coherence of one or another term in translations from the original, even if in dialogue with the Holy See.”

Pope Francis also grabbed headlines late in the year for two statements indicating further developments in Catholic social teaching, specifically regarding the death penalty and nuclear deterrence.

Marking the 25th anniversary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church at the Vatican Oct. 11, Pope Francis said the catechism’s discussion of the death penalty, already formally amended by St. John Paul II, needs to be even more explicitly against capital punishment.

The death penalty “is, in itself, contrary to the Gospel, because a decision is voluntarily made to suppress a human life, which is always sacred in the eyes of the Creator and of whom, in the last analysis, only God can be the true judge and guarantor,” the pope said.

Pope Francis’ remarks about nuclear deterrence came at a Vatican conference in early November. For decades, the popes had said the policy of nuclear deterrence could be morally acceptable as long as real work was underway on a complete ban of the weapons.

But at the conference, Pope Francis said that today with nuclear weapons, “the threat of their use as well as their very possession is to be firmly condemned.”

He later explained to journalists that the increased sophistication of the weapons means “you risk the destruction of humanity, or a great part of humanity.”

While Pope Francis used large public Masses, his early morning Mass homilies and his Wednesday general audience talks to reach thousands of Catholics with his message, 2017 gave him an opportunity for face-to-face meetings with many world leaders, including U.S. President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

He welcomed Trump to the Vatican May 24 for a visit described in the official statement as “cordial.” Common ground was found on the issues of protecting the unborn and defending religious freedom. But they also discussed their different positions on climate change and on the obligation to assist migrants and refugees.

Just a few days after he met the pope, Trump announced the U.S. was pulling out of the U.N. Paris agreement on climate change, an agreement the Vatican had urged him to uphold.

Just hours after Pope Francis appealed Dec. 6 for “wisdom and prudence” in protecting the status quo of Jerusalem, Trump publicly announced formal U.S. recognition of the city as Israel’s capital and a project to begin moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. The Holy See, like the overwhelming majority of nations, has said political control of the city must be determined by negotiation as part of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In addition, for decades the Vatican has urged a special status for the city to guarantee Jews, Muslims and Christians access to their faith’s holy sites.

Pope Francis also spent months urging the international community to ensure the new U.N. global compacts on migration and on refugees would support programs to help the poor stay in their countries rather than migrate and would open safe and legal immigration pathways for people fleeing extreme poverty and conflict.

Unity in diversity and care for the poorest and most vulnerable members of society also were on Pope Francis mind in early June when he joined celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the Catholic charismatic renewal.

Celebrating Pentecost with tens of thousands of Catholic charismatics from around the world and with dozens of Pentecostal and evangelical leaders, the pope said, “In a way both creative and unexpected,” the Holy Spirit “generates diversity, for in every age he causes new and varied charisms to blossom. Then he brings about unity: he joins together, gathers and restores harmony.”
Artist paints beautiful portrait of Our Lady for OLMC

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

The joy-filled, heartwarming eyes of the Christ child and serene, tender gaze of the Blessed Mother beckon you to accept the gift of the scapular and Mary’s maternal protection they offer in the painting “Our Lady of Mt. Carmel” by Blair Gordy Piras, say those who have viewed the divine portrait. The painting was unveiled Dec. 17 at Piras’ home church, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in St. Francisville, which has played an important part in the artist’s life.

Piras included familiar images to the parishioners at OLMC. The chair in which the Christ child sits in the Blessed Virgin’s lap is based on the church’s celebrant’s chair. The painting also includes the diamond motif taken from OLMC’s stained glass windows.

Piras also included references to the Carmelite Order, to whom Mary gave the scapular and through whom devotion to the scapular grew. She referred to the historical origin of the scapular by including the shield of the Carmelite order.

“It is in the background that these two elements, the history and the local parish, come together,” Piras said.

Additionally, Piras incorporated the iris and the fleur de lis, which are symbols of Mary.

“These three elements tell a little bit of the origin of the scapular and our church’s perpetuation of devotion to the scapular,” said Piras.

Her journey as an artist and faith-filled person began when she was a child. Born and raised in St. Francisville, Piras said she “grew up deeply rooted in nature and gained a love and appreciation for natural beauty at an early age.”

She said she always hungered to understand deep truths about reality, was fascinated by colorful illustrations of storybooks and to the fantastic realism genre in general.

She attended St. Francisian University in Steubenville, Ohio and immersed herself in studying the humanities and Catholic culture.

“I think with my college experience at Steubenville, which is a strong Catholic school, as my faith grew, so did my desire to use my artistic skills for God grew,” said Piras. “I wanted to grow in my skill level so I could glorify him on a greater level.”

A professor at Steubenville told Piras about the Sacred Art School Firenze in Florence, Italy, whose mission is inspired by Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body. “I thought about it for two years. I didn’t know if it was going to work out, but I was drawn to the school,” said Piras. “I was also drawn to Florence, a city which has a well spring of beautiful sacred art. A lot of great artists lived and worked there. My own tastes grew as I was able to experience the art all around the city, in the churches and museums and in being out and about.

“The school definitely challenged me to grow as an artist and it took a lot of devotion and hard work. I worked seven to eight-and-a-half hours (daily), drawing or painting in natural light.”

Piras added, “Really, training as an artist is training your eye to see better, and learning the techniques to portray well what you see.”

While developing her technical skills, Piras was taking courses in theology and philosophy to help her understand the liturgical role of sacred arts, its place in the church and its purpose in general.

“I think I grew in my formation as a person and a sacred artist while I was there,” said Piras.

While in Florence, Father Cary Bani, pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, met with Piras and her husband, and discussed the possibility of her doing a painting for her home parish when she returned to the United States.

“I started thinking about what I wanted to portray and how I would portray it,” said Piras.

After further discussions, it was decided that Piras would do a painting of the Blessed Mother under the title Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and the child Jesus presenting a scapular to any of the faithful of the devotion.

For the design elements, Piras started looking at different images of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, and the Mt. Carmel church itself.

“I know the parish well and I wanted to do something that would be useful in prayer,” said Piras. “I was thinking of the space where it was going to go. I thought about the size of the painting and the content. I also thought it would be nice to go in a place of prayer. I know this corner well (where the church’s votive offering candles are located), where people can light a candle and offer their prayers.”

She is currently an artist in residency at Steubenville, where she teaches and keeps an active studio. Wanting to keep the focus on the message of the painting, which has her signature on the back, rather than herself, Piras humbly said she is happy to give a gift to the parish that has been such a gift to her.

“I hope that, especially having grown up here as a child and benefitting from the sacred art here, it’s another aid to prayer and for people to grow in devotion to the Blessed Mother and the scapular,” said Piras. “I hope it sparks a desire for people to learn about this devotion, perhaps starting it in their life. I hope it can be a good place to come and ask for Our Lady’s intercession.”

The members of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel expressed their delight with the painting.

“It’s great for a young American artist to paint like an old master,” said David Norwood.

He noted, “The eyes of the Christ Child and the Virgin Mary are straight on you, which is a nice touch.

There is a reverence and “completeness” in which the Christ Child and the Virgin Mary are presented, according to Norwood. He said to him, the Blessed Mother looks like “someone from the other side of the world” or what Mary most likely looked like and the Christ child looks like “someone you would know” and “everyone’s child.”

“He (the Christ Child) looks like ‘I’m happy to sit on my momma’s lap and I’m happy to be here,’” said Norwood.

He concluded, “It’s a good modern version of a 2,000-year-old subject.”

Willia Parker said, “I was so eager to see the unveiling of Blair’s painting. A few months ago I came across her work on social media and was absolutely struck with awe. I truly think Blair is working through the eyes of God. It gives me goose bumps to see a young girl who was raised on Catholic Hill in St. Francisville share her talents and beauty with others throughout the world.

“Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is fortunate to own one of her masterpieces and it’s an honor and privilege to add this to our quaint, but beautiful church. It is breathtaking, but to say I know the artist makes the piece priceless to me and our parishioners.”

Father Cary Bani blesses the “Our Lady of Mount Carmel” painting by Blair Gordy Piras, as Piras prayerfully looks on, following the unveiling of the painting. Photo by Debbie Shelley
The ‘Catholic’ Ten Commandments/Non-sacramental marriage

Q Recently I read an article stating that the “Catholic” Ten Commandments are different from those given to Moses. According to this article, Catholics deleted the Second Commandment about no idols or graven images and then split the last one into two in order to make up for that deletion.

(It went on to say that the original Second Commandment was eliminated because of the statues in Catholic churches and the fact that Catholics offer prayers to Mary and to the other saints.) Can you elaborate on the difference and why? (Macomb Township, Michigan)

A The precise division and numbering of the Ten Commandments has, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, varied over the course of history (No. 2066). Catholics traditionally use the formulation proposed by St. Augustine in the fifth century.

The full text of the Ten Commandments as revealed to Moses comes from two scriptural sources: Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21. For both Protestants and Catholics, the currently accepted catechetical formulations represent an abbreviation of those biblical texts. Exodus 20:2-6, for example, says: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall not have other gods beside me. You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or serve them.”

For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their ancestors’ wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but showing love down to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

All that is summarized by Catholics in the words: “I am the Lord your God; you shall not have strange gods before me.” In prohibiting graven images, Catholics believe that the Lord was referring to such incidents as the golden calf (Ex 32), which some Jews of the Old Testament actually worshipped as divine. Catholics do not believe that God thereby prohibited all religious images—especially since Moses himself directed that replicas of cherubim angels should adorn the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25).

Some Protestant worship sites, in fact, mirror Catholic churches in displaying images of the saints in stained glass, and no one actually worships those images or imagines them to be divine; they simply remind us of the holy lives of our heroes in the faith and offer them for imitation. When Catholics pray to the saints, we are not worshiping them but only asking for their help.

Q A marriage took place in a Catholic church. The groom had not been baptized, and the couple later divorced. Now this same woman is planning to marry a different man and wants the marriage to be celebrated in the Catholic Church.

What procedure must she follow to see that this can happen? (I understand that the first marriage would not be considered a sacrament, since the first groom was not baptized.) (St. Cloud, Minnesota)

A Catholics can receive permission from their diocesan bishop (called, technically, a dispensation from disparity of cult) to marry someone who has never received Christian baptism—which is evidently what the woman in question did for her first marriage. It is true, as you say, that this marriage was not a sacramental one; as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, baptism is “the door that gives access to the other sacraments” (No. 1213). And if the non-baptized spouse could not receive a sacrament in that wedding ceremony, neither could the baptized one. You can’t have a “half-sacrament.”

Nevertheless in response to your question, that first marriage was still a valid marriage in the Catholic Church’s eyes, a holy covenant.

So, if the woman now wants to marry a different man in a Catholic ceremony, she would first need to obtain a church annulment for her earlier marriage. She should speak with her parish priest or contact her diocese to inquire about beginning that process.

Q Both my daughter and I left the church some years back, although for different reasons. I returned to regular practice about a year and a half ago, and my daughter is thinking of returning as well.

She is a single mom, with two children—ages 6 and 12—and she would like them to be baptized. (I have been trying to teach them about the Catholic faith.)

Our problem is that we have no other family, and our friends are not Catholic. Is it possible that I can be their godmother, even though I am also their grandmother? (Taylorsville, Kentucky)

A I am delighted to hear of your return to the sacramental practice of the Catholic faith and to the support this offers you in living the Christian life. Note, too, the “multiplier effect.” I can only believe that your own journey back has served as an example for your daughter, and now her two children will be raised as Catholics as well!

In answer to your question, yes, you yourself may certainly be the sponsor (godparent) for your grandchildren’s baptisms. A father or mother may not serve as a godparent for their own child (Canon 874 of the church’s Code of Canon Law), but there is no such rule prohibiting grandparents. The role of the sponsor is to “help the baptized person to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations inherent in it,” and I am sure you would do this well (Canon 872).

(The only downside I can see in a grandparent’s being a godparent is this: If the parents were to pass on or to be incapacitated in some way, a godparent is meant to serve as a “stand-in,” mentoring and assuring the continued Catholic life of the child so I suppose that the younger the godparent/grandparent is, the better!)

FATHER DOYLE is a retired priest in the Diocese of Albany, NY. Questions may be sent to Father Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 30 Columbia Circle Dr., Albany, NY 12203.

Coming January 19, 2018

Catholic Schools

Catholic Schools Week
2018

Of special interest to parents, The Catholic Schools Week section will feature information about the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, current registration for the next school year, distinguished graduates and more.

Deadline for this section is January 9, 2018.

Call Wanda Koch at 225-387-0983 or email wkoch@diobr.org.

THE CATHOLIC COMMENTATOR

January 5, 2018

The Catholic Commentator
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Excited to learn that the choir singing nearly 30 feet from a tree during Mass at the chapel of Our Lady of Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, Dec. 14. Photo by Bonny Van | The Catholic Commentator

Music teacher Angela Sneed leads the St. George School in Baton Rouge fifth-grade Mass choir in song during Mass at the chapel of Our Lady of Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, Dec. 14.

Connecting through music

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

Walking down the long hallway toward the chapel at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge on a recent morning, the sound of sweet, angelic voices could be heard, greeting the faithful as they found their places in the pews. All eyes were on the choir as their beautiful song filled the room.

Singing was the fifth-grade Mass choir from St. George School in Baton Rouge and they are 42 voices strong. But, they are not the first Catholic school invited to lend their voices to the celebration of Mass. The previous week, the fourth-grade and eighth-grade choir from Most Blessed Sacrament School in Baton Rouge was scheduled to sing at the 11:30 a.m. Mass but had to cancel because of the snow.

Caroline Isemann, public relations specialist for the hospital, said the idea to interact with area Catholic schools came from the hospital’s communications department.

“We’re building the Children’s Hospital and we wanted to find a way to connect with that population so they are familiar with that project, so they know what’s here in our community and know of opportunities that they have to volunteer,” said Isemann.

As for the children, the opportunity to sing was a blessing.

“I think it’s very thought-ful of them to let us come and sing, and I just really like singing,” said fifth-grader Emily Vennen.

Vennen is a classmate of Molly Perry, who spent weeks recovering at OLOL Children’s Hospital after falling nearly 30 feet from a tree in 2014. Vennen said she was excited to learn that the choir was chosen to sing at the hospital.

“My friend Molly might be decorating a room at the new hospital,” she said.

“This is an outstanding, wonderful opportunity for them, even as fifth-graders, to start becoming involved in learning the importance of their minis-try in the community, not just keeping it right at St. George School, and not just the school and not just the parish,” said Jan Dupre, director of performing arts at St. George.

“Obviously, I think it’s our kids have the opportunity to go out and perform,” said Jack Nelson, principal of St. George. “It’s another way we can share our ministry of the Catholic faith with our community.”

The Mass is shown on closed circuit TV throughout the hospital so that those who are confined to their rooms can view it. Such was the case with the young patients in the Children’s Hospital, who could not attend the Mass because of risk of infection.

However, those who could attend did.

“It was wonderful,” said Dr. Kelechi Iheagwara, a pediatric critical care specialist. “It really makes this festive. It brightened up the Mass.”

Iheagwara attended the Mass specifically to hear her young neighbors, both in the fifth-grade choir, sing. After the Mass, they rushed up to give her big smiles and hugs. A reception for the students followed the Mass, featuring cookies and punch and a demonstration by hospital staff to teach the students what takes place in a hospital so that they are not afraid of the sterile atmosphere of a hospital.

Isemann said more schools will be added to the calendar to participate in the Mass, especially during the upcoming season of Lent.
Christmas Time Is Here!

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

From pre-K to 12th grade, Catholic school students throughout the Diocese of Baton Rouge entertained family and friends with the sights and sounds of the Christmas season. The message of the coming of Jesus was portrayed through plays and songs. What a joyful time of year for the faithful of all ages! The season of Advent is one of anticipation and hope. Here are some scenes of the beautiful and sweet celebrations that were shared with The Catholic Commentator.

[1] OUR LADY OF MERCY SCHOOL IN BATON ROUGE – The Best Christmas Pageant Ever. Photo provided by Christy Haldane | Our Lady of Mercy


[3] MATER DOLOROSA SCHOOL INDEPENDENCE – Live nativity featuring Rhett Santangelo Ricard, grandson of principal Cheryl Santangelo, as baby Jesus, Baily Bell as Mary and Blaine Husser as Joseph. Photo provided by Erin Mendez | Mater Dolorosa

[4] ST. JOHN PRIMARY IN PRAIRIEVILLE – First- and second-graders perform the story of the Nativity. Photo provided by Teresa Landry | St. John Primary and St. Theresa


[6] ST. FRANCIS XAVIER SCHOOL IN BATON ROUGE – Fifth-graders Christian Carroll and Alex Smith as Joseph and Mary. Photo provided by Paula Fabre | St. Francis Xavier

HOLY GHOST SCHOOL IN HAMMOND – Luke Ard portrays Jesus as an adult. Also pictured, from left, Abigail McLeod, Matthew Mohammedi, Joe Kayuha, Alyssa LeBlanc, Lily Dumas, Baily Bell, Lily Dumas, Baily Bell, Lily Dumas, Baily Bell, Lily Dumas, Baily Bell, Lily Dumas, Baily Bell, Lily Dumas, Baily Bell, Lily Dumas. Photo provided by Cindy Wagner | Holy Ghost

ST. JOHN SCHOOL IN PLAQUEMINE – The kindergarten class entertains family and friends with a performance. Photo provided by April Boggs | St. John
Students in grades 1-12 at St. John Interparochial School in Plaquemine perform at their Christmas concert Dec. 14. Photo provided by April Hedges | St. John Interparochial School

Raise Your Voices,
Lift Your Hearts

Catholic High School/St. Joseph Academy in Baton Rouge assistant choir director Mark Primeaux directs members of the CHS/SJA Schola Cantorum for a Candlelight Christmas concert Dec. 13. The performance also featured the Wind Ensemble. Photo provided by Nancy Herin | Catholic High School

Choir members of the St. Theresa Middle School in Gonzales perform their Christmas concert Dec. 12. Photo provided by Teresa Landry | St. Theresa Middle School
**THE DISASTER ARTIST**

The eccentricsities of a notorious self-funding filmmaker (James Franco, who also directed) and the story of the friendship (with Dave Franco) that led to the making of his famously bad 2003 movie “The Room” provide steady laughs but will also touch viewers’ hearts as the relationship at the center of this fact-based comedy endures through numerous strains. The humor occasionally goes astray, particularly in scenes playing male nakedness for laughs, and the dialogue is overstuffed with vulgarity. But adults willing to overlook such flaws will find this study in strangeness, adapted from the 2013 book by Greg Sestero and Tom Bissell, richly entertaining. Recurring rear nudity, brief simulated sexual activity, cohabitation, about a half-dozen uses of profanity, a milder oath, frequent rough and crude language. A-III; R

**FERDINAND**

Good values help to redeem a somewhat padded plot in this animated adaptation of Munro Leaf and Robert Lawson’s 1936 children’s classic “The Story of Ferdinand,” directed by Carlos Saldanha. Escaping the fences of the stable in which he and other bulls are prepared for their fateful confrontation with a matador, the peace-loving protagonist of the title (voice of John Cena), who prefers smelling flowers to locking horns, is adopted as a pet by an affectionate and growing girl (voices of Julia Saldanha and Lily Day). But a misunderstanding sets him back on the path to the bullring where his commitment to nonviolence will be put to the ultimate test. Lively secondary characters (the most prominent voiced by Kate McKinnon) and charming pastoral landscapes surround a theme that all those who base their ethics on the Gospel, and parents in particular, will find congenial. Scenes of peril, some mild humor, a vague scatological reference, will find congenial. Scenes of peril, some mild humor, a vague scatological reference, will find congenial. Scenes of peril, some mild humor, a vague scatological reference, will find congenial. Scenes of peril, some mild humor, a vague scatological reference, will find congenial.

**THE GREATEST SHOWMAN**

Marital fidelity and family values in general are emphasized in this big, brash musical based on the life of pop entertainment pioneer P.T. Barnum (Hugh Jackman). The 19th-century impresario’s rise from poverty to worldwide fame is facilitated by his well-bred wife (Michelle Williams) and equally gentle partner (Zac Efron). But tensions arise when he shifts his focus from the cast of social outsiders who perform under his auspices to concentrate on backing the American premiere of Swedish diva Jenny Lind (Rebecca Ferguson). Director Michael Gracey’s feature debut, which also stars Zendaya as the African-American trapeze artist with whom Efron’s character shares a convention-defying romance, is historically naive in its backward projection of contemporary values onto Victorian-era America, and its brassy score, though well-suited to its subject matter, will best please those who appreciate the Lloyd-Webber style of Broadway and West End theater. Still, though unlikely to engage the youngest viewers, the film is appropriate for most others. Some nonlethal violence, a mild oath, a racial slur. A-II; R

**ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD**

A story of revenge, greed, and ravenous ambition, the film is co-written and directed by Ridley Scott. Starring Christian Bale as J. Paul Getty III, the grandson of his billionaire namesake (Christopher Plummer), makes a strong case that immense wealth not only can’t buy happiness, it also imposes depths of misery that few ever know. As scripted by David Scarpa from John Pearson’s 1995 book “Painfully Rich,” it traces the efforts of the victim’s divorced mother (Michelle Williams) and the ex-CIA agent (Mark Wahlberg) aiding her to out-negotiate both the miserly oil tycoon who refuses to pay the $17 million ransom and the lad’s captors. Mature themes, fleeting gore, frequent rough language. A-III; R

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**MOVIE REVIEWS**

USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classifications:

- A-I – General patronage
- A-II – Adults and adolescents
- A-III – Adults
- A-IV – Adults, with reservations
- L – Limited adult audience

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**ACROSS**

1. Calais monastic
2. Lincoln assassin
3. Texas student
4. Literary initials
5. Number of choirs of angels
6. Dad in the A-IV –
7. Parental guidance suggested; some material may not be suitable for children
8. NC-17 – No one under 17 admitted
9. Feared in a medical context, off-screen premarital sexual activity, acceptability of divorce, drug use, a few uses of profanity, frequent rough and occasional crude and crass language. A-III; R

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**DOWN**

1. High priest to whom Jesus was brought first (Jn 18:13)
2. Hungary
3. “I’m hysterical!” in netspeak
4. Paradise
5. Wife of Abram
6. Mediterranean
7. Chicken
8. 1986
9. A gym
10. Mother of Joseph (Lk 3:23)
11. Saved Civilization
12. Bonded together
13. Eldest
14. Fathers
15. Deep in the heart of Texas
16. In the old country
17. "You're a little short on..."
18. Bible
19. "...and a little short on..."
20. "...and a little short on..."
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**Solution on page 14**
Did you get what you wanted out of Christmas?

Traditionally Christmas trees and creches come down shortly after Epiphany on Jan. 6. The Magi have come and warned in a dream. St. Joseph has taken the Christ child and his mother, Mary, into Egypt, escaping from the murderous King Herod. The holiday season is over. In our busy Western World, we quickly move into the new year wondering only how long we will keep at least one or two of our multiple resolutions. Did four weeks of Advent and eight days of Christmas change us at all? Or, are we quickly back in the rat-race again, having quickly, like children, lost interest in the material presents we received?

Remember the beginning of Advent when St. John the Baptist urged us, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord?” We were supposed to increase our prayers and beg God to make himself known to our hearts as we prepared to celebrate his physical coming into our world as the Christmas babe in the manger. We were supposed to welcome God’s son like the shepherds, Mary and St. Joseph, and the Magi did. Those liturgical celebrations and the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist were supposed to increase our spiritual awareness of the presence of God among us.

Christmas must last for more than a day, more than eight days. It must reinforce our spiritual sense of interdependency, our union with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the lasting meaning of Christmas. No one understood this better or expressed it more beautifully than Charles Dickens. Listen to what Dickens wrote as to why Christmas ought to last the whole year.

“Who can be insensible to the outpourings of good feeling, and the honest interchange of affectionate attachment which abound at this season of the year. A Christmas family party! We know nothing in nature more delightful! There seems a magic abundance at this season of the year. A Christmas family party! We know nothing in nature more delightful! There seems a magic

FATHER CARVILLE is a retired priest in the Diocese of Baton Rouge and writes on current topics for The Catholic Commentator. He can be reached at johnmycarville@gmail.com.
Why don’t we preach hellfire anymore? That’s a question asked frequently today by a lot of sincere religious people who worry that too many churches and too many priests and ministers have gone soft on sin and are over-generous in speaking about God’s mercy. The belief here is that more people would come to church and more people would obey the commandments, particularly the sixth one, if we preached the raw truth about mortal sin, God’s wrath and the danger of going to hell when we die. The truth will set you free, these folks assert, and the truth is that there is real sin and that there are real and eternal consequences for sin. The gate to heaven is narrow and the road to hell is wide. So why aren’t we preaching more about the dangers of hellfire?

What’s valid in this kind of reasoning is that preaching about mortal sin and hellfire can be effective. Threats work. I don’t enter a love relationship because you feel afraid or threatened. You enter a love relationship because you feel drawn there by love.

More importantly, preaching divine threat dishonors the God in whom we believe. The God whom Jesus incarnates and reveals is not a God who punishes, good-hearted people into hell against their will, on the basis of some human or moral lapse which in our moral or religious categories we deem to be a mortal sin. For example, I still hear this threat being preached sometimes in our churches: if you miss going to church on Sunday it’s a mortal sin and should you do that and die without confessing it you will go to hell.

What kind of God would underwrite this kind of belief? What kind of God would not give sincere people a second-chance, a third one and 77 times seven more chances if they remain sincere? What kind of God would say to a person in hell: “Sorry, but you knew the rules! You’re repentant now, but it’s too late. You had your chance!” A healthy theology of God demands that we stop teaching that hell can be a nasty surprise waiting for an essentially good person. The God we believe in as Christians is infinite understanding, infinite compassion and infinite forgiveness. God’s love surpasses our own and if we, in our better moments, can see the goodness of a human heart despite its lapses and weaknesses, how much more so will God do this. We’ve nothing to fear from God.

Or, have we? Doesn’t Scripture tell us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom? How does that square with not being afraid of God? There are different kinds of fear, some healthy and others not. When Scripture tells us that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the kind fear it is talking about is not contingent upon feeling threatened or feeling anxious about being punished. That’s the kind of fear we feel before tyrants and bullies. There is, however, a healthy fear that’s innate within the dynamics of love itself. This kind of fear is essentially proper reverence, that is, when we genuinely love someone we will fear being selfish, boorish and disrespectful in that relationship. We will fear violating the sacred space within which intimacy occurs. Metaphorically we will sense we’re standing on holy ground and that we’d best have our shoes off before that sacred fire.

Scripture also tells us that when God appears in our lives, generally the first words we will hear are: “Don’t be afraid!” That’s because God is not a judgmental tyrant but a loving, creative, joy-filled energy and person. As Leon Bloy reminds us, joy is the most infallible indication of God’s presence.

The famous psychiatrist, Fritz Perls, was once asked by a young fundamentalist: “Have you been saved?” His answer: “Saved? Hell no! I’m still trying to figure out how to be spent!” We honor God not by living in fear lest we offend him, but in spending the wonderful energy that God gives us to help life flourish. God is not a law to be obeyed, but a joyous energy within which to generatively spend ourselves.

In Exile
Father Ron Rolheiser

Father Ron Rolheiser, theologian, teacher and award-winning author, is President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, TX. He can be contacted through his website ronrolheiser.com and facebook.com/ronrolheiser

Why wait? How Advent changes us

Wait, they said. Good news will come.

So I stood by the window every afternoon that fall of my senior year, waiting for the mail truck to reach our street. I’d run down the drive-way to see if any envelopes had arrived, thick with poetry. Finally came the sunny Saturday in July. Our parents walked us down the aisle and we kissed at the altar, they said. Good news will come.

So we counted down months and weeks, waiting for the celebration to arrive. We planned the Mass and the honeymoon, the music and the reception. (My mom planned the flowers and food, thankfully!) We sent save the dates so family and friends could circle their calendars to join us. They were waiting, too.

Finally came the sunny Saturday in July. Our parents walked us down the aisle and we kissed at the end. All the families danced till our feet ached, the little ones running round our legs. I never wanted the night to end.

The waiting was worth it. Every single second. Wait, they said. The baby will come.

We had to wait longer than friends and family. Our lives became wrapped round with wanting. One year, then two. We wondered if we would ever have a child of our own.

Finally came a positive test, astonishing before my eyes. I jumped on the couches while my husband laughed (and cried). Then we raced to the store to buy another test, just to be sure.

When we surprised my family with the news on Christmas Eve, my mom and sister looked at me with shock, starting to cry. “We thought it couldn’t happen!” they said. They had been waiting, too.

In August, he arrived safe and squalling in our arms.

The waiting was worth it. Every single second. Wait in hope, faith and love, the wise ones say. Wait and pray. Slow the rhythm of your hearts to God’s time.

We young ones are always impatient (can we be anything else?), but when we listen to their wisdom, we learn.

Families are made by waiting. Made for waiting together.

In good times and in bad, our everyday Advents are the fabric of ordinary time, the cadence of life in families. God makes holy our longing and looking forward. We are changed as we wait together.

We await Christ’s coming, he who is foreshadowed by all of the good things we wait for here and now. Joyful news and fresh beginnings. Holy love and sacramental feasts. Hopeful dreams and light in darkness.

His love is beyond our wildest waiting. Is there anything more wonderful?

The waiting will be worth it. Every single second. He teaches us each day.

Mothering Spirit

Laura Fanucci

Mothering Spirit

Racial Healing – The Racial Harmony Commission of the Diocese of Baton Rouge invites everyone who wishes to work together for racial healing and transformation to come to an organizational meeting on Saturday, Jan. 6, 9:30 a.m. – noon, at the Bishop Robert E. Tracy Center, 1800 S. Acadian Thwy., Baton Rouge. Plans will be made for the 2018 MLK Festival of Service, inviting Catholics from all over the diocese to enter into dialogue about racism and the divide it causes in our communities; a planned website to serve as a hub of communication; and a diocesan “teach-in” on racism later in the spring. For more information, contact Father Tom Clark SJ at clarktf2002@yahoo.com or 225-775-7067.

Epiphany Sunday – In recognition of the U.S. Catholic Church’s celebration of National Migration Week, St. Paul the Apostle Church, 3012 Gus Young Ave., Baton Rouge, will host “Many Journeys, One Family,” a special Epiphany Mass to welcome refugees and migrants in our community Sunday, Jan. 7, at the 10:30 a.m. Mass. For more information, call 225-383-2537.

Discalced Carmelites – The Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites will meet Monday, Jan. 14, 1:30 p.m., at Our Lady of Mercy Parish Activity Center in St. Gabriel’s Room, 444 Marquette Ave., Baton Rouge. For more information, call 225-343-3181 or 225-803-3391, or email robertwhite456@att.net.

St. George Events – St. George Church, 7808 St. George Dr., Baton Rouge, will host two upcoming events. Internationally known organist Maestro Hector Olivera will perform at the dedication of the new St. George organ on Sunday, Jan. 7, 3 p.m. The concert is free. Anu, Deacon Art Miller, will preside. The Archdiocese of Hartford, Connecticut, will present a parish mission, “From an Informed Catholic to a Transformed Catholic,” Monday, Jan. 15 – Wednesday, Jan. 17, 7 p.m. He will discuss the importance of being a member of God’s team, walking by faith and being open to God’s calling to the action of love. For information, contact Karen Fawley at karen@st-george.org or call 225-456-5417.

Pro-life Mass – A monthly pro-life Mass will be celebrated Tuesday, Jan. 9, 5:30 p.m., at St. Agnes Church, 749 East Blvd., Baton Rouge. All are invited to attend. For more information, call 225-383-4127.

Scripture Study – The Adult Formation Ministry of St. Thomas More Church, 11441 Goodwood Blvd., Baton Rouge, will host an eight-week session Scripture study, “Wisdom: God’s Vision for Life,” beginning Jan. 15. There will be evening sessions Mondays at 6:30, followed by repeat sessions Tuesday mornings at 9:30. Registration forms are available on the parish website at stmchurch.org or in the church office. Register by Friday, Jan. 5. For more information, contact Sarah Neau, director of religious education at 225-275-3940.

Eucharistic Morning – Most Blessed Sacrament Church, 15615 Jefferson Hwy., Baton Rouge, will have a Eucharistic Morning for Healing and Consolidation Saturday, Jan. 20, 9 – 10:30 a.m. The MBS Stephen Ministry, lay apostles and music ministry will host an exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and times of silence, reflection and music. For more information, call 225-752-6230.

Life March – Louisiana Life March South will take place Saturday, Jan. 20, 10 a.m. in downtown Baton Rouge. Due to construction, the route has been altered. The march, themed “Every Life Deserves a Lifetime,” will start in the grassy area outside of the State Capital near Spanish Town Road and North Fourth Street, then proceed south on Fourth Street on North Blvd., and south on River Road to the levee near the U.S. Kidd. A formal program will be held at the levee stage at approximately 11 a.m. For more information, visit prolifelouisiana.org.

Women’s Morning of Reflection – The Catholic Daughters of St. Jude Church in Baton Rouge, 9150 Highland Road, Baton Rouge, will host a Women’s Morning of Reflection, “Refueling Your Spirit When Running on Empty,” on Saturday, Jan. 27, 9 a.m. – noon. St. Jude parishioner, author and motivational speaker Jean Gatz will facilitate the event. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m. The program is free. RSVP by Thursday, Jan. 18 to Anita Harper at 225-706-7988 or Joyce Eiserloh at 225-448-3299.
Bishop Robert W. Muench ordained, from left, Deacon Tim Grimes, Father Ryan Hallford and Father Pat Broussard during ordination ceremonies May 27 at St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge. Deacon Grimes will be ordained a priest later this year. (File photo | The Catholic Commentator)

Adjusting to changing demographics within their parish boundaries, several parishes also adjusted their Mass schedules, with the consultation of the task force and parishioners. Father Pat Broussard and Father Ryan Hallford were ordained by Bishop Muench on May 27 at St. Joseph Cathedral. The bishop also ordained Deacon Tim Grimes as a transitional deacon. Deacon Grimes is scheduled to be ordained to the priesthood in May.

Retiring from the priesthood were Father Robert Stine and Father Tom Duhe.

Bishop Muench welcomed seven new permanent deacons during the Rite of Ordination of Deacons on June 10 at St. Joseph Cathedral. Ordained were Deacon Stephen Brunet, Deacon William Corbett, Deacon Kirk Duplantis, Deacon George Hooper, Deacon Tim Messenger, Deacon Gary Mooney and Deacon Minos Ponville Jr.

The diocese mourned the passing of several priests and deacons in 2017, Father Michael Collins, Father William Greene, Father Donald G. Bahlinger SJ, Brother A. Joseph Martin SJ, Deacon Peter "Pete" B. Schlette Sr., Deacon Albert Ellis and Deacon Eugene Brady died this past year.

Father Jeff Bayhi, pastor of St. John the Baptist in Zachary, joined Gov. John Bel Edwards and a group of travelers for an Aug. 30, Hurricane Irma, the shroud and educate people about Christ's suffering.

In August, one year after historic flooding in southern Louisiana, parishioners and students throughout the diocese jumped into action to help neighbors in Texas and southwest Louisiana in the wake of devastating flooding from Hurricane Harvey which made landfall Aug. 25. Less than two weeks later, on Aug. 30, Hurricane Irma slammed into Puerto Rico and Florida followed by Hurricane Maria, affecting families and friends in the diocese. Students at Holy Ghost School in Hammond raised money to donate to the family of Father Roberto Merced, pastor of Holy Ghost Church in Hammond, whose family lives in Puerto Rico.

New principals for the 2017-18 school year include Charles (Pat) Sanguinetti at St. Thomas Aquinas Regional High School in Hammond, Melanie Gardiner at St. Jude the Apostle School in Baton Rouge, C.J. Laird at Sacred Heart of Jesus School in Baton Rouge, Aimee Wiles at Redemptorist St. Gerard School in Baton Rouge, Dr. Kathleen Herpich at St. Elizabeth Interparochial School in Paincourtville, Cheryl Santangelo at Mater Dolorosa School in Independence, Claire Willis at Cristo Rey Baton Rouge Franciscan High School and Stacia Andricain at St. Joseph's Academy in Baton Rouge.

"I'm excited to be here because you are here and God is here!" proclaimed Bishop Muench during a special Mass celebrated at St. Joseph Chapel at the Catholic Life Center Sept. 17 for the confirmation of 112 special needs youth. It was the first of its kind held by the diocese.

Hundreds of faithful waited in line to venerate a relic of St. John Paul II that toured the diocese Nov. 2-4. A vial of the saint's blood was displayed at Our Lady of Mercy Church in Baton Rouge and Holy Rosary Church in St. Amant. The faithful line up at Our Lady of Mercy Church in Baton Rouge to venerate a relic of St. John Paul II. A vial of blood of the saint was displayed at Christ the King Church and Student Center at LSU, Our Lady of Mercy Church and Holy Rosary Church in St. Amant. File photo | The Catholic Commentator

The diocese also broke ground on a new archives building, which is scheduled to open in the spring. Muench said he has been privileged to serve the past 15 years as bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, constituting "the richest blessings of ministry I have ever received." Judicial Vicar Father Paul Counce said the bishop's resignation letter begins a formal consultative process that could last several months.

"I express an initial thanks to God, the Church and the members of our diocese for your care and prayers," said Bishop Muench. "Please know how deeply I hold all in my heart, mind and spirit. Be assured of my ongoing prayers.

The faithful line up at Our Lady of Mercy Church in Baton Rouge to venerate a relic of St. John Paul II. A vial of blood of the saint was displayed at Christ the King Church and Student Center at LSU, Our Lady of Mercy Church and Holy Rosary Church in St. Amant. File photo | The Catholic Commentator
“While Bethany was not on the list as a possible restriction, the guide felt based on years of experience that there is a lack of government and policing authority in that area,” Abshire said. “So there was a possibility of something happening there.”

She asked the guide about the potential of protesters targeting Americans but was assured typically it’s the Palestinians and Israelis that are in conflict with each other.

“They were not picking off tourists,” Abshire said. “I did see lots of Americans still traveling while we were there.”

The plan was then presented to the pilgrims, with Abshire adding the caveat that anyone who did not feel comfortable was welcome to stay behind at the hotel.

She added that no one stayed behind and there was never a thought of suspending the pilgrimage.

“I have a sister named Martha so I really wanted to see where Lazarus was raised,” Acosta said regarding the cancellation of the visit to Bethany. “But out of an abundance of caution they canceled it.”

“We never felt threatened and were just fine the whole time,” she added. “I feel more unsafe in the French Quarter.”

Father Lorrain said the group had a full schedule “so why risk it? It’s not as if we had a lot of free time on our hands. It worked out fine.”

With the security concerns mitigated, the pilgrims once again were able to focus on a journey that became even more spiritual in nature. For Father Lorrain, the experience was overwhelming, as he celebrated daily Mass at some of Christianity’s most sacred sites.

Perhaps most powerful was when he celebrated Mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is where Christians believe is the site of the resurrection. He said the altar sat above the slab where Jesus’ body was laid to rest.

“It was unbelievable,” he said. “I had done some reading ahead of time but you’re really not prepared to be there in person and actually experience the feeling of the place,” he said. “Having been ordained 31 years before the opportunity to go made it that much more special. To go after years of ministry and walk where Jesus walked was very powerful.”

Acosta said she left a little part of her heart in Israel, and that she will never pray the same prayer. She said one of the more moving days was when they walked the Way of the Cross, walking in Jesus’ footsteps on the way to Calvary.

“Torture and despair were the emotions of the Christ as we care for terminally ill patients and their families. We call forth the compassion and kindness of our staff, who serve in this health care ministry, to respond to the physical, spiritual and emotional needs of our patients and their families.

“We believe in the sacredness of life from conception to natural death, and we devote ourselves to supporting patients and families through the dying process at the end of life’s journey on this earth and new life in eternity.”

The 35 pilgrims from the Diocese of Baton Rouge departed their Jerusalem hotel before sunrise to begin the walk to Calvary.

She said one of the more moving days was when they walked the Way of the Cross, walking in Jesus’ footsteps on the way to Calvary. Since the day started before dark, the guide did recommend the group stay close together, with leaders in the front and back to watch for any potential problems, of which there were none.

Other visits included wading the Dead Sea, visiting the Mount of Olives, the Sea of Galilee and the Mount of the Beatitudes.

The married members of the group even had the opportunity to renew their marriage vows.

“It was a once in a lifetime experience,” Acosta said.