Every year as Christmas draws near, I call to mind good memories of family celebrations. Christmas feasts, the gathering of relatives, the lighting of the final candle of our family Advent wreath and midnight Mass. I am sure that many of us have these same kind of memories of family gatherings and rituals that create a deep spiritual joy that is uniquely connected to the Advent and Christmas season. Yet as strong as these memories are, it may seem that the connection with the deep spiritual meaning of Christmas seems to fade each year and all the busyness of our Christmas celebration seems to be more disconnected from the wonder and joy we should feel as we celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ.

When I was growing up there was never any doubt for me that everything my family did for Christmas was centered on our faith. Before the Christmas tree was decorated, we put up the manger scene. At every dinner meal for the four weeks before Christmas we lit a family Advent wreath and all our celebrations and dinners were scheduled around going to Mass and any other religious event at the church.

Bishop Duca’s Christmas Message

“Glory to God in the highest,” the heavenly hosts of angels are singing above them because, think about it, you’re out in the countryside and it’s pitch black,” she said. “You can probably only see a little bit by the light of a fire, and the sheep are sleeping, and all of the sudden this powerful witness happens and the heavens open up and a heavenly hosts of angels are singing ‘Glory to God in the highest,’ which is what we sing at Mass, and tell them what’s happened and direct them to go see this newborn king.”

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It is so easy to lose the heart of our spiritual joy at Christmas by losing the spiritual center of the season. Slowly, without realizing, we make our Christmas Day family schedule THEN we decide when or whether we have time for Mass. We may have long ago stopped planning to make time to attend an Advent penance service to prepare spiritually for Christmas. As the activities of Christmas become more separated from a spiritual center we become more frantic, demanding and less willing to make time for prayer, quiet and for anything that will complicate the schedule. For example, we may decide out of our stress, that there is no room for any one else for dinner especially for “you-know-who” because they will mess things up. At this point we might be accused of sounding like the innkeeper who told the Holy Family there was no room at the inn. Our Christmas celebration becomes so self-centered that we squeeze out a space for our Savior.

We can change. A few years ago my family decided we were buying too many presents and the frantic rush to give everyone a gift was taking the joy out of Christmas. So we decided to choose names and only buy one gift for the one person whose name we chose. The next Christmas we were able to approach Christmas day with calm and more time to reflect upon the wonder of God’s love.

Family Christmas centered on faith

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator
(Third in a series)

Imagine stargazing on a particularly cold, winter night, letting the brilliance of the stars guide your path.

Suddenly from deep in the recess of your heart, you hear the word “Come,” and the starlit path, especially one star brighter than the others, brings you to a manger. But this is much more than a stable with lulling cattle and bleating sheep. You have arrived at the first Nativity.

As Advent draws to a close, placing themselves at the manger scene helps people understand God’s humility in coming among them to save them, say priests, religious and faith formation leaders in the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

“It must have been a wondrous, quiet time in which so many things were going on,” said Dina Dow, director of the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis for the Diocese of Baton Rouge. “As new parents, Mary and Joseph were caught up in joy, wonder and elation of knowing that promise of who Jesus is and then there’s simultaneously the story of shepherds tending their sheep and they encounter the heavenly host.”

“I can only imagine they must have been in fear of what’s happening in the skies above them because, think about it, you’re out in the countryside and it’s pitch black,” she said. “You can probably only see a little bit by the light of a fire, and the sheep are sleeping, and all of the sudden this powerful witness happens and the heavens open up and a heavenly hosts of angels are singing ‘Glory to God in the highest,’ which is what we sing at Mass, and tell them what’s happened and direct them to go see this newborn king.”

With such a wondrous announcement, Dow thinks the shepherds must have said, “Okay, we gotta check this out.” Coming upon the scene, quietly by Mary and baby Jesus’
DID YOU KNOW

Candy canes rooted in sweet tradition of Catholicism

The stockings have been hung by the chimney with care, and the lights put up without pulling out one’s hair. Now perhaps comes the most delectable part of decking out the house with Christmas cheer: strategically placing the candy canes on the tree, participating in a Christmas tradition rooted in Catholicism. Candy canes? Catholicism? According to legend, those delicious, sugar-powered candies first made their holiday appearance during the 17th century. Originally believed to be developed in Europe as a white sugar stick around 1650, the candy took on the shape of a shepherd’s staff, or a bishop’s crosier, around 1670 when the choirmaster of Cologne Cathedral in Germany gave candy to children (and perhaps fidgety adults) for staying still during midnight Mass services.

That quickly evolved into a popular European tradition but did not make its way to the United States until 1847 when a German immigrant first put the canes on his Christmas tree in Wooster, Ohio.

The symbolism of the modern cane is steeped in Catholicism. Consider the shape of the candy cane is a “J,” in honor of Jesus. Of course it is also shaped like the staff shepherds use to tend to their sheep, and Jesus is the “Good Shepherd.”

And it is no coincidence the candy is so teeth-rattling hard, purposely produced that way to remind Christians that the church teaches us to tend to the souls of others. First, they brought to the Holy Family. The flavor of peppermint also played prominent roles in Catholicism.

So when generously draping the Christmas tree with candy canes, or hanging them by the fireplace, or even biting into the holiday treat, remember you are partaking in a Catholic tradition that dates centuries. Merry Christmas!

Peace & God’s will

By Dina Dow

The liturgical season moves to Christmas, which we celebrate for 12 days. Yes, 12 days. Keep your trees and nativities displayed as we journey from lighting the last candle of Advent to the visit of the Magi.

He shall be peace (Mi 5:4)

The prophet Micah foretells the plan of salvation from God. From the least of the tribes of Israel shall come the strength of God. From the smallest of towns, shall come the savior of the world. His rule is firm yet pastoral as he brings peace that will cover all the earth. Father Michael Gasnier OP in his book “Joseph the Silent,” writes, “It is impossible to imagine without deep emotion the intimacy in which Mary and Joseph spent the final months before the infant’s birth. Did they search the Scriptures, study the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah? If so, they would have read Micah.

The peace of God comes to those who followed his will. St. Augustine states, “Peace is the tranquility of order.” Thus, salvation moved through the “yes” of a married couple: man and woman; husband and wife; Joseph and Mary. Together they trusted our all-knowing God, despite the unknown path ahead of them. They answered in faith through love by the peace given to them to become a home for the Savior of the world.

Another who accepted the will of God was Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. The Fourth Sunday in Advent recalls the visitation between the two. Following her encounter with the angel Gabriel, Mary is “convinced of what she should set about doing.” Since God had given her a sign that the angel’s message was true, a visit to her cousin seemed to be the next movement. The child within her urged on. The Messiah wished to sanctify his precursor. This long journey, guided by the one who sent her, was the time she composed the Magnificat. (abid. pg. 66–67)

Elizabeth, with her face turned to God, experienced the presence of the Messiah, as evidenced by the joyful leap of the baby in her womb. She realized the fullness of the plan of salvation. She realized God blessed her. She listened for God. When have I experienced the presence of holiness? Am I turned toward God? Do I realize the saving power of His eternal promise?

Forever Peaceful (Is 9:6)

The journey made by Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was long. Imagine riding on a donkey or walking next to one along River Road from Baton Rouge to Kenner with hilly, rocky roads to traverse. Despite the darkness of the journey, at the end the light pierced the night sky and radiated the glory of God, as first proclaimed to the shepherds who watched over their flock. A colleague asked which person depicted in the Nativity would I like to be, and why. I answered, “One of the shepherds, because they witnessed the heavenly hosts and were terrified! But, their fear was replaced by peace: peace of God, peace of the promise, peace that is forever.” Is that not what many truly desire: to know and experience God’s peace?

St. Thomas Aquinas states the fact that we desire anything motivates us to strive for that desire until achieved.

The peace of God through Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of what is longed for, that being among many other desires such as unity, justice, truth, abundant joy, great rejoicing, community, faith, hope and love for all eternity. How can I become an instrument of God’s peace?

And let the peace of Christ control your hearts (Col 3:15)

This peace enters into the heart to control the rhythm when we allow Jesus to become our pacemaker. He sets the pace by his word and the entries into the very heart of individuals and families. Jesus pierces the darkness of our hearts and desires to dwell in the very place we live: in the heart of the family.

Relationships require virtuous hearts to open to Jesus’ love and mercy. St. Paul reminds us, “...to clothe ourselves in heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.” Most of all he advises to put on love, which perfects the union of the family (Col 3:12).

SEE GOSPEL PAGE 7

Peace of God's will
Father Johnson, Father Alello honored

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

Residents in Ascension Civil Parish have praised Holy Rosary Church's ability not only to overcome adversity, but to extend its arms and welcome, serve and evangelize by voting the St. Amant church Best Place to Worship of 2018. Pastor Father Josh Johnson was voted Person of the Year.

Holy Rosary and Father Johnson were nominated in individual categories by citizens. The top five contenders in their category for the contest, sponsored by the Gonzales Weekly Citizen and the Donaldsonville Chief, made it to the final vote by the people.

"It made me feel so good to see what the Lord has done in the life of our parish since the flood (of 2016)," Father Johnson said of the parish's award. "When the flood hit, it hurt the parish, but they have really come out of it."

Father Johnson was the second clergy member to be recognized by the secular media. In November, Father Michael Alello, pastor at St. Thomas More Church in Baton Rouge, was selected as a member of the 40 Under 40 by a Baton Rouge business publication.

"I am truly humbled to be recognized by the Baton Rouge Business Report as a young leader in our community," Father Alello said. "It was an honor to stand among this year's class of 40 under 40, representing St. Thomas More and our Catholic Church.

"Our Baton Rouge community is filled with many amazing leaders, doing great things to move our city forward."

Holy Rosary parishioner Justin Morgan, who is a eucharistic minister and involved in the men's retreat ministry at Holy Rosary, agreed with Father Johnson regarding the parish's recovery.

"We've had a lot of ups and downs – damage to the church and rectory. Seeing us come back for our first Mass in the church (after its repairs and renovations) was awesome," he said. "It's a movement of the Holy Spirit – our struggles and watching us come out stronger than before."

Parishioner Iva Tullier, 68, who has received all of her sacraments at Holy Rosary and whose family worships at the church, said, "Things are on fire here right now. We are here to serve others, because that is what Jesus would want us to do."

Tullier's grandfather helped build the church.

"It's also a responsibility because so many people are coming to the church, and they are certainly welcome," Father Johnson said.

He said he was taken by surprise and honored for winning Person of the Year. But his award was not surprising to others.

"Father Josh has challenged us to reach out and be the people God called us to be," said Morgan. "If we're treating people the way they are supposed to be and be kind, it opens up conversations."

He said these path-crossings prompts people to ask, "How can we get involved and get plugged in?"

SEE WORSHIP PAGE 9

The Catholic Commentator staff,
Richard, Debbie, Bonny, Wanda, Lisa and Nicole
Study shows young adults leaving church start down that path at age 13

SANTA CLARA, Calif. (CNS) – To find Catholics who have left the church, start looking at the faces in the pews, according to a recent report.

A 2018 study on young adults leaving the Catholic Church found people stopped identifying as Catholics at a median age of 19, long before they ceased attending a parish. The report adds to the picture of a church that more people are leaving and that fewer ever want to return.

At a Nov. 29 symposium prior to the start of the Santa Clara Faith Formation Conference, researchers from St. Mary’s Press discussed the findings from their study. Titled “Going, Going, Gone: the Dynamics of Catholic Disaffiliation,” the report presented an in-depth look at stories of the men and women who left Catholicism.

Robert J. McCarty, one of the study authors, told the audience that about a third of respondents left over church teaching, most often that on same-sex marriage and homosexuality.

“Young people see dealing with the gay community as an issue of social justice and human dignity, not an issue of sexuality,” he said.

Study participants also said they stopped identifying as Catholics because of a disbelief in religion, or a personal or familial change in their religious denomination.

About half of those who left Catholicism joined another religion, while 35 percent became “nones,” unaffiliated with any particular religious tradition. Less than a fifth of respondents became atheists or agnostics.

According to St. Mary’s Press research, many of the respondents who stopped identifying as Catholics tended to have weak signs of attachment to the church. More than half of respondents said when they identified as Catholic they attended Mass a few times a year or less. Two-thirds of them had made their first Communion, but only a third had received confirmation. Nearly 60 percent had never been involved in any religious education or youth ministry.

Although their work focused on young adults age 15 to 25, McCarty said disaffiliation from the church is not a problem of youth ministry but a systemic crisis in handing on the faith. According to Pew Research Center, a little over a third of the adults born between 1981 and 1996 do not identify with any religion tradition. Around 13 percent of U.S. adults are former Catholics.

Part of the story of disaffiliation is the decline of social trust in all institutions. The young age of disaffiliation suggests families play an important role in choosing to leave Catholicism, McCarty said, but he also pointed to the experience of community at churches.

“Our faith community enables us to encounter Jesus: If the community doesn’t do that, it’s easier for us to walk away,” he said.

Disaffiliation happens slowly, McCarty said, with faith gradually disappearing until a crisis forces people to make a choice.

Above all, the rise in disaffiliation reflects “the secularization of culture where faith and belief are optional and not a given,” he said.

The end of religious practice is not the end of spiritual desire: McCarty noted study respondents were still intensely interested in finding meaning, dignity, justice and community. But for 87 percent of respondents, nothing the church could do would bring them back to Catholicism.

Responses to disaffiliation have varied. Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Barron, a participant in the recently concluded Synod of Bishops on young people, has argued for “a renewed apologetics and catechesis” that will allow for “an intelligent, respectful, and culturally sensitive explication of the faith.

“The church must walk with young people, listen to them with attention and love, and then be ready intelligently to give a reason for the hope that is within us,” he said.

Whether people will continue to form religious identities absent an interest in God is in question. A recent Pew Research Center study on what gives meaning to people’s lives found that only 10 percent of American adults under 30 mention “spirituality, faith, or God” when describing what affects their sense of meaning, compared to 20 percent of all U.S. adults.

The church also is encountering loss through people who were never introduced to the faith. Parents raised as Catholics increasingly choose not to enroll their children in the sacraments of initiation. While Catholic fertility rates largely reflect that of the general population, fewer infants are baptized today than in the 1940s, according to Mark Gray, a senior researcher on Catholicism.

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Supreme Court won’t hear states’ appeals

Staff, wire reports

One of the state’s leading pro-life supporters expressed disappointment with a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court declining to hear the appeals of Louisiana and Kansas, who were challenging lower courts’ decisions to prevent the states from excluding Planned Parenthood as a Medicaid contractor, but expressed optimism regarding future cases.

The court issued the 6-3 order in the cases of Andersen v. Planned Parenthood of Kansas and Mid-Missouri and Gee v. Planned Parenthood of Gulf Coast on Dec. 10.

The three justices who dissented were Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito and Neil Gorsuch. New Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh was in the majority; if the order had been 5-4, the court would have heard the appeals.

“Planned Parenthood was exposed for selling the body parts of aborted babies, and it should be the prerogative of Louisiana to determine how tax dollars are spent in this state,” Louisiana Right to Life executive director Ben Clapper said.

“As Justice (Clarence) Thomas clearly outlines in his dissent, this is an important question of taxpayer funds and it should be the prerogative of Louisiana to put a firewall between the Supreme Court deciding that it is the right of the state to put a firewall between tax dollars and the business of abortion,” national pro-life leaders also voiced their disappointment.

“Complicated legal arguments don’t take away from the simple fact that a majority of Americans oppose taxpayer funding of abortion,” said Jeanne Mancini, who is president of March for Life.

“America’s largest abortion provider, Planned Parenthood, is responsible for more than 300,000 abortions each year and was recently found to be involved with the harvesting and trafficking of body parts from aborted babies,” she said in a statement issued shortly after the high court declined to hear the states’ appeals.

“Abortion is not health care, it is a human rights abuse,” Mancini added. “Until Planned Parenthood ceases to perform abortions, they should not receive any money from taxpayers.”

Federal funds cannot be used to pay for abortion, but pro-life advocates say Planned Parenthood should not get Medicaid funding because its facilities primarily perform abortions. Also, the organization has been accused of making a profit on providing fetal body parts to researchers.

Planned Parenthood officials and its supporters say the Medicaid funds are used only to help low-income women receive wellness services, cancer screenings, pregnancy tests and birth control.

Marjorie Dannenfelder, president of the national pro-life group Susan B. Anthony List, said that despite the Supreme Court declining to take the two states’ appeals, the pro-life grassroots movement “will not stop fighting until every single tax dollar is untangled from the abortion industry led by Planned Parenthood.”

She said the pro-life citizens of Kansas, Louisiana and other states “do not want Medicaid tax dollars used to prop up abortion businesses like Planned Parenthood.”

“We support their right to redirect taxpayer funds away from entities that destroy innocent lives and instead fund comprehensive community health care alternatives that outnumber Planned Parenthood facilities at least 20 to one nationwide,” Dannenfelder added.

“So what explains the court’s refusal to do its job here? I suspect it has something to do with the fact that some respondents in these cases are named ‘Planned Parenthood,’” Thomas wrote in dissent. “That makes the court’s decision particularly troubling, as the question presented has nothing to do with abortion.”

UGLY SWEATER CONTEST – Eighth-graders at Sacred Heart of Jesus School in Baton Rouge participating in the Ugly Sweater Contest were, from left: Kayla Dowden, Alana Simon, Jude Michael Robert, Preston Stoeckle, Reagan Chapman, Alyssa Keown, Natalie Feduccia and Christian Francis. Simon was declared the winner. The contest was part of the school’s annual Christmas tree decorating assembly Dec. 7. Photo provided by Lisa Case | Sacred Heart of Jesus
Confessing a murder/The church and single parents

Q I am an old-time Catholic. We were taught that, to be forgiven in confession, we had to: 1) be truly sorry; 2) resolve firmly never to commit the sin again; and 3) make it right (e.g., give the money back, tell people that the gossip was a lie, etc.). On television and in the movies, sometimes a murderer confesses to a priest who is unable then to break the seal of confession. My question is this: Are murderers forgiven if they do not turn themselves into the police and serve prison time for the crime? Or is the sin forgiven with no strings attached? (Milwaukee)

A With regard to the conditions for forgiveness, you learned in your catechism well. In fact, the present-day Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries)” (No. 1459).

You are right, too, about the seal of confession; a priest is bound to absolute secrecy. The church’s Code of Canon Law could not be more clear: “The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason” (Canon 983).

A later canon stipulates that a priest who would violate the seal is to be excommunicated (Canon 1388). (In 2017, when an Australian government commission recommended that Catholic priests become mandatory reporters on child sexual abuse, the Catholic Church strongly objected as applied to the sacrament of penance.)

As to your specific question, forgiveness in the sacrament is contingent on a person’s genuine sorrow and sincere resolve not to commit the sin again; those are the “strings attached.” Beyond that, a priest has no power to condition absolution on the sinner’s turning himself in to the police.

The confessor can encourage, plead with, urge the penitent to do exactly that — he might even offer to accompany the penitent to the police station — but having judged the penitent to be truly sorry, the absolving priest has no authority to impose this further step as a prerequisite to absolution.

Q Recently you wrote a column about the vocation of singles in the Catholic Church and the need to pray for them. Unfortunately, you left out a whole cohort of people: single parents. I have heard of only one ministry in the church for us, and it was not in our diocese. We, as single parents, are expected to support, guide and educate our children in a similar fashion to married folks, but we get none of the time and attention paid to married couples.

It is absolutely exhausting, and you are constantly second-guessing yourself because you know that the life and welfare of another human being falls totally on your own shoulders and no one else’s.

Priests should reach out and invite single parents to their rectories for meals and recreation. Perhaps, too, you could find married couples who might take single parents under their wings, mentor them and help see to their needs. (City of origin withheld)

A This writer speaks eloquently about the various struggles they face and 30 Columbia Circle Dr., Albany, NY 12203.

Recently you wrote a column about the vocation of singles in the Catholic Church and the need to pray for them. Unfortunately, you left out a whole cohort of people: single parents. I have heard of only one ministry in the church for us, and it was not in our diocese. We, as single parents, are expected to support, guide and educate our children in a similar fashion to married folks, but we get none of the time and attention paid to married couples. It is absolutely exhausting, and you are constantly second-guessing yourself because you know that the life and welfare of another human being falls totally on your own shoulders and no one else’s.

Priests should reach out and invite single parents to their rectories for meals and recreation. Perhaps, too, you could find married couples who might take single parents under their wings, mentor them and help see to their needs. (City of origin withheld)

This writer speaks eloquently about the various struggles they face and to the plight of single parents, not an insignificant segment in contemporary America. I read recently that in the state of New Jersey, 30 percent of children currently live in single-parent households.

In terms of financial assistance, Catholic Charities in some instances has been able to help; the website of Catholic Charities USA indicates where grants might be available for such needs as housing, medical and dental care and legal assistance. But with regard to broader programs — such as help with parenting skills — I would agree that the church is only now beginning to catch up with the need.

The Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, for instance, offers support groups specific to single parents providing them an opportunity to associate with their peers and to talk about the various struggles they face bringing up children alone. Throughout the country a number of individual parishes are beginning to offer similar programs.

Q My question centers on the physical appearance of the body of Jesus as he hangs on various crucifixes. I have yet to see one which conveys the suffering that Christ must have experienced during his scourging, when straps covered with iron hooks penetrated to the bone and tore off large pieces of flesh. To look at the crucifixes in our churches today, you would never grasp the degree of suffering which our Savior must have undergone, and I am wondering why. (Brookhaven, Georgia)

A Certainly the suffering of Jesus during the Passion went beyond what we could ever imagine. I remember many years ago, as a seminarian, reading a book entitled “A Doctor at Calvary.” It was written in 1950 by a French surgeon named Pierre Barbet and described the Passion in detail, including the scourging. Scourges have been found in the catacombs made of brass chains tipped with lead, and the Shroud of Turin would indicate that Jesus was struck with such scourges more than 100 times.

Interestingly, the Crucifixion does not appear regularly in Christian art until the sixth century. Scholars suggest that early Christians were reluctant to portray their Savior in that way because crucifixion represented a dishonorable death in the Roman world, a fate reserved to slaves and criminals.

During the Middle Ages, the crucified body of Christ began to be shown more and more realistically. A painting done in 1503 by Lucas Cranach that hangs now in a museum in Munich displays blood spouting out of Christ’s nailed feet, the feet bizarrely twisted together and shapeless.

Such depictions were offered during a time when plagues ravaged Europe, wide-scale death was a daily occurrence and criminals were still executed publicly. Artistic tastes change, and we in the 21st century seem to shy away from such graphic images, but it helps to be reminded of all that Christ went through on our behalf.

Father Kenneth Doyle is a retired priest in the Diocese of Albany, New York. Questions may be sent to Father Kenneth Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 30 Columbia Circle Dr., Albany, NY 12203.
Delivering the Lord through Communion

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

When Patience Moreno, a parishioner of St. Aloysius Church in Baton Rouge, was a patient at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, she was surprised when someone walked into her hospital room to distribute holy Communion.

Moreno was surprised to see the person was a friend and was inspired to make this her own ministry.

“I had friends that did it and I thought they were wonderful,” said Moreno. “When I was a patient, it made a difference to me and I wanted to have a ministry. I love the church and I’m big on evangelization, bringing the Lord to other people.”

“I love the church and I’m big on evangelization, bringing the Lord to other people.”

Moreno is one of about 30 eucharistic ministers that volunteer at OLOL each day, on a rotating schedule, bringing holy Communion to patients who request it. However, because of the demand, about 50 eucharistic ministers are needed, according to OLOL chaplain Father Donatus Ajoko.

“Moreno then offered Communion and said there was a marked difference in the patient’s demeanor. Another visit ended with the elderly patient cradling Moreno’s face and saying, ‘You’re a sweet angel.”’

Patience Moreno gets ready to distribute Holy Communion to patients at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge. The hospital needs more volunteers to help with this ministry. Photo by Bonny Van | The Catholic Commentator

GOSPEL ▼

From page 2

3:12-14).

As Jesus is born, so too, the Holy Family immerses. There is joyful peace around the manger than any ever to be experienced. There is also a sense of the unknown, as with any family. Mary and Joseph once again must abandon themselves and trust completely in God.

Gospel (Luke 2:41-52)

Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people. One day when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Temple, his family went to visit him there and found him interacting with the elders, asking questions with the elders. He was_feed finished

Fourth Commandment, “Hon- or your father and mother” is THE family commandment. The Christian family reveals the unity of father, son and Holy Spirit and the church. (Catechism 2204-2205) As baptism invites us into the family of God, so too, do our own families provide a community to walk with on the path to eternity. We have a choice in both contexts: to live out our baptismal promises or deny them. Similarly, we have a choice to live our promises as a family or deny them. Is my family life giving, same as my faith? How can I help my family grow deeper in faith and in unity?

During this Christmas season, let us strive to renew ourselves in the hope of Jesus’ birth, put on the love given freely and “let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful” (Col 3:15). Come, Lord Jesus, come into our hearts, homes and lives. Amen. Merry Christmas.

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

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Dramatic performance chronicles Fr. Tolton’s life

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

As the lights dimmed across the ballroom of the Catholic Life Center, with the exception of a soft blue hue focused on the stage, the audience is taken back to 1862. A wide-eyed, young Augustus Tolton, born into an enslaved family, makes a harrowing night-time escape with his courageous mother, Martha, sister and baby brother across the Mississippi River to the town of Quincy, Illinois. Dodging bullets from Confederate soldiers and spurred to keep rowing the boat by his mother, Augustus’ family makes it to safety. His mother turns to him and says, “John, boy, you are free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord.”

From the beginning of this riveting one-man performance “Tolton: From Slave to Priest,” which features actor Jim Coleman and through the artistry of video other cast members were so realistically portrayed they seemed to be on stage as well, people across the Diocese of Baton Rouge learned about the inspiring story of America’s first African-American priest.

Audience members laughed and cried during the Dec. 4 performance as Coleman took them on an emotional journey through the peaks and valleys of Father Tolton’s life, breaking through the glass windows of the Catholic Church in America to pursue his desire of becoming a priest.

Coleman deftly portrayed the harassment the future priest faced by his classmates and rejection by parents at his Catholic school in Quincy. Coleman showed how the young boy’s determination and faith was unshakable.

Throughout his life Father Tolton was haunted with thoughts of defeat from an evil spirit, effectively depicted through video, that tried to convince him his life would never amount to much, as well as characters who hurled racist remarks against him, drawing gasps from the audience. But at those crucial moments, words of encouragement from his mother shone through.

Father Tolton was also supported by his pastor, Father Peter McGirr, who inspired the boy to consider entering the priesthood.

"You have to take your fight into the spiritual realm,” he advised Father Tolton. When Father Tolton was rejected by every seminary in the United States, Father McGirr arranged for him to be tutored privately by local priests until St. Francis Solanus College (now Quincy University) admitted him in 1878 as a special student.

Coleman then twirled and walked as the stage turned into the streets of Rome as his character continued his studies for the priesthood at the Urban College of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide in Rome. After studying for six years, Father Tolton was ordained a priest on April 24, 1886.

Even in Rome he could not escape the voice of the evil spirit but his mother’s voice was also with him, singing, “Oh Lord, make my son a great saint for our people.”

People speculated Father Tolton would be a missionary in Africa, but he was assigned to the United States and returned in 1886.

Dressed in vestments, Coleman gave a stirring delivery of Father Tolton celebrating his first Mass at St. Benedict the
#iGiveCatholic campaign tops $100,000

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

As the fledgling #iGiveCatholic campaign neared, Tammy Abshire, stewardship director for the Diocese of Baton Rouge, expressed optimism that the third year would show continued growth.

But not even Abshire could have predicted such success.

During the 24 hours of the Nov. 27 campaign, the diocese raised $102,272, not only a single-year record but more than the previous two years combined. In 2016 #iGiveCatholic generated $47,500 and $49,675 a year ago.

“I am completely overwhelmed and so grateful to the people in the Diocese of Baton Rouge who continue to support our ministries and schools,” Abshire said. “We were optimistic about having a great year but to raise more than $100,000 is phenomenal.

“Our churches, our parishioners and perhaps most importantly our young people will be the beneficiaries of the generosity of so many.”

Baton Rouge was one of 29 dioceses/archdioceses that participated in the national campaign that raised more than $5.6 million, benefiting 1,354 ministries.

Donors also hit a record high, increasing from 476 in 2017 to 501, and those donors contributed to 36 ministries that included schools, church parishes, non-profit organizations and Catholic communication outlets.

St. Mary of False River Church in New Roads set the bar by raising $50,775, more than five times higher than St. Jean Vianney Church in Baton Rouge, which ranked second at $10,109.

St. Michael the Archangel High School was third and ranked as the highest school, raising $9,945.

The Woman’s New Life Center in Baton Rouge ranked fourth and first among non-profit organizations with $6,200.

St. Mary led the way with 134 donors, more than 25 percent of the number of the total number who contributed.

St. Jean had 109 donors and St. John Primary and St. Theresa Middle School was third with 70 total donors.

Abshire said the record year is an indicator of how important the Catholic faith is to the people in the diocese.

WORSHIP ▼

From page 3

“(Father Johnson) has a caring and reverence for the Catholic faith,” said Lucy Cason, director of the RCIA program. “Also, he’s forward looking and has the ability to speak to the younger generations. He resonates with everyone no matter where you are in your faith journey.”

She noted that Father Johnson is ecumenical, respected by the pastors of other church denominations and addresses the needs of the person without asking whether they are Catholic. Cason said she knows a person who has been through great loss and he has been helping her through her trials.

Through his ministry she said people have learned more about the Catholic faith “in just five minutes talking with Father Josh” and many “Sunday Catholics” have become more involved in the church’s ministries.

Tullier credits Father Johnson for lighting the fire that is in the church’s heart right now. She said he does so by reminding them “we are here to be saints and as saints we will receive an eternal reward.”

“He believes we can do it,” said Tullier.

Bishop Michael G. Duca said of Holy Rosary and Father Johnson’s recognition, “Although we don’t look for accolades for what we do, I’m deeply proud that Father Josh’s work in the community has been recognized and that Holy Rosary has been a source of unity and a witness of Christ in the local community and (Ascension) parish.”

Of Father Alello, he said, “I’m proud of the witness that Father Alello gives of Christ in the local community and the community beyond the boundaries of the parish.”

Next: Holy Rosary’s mission in the community through “Full of Grace Café.”
By Richard Meek

Nestled in the tiny enclave of Morganza on the western outskirts of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, St. Ann Church might be diminutive in size but rich in spirit.

That spirit, especially among the Hispanic population, came alive during a celebration commemorating the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Nearly 200 people, the majority of whom were Hispanic, gathered for the Dec. 9 Mass and dinner, which were celebrated three days before the actual Dec. 12 feast day.

A Mass kicked off the evening followed by a reception featuring a Hispanic Apostolate dance troupe dressed in bright attire performing a traditional dance.

“This is a very important celebration for the Hispanic community,” said parishioner Cruz Gonzales, adding that Our Lady of Guadalupe is the most important saint in her culture.

She also expressed her appreciation to St. Ann pastor Father Brent Maher, who celebrated the Mass in Spanish, accompanied by a choir that was also from the Hispanic Apostolate.

For the Hispanic community, the Mass was also an opportunity to express their appreciation to Father Maher, who, along with other priests have expanded the number of Spanish Masses from once a month to twice, Sundays beginning at 5:30 p.m.

Father Maher was also the first St. Ann pastor to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Previously, Father Elicer Montanez Grimaldos would come from Baton Rouge to celebrate, but he was reassigned to his native Colombia by his order in 2016.

When Father Grimaldos was transferred, Father Maher said he reached out to the Hispanic community to discuss their needs.

“I wanted them to know they are our family, they are our parishioners,” Father Maher said. “They need to feel like they are a part of the community.”

He said it was important not only to continue the Guadalupe Mass celebration, but to expand the available Spanish Masses as well.

“The Hispanic community is very connected to their faith,” Father Maher said, adding he has been impressed by their deep love of the Catholic Church.

“We are allowing them to teach us,” he said.

During his homily, Father Maher told the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe and how she appeared to St. Juan Diego when he was walking to his parish, asking that he build a church for her. Father Maher noted that St. Juan went to the bishop who asked for a sign to prove the request was coming from a heavenly lady.

Father Maher said St. Juan, after learning his uncle was gravely ill, was walking to the church to contact his parish priest but took an alternative route, hoping to avoid Our Lady. But she startled the future saint by appearing and asking him, “Am I not here for you? Am I not here for you? Am I not here for you? Am I not your mother?”

St. Juan Diego returned to the bishop, who was convinced the lady was heavenly when he saw the imprint of Our Lady of Guadalupe on St. Juan’s tilma.

Father Maher noted that many people are similar to St. Juan, originally resisting God’s plans because “we don’t have time, we have work to do.”

“The Lord is not tricked, the Lord is not fooled,” he said. “He watches over us, and even in the darkest moments of our lives he is working for our good.”

He encouraged people to emulate St. Juan, to be “willing to humble ourselves and act in faith. The Lord is greater than all of these things we may have planned.”

Photos by Richard Meek

A dance troupe from the Hispanic Apostolate performed during a celebration and dinner following Mass at St. Ann Church in Morganza. Nearly 200 people gathered at the Dec. 9 evening Mass to celebrate the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Photos by Richard Meek
Student carries on family tradition of charity

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, Alex Ezell, a senior at St. Michael the Archangel School in Baton Rouge, helped his mom and dad unload trays of pulled pork, baked beans and coleslaw and carry them into the Sweet Dreams Family Shelter in Baton Rouge.

The family was preparing to feed 40 residents through the Manna Givers program at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The community service was part of Ezell’s high school curriculum but it’s also been a part of the Ezell tradition for several years, when Tyler Ezell, now a college student, was a student at SMHS.

“It opened my eyes to (everything),” said Alex. “Before I got into high school I didn’t realize the serious situation that it was (regarding homelessness). And then I got to realize that people can still be happy even in that situation.”

Traci Ezell, Alex’s mother, said she believes volunteering in the past helped both of her sons understand that “life isn’t always rosy.”

“One of the situations I remember was there was a gentleman who had just separated from his wife and Tyler said, ‘Mom, how could it be that he has a full-time job but he’s there?’ I said, ‘Well, not all families can support two households,’ ” Traci recalled.

Serving those in need is the mission of Manna Givers, according to Michael Acaldo, president and CEO of SVDP. Manna Givers is a program that provides a sign-up schedule for individuals and groups to provide meals for up to 40 people at each of the shelters: the Bishop Ott Shelter for Men, the Sweet Dreams Shelter and the SVDP men’s shelter.

“When you come to serve and you interact with people that are in a difficult spot in their lives, it’s a really powerful connection,” Acaldo stated. “And, I think it is an experience that people never forget. I think it also provides them the opportunity to really come in contact with Christ through the poor, and to grow spiritually. It’s a powerful experience.”

According to Acaldo, the idea for Manna Givers started 26 years ago by Mercedes Jenkins, a volunteer who said she didn’t have a lot of money but could cook and wanted to bring a home-cooked meal to the men staying at the newly-opened shelter. Another volunteer, Donald Brousard, a parishioner at St. Thomas More Church in Baton Rouge, was inspired by Jenkins’ efforts and suggested getting others involved, said Acaldo.

“It’s a great program,” said Acaldo, who acknowledged some people are initially reluctant to get involved. “But once they came and did it, they said, ‘This is great! I’d like to come back.’”

“It’s just a wonderful experience.”

It’s one the Ezell family, parishioners of St. Theresa of Avila Church in Gonzales, continue to sign up for.

“It’s important to give to others what you have,” said Alex.
RACING FOR HOPE – Members of the cross country team at Holy Family School in Port Allen ran in a Color Run to raise funds for "A Door of Hope," a nonprofit group that helps girls and women dealing with life controlling issues. Photo provided by Annette Fitzgerald | Holy Family School

COOKIES WITH SANTA – Every year during the first weekend of December, St. Michael the Archangel High School in Baton Rouge hosts "Christmas Cookies with Santa." On Dec. 3, more than 60 elementary and middle school students enjoyed the event in the SMHS cafeteria. Photo provided by Leighann King | SMHS

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Brian Butler, Presenter
The ends justify the means in this well-crafted but gritty heist drama from director and co-writer Steve McQueen. After her career criminal husband (Liam Neeson) is killed while robbing money from a corrupt politician (Brian Tyree Henry), a union official (Viola Davis) is threatened with death unless she repays the stolen loot. Using a notebook her spouse left behind with plans for his next job, she recruits the widows (Michelle Rodriguez and Elizabeth Debicki) of two of his gang members to help her pull the projected theft off instead. In adapting of his gang members to help her pull the

Widows

**Fox**

The Possession of Hannah Grace

**Screen Gems**

Dreary horror tale in which an ex-cop (Shay Mitchell) with mental and addiction problems who now works the night shift at a Boston hospital’s morgue is confused to find one of the cadavers in her care, that of a teen girl (Kirby Johnstone) who died during a failed exorcism, refusing to rest in peace. Though director Diederik Van Rooijen focuses more on spooky settings than splatter, momentary bloodletting and some grisly sights suggest even many grown-ups may want to avoid his unrewarding film. The pseudo-Catholic content is mostly restricted to one sequence and no more inaccurate than is typical for the genre. Occult themes, occasional violence, including torture, with brief gore, gruesome images, distant rear and partial nudity, a mild oath, about a half-dozen crude terms. A-III; R.

Schindler’s List

**Universal**

Sobering account of an opportunistic German businessman (Liam Neeson) who comes to occupied Poland to make his fortune by exploiting Jewish capital and labor but, after witnessing the increasing barbarism of Nazi racial policies and the sadistic perversions of the local concentration camp commandant (Ralph Fiennes), he risks his life by using his talents for manipulation to save the Jews in his employ. Director Steven Spielberg painstakingly restages the appalling history of the Holocaust on an epic scale that gives horrifying dimension to one man’s attempt to save some innocent lives, but the narrative provides little insight in the German’s moral transformation or the individual lives of his slave laborers. Realistically graphic treatment of an infamous historical period and its crimes against humanity, a few discreet sexual scenes, occasional rough language. A-III; R.

Stan & Ollie

**Sony Classics**

Film comedy icons Stan Laurel (Steve Coogan) and Oliver Hardy (John C. Reilly), fight off age and obscurity with immense courage during what would be their final tour of British music halls in 1953. Director Jon Baird and screenwriter Jeff Pope have achieved a poignant, pitch-perfect, affectionately nostalgic story without much bitterness and no hidden dark sides. The upshot is the sublime joy of an earlier age, impeccably reproduced. At least one crass term. A-II; PG

Mortal Engines

**Universal**

Visually impressive but dramatically sterile adventure set in a dystopian far future where huge mobile cities roam around battling one another for scarce resources. Thrown together by chance, a previously contented citizen of locomotive London (Robert Sheehan) and a rebel warwielder from files put aside their initial differences to fight the attempt of an influential archaeologist (Hugh Weaving) to gain dominance for the British metropolis by reviving the doomsday armaments that long ago destroyed all civilization. The duo is eventually aided by a glamorous outlaw (Jihae) but stalked doggedly by an unstoppable human-android amalgam (Stephen Lang) unleashed by the villain. Despite the appealing leads and the innovative gestural of featuring a heroine whose face is disfigured by scars, flat dialogue from screenwriters Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Peter Jackson and an emphasis on special effects that marginalizes the human element leave director Christian Rivers’ screen version of Philip Reeve’s novel for young adults wanting. As a cautionary tale about the dangers of advanced weaponry with relatively few objectionable elements, it’s probably acceptable for older teens. Much combat and other violence with some gore, a mild oath, a few scatological jokes, at least one crass term. A-III; PG-13

Once Upon a Deadpool

**Fox**

Slightly reworked version of “Deadpool 2” designed to qualify for a less restrictive rating from the Motion Picture Association of America. Besides subtractions of violence and gore, there’s the addition of a framing narrative in which the snarky superhero of the title (Ryan Reynolds, who also co-wrote the script) recounts his adventure to actor Fred Savage in an homage to Savage’s childhood role in 1987’s “The Princess Bride.” Much of the objectionable material from the original remains. So, even toned down, this is hardly family fare. Pervasive sexual references, including to incest and contraception, a couple of slightly irreverent jokes, several uses of profanity, at least one rough term, frequent crude and crass language, obscene gestures. L; PG-13

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse

**Columbia**

Innovative but noisy and frenetic animated take on the Marvel Comics superhero saga focuses on a Brooklyn teen (voice of Shameik Moore) who, like the original before him, acquires web-slinging abilities after being bitten by a radioactive arachnid. When a villain (voice of Liev Schreiber) opens a portal to other dimensions, a quintet of alternate versions of the title character (the most prominent voiced by Jake Johnson) arrives on Earth one by one and together with the New York novice they battle the black hat as well as his octopus-like sidekick (voice of Kathryn Hahn). A message about the importance of family bonds and a lesson in living up to your potential are conveyed amid stylized duels and a seemingly impossible chase film from co-director and co-writer Rodney Rothman who penned the script with Phil Lord and shared the helm with Bob Persichetti and Peter Ramsey. Not an adventure for the easily jangled or the littlest tots but otherwise suitable for a wide audience. Some harsh but bloodless violence, including gunplay, references to puberty, a single vaguely crass word. A-II; PG
Nuestra Señora De Guadalupe celebrado en Morganza

Por Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

Situada en un enclave diminuto de Morganza, en los confines de la parte oeste de la Diócesis de Baton Rouge, la Iglesia de St. Ann puede ser diminuta en tamaño, pero rica en espíritu.

Ese espíritu, especialmente entre la población hispana, se vivió durante la celebración en conmemoración de la fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Cerca de 200 personas, quienes la mayoría de ellas eran hispanas, se reunieron para la misa y cena del 9 de diciembre, que se celebró tres días antes del día 12 de diciembre, el día exacto de la fiesta.

Se comenzó con una misa por la noche, seguida de una recepción que presentó a un grupo de danza del Apostolado Hispano, con vestimentas de colores muy vivos y brillantes, bailando una danza tradicional.

"Esta es una celebración muy importante para la comunidad Hispana" dijo Cruz González, feligrés, agregando que Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe es la santa más importante en su cultura.

También expresó su agradecimiento a la comunidad hispana por el coro que también era del Apostolado Hispano.

Para la comunidad hispana, la Misa les dio también la oportunidad de expresar su aprecio por el Padre Maher, quien, desde que fue nombrado párroco, ha expandido el número de misas en español de una vez al mes, a dos, los Domingos comenzando a las 5:30 p.m.

El Padre Maher fue también el primer párroco en St. Ann que celebró la fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Anteriormente, el Padre Eliecer Montañez Grimaldos iba de Baton Rouge a celebrar, pero fue reasignado a su nativa Colombia por su congregación el año pasado.

Cuando el Padre Montañez Grimaldos fue transferido, el Padre Maher se acercó a la comunidad hispana para discutir sus necesidades.

"Quería que supieran que ellos son nuestra familia, nuestros feligreses" dijo el Padre Maher. Ellos necesitan sentirse que son parte de la comunidad.

Dijo que es importante no sólo continuar con la celebración de la Misa de Guadalupe, pero expandir las misas también.

"La comunidad está muy conectada a su fe" dijo el Padre Maher, agregando que está impresionado por su amor tan profundo por la Iglesia católica. "Les estamos permitiendo que nos enseñen"

Durante su homilía, el padre Maher habló de la historia de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe y de cómo se le apareció a San Juan Diego, cuando iba camino a su parroquia, y le pidió que le construyera una iglesia. El padre Maher hizo notar que San Juan Diego fue a ver al obispo, quien le pidió una prueba para comprobar que su petición venía de una señora del cielo.

El padre Maher dijo que San Juan Diego, al saber que su tío estaba gravemente enfermo, se fue a la parroquia para buscar al sacerdote, pero tomó otra ruta, esperando evitar a Nuestra Señora. Pero ella sorprendió al futuro santo apareciéndose y preguntándole: "No estoy yo aquí para ti? No soy yo tu madre?"

San Juan Diego regresó al obispo, quien se convenció de que la señora venía del cielo. Cuando el Padre Montañez Grimaldos fue a la parroquia para buscar al sacerdote, fue a la parroquia para buscar al sacerdote, pero tomó otra ruta, esperando evitar a Nuestra Señora. El padre Maher hizo notar que el espíritu, especialmente en los momentos más obscuros de nuestras vidas, El está trabajando por nuestro bienestar.

"No se le puede engañar al Señor, el Señor no es un tonto", dijo. "El nos cuida y aún en los momentos más obscuros de nuestras vidas, El está trabajando por nuestro bienestar".

El Padre Maher animó a la gente a emular a San Juan Diego, para estar "dispuestos a ser humildes y actuar con fe. El Señor es más grande que todas estas cosas que podamos haber planeado.

"Es más importante en su cultura"

Un grupo de danza del Apostolado baila antes de la cena en el salón parroquial de la Iglesia de St. Ann en Morganza. Los bailarines mostraron una danza tradicional hispana para rendir homenaje a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Foto de Richard Meek /The Catholic Commentator
If you feel you are losing it, or you are becoming a Christmas grouch, then take time to prayerfully consider where your faith in Christ is in all this activity. The first step is not to change what you do, it is to discover why you are doing it. When you have re-discovered Christ at the center then not only will everything find its place, but you will be free to make room for the unexpected.

You might even open your door to the unexpected or difficult guest and discover they are not in your way, but they may be THE WAY in a loving manner and truly celebrate the meaning of Christmas, something the innkeeper never discovered in Bethlehem. By grounding ourselves in the deeper spiritual meaning of Christmas you are able to find hope and joy even when it is hard.

For some there are no warm memories of Christmas celebrations with their family. For others, the easy joy of this year’s celebration has been broken by the death or illness of a loved one. For someone who has lost their job it is difficult to create the memories that come with Christmas dinners and gifts for the family. Especially in these moments the true meaning of the love of God is revealed: that our Savior came to be with us and give us hope even in these darkest moments. When we are poor and in need we discover our deepest faith and the most profound gifts that Jesus offers.

So in the end think of it this way: If on Christmas Eve you took away every decoration, light, Christmas tree and evidence of Christmas and cancelled every gathering and dinner, on Christmas morning, when you awoke, would your heart be filled with the joy even when it is hard.

I pray your Christmas celebrations of the birth of our savior will be a time of grace and blessing.

**Mission Statement**

The mission of The Catholic Commentator is to provide news, information and commentary to the people of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Catholics and their neighbors alike. In doing so, The Catholic Commentator strives to further the wider mission of the Church: to evangelize, to communicate, to educate and to give the Catholic viewpoint on important issues of the present day.

**MESSAGE ▼**

**From page 1**

**Hope is the blessing that the birth of Jesus brought and still brings**

There is a hymn in the Office of Readings, found in the Breviary which we read as our daily prayer, entitled Venite Divin Messie (Come, Divine Messiah). The refrain is “O Come, Divine Messiah/ The world in silence waits the day/When hope shall sing its triumph/ And sadness flee away.”

This captures perfectly the true meaning of Christmas.

We live in a world that can be so cruel. Right now thousands of young men and women in our armed forces are preparing to spend Christmas in Afghanistan where daily they are dealing with war and death. Even here in Baton Rouge, we deal with killings on our streets far too often. The reports of such violence and loss bring sadness, no matter how “safe” we think our neighborhood may be.

Although the world was at peace under its Roman domination, it was a most cruel domination. The crucifixion of Jesus and the torture that preceded it with beatings and the crowning with thorns demonstrated this. “Pax romana” was peace at a terrible price. In that world, a pagan world, there was much sadness.

Into that world, “in the fullness of time” (the right moment for the fulfillment of God’s plan), the eternal father and creator sent his only begotten son to die and rise, and share his destiny with us for our redemption.

The midnight Mass of Christmas begins with the words of Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who walked in the land of gloom a light has shone.” It is a light that has been needed through the centuries, and will be needed until this world has passed.

This image of the arrival of Christ bringing light into darkness, hope into despair took on a remarkable meaning for a prisoner of the Nazis, Viktor Frankl, in World War II. Frankl wrote about it in “The Meaning of Meaning.” One morning he and other prisoners were forced to dig a trench in frozen ground.

“The dawn was gray around us; gray was the sky, gray was the snow in the pale light of dawn; gray the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad; and gray their faces ... I was struggling to find a reason for my sufferings, my slow dying ... At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if it were painted there, in the mist of the miserable gray.” Across his mind flashed the words of the Christmas Gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.” He said that experience gave him hope, where before there had been only despair. He also concluded that those few who with him survived were those whose lives had the purpose of living for one another. That purpose as God’s intention for his own son and for us began in the manger of Bethlehem.

If the hope that Jesus brings is to be born again in our violent, war-torn, terrorized world, it has to be through us who know that Jesus is our light, and his way is God’s justice and mercy. He wishes to be born again through our faith and our action. To the extent that we let the light of Jesus’ justice and mercy shine through us, our world today will receive the gift of Christmas that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds: peace on earth and goodwill to all.

Like Mary, let us keep in prayerful reflection this mystery of our redemption, which began with the birth of her son. Pray the responsorial Psalm 97 of the Christmas Mass at dawn: “A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us. The Lord is king; let the earth rejoice; let the many isles be glad. The heavens proclaim his justice and all peoples see his glory. Light dawns for the just; and gladness, for the upright of heart. Be glad in the Lord, you just, and give thanks to his holy name.”

**Another Perspective**

Father John Carville

**Dec. 27** Rev. J. Clifton Hill CSSR
Dec. 28 Rev. Elisesus Ibeh MSP
Dec. 29 Rev. Charbel Jamhoury
Dec. 30 Rev. Joshua D. Johnson
Dec. 31 Rev. Rafael Juantorona
Jan. 1 Dcn. Br. James Burns SC
Jan. 2 Dcn. Alfred J. Ricard Jr.
Jan. 3 Dcn. Thomas M. Robinson
Jan. 4 Dcn. Mauricio Salazar OP
Jan. 5 Dcn. Eliazar Salinas Jr.
Jan. 6 Dcn. Mario (Sam) Sammartino
Jan. 7 Dcn. Joseph M. Scimeca
Jan. 8 Dcn. Rudolph W. Stahl
Jan. 9 Dcn. Michael F. Thompson
Jan. 10 Dcn. James E. Wax
Jan. 11 Dcn. Sandra Blanchard CSJ
Jan. 12 Dcn. Ronald Hingle SC
Jan. 13 Dcn. Carolyn Brady CSSJ
Jan. 14 Rev. Leonard Kraus SJ
Jan. 15 Rev. Johnson Kuriappilly
Jan. 16 Rev. J. Joel LaBauve
Jan. 18 Rev. John W. Veron
Jan. 19 Rev. Ronald Hingle SC
Jan. 20 Rev. Charles R. Landry
Jan. 21 Rev. Carolyn Brady CSSJ
Jan. 22 Rev. Juel Kandula IMS
Jan. 23 Dcn. Br. William Cawley SC
Jan. 25 Dcn. Joseph M. Scimeca
Jan. 26 Dcn. Stephen A. Jurney
Jan. 27 Dcn. Kathleen Babin CSJ
Jan. 28 Dcn. Sandra Blanchard CSJ
Jan. 29 Dcn. Elizesus Ibeh MSP
Jan. 30 Dcn. Mario (Sam) Sammartino
Jan. 31 Dcn. Kathleen Babin CSJ

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

December 21, 2018

VIEWPOINT

From the Bishop

Bishop Michael G. Duca

Dear People of God of the Diocese of Baton Rouge,

The upcoming annual Continuing Formation days for our priests are Jan. 14-17. These days represent an important occasion for our priests’ renewal and growth in intellectual and spiritual formation, emotional maturity and physical well-being. Since these days are offered once a year and is a commitment by the diocese for their on-going formation, participation by our active priests is mandatory.

With the guidance of the Diocesan Presbyteral Council and Priests’ Continuing Formation Committee, the site secured this year for these days is in Metairie, and our parish priests will not be commuting. Their temporary absence will affect certain regular pastoral ministries. In particular, the schedule of weekday Masses and possible times for funeral Masses may be impacted and adjusted in your parish to meet needs during these Annual Formation days. While this is a sacrifice, I consider this sacrifice worth making. Deacons are able to provide needed funeral rites, namely the vigil, wake, funeral without Mass and rite of committal. If the local parish staff is unable to secure a deacon for this special funeral need, the parish staff may call the Office of the Vicar General at 225-387-0561 for further assistance.

Thank you for understanding and supporting our priests with their ongoing formation renewal for ministry. I ask that you pray for our priests and our diocese during these days. I appreciate your affirmation and encouragement of our priests who give their lives for our diocese. May God be generous in leading us into the future with hope.

God, it seems, favors the powerless, the unnoticed, children, babies, outsiders and refugees with no resources or place to go.

That’s why Jesus was born outside the city, in a stable, unnoticed, outside all fanfare, away from all major media and away from all the persons and events that were deemed important at the time, humble and anonymous. God works like that. Why?

In the rock opera, “Jesus Christ Superstar,” that question is asked of Jesus: “Why’d you choose such a backward time in such a strange land? If you’d come today you could have reached a whole nation. Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication.”

Scripture answers by telling us that God’s ways are not our ways and our ways are not God’s ways. That’s true here. We tend to understand power by how it works in our world. There it works through popularity, through mass media, through historical privilege, through financial clout, through higher education, through idiosyncratic genius, and, not infrequently, through raw aggression, greed and insensitivity to the needs of others and of nature.

But even a quick reading of Scripture tells us that’s not how God works. The God that Jesus incarnates doesn’t enter into this world with a huge splash, as a royal birth eagerly anticipated and then announced by all the major media outlets, with photos of him and his parents on the cover of every popular magazine, with universal predictions as to his future greatness and influence, and then with privileged access to the best educational institutions and circles of power and influence.

Clearly, clearly, that’s not the story of Jesus’ birth, nor of how his life unfolded. God, as Scripture shows, works more through anonymity than through the headlines, more through the poor than the powerful, and more through those outside the circles of power than those inside them. When we examine how God works, we see it’s no accident that Jesus was born outside the city and that after he was crucified he was also buried outside the city.

God’s work in our world generally does not make the headlines. God never breaks into our world or into our consciousness by showy displays of power. God works more discretely, in quiet, touching soul, touching conscience and touching that previously touched part inside of us where we still unconsciously bear the memory of once, long before birth, being touched, caressed and loved by God. That’s why Christ was born into this world as a baby and not as a super-star, as someone whose only power was the capacity to touch and soften the hearts of those around him. Babies over-power no one, physically, intellectually or athletically. They lie helpless and cry for love and care. That’s why, paradoxically, at the end of the day, they’re more powerful than anyone else. No physical, intellectual or athletic power can ultimately touch the human conscience as can a baby and similar sights of innocent helplessness, a wounded bird, an abandoned kitten, a young child alone and crying. What’s best in us enflames, healthily, in the presence of powerlessness and innocence.

That’s how God enters into us, gently, unnoticed. No big splash. That’s also why God tends to bypass circles of power to favor the abandoned and vulnerable. For example, when the Gospel of Luke records how St. John the Baptist came to be specially blessed, it takes a scathing swipe at both the civic and religious powers of its time. It names all the major civil and religious leaders of the time (the Roman rulers, the kings in Palestine and the religious high priests) and then tells us plainly that the word of God bypassed them all and came instead to St. John, a solitary, living in the wilderness (Lk 3, 1-3). According to the Gospels, the wilderness is where we’re most likely to find and experience God’s presence because God tends to bypass the centers of power and influence to find a place instead in the hearts of those outside those circles.

You see this too, though admittedly without the same theological weight as is manifest in Scripture, in the various apparitions of Mary, Jesus’ mother, that have been approved by the church. What’s common to all of them? Mary has never appeared to a president, a pope, a major religious leader, a Wall Street banker, the CEO of a major company or even to an academic theologian in his study. None of these. She’s appeared to children, to a young woman of no earthly importance, to an illiterate peasant and to various other persons of no worldly status.

We tend to understand power as residing in financial influence, political clout, charismatic talent, media influence, physical strength, athletic prowess, grace, health, wit and attractiveness. On the surface, that assessment is accurate enough, and indeed none of these are bad in themselves. But, looked at more deeply, as we see in the birth of Christ, God’s word bypasses the centers of power and gestures instead in the hearts and consciences of those outside the city.

OBLATE FATHER RON ROLHEISER, theologian, teacher and award-winning author, is president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He can be contacted through his website ronrolheiser.com and facebook.com/ronrolheiser.
The Catholic Commentator

St. Francis Xavier Centennial Mass and Gala – St. Francis Xavier Church, 1120 Myrtle Dr., Baton Rouge, will celebrate its 100th anniversary closing Mass on Sunday, Dec. 30 at 10:30 a.m. Celebrant will be Bishop Michael G. Duca. Festivities will conclude that night with a centennial gala at the Belle of Baton Rouge Hotel Atrium, 102 France St., Baton Rouge. Speaker will be Lt. General Russell L. Honoré. For more information, call 225-383-3479.

Theology of the Body Workshop – Brian Butler, executive director and co-founder of Dumb Ox Ministries, will present a workshop for parents and teachers of youth in grades 6-8, “Theology of the Body for Teens,” Saturday, Jan. 5, 9 a.m. – 5 p.m., at the Catholic Life Center, 1800 S. Acadian Thwy., Baton Rouge. The cost is $45, which includes lunch. To learn more and register, visit goo.gl/AnrgbL.

Afternoon of Reflection – Becky Eldredge will present an afternoon of reflection, “The Spirit of Accompaniment,” for wives of deacons of the Diocese of Baton Rouge on Sunday, Jan. 13 at 3 p.m. All wives of deacons, current, retired or deceased are invited to join the gathering. For more information, call 225-978-7046.

Allen Hunt Presentation – Dr. Allen Hunt of Dynamic Catholic will present a talk, “What a Beggar Taught Me About Being Catholic,” Thursday, Jan. 17, 7 p.m., at Christ the King Church and Catholic Center, corner of Dalrymple Dr. and Highland Road on LSU campus in Baton Rouge. To RSVP email adazzio@ctklsu.org.

Eucharistic Healing Morning – A Eucharistic Morning for Healing and Consolation will be held Saturday, Jan. 26, 9 – 10 a.m., at Most Blessed Sacrament Church, 15015 Jefferson Hwy., Baton Rouge. For more information, call 225-752-6230.

Men’s Conference – Tickets are now available for the Men of the Immaculata’s men’s conference “A Call to Battle” that will be held on Saturday, March 9 at St. George Church, 7808 St. George Drive, Baton Rouge. Tickets are $50 for adult and $25 for youth. For tickets and more information, visit catholicmenbr.com.


Rosaryville Events – The following events will take place at Rosaryville Spirit Life Center, 39000 Rosaryville Road, Ponchatoula. There will be a Taize service on Monday, Jan. 7, 7 p.m. The candlelight service consists of music, Scripture readings and reflections. A Men’s Road to Emmaus Retreat will take place Friday, Jan. 25 – Sunday, Jan. 27. To register and for more information, visit catholicretreatcenter.org. email scallais@oppeace.org or call 225-294-5039.

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side is St. Joseph, whose role resonates with priests.

“As a priest I’m a protector and provider of the church,” said Father Brad Doyle, parochial vicar at Our Lady of Peace Church in Vacherie, St. James Church in St. James and St. Mary Church in Vacherie. He said a priest leads and guides his parish in the faith, provides for their well being through the sacraments. And when people stray from God, he is an instrument of grace in helping restore that relationship through the sacrament of reconciliation.

Father Pat Broussard, pastor of St. Mary of False River Church in New Roads, agreed.

“The images of new life coming in to the world are beautiful,” said Father Broussard, who was a widower before he was ordained a priest. “As a biological father you feel this sense of protectiveness that you are the father. This is your family, this is your beloved and your child in a most tender moment and a very vulnerable moment. And it actually becomes kind of primal. And I think that spills over into the spiritual fatherhood as spiritual fathers as priests.”

Deacon Michael Chiappetta, deacon assistant at Immaculate Conception Church in Denham Springs, recalled the visit from the Three Wise Men, who were learned in the natural sciences, to the Nativity. They were called by the Star of Bethlehem to go with expectation to the manger scene and they witnessed the glory of God coming to Earth.

“We are all called by the Star of Bethlehem to have a sense of expectation and find the deeper meaning of Christmas,” said Deacon Chiappetta.

An avenue to find this deeper meaning is to enter into the poverty experienced by the Holy Family, according to Sister Il-leana “Ily” Fernandez SJ, who is involved in different ministries in her congregation, and is also the spiritual director and coordinator of the 20/30 Ministry at St. George Church in Baton Rouge.

In an Ignatian meditation, Sister Ily reflected on the long journey that ends up in such stark circumstances in Bethlem, with Mary about to give birth and the only place to stay is a cave.

“They are given a cave, a place where there are animals, and dirt; it smells bad,” Sister Ily said. “I look in through a small window. Mary’s time to give birth has come ... no clean blanket, nothing to receive Jesus, except the strong arms of Joseph. He wipes your face and nose, and you begin to cry ... I ask Mary to let me hold you. As I bring you close I know it is cold, it is all dirty around here and you are in this kind of place, why? I let you sleep in my arms ...”

“I ponder all this, Jesus, the Son of God, you are born as a poor refugee child in a cave, only the love of your parents surrounds you. There is such simplicity and humility here, how can this be? Why did you Jesus, Savior of the world, choose to be born this way?”

As she pictures herself sitting next to the tired parents, Sister Ily realizes it is all done out of love.

“You are doing this to be with Jesus,” said Father Broussard. “You are doing this to be with Jesus, the Son of God, you are born as a poor refugee child in a cave.”

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Moore, a predominantly black church in New York City, before returning to his hometown of Quincy as pastor at the mainly black St. Joseph Church.

Coleman showed how Father Tolton became such a popular preacher that he attracted some members of local white—mostly German or Irish congregations, sparking discrimination from diocesan priests.

The St. Augustine Society, an African-American Catholic charitable organization, contacted Father Tolton about moving to Chicago to help its members found a congregation. In 1886, Rome granted Father Tolton a transfer to Chicago, where he became the city’s first African-American Catholic priest and was granted jurisdiction by the archbishop over all of Chicago's black Catholics. At the beginning, he ministered to a black congregation that met in the basement of Old St. Mary's Church.

Coleman eloquently portrayed the passion Father Tolton had for his people, telling them, “Pray for your persecutors” and “There’s only one race, the human race.”

Through the efforts of Father Tolton and the St. Augustine Society, as well as a private gift, money was raised to build St. Monica, a church on the southside of Chicago, where Father Tolton celebrated the first Mass in 1893.

Father Tolton was plagued by “spells of illness” that same year and two years later was forced to take a temporary leave of absence.

Even as he approached death, the evil spirit told him he was a failure. In a climactic scene, Coleman dramatized the priest clinging rosary as he held it in the air and prayed in defiance of Satan.

Father Tolton died at Mercy Hospital in Chicago in 1897.

“Without a doubt, the production on Father Tolton was superbly done,” said Jerilyn Williams, director of religious education at St. Benedict the Moor Church in Bertrandville. “The actor portrayed the role so convincingly I had to pause a second and realize he was not an ordained priest.”

“Father Tolton’s story truly challenged us about our faith,” she added. “His mother’s prayers and faith in her black son becoming a priest is as prevalent now as in so many walks of life today. His desire to be a priest in spite of the prejudices he faced is a true testimony to our faith.”

This play was personal for Father Rick Andrus SVD, pastor of St. Paul the Apostle Church in Baton Rouge. From 1982-1987 he was pastor at St. Elizabeth Church in Chicago, where parishioners from St. Monica's were transferred to when it was closed after Father Tolton's death. After serving as a pastor at St. Nicholas Church in St. Louis, Father Andrus returned to St. Elizabeth in 2000.

“When I knew I was going back to Chicago from St. Louis I made a special trip to Quincy,” said Father Andrus. “I went to his (Father Tolton’s) grave and prayed for his intercession and inspiration. I stayed at St. Elizabeth for 13 years and walked the same streets and did a lot of the social outreach he did.”

Father Andrus said it was a joy to follow the same footsteps as St. Katherine Drexel and soon to be St. Tolton. He said the production sends a powerful message about the importance of education, working to eliminate institutional racism and that “God is in control.”

St. Paul parishioner Martha Davis said, “I was just amazed at the way he (Coleman) moved into the role of Father Tolton.”

Father Ed Chifriller SSJ, pastor of St. Francis Xavier Church in Baton Rouge said the play is “a story that needs to be told to the wider church community.”

Johnny Narcisse, parishioner at St. Francis Xavier, was intrigued by the play and said though he went to an elementary Catholic school and later attended Xavier University in New Orleans, he was largely unaware of Father Tolton’s story. But he wants to learn more.

“I grew up in the 1950s in the south. I went through some tough times with the Catholic Church,” said Narcisse.

Cassandra Will, president of the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women said “Father Tolton’s story is relevant to men that God is calling to the priesthood, particularly African-Americans, that all things are possible with God.

“African-American males who are considering the priesthood, should use his story as a vehicle to pursue their calling.”

(Coming Jan. 4: an in-depth and personal interview with Coleman and the impact portraying Father Tolton has had on the actor’s life.)