Bishop to submit letter of resignation to Vatican

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

Bishop Robert W. Muench said he has been privileged to serve the past 15 years as Bishop of Baton Rouge, constituting “the richest blessings of ministry I have ever received.”

Bishop Muench made his comments to The Catholic Commentator as he prepared to submit his letter of resignation to the Vatican on Dec. 28, the day he turns 75, as required by canon law. But as he noted in the statement, Pope Francis “one of the easiest things I have done in my life.”

“Relinquishing the administrative side of my current responsibilities will cause me neither grief nor disappointment,” Bishop Muench added, quoting Scripture. “There is an appointed time for everything under the heavens” (Eccel 3:1).

And while the pastoral responsibilities will be diminished, I know how busy our physically able retired priests are,” he added. “I express an initial thanks to God, the Church and the members of our diocese for your care and prayers. Please know how deeply I hold all in my heart, mind and spirit. Be assured of my ongoing prayers.”

Bishop Muench said he recently spent time with four retired bishops from the region and said all were in great spirits and “assured me they are enjoying their new status and staying busy.”

Judicial Vicar Father Paul Counce said the bishop’s resignation letter begins what is expected to be a formal consultative process, one lasting several months at least and which will solicit input from a number of sources. Father Counce said the bishop’s letter will first go the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, and will then be forwarded to the Vatican.

‘ARTISTIC CRIB’

Creche celebrates 75 years

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

A hushed, heavenly embrace is given to many gazing at a crèche scene of God coming to earth in a burst of glory, with wide-eyed shepherds, gift-bearing Magi, docile animals and adoring angels looking with Mary and Joseph upon the infant Jesus. Setting up and enjoying a crèche is a special time for families, especially when there are pieces that have special memories behind them. This is especially true for the faith family at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church and the members of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church legend says the three-quarter-life-size plaster statues were made in Italy, but no records have been found to verify their origin, according to Eggart.

Sacred Heart’s Nativity statues made their debut in 1942, which was the first Christmas the church celebrated in its new building, Sacred Heart archivist Mary Lee Eggart said.

Church legend says the three-quarter-life-size plaster statues were made in Italy, but no records have been found to verify their origin, according to Eggart.

The crèche at Sacred Heart Church in Baton Rouge has a 75-year history with the church and has inspired people over the generations. Photo by Lisa Cosé | Sacred Heart Church

“It seems that our new crib has excited the admiration of all those who had seen it. In fact it is an artistic crib. We are still true to our policy; nothing shall be too beautiful or too costly for the home of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, either interiorly or the grounds that surround it. Please do not accuse your pastor of extravagance. It is true, he has a very expensive taste, but he certainly knows how to make the old dollar go far. It must not be forgotten that our parish has many friends, far and near, and all take great pride in the new church. The new crib, which cost $360, plus transportation, has not been paid for, but the infant Jesus will touch the heart of someone — we feel confident that the money will be forthcoming. Let’s trust in divine providence. Why be discouraged?”

It is not known how the crèche was originally set up, because there are no pictures in the Sacred Heart archives from Msgr. Blasco’s pastorate. Sacred Heart’s next pastor, Msgr. Paul Gauci, had an elaborate platform built in the western arm of the transept in front of the St. Joseph altar, complete with a stable, an original backdrop, painted by Eggart’s uncle and parishioner William L. Moreland, who is now deceased. He painted a heavenly host of angels over the town of Bethlehem.

The crèche statues were stored in a closet in the choir loft.

“Years of hauling them up and down the stairs took their toll and by the end of the 1950s they were badly in need of repair,” said Eggart.

Parishioner Alice Jones and Eggart’s mother Mary Lee Moreland Eggart renovated the statues. They worked in the old kindergarten building, which...
LIGHTING A TRADITION — Bonfires along the Mississippi River from Port Allen south have been a long-standing tradition for generations. Families plan their bonfires well in advance, and weeks before Christmas Eve trees are cut and the poles begin to dot the river levee. Although the origin of the tradition remains a mystery, the fires rekindle the memory of when a great light and angels appeared to the shepherds on the outskirts of Bethlehem as they watched over their sheep The angels brought the news of the birth of Jesus. Above, people in Gramercy prepare their bonfire which includes the log cabin, circa 1986. Photo provided by the Archives Department of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

DID YOU KNOW

Baptism of bells

Church bells are commonplace today, but for the first 400 years of the church there was only silence. Paulinus of Nola first introduced the bells at a church in the year 400. In 604 Pope Sabinius officially sanctioned the usage of bells, and by early in the Middle Ages ringing could be heard throughout northern Europe.

Although the primary purpose of the bells has traditionally been to alert Catholics in a particular area that Mass time is nearing, they can be heard throughout the day at many churches. Some might be three times, but some others might ring them hourly.

Bells are also consecrated in a solemn function, known as the “baptism of the bell.” The tradition is thought to date to the 8th century but some believe it started earlier. At one time, the bells were actually dipped into baptismal water, while the presiding priest or bishop pronounced the words used at baptism.

That particular practice was condemned in 789 but washing the bell with specially blessed water and even anointing them with oil had already woven itself into the fabric of the ceremony.

In modern church culture, the water used to “baptize” the bell must be blessed by a bishop, even if he does not actually bless the bell. However, if a priest is to bless a bell, he must have a special faculty granted by the Vatican.

A prayer is read before the bell is washed with the holy water. After it has been washed, the bell is anointed on the outside with the oil of the sick by the bishop or presiding priest as he recites a prayer.

The bell is anointed outside seven times and inside four times all while saying a prayer that in part asks that “whoever assembles at its sound may be free from all temptations of the enemy, and ever follow the teaching of the Catholic faith.”

In what many experts find no spiritual base, the ceremony concludes with the chanting of a passage from St. Luke’s Gospel where the Lord was entertained by Martha and Mary. So when you hear that ringing in your ears, you are likely hearing a tradition dating to the 5th century.

By Dina Dow

“... let the earth be open and bring forth a Savior.”

The early weeks of the new liturgical year correlate with the end of the calendar year, as we celebrate incredible feasts back-to-back: the Fourth Sunday of Advent, within hours of Christmas vigil Mass, then the following Sunday’s Feast of the Holy Family, within hours of the Solemnity of Mary, the mother of God on New Year’s Day. We have the opportunity to go to Mass A LOT over the next two weekends. And according to Pope Francis, we should!

A dwelling place for God

The focus of Christmas is an extraordinary moment of grace. The star was the brightest ever seen. It penetrated through the darkness of the world and illuminated a baby, his mom and foster father. The whisper of the night was interrupted by the song of an army of angels shouting, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” (Lk 2: 14). God opened the floodgates of heaven and poured upon the earth grace everlasting through Jesus who made a dwelling place among us. Salvation has come to all who believe, hope and love. The promise is peace.

Ark of the Covenant

A few thousand years preceding the incarnation, God made a dwelling place with the Israelites, his chosen people. God said to Moses, “And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst.” Within this movable tabernacle were placed the Ark of the Covenant, a table for the bread of the presence and the golden lampstand. Each illuminates the divine. King David years later desired to build a more appropriate place for the ark, which resulted in the construction of the temple in Jerusalem built by Solomon. The temple replaced the movable tabernacle with a permanent dwelling place for God, or so they thought. Overtaken by enemies, the temple was destroyed and the chosen people exiled. They felt lost and afraid. Hope was restored through the great prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, that one was to come to restore God’s people: “I will fix a place for my people Israel; I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place without further disturbance” (2 Sm 7:10).

Mary, the new Ark of the Covenant

“...Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel” (Is 7:14). The sign of hope given years before is perpetuated with Mary’s fiat, her “yes” to the message of the angel Gabriel as he announced, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” Mary, thus, became a dwelling place for Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, who was sent to bring us home to the father; to show us the way of love; to free us from sin and bring us to everlasting life. She is the model for all Christians who are called to open their entire being to the presence of God, a dwelling place for Jesus. How can we become such a dwelling place?

Eucharist, the bread of the presence

Dr. Brant Pitre, professor of Sacred Scripture at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, poses this question in his book ‘Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: How would God be present to his people, as he had been in the past, in the tabernacle of Moses?’ He explains the bread of the presence is “the bread of the face of God.” The fulfillment of this holy offering is made available each day in the sacrifice of the Mass. We see the face of God in the Eucharist. His real presence is

SEE GOSPEL PAGE 15
Diocese issues statement concerning allegation of sexual misconduct against Fr. Eric Gyan

On Nov. 8, 2017, the Diocese of Baton Rouge received from a woman in her thirties a written allegation of sexual misconduct against a priest of this diocese, Father Eric Gyan, currently pastor of St. Theresa of Avila Parish in Gonzales. The misconduct was alleged to have occurred in 1996 when the woman was a minor and Father Gyan was pastor of St. John the Baptist Parish in Brusly. This is the only such complaint the diocese has ever received about Father Gyan.

The diocese’s victim assistance coordinator, Amy Cordon, has spoken to the person making the allegation and offered assistance on behalf of the diocese.

Following the diocese’s own Policy Regarding Sexual Abuse of Minors by an Employee when an allegation is made, and in compliance with the U.S. Bishops’ Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People**, the diocese immediately notified civil officials of the allegation and assured them of our full cooperation. The diocese also informed the person who made the allegation that she had the right to contact civil officials.

As required by canon law, and the aforementioned policies, trained professional lay persons were appointed by the diocese to conduct a preliminary inquiry into the matter. In addition, the Independent Review Board of the diocese was notified. The investigation is ongoing and to this point has not yielded any cause to remove Father Gyan from his current pastoral service. Father Gyan has categorically denied the allegation.

The diocese takes such allegations very seriously. If anyone has information that can assist the diocese concerning this matter, please contact Amy Cordon in the diocesan Victim Assistance Office at 225-242-0250.

**diobr.org/images/2016_Revised_Policy_SAM.pdf

COMING HOME

Mass celebrated at IC Chapel

By Richard Meek

The Catholic Commentator

Henry Blanchard goes home twice a year. Home being only a short walk from his house. On All Saints Day and on the Sunday nearest the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Blanchard and many others in the Napoleonville community attend Mass at the Immaculate Conception Chapel on LA Highway 401, or “down the canal” as it is known among local folks.

Originally founded in 1858 and clustered with St. Anne Church in Napoleonville in the 1980s, those days are the only days of the year when Mass is celebrated at the chapel.

“It means a lot for me to be able to come to attend Mass here,” said Blanchard, who served as an altar boy in the 1950s at Immaculate Conception, located just down the street from his house. “It’s meaningful because it’s part of the community. It’s home to me.

“I was born and raised here and was married here but can’t be buried here,” he said, understanding that funerals and weddings are not permitted to be celebrated at the chapel. “So I told my wife to put me in the (next door) firehouse and roll me to the (adjacent) graveyard.”

Immaculate Conception was founded in the same year the current church was constructed on land donated by a parishioner and also the same year of the founding of St. Joseph the Worker Church in Pierre Part. In fact, at that time one priest served both parishes, and legend has it that when visiting Immaculate Conception every two to three weeks to celebrate Mass, the priest would often go rabbit hunting with parishioners.

Immaculate Conception was one of the first

SEE CHAPEL PAGE 18
Nativity scenes bring joy to hardened hearts

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – The Nativity scene in St. Peter’s Square is not getting rave reviews: The backdrop does not look like a stable and the characters in need, hungry, naked, dead, imprisoned, don’t exactly evoke a silent night when all was cozy, calm and bright.

Franciscan Father John Puodziunas said he didn’t like it at first.

In addition to Mary and Joseph – baby Jesus will appear only on Christmas – the scene includes figures of people who illustrate the ongoing need for the corporal works of mercy, including feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, burying the dead, caring for the sick and visiting those in prison.

As Father Puodziunas, a friar from Philadelphia who is now general treasurer of the Order of Friars Minor, stood in St. Peter’s Square, he said he realized “this really captures what I believe the Nativity set is about. It’s about ‘Where am I today? Where is the world today? Where is the church today?’”

The Vatican display, he said, “brings the manger scene into our present world reality to remind us that this is a God who continues to step into our world. It isn’t just something that happened 2,000 years ago.”

According to legend, it was St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of Father Puodziunas’ order, who invented the Nativity scene in 1223 by bringing straw, an ox and an ass to the side of a hill where Christmas Mass was about to be celebrated.

Father Puodziunas conceded Nativity scenes may have been around before St. Francis brought one to life in Greccio, Italy, but the Franciscan is certain the friars were responsible for spreading the tradition and bringing it into people’s homes.

“Why did St. Francis do the crib scene on the side of the mountain? Because the people were not able to receive the child into their lives,” he said. Back then, like today, the obstacles may have been “busyness or anger or war or the past or concerns.”

But by bringing the people of Greccio to the manger, he said, St. Francis hoped they would be able to experience again the power and awe of God taking human flesh, becoming one of them and then offering his life for them.

“The whole idea of the creche speaks to so many feelings and emotions we have,” Father Puodziunas said. “The child, manger, animals, night, outdoors, emptiness – they all communicate feelings that endure through time and can be recreated anywhere.”

St. Francis, he said, was focused on “the creche and the cross. The wood of the manger becomes the wood of the cross. This Christ that steps into a messy world – whether at the time of Christ, the time of St. Francis or our own time – is the same Christ that takes us to the cross and is the source of our salvation.”

While there probably was a catechetical element to St. Francis’ creche, Father Puodziunas believes it was more spiritual and experiential than education. “It was about making the story of Christ come alive in their lives ... This child steps into the world we have today, into our own lives, not as a child, but as a savior.”

The scene also is a reminder of humanity’s poverty, not in the sense of things that people do not have, but in the sense that there is a void in everyone that only God can fill, he said. “Love, peace, mercy, freedom, joy – these are the real poverties of the world” and the gifts that the Christ child brings.

St. Francis believed that “we’re not all that bad,” but that God steps into the world to offer more, he said. “As pretty as our manger sets are,” he said, “the reality is that that first manger wasn’t a pretty sight and that the world that this child steps into isn’t always pretty. And yet, this child chooses to step into this world.”

The inclusion of animals in a Nativity scene not only helps illustrate Jesus’ birth in a stable, he said. “Clearly, the Incarnation touches all of creation” and “all things are created for the purpose of praising God.”

But, he said, “we are not a ‘Hallmark Christmas’ people, life gets messy, but in the Gospel Jesus talks about the truth being revealed to the smallest children.”

As they “grow up,” Father Puodziunas said, many people build walls and other obstacles to experiencing God’s love for them and to seeing how God is stepping into their lives.

When he was in parish ministry, he said, he would bring the little children up to the Nativity scene and tell them there was something they must tell their parents and older siblings “because they forget,” and that is: “Jesus is born.” And after Mass, he would tell them, “You need to bring them up to the manger scene.”
Youth eager for annual March for Life pilgrimage

Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

Want to take a trip that can include struggling with brain fog because of lack of sleep, being outside in freezing temperatures, bouts of restlessness during “technology free zone” times on a seemingly endless ride on a bus, which may break down — while being admonished to “offer it up with prayer and sacrifice” and “we’re pilgrims — not tourists”? The first impulse is most likely to run away from such an offer. But youth throughout the Diocese of Baton Rouge are running to the opportunity to take a trip that may include some or all of the above problems because of the many “way worth it” moments of beauty in which they can bond with their pro-life peers and deepen their faith as they become a voice for the “voiceless,” the unborn, during March for Life in Washington, D.C., set for Jan. 19.

More than 450 youth and adult chaperones from more than 20 church parishes in the Diocese of Baton Rouge will trek to the nation’s Capitol to speak out for the lives of the unborn during the 45th March for Life, themed “Love Saves Lives.”

Tentatively, pilgrims leaving from the Catholic Life Center will board nine buses at 6:30 a.m. on Jan. 15 for the 24-hour trip to Washington, D.C. Along the way they will visit the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament at Hanceville, Alabama. They will also visit the motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia. Some of the sisters will board the bus and accompany the youth for the rest of the pilgrimage.

While in the Capitol, the youth will visit Mt. Vernon, which was the home of George and Martha Washington, the National Mall, Arlington National Cemetery, the Shrine of the National Basilica, the Smithsonian museums and the National Holocaust Museum. There will be a “touch of home” during the event when the youth will gather with other pro-life peers at a Louisiana Geaux Forth Rally.

Praise and worship will provide more sparks of inspiration for many youth, with MP3 rallies at their “home base” for the trip, Camp Letts. On Friday night there will be a concert and adoration vigil at a “Life is VERY Good” rally at George Mason University.

There will be other opportunities for pilgrims to spread the pro-life message, including a rosary walk at the White House and Planned Parenthood.

The culmination of the trip will be the march. The local pilgrims will join hundreds of thousands of pro-lifers in peacefully protesting the Supreme Court’s decision legalizing abortion in Roe v. Wade in 1973 and calling for the end of legalized abortion.

Emily Froeba, pilgrimage coordinator, said March for Life has a life-changing impact on the attendees.

“I am so excited about the good things that God will do through the March for Life Pilgrimage this year,” said Froeba. “We are on a pro-life mission. Additionally, our (diocesan) theme this year, ‘Fully Alive,’ also reflects our hope for each participant. We pray and work that they might see the beauty of the church, their own lives and the lives of others. I thank God to be a part of pilgrimage planners at St. Michael High School and I am constantly amazed by their support and belief in this pilgrimage. And I know that throughout the diocese we also have the prayers and support of so many.”

Jansen Bourgeois, a senior at St. Michael, said she is excited to be making her first trip to March for Life and to the Capitol.

“Going to Catholic school my whole life, I have always heard about March for Life,” Bourgeois said. “But I became especially interested in going when I began high school at St. Michael. I had seen the promo videos of getting to go to Washington, D.C., and they deepened my understanding of abortion and how passionate I am about standing up for those who don’t have a voice; so for me, it is a win-win getting to go on the march.”

Bourgeois is nervous about some things, such as what protestors of the march might say or do.

“I’m truly anxious to see how the march is going to impact me and help me grow as a person,” said Bourgeois. See March Page 15

OBITUARY

Brother A. Joseph Martin dies

Brother A. Joseph Martin SJ died Dec. 4 in Grand Coteau after a long illness. He was 88 years old and a Jesuit for 63 years.

Remembered by his brother Jesuits for his kindness and intelligence, Brother Joseph’s life was celebrated in a Mass of Christian Burial on Dec. 9 in the Main Chapel of St. Charles College in Grand Coteau. Burial was in the Jesuit Cemetery of St. Charles College immediately following the Funeral Mass.

Brother Joseph was born June 25, 1929, in Maringouin to Alcide Joseph Martin and Delia Blanchard Martin, who preceded him in death. His two sisters, Meredith Templet and Norma Cardinal, also died before him.

He was raised and educated in Plaquemine, graduating from Plaquemine High School in 1945. He earned a bachelor of arts degree from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge before joining the U.S. Army Signal Corps. He served in Korea during the Korean Conflict.

He entered the Society of Jesus at St. Charles College in Grand Coteau on Sept. 15, 1953 and pronounced first vows on March 19, 1956. He pronounced his final vows on Aug. 15, 1964, also at St. Charles College.

As a religious brother in the 1950s, Brother Joseph’s training was diverse and hands-on, with instruction coming from more experienced brothers. He gained experience as secretary, bookbinder, infirmary, host maker, sacristan, kitchen manager, buyer, diarist, farmer and tailor.

During his ministry, he served in most of the large communities of the former New Orleans Provinces, most often as minister, responsible for caring for the material needs of the community and the physical facilities. He was also assistant director of the Jesuit Seminary and Mission Bureau in New Orleans from 1981-89.

Brother Joseph’s intelligence, generosity and skill enabled him to fill many roles. He was at his best in making a Jesuit community a true home for the men living there, comfortable and welcoming. He was especially attentive in his care for the sick and elderly, and he played a crucial role in setting up the former Ignatius Residence in New Orleans for senior Jesuits; those men now reside at the St. Alphonsus Rodriguez Pavilion in Grand Coteau.

Memorial gifts may be made to the USA Central and Southern Province of the Society of Jesus at 4511 West Pine Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108 or online at jesuitscentralsothern.org.

The annual pilgrimage to March for Life in Washington, D.C. is a challenging, but life-changing trip for youth in the Diocese of Baton Rouge. File photo by Debbie Shelley | The Catholic Commentator
Burial of unbaptized/ Role of deacon

Q My son passed away recently at the age of 35. We held a memorial service for him since we could not have a funeral Mass. (He was not baptized as an infant, which was my decision, of course, not his.) I have been a Catholic all my life, have followed Christian principles and have raised my children with those same values. My parish priest is saying that since my son was never baptized, he cannot be buried in our church’s Catholic cemetery (where our family has already purchased plots for cremains). I was very saddened to be told this because now, until my husband or I die, we will hold onto our son’s ashes; and we ourselves will now choose to be buried in a non-Catholic cemetery so that our son is not laid to rest alone. We want him to be next to us. I would appreciate whatever information or guidance you might offer. (northeast Texas)

A First, my condolences and the assurance of my prayers. Losing a child is, I think, the hardest loss of all, for which no one is ever really prepared. You live with the understanding that your parents are likely to predecease you and that your spouse might as well, but you never expect to outlive your own children. So I will pray for you, that God will ease your sorrow and for your son, that he may enjoy the peace of God’s presence and one day welcome you there. Meanwhile, please take comfort in the fact that your son’s remains can in fact be buried with you in the family plot you have purchased. Family ties are sacred, and the church has no interest in separating loved ones either in life or in death. Nothing in canon law prohibits a non-Catholic from being buried in a Catholic cemetery. The website of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, for example, says clearly: “Non-Catholics may be buried with their Catholic spouses or other family members ... in a Catholic cemetery.” It is true that, in most circumstances, a Catholic funeral Mass may be offered only for those already baptized in a Christian denomination (several of the ritual’s prescribed prayers refer directly to the baptism of the deceased), but there is no such limitation regarding the place of burial.

Deacons are authorized by the laws of the Catholic Church to baptize, witness marriages, perform wake and funeral services outside of Mass, distribute holy Communion, proclaim the Gospel, preach homilies and expose the Blessed Sacrament for eucharistic adoration. (A deacon is not empowered as a priest to consecrate the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, to hear confessions or to anoint the sick.) The work of a deacon, however, is done at the discretion and under the immediate supervision of the pastor of the parish to which that deacon is assigned. So there is some variation from parish to parish as regards the particular ministries of the deacon assigned there and the frequency with which those ministries are exercised. As you have pointed out, the current shortage of priests has made the work of deacons in the church today all the more valuable.

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.
Congregation of St. Joseph’s service day aids community

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

During a visit to the Holy Land a year ago Cherry Riggs was exposed to how people in other parts of the world are forced to live and how they often leave everything in their native country to immigrate to the United States.

She was struck by the importance of reaching out to refugees and making them feel welcome in their new home. Riggs' commitment to assisting immigrants and refugees is why she recently joined other volunteers in putting together 25 welcoming baskets for new families arriving in the Baton Rouge area.

Riggs and several other lay associates of the Congregation of St. Joseph as well as St. Joseph women religious and St. Joseph's Academy students gathered Oct. 21 at the Sisters of St. Joseph convent to assemble the baskets, which contained such household items as toothpaste, tooth brushes, bath towels, bath mats, hair items and cleaning supplies.

Also included was a card that said “Welcome” in six different languages on the one side and on the other side a prayer written by associate Barbara Chenevert for refugees. “It’s a little way to me that the Holy Family were also with them and express our love and concern to refugees,” Riggs said.

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“I think that is also part of the biblical mandate to care for widows, orphans, refugees,” she added. “It’s a way of saying we are all one.”

Sorting through more than 200 pounds of canned goods and divvying them up in 18 different categories at the food bank was such a success that Kirsty Roubique, also an associate, said she and others have decided to volunteer at the facility on the fourth Monday of every month from 8 a.m. – noon.

“When the food bank you are talking the generosity of the community that has already donated the food,” Roubique said. “We are just one small part in this extremely efficient organization to feed your neighbor. As long as we can be a part of that we feel like the charism of the sisters is progressing through that chain.”

Associate Fran Harvey said she and several fellow associates as well as other volunteers and SJA students spent one a Sunday afternoon equipping the kitchen at Thrive Academy, which is a school where at-risk students live during the week and return home during the weekend. Harvey said the group had equipped four kitchens of the recently completed dormitories earlier in the year and returned to finish one more.

The school houses some of the community’s highest at-risk students in grades sixth through 12th.

“It’s a mystery being involved in a service project like this,” Harvey said. “We don’t know who is on the receiving end and it’s a challenge not to have judgment (regarding) who is receiving what.”

“That is not what the call is about,” she added. “The call is about doing your part and showing up. And give and offer what you can and let it and let God after that. It is a beautiful part of who shows up.”

Riggs agreed, saying she was also inspired by having the opportunity to volunteer alongside students, even two young children who were brought by their grandmother, and especially the sisters.

“Just working with them was just a powerful experience and looking all the way down to these tiny people and thinking of what an impact it made on them,” Riggs said. “The thing that touched my heart so much was certainly the generosity of the associates, students but on that day we gathered those of us who were associates were so very grateful to be working hand in hand with the sisters who have been models for us for so many years. It was joyful, peaceful.

“My heart was just bursting being in the presence of all of these people working together.”
CHRISTMAS VILLAGE – Father Jason Palermo’s Christmas village is celebrating its 25th anniversary, as it is on display at St. Joseph Church in French Settlement. Father Palermo, pastor at St. Joseph, said he built an addition to the rectory at St. Joseph to be able to display the village in one room. He said his mother has made some of the houses, and he also used show his creative and artistic side. Recent additions are 3-D puzzles of famous landmarks. The village contains miniature versions of New York, London, Walt Disney World and some country scenes along with miniature trains and trolley. It is open to the public through mid-January. Photos by Richard Meek | The Catholic Commentator
By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

Integrating evidence-based science and faith is the way to stop the dismembering of the soul from the body done by secular cultural messages that yield such tragic results as the rise in teen suicide, according to Staci Gulino MSN. She talked about the importance of presenting messages that look at the whole human person in the presentation, “13 Reasons Why Not” presented Nov. 14 at the Catholic Life Center.

Further more, people are seen as an object to be consumed and discarded. This has led to such things as abortion, euthanasia, etc.

There are dangerous philosophies that exalt such things as good looks, wealth, status and power that can make people who don’t have these things think they are not of any worth. Gulino noted this is the wrong lens to look through and it complicates the way the human person is seen.

“Catholics can change the lens through which they view the beauty of the human person,” said Gulino, noting St. John Paul II called it an obligation to do so.

Noting “the truth will set you free,” Gulino said conversations about the human person should look at conversion, consequences of one’s actions and that choices matter. It matters what people consume – what they take in, what they exclude and what activities they choose to decline or participate in, according to Gulino.

There has been much scientific learning about the brain and its ability to regenerate itself, according Gulino.

“We learned so much about the mind and how it works in good and not so good ways,” said Gulino.

She pointed out that the sciences can help people get an accurate diagnosis and proper therapy and treatments for physical things that can affect their brain.

Equally important is the spiritual sustenance people can provide suffering youth, said Gulino.

“We are called to help people in their suffering,” said Gulino, stressing that being present with, listening and responding to people in their time of need is an act of mercy.

To the question of, “What can I do within the relationships I have?“ Gulino encouraged audience members to pay attention to the signs that someone may be considering suicide and care enough to ask them questions. Additionally, they should be present, listen, affirm the person and offer prayer and sacrifice redemptively for that person.

Recognizing the spiritual battle element of the problems is also very critical, stated Gulino.

“We know we are in a spiritual battle. The church should convey the message you are never, ever alone,” said Gulino.

While taking care of troubled loved ones, people should...
An unusual snowstorm provided an early Christmas present for south Louisiana residents. Snowfall totaled two – seven inches throughout the Diocese of Baton Rouge, closing schools, offices and snarling traffic. Shown are snow scenes from area churches.
Bells ring melodious chapter in history of diocese

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

Early Sunday morning, the quiet dawning of a new day across the Diocese of Baton Rouge is broken by the joyous, deep, rich tones of church bells ringing as they beckon and welcome the faithful to Mass. For some of the older churches and parishes in the diocese, the pealing of church bells has continued for almost two-and-a-half centuries.

And, for many parishioners, that musical sound is so familiar that it has become a part of their own traditions, their history and, in some cases, their family. At St. Michael the Archangel Church in Convent, a baptismal record written in French and dated May 16, 1810 notes the blessing of the bell by Father Charles Lusson.

The blessing of the bell is not unusual, as it was and still is common practice that everything used in a church will receive a special blessing, from the church building to the religious statues and cemetery. But as communities were growing and churches were being built, the bells were given a special place in the churches and in church records. They were given mostly female names and godparents. The first St. Michael bell was named Pierre-Suzanne, for godfather Pierre Michel and godmother Susanne Lavigne Chenet.

“It’s just an old tradition in the church,” said Father Frank Uter, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Denham Springs. “It was almost like a baptism because water was sprinkled on them.”

According to Father Uter, author of “Stones Beside a River: A History of the Catholic Church on the East Bank of St. James Parish” and former pastor of St. Michael, a new St. Michael church was built in 1831 with a new 1,500 pound bronze bell from Belgium. That bell was blessed Dec. 11, 1832 by Father Simon Richard and named Eugenie-Louis in honor of its sponsors, Mother Eugenie Audie RSCJ, superior of the Sacred Heart Convent, and Louis LeBourgeois. Meanwhile, the Pierre-Suzanne bell was sent to St. Joseph Church in Paulina, where it remains today.

In 2005, St. Michael installed an electronic system to ring the Eugenie-Louis bell, which had previously been rung manually with a rope.

“We knew who the godparents were for the bell when it was first blessed,” said Father Uter. “So, what we did was cut down the church and place the godparents to stand there for the blessing of the new system.”

St. Michael is not the only church that contains a bell with familial ties to the community. At St. Elizabeth Church in Paincourtville, the Big Bell or La Belle, as she was called, was christened Armélise in 1876 by Archbishop Napoléon Perché, of New Orleans.

Renee Richard, assistant archivist for the Diocese of Baton Rouge, said records of the blessing of the bells at the oldest churches in the diocese are in baptismal records, where everything of significance was noted.

“We have a card catalog that had historical accounts noted in the baptismal records,” said Richard. “It has always been the practice of noting things in a register because the registers are dictated by Rome. They have to be kept forever and so, because of that, they become a place to record history.”

At St. John the Evangelist Church in Plaquemine, one bell, Joannes Maria, was blessed in 1885 and a second bell, Anna, was blessed in 1898. St. Philomena Church in Labadieville has two blessed bells. The larger one is named Marie Elizabeth and the smaller one Louise Philomene. All of them had godparents or sponsors.

Father Joseph Vu, administrator of St. Philomena Church, said the high cost of maintenance of real bells has forced many churches to adopt electronic systems. He added that church bells often served to keep time for people in a town or village, a practice that he utilizes today.

“If I’m in a meeting, it’s really rude for me to look at my watch to see what time it is,” said Father Vu. “But I’m around the church area and the bells go off, because they go off every half hour, I’ll know if I need to be somewhere next.”

The bells of St. Philomena also kept Father Uter on time for church growing up. During visits to see his grandmother, the church bell was rung twice during the half hour before Mass.

“The second bell would ring like five or 10 minutes before Mass and that meant, ‘You better get on your way!’ I can remember my grandmother saying, ‘Hurry up! That’s the second bell! We gotta get going!’ and ‘The second bell’s already rung!’ and I can just hear her right now,” he laughed.

The oldest church bell in the diocese, belonging to St. Francis Chapel in New Roads, was blessed July 9, 1741. Thirty years later, a bell cast in Spain, was donated to St. Gabriel Church in St. Gabriel. This was during the time Louisiana was under Spanish rule. That bell now hangs in the bell tower of the new St. Gabriel Church building. No godparents are listed among archival records for these two bells.

The most recent documentation of godparents for bells in the diocese is 1927. After Our Lady of Prompt Succor Chapel in Lutcher was enlarged, the bell, donated by the Nobile Family, was blessed. Margueritte Nobile Hymel was listed as the godmother and Ferdie Nobile as the godfather.

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Whether it’s a joyous ring or a toll marking the passing of someone, Father Uter said, “Bells tell people what they need to know when there’s no one else to tell them.”

After Mass, Father Uter said the bells at Immaculate Conception will peal as long as there are people outside visiting.

“The bells are like an accompaniment to what is going on,” he said. “I think it’s great because it lifts the heart.”

And, so the bells will ring throughout the Diocese of Baton Rouge on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, welcoming Jesus in joyful song in a celebration that makes us all part of God’s family, godparents and all.
Students spread the love with bags to the needy

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

In a season of waiting, watching and preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the preparational aspect of Advent can sometimes take over and take hold of day-to-day activities. From school concerts, parties and church events to shopping, decorating and planning for guests, the Christmas season can be the busiest time of year for many.

However, for freshmen students at St. Michael the Archangel High School in Baton Rouge, Advent has taken on a new meaning with preparing and watching, in that order, thanks to “love bags” that are being distributed to the needy. Students fill the gallon-sized storage bags, with toiletries, snacks, rosaries and instructions on how to pray the rosary, then they watch.

“It goes in their car for the holidays and because we pray about it, God is going to see that the person who needs it is going to get it. And, the kids believe that,” said ninth-grade religion teacher Robin Haile.

“I’ve already had stories coming back about families already giving out love bags to various people. I have one little boy who went to a Saints game in New Orleans. He gave his bag to someone in New Orleans, so it’s just going to (be) far-reaching - where the Holy Spirit sends it.”

According to Haile, the love bags were borne from a lesson based on the Gospel of Matthew 25:42-43: “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.”

“They (the people) said, ‘When did we see you hungry, when did we see you thirsty?’” and Jesus said, “The least you do to my brothers, the least you do to me,” so the kids took that to heart,” said Haile, who credits ninth-grader Edie Sanders for coming up with the project.

During the summer, Sanders, a shy student, attended Real World Camp in the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

“You live as people who are homeless and struggling with money,” said Sanders. “So, when we passed by people in need, we made these bags filled with toiletries, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste. Then I thought they need something to eat as well, so I put pastries in mine.”

As summer transitioned into fall, Sanders was a bit apprehensive about the start of a new school year at a new school. With no core group of friends to start off high school, she didn’t expect to be involved in any activities outside of her class work. But with her older brother Brock, a senior at St. Michael, many of the upper class students made a point to reach out to the younger sister of their classmate, a gesture that sparked an idea in Sanders who was still reeling from her life-changing experience on the streets.

“When I’d go to football games, people would be ‘Hi, Edie!’ she recalled. “So many people reached out to me and asked if I needed help and I thought, ‘Wow! Can people do this for other people out on the streets and stuff?’”

Sanders got her chance to recruit others to the cause when Haile asked the class to put the Gospel of St. Matthew into practice. Haile said the students embraced the idea for the love bags and the entire freshman class (160 students) got involved. Emails to parents and other teachers led to donations of supplies.

“It’s so hard, sometimes, to get the students to understand so much the need of our community and abroad and so to make a person that is homeless real for them, we talked about what leads people to that avenue,” said Haile.

The idea to include a rosary came from ninth-grader Garren Stevison, who was studying for a rosary test with his grandmother during a hospital stay in Memphis. He said a nurse returning to the Catholic faith asked Stevison for help praying the rosary. It was an experience that motivated him to recommend that a rosary be included in the love bags.

“I was a little nervous (to share the story) but then I realized I got somebody back in the Catholic faith and I realized that was a big thing for me to do and I did what Jesus wanted me to do and that was God’s plan,” he said confidently.

One final item in the love bag is a sheet colored by the students with either Scripture or an inspirational saying to give people hope. When pitching the idea, Sanders stressed that homeless people are people without a home, so Haile made sure students introduced themselves and
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- Dean of Curriculum
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For job descriptions and information on how to apply, please visit our school website at www.cristoreybr.org.

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RECORDING DREAMS – Fifth-grade students at St. Peter Chanel Interparochial School in Paulina recently designed their own writer’s notebooks. The notebooks are used to record the students’ favorite quotes, dreams, ideas and experiences. Photo provided by Paula Poche | St. Peter Chanel School

HAWKS IN THE SKY – Middle school students at Mater Dolorosa School in Independence were paid a special visit by a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter. Robert Johnson, father of third-grader Kori Johnson, along with LTC Jacques Comeaux, WO1 James Cardin, SGT Joshua McNeese and SPS Cameron Ockman planned the event. Students were able to sit inside the helicopters, ask questions and take pictures. The students returned to class to write about their experience. Photo provided by Erin Mendez/Mater Dolorosa School

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ST. THOMAS MORE Catholic School

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Coco

Disney

A young Mexican lad’s (voice of Anthony Gonzalez) quest to follow in the footsteps of his hometown’s most famous son (voice of Benjamin Bratt) by becoming a world-renowned musician takes a supernatural turn on the Day of the Dead when he is mysteriously transported to the afterlife as depicted in the folklore associated with the pre-Columbian aspects of that celebration. There, a good-hearted old goat (Morgan Freeman) becomes his guide and agrees to help him obtain the blessing of a deceased relative he will need if he is to return to the land of the living. While free of any age-inappropriate content and strong on the importance of family solidarity, co-director Adrian Molina’s script, penned with Matthew Aldrich, is stuffed full of notions about the fate of the departed that clash with revealed truth and so are unsuitable for impressionable viewers. Thus principal director Lee Unkrich’s visually rich animated fantasy cannot be recommended for the youthful audience at which it seems primarily aimed, though teens and grownups can safely appreciate it. Non-scriptural religious ideas. A-II; PG

The Man Who Invented Christmas

L Street

This charming fact-based historical drama tells the original story of Victorian author Charles Dickens’ (Dan Stevens) beloved novella, “A Christmas Carol.” With his past three titles having failed to sell, Dickens fears falling into debt if his next production is equally unpopular. As he struggles with writer’s block and the endless distractions of his burgeoning family’s domestic life, a visit from his feckless father (Jonathan Bleecker), whom Dickens blames for the sufferings of his childhood, is a particular source of worry and conflict. The writer fancifully summons up and interacts with his own characters, most prominently dour miser Scrooge (Christopher Ebenzener). His patient wife (Plummer Clark) and unpaid literary agent (Justin Edwards) offer him encouragement, and the conversion story he eventually pens finds a real-life counterpart in the amendment of Dickens’ own behavior. Director Morfydd Bharat adaptation of Nalluri’s Les 2008 book is family-friendly in most respects and will likely prove a winner with a broad range of age groups. A very vague sexual joke, a single mild oath. A-II; PG

Roman J. Israel, Esq.

Columbia

Generally intriguing character study, set in Los Angeles, in which an eccentric civil rights lawyer (Denzel Washington) finds his ideals put to the test when the critical illness of his senior partner leads to the dissolution of their firm, and he is offered a much-needed job by a successful acquaintance (Colin Farrell) he considers a sellout. Though the dialogue in writer-director Dan Gilroy’s drama, which also features Carmen Ejogo as a social activist, somedly lapses into political rhetoric, the moral shadings of the two main characters keep the proceedings from becoming dull. Possibly acceptable for older teens. Fleeting violence, several uses of profanity and a milder oath, a single rough term, occasional crude and crass language. A-III; PG-13

Just Getting Started

Broad Green

This dismal attempt at comedy pits the old goat (Morgan Freeman) who manages a Palm Springs resort for retirees against his establishment’s newest guest (Tommy Lee Jones) in a competition that spans the golf links, the poker table and the chess board and that aims at, but never quite reaches, the boudoirs of the past-their-prime barflies both men are fond of chasing. The arrival of a corporate executive (Rene Russo) who has been dispatched to check up on the place eventually gives the rivals a new prize for which to strive. Besides its smirking attitude toward promiscuity, writer-director Ron Shelton’s false, flat, self-satisfied film is a work of such unrelied dullness that watching its wheels spin at times is mesmerizing. But not for long. Brief gunplay; sexual humor and references, a couple of uses of profanity, about a half dozen milder oaths, at least one rough term, occasional crude and crass terms. A-III; PG-13

Star Wars: The Last Jedi

Disney

Engrossing sci-fi epic in which the leading general (Carrie Fisher) of an embattled group of rebels sends a messenger (Daisy Ridley) to the distant planet on which her brother (Mark Hamill), a famed warrior, is living in self-imposed exile to summon his help in the desperate struggle against their fascistic enemies (led by Andy Serkis). Though he refuses to join the conflict, the veteran fighter does agree to train the envoys in the ways of the Force, the mysterious spiritual energy from which he derives his prowess. She will need its power when she eventually confronts her leader’s son (Adam Driver), an originally good person who has gone over to the side of darkness, but whose ongoing moral struggle has the potential to sway the outcome of the intergalactic war. Though it gets off to a slow start, once it hits its stride writer-director Rian Johnson’s eighth episode in the saga initiated by George Lucas in 1977 sweeps viewers along with stirring action and audience-pleasing plot twists. Teens able to take the “Jedi religion” as no more than the mythos of a fantasy world will benefit from lessons about the value of hope and the true nature of heroism. Frequent but bloodless combat violence, a scene of torture, a couple of mild oaths, a few crass terms. A-II; PG-13
what we eat and drink at every Mass. Established within our soul at baptism is a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. Established in our body and soul at Eucharist is the capacity to be a dwelling place for Emmanuel, God with us.

Inexhaustible spring of the Eucharist

This brings us back to the original point: the real reason for the season. Pope Francis, during his Oct. 25 general audience in St. Peter’s Square, challenged the faithful: “But how can we practice the Gospel without drawing the necessary strength to do it, one Sunday after another, from the inexhaustible spring of the Eucharist?”

The reason for Christmas is to celebrate the “opening of the earth and bringing forth a Savior.” Jesus’ saving birth will eventually lead to his saving death and the families of the parishes. The hands and feet of this child will grow into an adult, who ultimately will be pierced for the salvation of all, yet not before showing us how to live, love and be merciful. To keep us close, he sent the Holy Spirit and cleaved us to his body and blood in the real presence, the Eucharist.

The power of the “inexhaustible spring of the Eucharist” can move mountains. Once received in good faith, we can become loving and merciful dwelling places for God. We are called to move mountains by our love, our actions and our prayer. Strengthened by Eucharist we are capable of sharing this good news to all so they may come to know that Jesus Christ is our savior and shut with the angels, “Gloria in Excelsis Deo!”

Christmas opens the path for pilgrims to humbly follow the star, led by angels, and bear gifts to give to the one who is the face of God. Jesus incarnate, God in the flesh, is touchable, knowable and lovable. He is the way, the truth and the light. We call him Wonder Counselor, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. May this Christmas season renew your faith in Jesus Christ as the greatest of all joys and sing, “...veiled in flesh the God-head see. Hail the incarnate deity. Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel. Hark the Herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn King.” Make room for God. Come to Mass each Sunday. Become a dwelling place for him. Amen. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Dow is the director of the Evangelization and Catechesis for the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

She is also looking forward to seeing the monuments and other sites at the Capitol. “I think this trip is going to be substantially more historical and educational than any other trip I’ve taken,” Bourgeois said.

Joseph Bergeron, a member of St. Isidore Church in Baker and a freshman at St. Michael, will be making his second trip to March for Life. “During adoration (of last year’s trip), I felt a sense of peace and contentment,” Bergeron said. “I firmly believe that this trip is going to be substantial more historical and educational than any other trip I’ve taken.”

What strongly impacted Bergeron happened toward the end of the march, when he saw photos of what happens when a baby is aborted.

“That was rough, it really hit my heart hard,” said Bergeron. “I’ve been raised in Catholic schools and I had never seen it. That’s the moment I realized what I was marching for.”

He added, “A majority of my generation doesn’t know about abortion. I want to help get information out there that it’s wrong,” said Bergeron.

Trey Parker, a SMHS senior and member of the youth group at St. George Church in Baton Rouge, who is making his third trip to March for Life, agreed.

Parker said, “The question of whether I should go again was a no brainer, for once you experience a pilgrimage so centralized on discovering Christ through the beauty of his creation, you would do anything to go back. This year, I want to branch out of my friend group. I want to really go beyond my social bubble to meet new people and to strengthen some friendships that have dwindled as the years have gone by. I hope to take the passion for life and for Christ back to my school community.”

asked for the person’s name when they distributed the bags.

“God knows that person’s name and I tell them, ‘Think how many times you’re called by name during the day. They’re never called by their name,’” said Haile.

“This project has been outstanding because it started out on the grassroots level with the student’s idea and then the rest of the students embraced it and the faculty, the families the parents,” said Ellen Lee, principal of St. Michael. “The whole community has really embraced the project which is a beautiful testament to the catholicity of the school.”

Even going out to dinner has turned into a chance to practice charity for Sanders, who said she takes her leftovers from a restaurant and searches for someone to share it with on her way home. She lives every day in the season of Advent: waiting, watching and preparing for Jesus.

“I will always look for someone and ask, ‘Do you really need this?’” she said. “You gotta be grateful for what you have, and for what you have, you have to give to others.”

ACROSS

36 Characteristic of God (Gen 4:16)
37 Former overseer of the VOA
38 Capital of Tibet
40 Withered
41 Alphabet string
42 Theology on ______ program
43 Priest
46 Space
47 Roman statesman
48 Characteristic of God
52 Of book that precedes Ruth
55 Opposite or absence of good
58 Zoo sight
59 “________, saw Elba”
66 Hip bones
67 Aromatic fragrance

DOWN

1 Blow on the cheek delivered by the
2 Bishop at Confirmation
3 Death, on a pale green horse (Rev 6:8)
4 Pellucid
5 Emotional outburst
6 Saint of Avila
7 River in central Europe
8 Meadows
9 Cain traveled this direction from Eden (Gen 4:16)
10 Papal ambassador
11 Double curve
12 Having wings
13 Ballyhoo
22 Cover with wax
23 Debt that remains unpaid
25 Theater district
27 More, to Pedro
28 Paris’ debarking point
30 He blamed the Christians for burning Rome
31 Copier
32 Without value
33 Wor ______
34 “The Tell-Tale Heart” monogram
35 Son of Noah
36 Give consent
37 Former overseer of the VOA
38 Capital of Tibet
40 Withered
41 Alphabet string
42 Theology on ______ program
43 Priest
46 Space
47 Roman statesman
48 Characteristic of God
52 Of book that precedes Ruth
55 Opposite or absence of good
58 Zoo sight
59 “________, saw Elba”
60 Tithing percent
62 Rent
63 Run
64 Lofty nest
65 Mary, ______ Virgin
66 Hip bones
67 Aromatic fragrance
68 Barely passing grades

Solution on page 18
Why did two evangelists give us Christmas?

S

t. Mark, who was the first disciple of Jesus to write a Gospel in the late 60s of the first century, chose to begin with St. John the Baptist calling his fellow Jews to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God by being baptized as a sign of repenting their sins. The Messiah, John said, whom God through the prophets had promised in the Old Testament, would soon appear and baptize them with the Spirit of God himself.

St. John the Evangelist, who wrote the last of the Gospels around the year 100, begins by identifying that messiah as the word of God (or blueprint of God’s plan) who had existed before all ages, through whom the world was created, who now had become flesh in the human-divine Jesus. “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14).

But St. Matthew and St. Luke, who wrote in the 80s, chose to begin their Gospels with the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus. They didn’t, like St. Mark, portray Jesus as the miracle-worker who brought the power of God to earth by healing the sick and lame, casting out demons from the possessed, and giving sight to the blind. Nor did they, like John, portray Jesus as the spirit-filled messiah who preached a gospel of love and union through him with God, his father. They began with a God who, as St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, did not cling to his divinity, but humbled himself to become man and share his creatures’ hardships and sufferings, even to the cross.

This God-in-a-manger was certainly a different kind of God than the world expected. But St. Matthew and St. Luke, each in their own way, use the story of Jesus’ birth to tell us that he was, indeed, the promised Messiah, our Savior and a God who always will be with his creatures whom he truly loves. The poverty of the baby and his parents, the vulnerability of their condition, shows us that God’s love reaches down to the lowest common denominator of human existence. No one is excluded by the way he or she comes into this world. Our royal lineage comes from the king of kings, the lord of lords, who began life as the son of a simple Jewish girl and a village carpenter. His birth was attended by shepherds, the lowest rank of Jewish society, and their animals. This is how St. Luke chooses to tell the story. St. Matthew begins with Jesus’ ancestors who begat and begat and begat. He traces Jesus from Abraham to King David to Joseph, the husband of Mary. This poor couple are important because they have been chosen by God, as the angel explains to Joseph in his dream, to bring this child, Jesus, into the world. As his name implies, he will be its savior. Magi from the East come to do him homage. It is not their kingly status that is important. They represent the extension of God’s gift of salvation beyond Judaism to the rest of the world. But first he must survive the powerful among his own people.

Aimed at losing his own power, Herod Antipas tries to kill the child. Warned again by an angel, Joseph takes the child and his mother and flees to Egypt. The Holy Family becomes the first Christian missionaries. St. Matthew adds, “He (Joseph) stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’” St. Matthew wrote his Gospel for Jewish converts to Christianity in Palestine. He wanted to strengthen their faith in Jesus by showing how he fulfilled God’s promise to send a messiah.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the baby Jesus is the beginning of God’s proof that he loves humanity. The popular Franciscan spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, calls Jesus the “personal embodiment of universal love. Christ is the blueprint and icon of God’s loving presence and plan always and everywhere.” Another American writer, not so spiritual, Mark Twain, stumbled on the same truth when he wrote that, “Every baby born is a proof that God is not yet fed up with us.”

What is true in the Old Testament becomes visible in the New Testament with the birth of Jesus. God is in his creation. We humans are graced, privileged to recognize our own dignity because God in his only son, Jesus, dwelt among us and shared our life and our death. “No greater love than this has any man that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). Through his resurrection, Jesus became the eternal Christ. He left us behind as his church, his body on earth to continue what he began.

We often fail to recognize our dignity and our destiny, and we abuse each other and creation all around us. We need Christmas to remind us of what God created us for, to embody in our own lives the love of Christ. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Creation is groaning in anticipation ... waiting for the revelation of the sons and daughters of God” (Rom 8:22-23).

We want our own plan for our lives, but God wants much more. The full story is way ahead of us. Faith tells us to move ahead and trust in God. As we look upon the baby Jesus and put ourselves in the place of Mary and St. Joseph, we know our own story so far. We should be grateful for it. God has proven that his love is stronger than life’s reversals, even stronger than death. We know the end of Jesus’ story, but we live without closure to our own. Like St. Joseph and Mary, we have to move ahead and trust in God. The child Jesus is proof that God will be always with us.

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 johnnyecarville@gmail.com.

FATHER JOHN CARVILLE

Another Perspective

PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PRAY FOR US

Please pray for the priests, deacons and religious women and men in the Baton Rouge Diocese.

Bishop Muench’s annual Christmas message

December 22, 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Lord,

“Say to those who are frightened: Be strong fear not! Here is our God, he comes to save us” (Is 3:4).

As Christmas 2017 nears, we again approach in awe and wonder the manger of Bethlehem and the presence of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Comprehending the mystic truth of the Word becoming Flesh and living among us (Jn 1:14) requires us to realize Jesus is the third word of God; the first being the cosmic word – the universe; the second being the inspired word – the Sacred Scriptures, and the third word being Jesus, the Incarnate Word (Father Mark Link SJ, “He is the Still Point of the Turning World”). This marks the epicenter of the coalescence of the timeless into time and the divine with the human. We fall on our knees, literally and figuratively, to adore.

Our celebration of the Incarnation creates unfathomable joy, immeasurable hope and priceless love. It overwhelms our hearts, enlightens our minds, excites our emotions, elevates our spirits and fortifies our will. It provides a special opportunity to express ultimate praise to the Almighty – Father, Son and Holy Spirit and profound gratitude for our being provided human life in the image and likeness of God himself. It enables us to acknowledge special regard for immediate family and relatives, friends and business associates and all others. It includes both those like us and those different from us, whether by race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, social or economic class or any other way, all who represent neighbor to us.

In the midst of conflict and turmoil, division and controversy, unrest and tension of the world, the Nativity of the Lord graces us. It allows us to recall the emphatic teaching of Pope Francis to practice the time-honored Corporal Works of Mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide shelter for the homeless, visit the sick, visit prisoners, bury the dead; and the Spiritual Works of Mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish the sinner, comfort the sorrowful, forgive injuries, bear wrongs patiently, pray for the living and the dead, give alms to the poor. During this time may we joyously herald the Good News proclaimed by the angel and heavenly host: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (Lk 1:13-14).

Merry Christmas, everyone. Heartiest blessings for the New Year.

Affectionately yours in the infinite love of our Divine Savior,

+ Robert W. Muench

P.S. As many of you know, at the end of this month I will turn 75 and thus, in accord with canon law, will offer to Pope Francis my resignation from the office of Bishop of Baton Rouge. This will only become effective after the Holy Father responds back by giving me the date when it will take effect. There is no way to predict when that will be. Please keep me in your prayers as I keep you in mine.

The Christ-Child of the year

Every year Time magazine recognizes someone as “Person of the Year.” The recognition isn’t necessarily an honor; it’s given to the person whom Time judges to have been the newsmaker of the year for good or for bad. This year, instead of choosing an individual to recognize as newsmaker of the year, it recognized instead a category of persons, the Silence Breakers, namely, women who have spoken out about having experienced sexual harassment and sexual violence.

Part of the challenge of Christmas is to recognize where Christ is being born in our world today, where 2,000 years after the birth of Jesus we can again visit the stable in Bethlehem, see the new-born child, and have our hearts moved by the power of divine innocence and powerlessness.

For Christmas this year, I suggest we honor refugee children as the “Christ-Child of the Year.” They bring us as close to the original crib in Bethlehem as we can get within our world today because for them, as for Jesus 2,000 years ago, there is no room at the inn.

Jesus’ birth, like his death, comes wrapped in paradox: He came as God’s answer to our deepest desire, badly wanted, and yet, both in birth and in death, the outsider. Notice that Jesus is born outside the city and he dies outside the city. That’s no accident. He wasn’t born a “wanted” child and he wasn’t an accepted child. Granted, his mother, Mary, and those who had religious hearts wanted him, but the world didn’t, at least not on the terms on which he came, as a powerless child. Had he come as a superstar, powerful, a figure so dominant that knees would automatically bend in his presence, a messiah tailored to our imagination, every inn door would have opened to him, not just at birth but throughout his whole life.

But Christ wasn’t the messiah of our expectations. He came as an infant, powerless, hidden in anonymity, without status, uninvited, unwanted. And so Thomas Merton describes his birth this way: Into this world, this demented inn, is not that the innkeepers in Bethlehem were cruel and callous and this singular, poor, peasant couple, Joseph and Mary, were treated unfairly. The motif of “no room at the inn” wants rather to make a much larger point, the one Thomas Merton just highlighted, namely, that there’s never room in our world for the real Christ, the one who doesn’t fit comfortably into our expectations and imaginings. The real Christ generally shocks our imagination, is a disappointment to our expectations, comes uninvited, is perennially here, but is forever on the outside, on the periphery, excluded by our imaginations and sent packing from our doors. The real Christ is forever seeking a home in a world within which there’s no room for him.

So who best fits that description today? I suggest the following: Millions of refugee children. The Christ-Child can be seen most clearly today in the countless refugee children who, with their families, are being driven from their homes by violence, war, starvation, ethnic cleansing, poverty, tribalism, racism and religious persecution. They, and their families, best fit the picture of Joseph and Mary, searching for a room, outsiders, powerless, uninvited, no home, no opportunity to take them in, on the periphery, strangers, labeled as “aliens.” But they are the present-day Holy Family and their children are the Christ-Child for us and our world.

Where is the crib of Bethlehem today? Where might we find the infant Christ to worship? In many places, admittedly in every delivery room and nursery in the world, but “preferentially” in refugee camps; in boats making perilous journeys across the Mediterranean; in migrants trekking endless miles in hunger, thirst and dangerous conditions; in people waiting in endless lines to be processed in hope of being accepted somewhere, in persons arriving at various borders after a long journey only to be sent back; in mothers in detention centers, holding their young and hoping; and most especially, preferentially, in the faces of countless refugee children.

The face of God at Christmas is seen more in the helplessness of children than in all the earthly and charismatic power in our world. And so today, if we want, like the shepherds and wise men, to find our way to the crib in Bethlehem we need to look at where, in this demented inn, the most helpless of the children dwell.

OBLATE 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 on facebook.com/ronrolheiser
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, “Putting the Spirit First.” On Saturday, Jan. 27, 9 a.m. – noon. St. Jude parishioner and 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 225-766-7988 or Joyce Eisleroh at 225-448-3299.

Day of Prayer – Sister Mary Noel OP will present a day of prayer, “Resting in God’s Presence,” Tuesday, Jan. 23, 9 a.m. – 3 p.m., at Rosaryville Spirit Life Center, 39003 Rosaryville Road, Ponchatoula. Cost is $35. For more information, email scallais@oppeace.org or visit rosaryvillela.com.

Epiphany Gathering – St. John the Baptist Church, 402 S. Kirkland (River Road) Brusly, and the West Baton Rouge and West Baton Rouge Senior Spirit are hosting an evening of music, refreshments and fellowship, “Twelve Days of Christmas” Saturday, Jan. 6, the vigil of the feast of the Epiphany. Adults 50 years of age and older are invited to attend the event at St. John the Baptist Activity Center. To RSVP contact Babs Babin at 225-749-2518 or email bbabin@cox.net, Lucy Landry at 225-749-2981 or lucylandra@bellsouth.net by Friday Dec. 29 to register.

Silent Retreat – Father Albert Haase OFM will present a preached silent retreat, “The Spiritual Journey: A Process of Transformation,” Friday, Jan. 12 – Sunday, Jan. 14 at the Archdiocese of New Orleans Retreat Center, 5500 St. Mary St., Metairie. Father Haas will explore the dynamics of being transformed by the Spirit of God into the image of Christ for service in the present moment. For more information, call 1-866-937-9700 or email retreats@arch-no.org.

Revelations Study – St. Joseph the Worker Church, 3304 Hwy. 70, Pierre Part, will host an 11-week Bible Study, “Revelation: The Kingdom Yet to Come,” by Jeff Cavins, on Tuesdays, 10 a.m. and 7 p.m., beginning Jan. 9. For more information, call Duane at 985-252-6008 or email duane@sjworker.org.

Survivors of Suicide – People who have lost a loved one to suicide, or knows one who has, is invited to attend a non-denominational free support group, Survivors of Suicide (SOS) every first and third Sunday of the month, 6 p.m., at St. Albert the Great Church and Catholic Student Center, 409 W. Dakaota St., Hammond. For more information, call Angie Arnone at 985-351-1073.

Catholic Basics – A five-night series, “Five Nights of Catholic Basics with Father Trey Nelson and Friends,” will be held Sunday, Jan. 28 – Thursday, Feb. 1, 6:30 – 8 p.m., at St. Jude the Apostle Church, 9150 Highland Road, Baton Rouge. Topics will include “Adam and Eve: Annunciations” and “Eternal Life: Church Structure.” Babysitting will be offered. For more information, call St. Jude at 225-766-2431.

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parishes in the Diocese of Baton Rouge to be clustered but with the stipulation, according to Father John Vu, administrator at St. Anne Church in Napoleonville, that the two Masses be celebrated annually.

“If not (for the stipulations), the land and oil well (which is located on the property) would go back to the previous owner. And we still have the cemetery (on the property),” he said.

Father Vu said that when he first arrived at St. Anne, parishioners would talk to him about the church “down the canal.” He said they soon gave him a tour and a history lesson, so he understands the significance of Immaculate Conception and the role it has played in the tight knit community.

“It’s important to be able to say Mass here,” he said.

The interior of the church is maintained by the Ladies Altar Society, which also helps maintain St. Anne, and the exterior is tended to by volunteers.

“We put out a call and everybody comes to help,” said Larry Arbonaux, also a long time parishioner, and like Blanchard, lives a short distance from the chapel. “We like it, it’s our little community church.”

“With the speed of life today, it’s very important to try to hold something together,” he added.

Twice a year, the community is able to do just that, reuniting to take a step back in time and celebrate a historic past.
was later named Blasco Hall and has since been demolished.

“I remember being fascinated with the rebuilding they were doing ... I remember them rebuilding fingers, toes, arms, ears, noses and wings. I will forever remember the smell of oil paint and turpentine,” said Eggart.

The backdrop had deteriorated badly also, so Eggart’s father, Al Eggart, also deceased, created a new one, with a deep blue starry sky and Bethlehem off in the distance.

After Msgr. Gauci died, subsequent pastors decided not to use the crèche figures and purchased a new smaller wooden one that was used for several years. The new crèche was attractive, but not suited to the large scale of the building, according to Eggart.

Because there was no permanent committee in charge of the crèche set-up, there was no consistency in its design from year to year. Eggart and her mother asked permission to resurrect the old statues.

Working on the crèche was an honor for Eggart.

“I love Father Gauci’s version of the crèche,” said Eggart. “It was huge or so it seemed to me as a child, and was like a window into another world. They would start building it during Advent, but draped sheets in front of it while in progress, until it was finally unveiled at Christmas, which added to the Advent feeling of anticipation.”

By this time, the statues were in need of repair again and while mother and daughter did the restoration work a new cabinet was custom built to house the statues in the ground floor of the church under a stairwell.

Eggart designed a new stable and parishioner Joe Ford, deceased, constructed the stable and platform that is still used.

Eggart enjoyed the time she spent with her mother working on the crèche.

“The last time we restored them (the statues) in 2005, we did it in the sacristy of the church,” said Eggart. “We’d go to 9 a.m. Sunday Mass then change clothes and get to work.

“Father Shelton Fabre (now bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux) was our pastor. We both loved the fact that we would hear the 11 a.m. Mass while we were working and hear Father Shelton’s homily again. It created a very peaceful atmosphere for us to work in and often became meditative.”

For almost 30 years, the two Marys implemented the crèche each year. Early on, the cat lovers instituted a plaster cat, which is in accordance with an old Italian legend about the cat who witnessed the first Christmas. For several years, only children seemed to notice the cat in the Sacred Heart crèche.

The statues began to show wear, so Eggart and her mother did another restoration in the summer of 2005.

After Father Kenneth Smith became pastor of Sacred Heart, a tradition was started in which a young Sacred Heart student was chosen each year to carry the baby Jesus and place him in the manger at the Christmas Vigil Mass, said Eggart.

In 2007, a new statue was donated by Susie Hotard and the Knights of Columbus.

“The new statue, crafted in Florence, Italy, is a perfect match to the original except that it is made of wood,” said Eggart. “This makes it a much lighter burden for the child chosen to carry it in the Christmas Vigil procession. It is also smaller and in better proportion with the other statues.”

Over the years, the two Marys began to name the statues. The three shepherds are named for Sacred Heart’s early pastors, Dominic (Blasco), Paul (Gauci) and Jerome (Dugas). The angel is named Shelton (Bishop Fabre), and the donkey is named Henry (Father Henry Vavasseur, former pastor). The cow is named Catherine (Sister Laboure Duggan, former pastoral associate), and a sheep with a label “good sheep” on its base is named Kenneth (Father Kenneth Smith, former Sacred Heart pastor), and the cat is named Gloria, as in “Gloria in Excelsis Deo.”

When Eggart’s mother passed away in 2010, Eggart continued to set up the crèche with help from her husband, Clyde LeBlanc. In 2012, she passed on the torch to Dorothy Calandro, who is continuing the tradition. She is assisted by husband, Raymond, who was involved from the early days as an assistant to Ford in building and setting up the platform, trees and stable and has continued to set it up most years to the present.

Working on the crèche also has special meaning for Dorothy Calandro.

“We raised three beautiful daughters who we brought to the church here also,” said Calandro. “I have beautiful memories of the crèche. One in particular is when my youngest, Maggie, who was seven at the time, was chosen to bring the baby Jesus down during the procession on Christmas Eve. We all walked with her to the crèche as she laid baby Jesus in the manger.”

She added, “I love knowing that my friends will be helping me set up one of the most important and beautiful symbols of the Christmas season in the church. It also makes me feel closer to the Lord.”

She and Eggart said parishioners have also said the crèche brings the message of Christmas closer to them.

“I think the continuity of having the same scene every year – even though we may change a few details here and there - really gives parishioners a sense of connection with their history and their families,” said Eggart. “It’s also heartwarming to see someone showing their young child or grandchild our Nativity scene and talk about how it is the same one they saw when they were a child. It really speaks to the universality of the Christmas story.”

CELEBRATING THE Reason for the Season

Wishing you and your family a Merry Christmas.
He emphasized only the pope can officially accept a bishop's resignation. Father Counce said there is no clock, no deadline or no date as to when the pope will appoint the bishop's successor. Until then, effectively nothing changes regarding the bishop's authority. "(Bishop Muench) remains the Bishop of Baton Rouge with full power and authority until they announce his successor," Father Counce said, adding that he believes a new bishop will not be appointed before the end of May. "Five months (to name a successor) would be incredibly fast."

The process is rather complex, beginning when the Holy See receives Bishop Muench's resignation letter. Pope Francis will turn the letter over to the Congregation of Bishops, who will then notify Bishop Muench that he will remain the Bishop of Baton Rouge until his successor is named, Father Counce said. He said the Congregation of Bishops will implement a consultation process as to who will be appointed the sixth bishop for the Diocese of Baton Rouge. He said the bishops of Province of New Orleans will have sent in three names to the Apostolic Nuncio. He said every individual bishop also is allowed to send him the names of potential replacements. And, Father Counce added, virtually every bishop of a smaller diocese and every auxiliary bishop in the country could be considered a candidate as well.

If more information is needed about any of the potential candidates regarding their prudence, spirituality, pastoral style or prayer life, the Congregation of Bishops or Archbishop Pierre will undertake a consultation. All consultations are under "Pontifical secret," Father Counce said.

"I couldn't tell you if I've been consulted about anybody," he said. "It's very typical for the vicar general and judicial vicar and other officials (of the diocese where a successor is to be appointed) to be consulted on these kinds of things."

"Certainly, Bishop Muench will be consulted."

He said Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond as well as Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, Texas, would also very likely be consulted.

Some of the questions posed during the consultative process include opinions on what type of bishop the diocese might need, what qualities or particular skills might be especially useful, any language in which the incoming bishop should be fluent in and his background. The Nuncio typically asks for personal recommendations. The consultative process might also be person specific, Father Counce said, where the questions would seek specifics about a potential new bishop, such as his prayer life, humility, liturgical skills, ministerial experiences, etc.

Once Pope Francis has settled on a successor, he will then notify the Apostolic Nuncio, who will inform that person and then Bishop Muench, usually about one to two weeks before the official announcement. At that point, Bishop Muench will then become the administrator of the diocese, a position which Father Counce said retains most of the power of the bishop's office within a few exceptions.

"Fundamentally, administrators are bound by the canon law 'nothing new is to be put into effect,'" he said. "He can close a parish but cannot establish a new parish," for example.

During the transition, which is typically in the two-month range, the bishop cannot appoint any new pastors but can appoint parish administrators. New financial initiatives would also not be permitted. In short, anything which would prejudice the rights of the incoming bishop are not allowed.

Father Counce said a committee would likely be appointed by Bishop Muench to ensure a smooth transition. He said the new bishop will select the place for his installation and decide as to where he wants to live. Typically, bishop's installations are celebrated in the cathedral of a diocese, but that is not mandated by canon law.

"I am sure Bishop Muench will help (the new bishop-elect) however he wants to be helped," Father Counce said. "He wants to make the transition as easy as possible and will keep the bishop-elect as informed as possible."

After the installation of the new bishop, Bishop Muench will then become bishop-emeritus. As a priest who can say Mass and hear confessions, a pastor could invite him to substitute in a church parish, perhaps when a priest might be on vacation or sick. Bishop Muench will also be available to administer confirmations if requested by the incoming bishop.

Father Counce said that under canon law, if the bishop-elect is a current bishop, then the installation must generally be performed within a two-month window, although exceptions can be granted. If he is not a sitting bishop, then that window might extend to four months.