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Advent 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I spent one long night spotting fire, and it formed the way that I see the season of Advent.

I was still in grade school the night that a brush fire started between our house and the neighbor's place. The wind kicked up. About bedtime, we realized that our house and barn were not in danger, but our neighbor's homeplace was. We drove north. Dad posted me on the barn roof, where I scanned the sky to the south, watching cinders on the wind and calling out when danger came too near. The others scurried around with shovels stomping on flames and spading earth over the threat.

Things went on that way for several hours before the fire started to burn itself out and the wind stilled. I was tired, smoke-logged, and covered with grime. My eyes burned. Just as I felt the fear and sustained adrenaline break within me and embraced the feeling of exhausted relief, the first light of dawn tinged the sky. A finger of rose-colored light streaked through the dark blue-violet horizon.

These colors of the breaking dawn are the colors of the candles of the Advent wreath and the vestments the priest wears to the altar during this sacred season of hope. During Advent, we recognize that we are amid suffering and injustice and that something within us longs for the completion of love and healing that is the heart of the Kingdom of God.

The very limits that we experience within ourselves and our society urge us toward completion and fulfillment. We suffer and we seek relief. We grieve and seek to be made whole. We question and long for answers. We find the hope of fulfillment only in the dawning light of God's action for the salvation of the world.

Our world is on fire and many cry in the night, but the light of dawn is already painting our world and drawing us toward perfect justice and mercy. Christ is coming!

That tense and vital anticipation of God's being all in all is the holy season of Advent. We are "already and not yet" people. The Kingdom of God has been inaugurated in the world. So much suffering remains. We long for resolution and completion. Advent teaches us that this tension in our lives is sacred ground where God is present and at work.

The apostles and the early Church knew this compromised position well. They had encountered the risen Lord and knew that Christ had won the victory once for all. Yet they continued to live in a world where they were often outcasts, unaccepted, persecuted and even martyred. They witnessed so much evil and suffering. For faith in Jesus, they suffered alienation from families, careers, temple and synagogue. They endured the hardship of unprotected travel in the ancient world to preach the good news. They suffered resistance, violence and sometimes persecution. Crime, wars, political intrigue and natural disasters did not stop. They knew those too.

How did our ancestors in faith stoke their trust that God was guiding them toward His Kingdom? They lifted the voices of those who had seen the approaching Kingdom from near and far and who counsel us to wait actively.

Today the Church continues to lift Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mother Mary to sustain our hearts as we wait for the light to grow in our world and to cast out darkness and the threats that lurk in the shadows. These witnesses cry out to us to wait patiently for the gift and to work actively to prepare for the King's arrival in the world. They urge us to ease his coming by preparing a place for Jesus in our hearts, our families, and our communities.

This is Advent. We are exhausted by the evil in the world and the constant defense we must muster. We grow weary at the sheer number of the sick, broken, dying, war-torn, hungry and scattered folks (all of us really). And just as the grief and call for action threatens to become too much, light as from a single rose candle brightens the violet bruise of our horizon. And we hear, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

May this Advent be a season of constant prayer, charitable action, resistance to evil, and growth in trusting faith for you, and me, and the entire Church in Covington. The dawn approaches. Jesus is coming!

Your Devotedly in Christ,

+ John C. Iffert

Most Rev. John Iffert
Bishop of Covington



First Sunday of Advent, Dec. 3





December 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On the weekend of December 16 and 17, the Diocese will conduct the Retirement Fund for Religious Collection. This annual appeal benefits 25,000 elderly Catholic sisters, brothers, and priests nationwide.

Our country’s numerous hospitals, Catholic schools and social service agencies that were founded and supported by religious orders of men and women benefit us today and will continue to benefit future generations. Their faith and sacrifice are great examples of Christ’s love. I am asking for your assistance to show them our love by supporting them in their retirement.

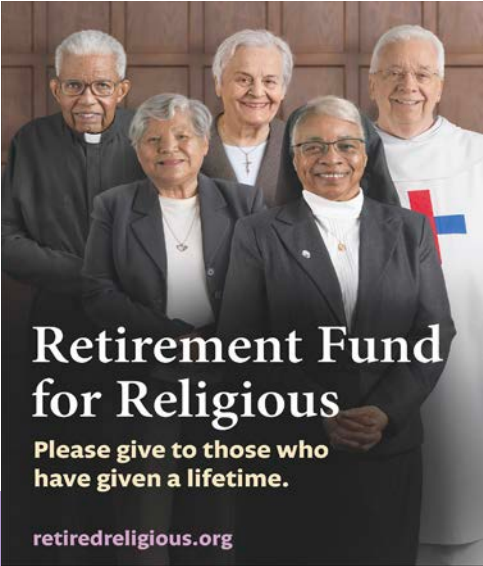
Your gift to the Retirement Fund for Religious offers support that helps religious communities provide loving care for older members while ensuring younger ones can continue the good works of their elders.

Retirement income for our religious is minimal, while the cost of health care, medications, and nursing assistance continue to rise. Your financial contribution to this collection will help offset these rising costs. We are reminded in Hebrews 13:16, “Share what you have; God is pleased by sacrifices of that kind.” Thank you for your generosity, and please pray for our retired religious men and women.

Yours Devotedly in Christ,



Most Rev. John C. Iffert
Bishop of Covington



Bambinelli and Christmas Tree Lighting and Blessing

Sunday, Dec. 17

St. Mary’s Park, 1125 Madison Ave., Covington

Schedule of Events

Inside at Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium

6:30–8 p.m.
Hot chocolate, cookies, sandwiches

7:15 p.m.
Storytime — “Bambinelli Sunday: A Christmas Blessing,” by Amy Welborn; narrated by David Cooley

Outside at St. Mary’s Park

6:30–6:45 p.m.
Blessed Sacrament Parish Children’s Choir

7:00–7:15 p.m.
Christmas Tree Blessing and Lighting with Bishop Iffert

7:15–7:30 p.m.
The Cathedral Bishop’s Choir

7:30–8 p.m.
Blessing of the Bambinellis with Bishop Iffert
St. Henry District High School Chamber Choir

High School Placement Test

The Department of Catholic Schools announces the annual High School Placement Test Saturday, Dec. 9, 9 a.m. to Noon

The High School Placement Test is administered to current 8th grade students who are interested in attending a Catholic high school in the Diocese of Covington. High School Placement Test Scholarships will be awarded to students only from the high school where the student took the test.

The registration process is coordinated through each individual high school. For further information, contact any secondary school listed or the Department of Catholic Schools at (859) 392-1500.

Bishop Brossart High School, Alexandria www.bishopbrossart.org

Covington Catholic High School, Park Hills www.covcath.org

Holy Cross District High School, Covington www.hchscov.com

Newport Central Catholic High School, Newport www.ncchs.com

Notre Dame Academy, Park Hills www.ndapandas.org

St. Henry District High School, Erlanger www.shdhs.org

Villa Madonna Academy, Villa Hills www.villamadonna.org

The following schools do not administer the standard High School Placement Test. Contact the school directly for admission information.

Covington Latin School, Covington www.covingtonlatin.org
Entrance exam: Dec. 9, 9 a.m. or Feb. 17, 9 a.m.

St. Patrick High School, Maysville www.stpatschool.com
Schools in the Diocese of Covington accept students of any race, color and national or ethnic origin who otherwise meet the criteria for admission.

THRIVE! Youth ministry gathering.

Dec 6, 5:30–8 p.m. at the Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington.

Momentum for Youth Ministry is building in the Diocese of Covington, according to Angie Poat, diocesan Youth Minister. Youth returning from last week’s NCYC (National Catholic Youth Conference) has spawned unprecedented energy, excitement and ideas among the diocese’s youth. The teens who attended NCYC have taken to heart Bishop Iffert’s message that they are “both/and” the future Church and the Church now and are eager to share their “Fully Alive” faith.

Adult leaders — volunteers, catechists, teachers, coaches, campus ministers, youth ministers, chaperones, retreat leaders, and all who desire to serve the young church — are needed to join the youth in their excitement. THRIVE! Is a gathering of youth ministers. Come hungry! Dinner and spiritual nourishment will be provided, including a positive, prayerful and productive night filled with information to help our Diocese THRIVE! RSVP by Dec 2, at covidio.org/youth.

40 Hour Devotion

This year, the three-year Eucharistic Revival is in its parish phase. To help unite parishes around the Eucharist, Bishop John Iffert, at the request of the diocesan Worship Committee, has asked pastors to host 40 Hours of continual Eucharistic adoration.

These 40 Hours will be scheduled sometime during the year, from now until July 2024, when the revival culminates with a Eucharistic Congress, July 17–21, 2024, at Lucas Oil Stadium, Indianapolis. Discounted tickets for the Congress are available through the diocesan Office of Worship and Liturgy; an application is online at covidio.org.

Upcoming 40 Hour Devotions

Dec. 8, 2023, St. Patrick Parish, Maysville

Dec. 15, 2023, St. John Parish, Carrollton

May 3, 2024, St. Joseph Parish, Camp Springs

Good Leaders, Good Shepherds cohort 1 completes first of 4 sessions

Laura Keener
Editor

As the Diocese and parishes finalize their three-year pastoral plans, the With One Heart initiative is transitioning from its data-gathering and planning phase into leadership development. Fittingly, the priests of the Diocese are leading this phase.

Seventeen priests and Bishop John Iffert, collectively known as Cohort 1, participated in the first four-day leadership development retreat, Nov. 7–10, at Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Center, Norwood. This is one of four retreats, that will be held over the next five months, that comprises the Good Leaders, Good Shepherds priest leadership development curriculum offered by the Catholic Leadership Institute. Another group of priests — Cohort 2 — will begin Good Leaders, Good Shepherds in 2025. In February, CLI consultants will begin the leadership development program “Tending the Talents” for diocesan and parish lay leaders.

This first retreat focused on knowing oneself and natural leadership traits. Leading up to the retreat, each priest and Bishop Iffert completed a self-assessment tool, and each invited several people who know and work with them to evaluate them. With this information, consultants from Catholic Leadership Institute guided the Good Leaders, Good Shepherds participants through a series of personal growth workshops.

Following the retreat, the *Messenger* caught up with three participating priests to gather their thoughts — Father Conor Kunath, pastoral administrator, Sts. Boniface and James Parish, Ludlow; Father Ivan Kalamuzi, pastor, St. Anthony Parish, Taylor Mill and Father Ryan Maher, rector, Cathedral Basilica of the



Assumption, Covington.

“I didn’t know what it was going to be, but I was surprised and in a very positive way,” said Father Kalamuzi about the DiSC personal assessment tool.

DiSC is a popular personality assessment tool businesses and others use to help employees understand themselves and the people they work with. Being able to assess the strengths and natural leadership tendencies helps teams to work more effectively and productively.

“I was very impressed with its accuracy, ... it surprised me that it was very close to what I feel about myself. So, the opening session was really very, very interesting, eye opening and thought provoking,” Father Kalamuzi said.

Father Maher agreed, “I had a little bit of apprehension going into it not knowing what to expect or what it was going to be about. But I found it to be really a positive experience.” He also found that both the DiSC assessment and the feedback he received from colleague evaluations “really matched pretty well. It’s really based on observable behaviors that we all have. That feedback was really helpful,” he said.

Father Kunath said that he did not have any expecta-

tions for the retreat. “I try very hard just to go into things without deciding beforehand whether I’m going to like it or not. My only reservation was, and it’s the same reservation I have with most things I end up doing, is it just going to be worth it?”

And his assessment? “We spent a lot of time looking at our dispositions — how we’re kind of wired to act — it’s not a question of good or bad, it’s just this is how you were created and trying to understand how we’re going to lead and how we’re going to follow, what kind of tasks or language are going to be best suited to your disposition as a person. So that was really good,” Father Kunath said.

Four days is a long commitment. Father Kunath said that the days were long, usually beginning around 8 a.m. and continuing until 5:30 p.m. Father Maher concurred, “the sessions were long, you know, the day’s sessions were long, but they used a variety of different teaching styles, which was helpful.”

Another welcome aspect of the retreat was being able to spend time with their brother priests in a different way, a way other than at a liturgy or a business meeting.

“I liked the chance to really to get to know my brother priests a little better; especially the guys that I didn’t know very well,” said Father Maher. “Everybody really participated, which was wonderful, and it was good to be a part of that.”

Of particular concern for Father Kalamuzi is whether or not the leadership tools being provided would “transcend cultures.” Father Kalamuzi, himself, is from Uganda and St. Anthony Parish is multi-cultural, with a traditional Anglo community and a new and burgeoning Guatemalan community. “It surprised me, but I think this could work regardless of culture, it’s that good of a tool.”

Father Kalamuzi said he is “positively anxious” for the next session, which will be Dec. 4–6 at the Jesuit Spiritual Center, Milford.

Likewise, Father Kunath said he is looking forward to the next session and completing the Good Leaders, Good Shepherds program.

“I’m a very process-oriented person. I really like having a process and then slowly, slowly, slowly refining and perfecting processes, because a process guarantees a result,,” Father Kunath said. “I’m looking forward to learning best practices and the processes behind leadership ... My goal in life is essentially to be the best priest I can be. That’s what God’s calling me to do as a vocation in a broad sense. So, I think at the end of these five sessions, I’ll be a much better priest for all of it.”

Spend this Advent season with the saints

Bert Ghezzi
OSV News

Advent prepares us for Jesus’ coming at Christmas and for his coming into our lives afresh. And no one knows how to get ready to welcome Christ better than the saints.

They express their love for him by putting him first in their hearts. They make room for him by clearing out the clutter of sins and faults. The saints pursue holiness by embracing the Lord’s teaching and lifestyle. They respond to his graces by practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer, Scripture study, fasting and almsgiving. And the saints express their love for God by reaching out to others with the Good News. They especially dedicate themselves to caring for the poor and marginalized.

So, let’s make the most of this Advent and spend it with three representative saints, imitating the ways that they opened their hearts to Jesus. Week 1 we learn from St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897)

We are attracted to St. Thérèse because she was an ordinary person. Raised in a faithful Catholic family, she was doted on by her father, teased by her sisters and

suffered the pain of loss. Her youth was troubled by her mother’s death and by two sisters entering the convent. But on Christmas 1887, Thérèse experienced a conversion that released her spiritual sadness. “Love filled my heart, I forgot myself, and henceforth I was happy,” she said.

The next year, when Thérèse was only 15, the bishop allowed her to join the Carmelite convent at Lisieux. She wanted to become a missionary and a martyr, but soon realized that neither option was open to a cloistered nun. So she sought the Holy Spirit for another way to serve the Lord Jesus. Reflecting on Scripture, Thérèse learned to do the loving thing in every situation, which she discovered was the fuel that fired the faith of martyrs and saints. Doing the least of actions for love became the secret of her “little way.”

What does a 19th-century nun have to do with us? Juggling the duties of family, work or school, navigating freeways and keeping up with the digital world, we don’t have much time for pursuing holiness, do we? But that’s where Thérèse sets the example for us. Her simplicity shows us that we, too, can be holy.

This Advent, following the saints, may we decide always to love God above all and to do the loving thing in every circumstance.



Bishop's Schedule


Dec. 2 Vigil Mass, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington, 4:30 p.m.	Dec. 8 The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception — Curia offices closed
Dec. 3 Advent Lessons and Carols, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 3 p.m.	Dec. 9 Vigil Mass, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 4:30 p.m.
Dec. 4-6 Good Leaders, Good Shepherd retreat, Jesuit Spirit Center, Milford	Dec. 10 Mass, St. Mary Parish 40th anniversary of church building, St. Mary Parish, Alexandria, 11 a.m.
Dec. 5 St. Elizabeth Healthcare annual Christmas dinner, Ft. Mitchell Country Club, Edgewood, 5:30 p.m.	Permanent deacons and wives Christmas party, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, 2 p.m.
Dec. 7 Vigil Mass for the Solemnity of The Immaculate Conception, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 5:30 p.m.	Dec. 12 Priest Formation Day, St. Joseph Heights, Park Hills, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.
	Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mass, Cristo Rey Parish, Florence, 7 p.m.

COMMENTARY

Entering the spiritual space of John the Baptist

One of my favorite places on earth is the great Cathedral of Chartres, located about an hour by train south of Paris. For me, it represents the richest expression of Gothic architecture, and the Gothic is, again for

WORD ON FIRE



Bishop Robert Barron

me, the most religiously evocative type of architecture. When I was a doctoral student in Paris many years ago, I would journey as often as I could to Chartres, and each time that I approached the building, I did so, not in the manner of tourist, but as a seeker coming to the end of a pilgrimage.

Chartres is famous, of course, for its transcendently beautiful stained glass, but it also boasts hundreds of exquisitely

rendered sculptures of biblical figures. On the north porch of the cathedral, there is a statue that I particularly savor: It is a depiction of John the Baptist, and it shows him as an emaciated figure (after all, the Bible tells us that he ate locusts and wild honey) holding an image of the Lamb of God. But what is most striking about the sculpture is the face of the Baptist. He bears an expression that bespeaks an aching, a longing, a looking toward something that he does not have but wants. Some of the saints that surround Chartres Cathedral seem blissful, already in possession of the great good for which they longed. But not John the Baptist. He yearns, pines, hungers still.

And this makes him, par excellence, a saint of Advent.

This holy season, of course, calls to mind the coming (adventus) of Jesus in history, but it also anticipates the arrival of the Lord at the culmination of the age, that time when, as St. Paul puts it, Christ will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). This fulfillment, obviously enough, has not yet happened, for the world is still plagued by wars, famine, floods, earthquakes and pandemics. And our lives are still marked by depression, failure, sin and frustrated plans. None of this tells against the fact that God’s creation is good, but it does indeed confirm the intuition that this life is, as the Salve Regina puts it, “a vale of tears.” All of us, therefore, wear the expression of the John the Baptist of Chartres: craving an absent good.

Might I suggest some practices for all of us Advent people during these upcoming weeks? First, we should deepen our lives of prayer. As John of Damascus told us long ago, to pray is to “raise the mind and the heart to God.” It is to be consciously aware of God, present to him. Even if we wear a somewhat anguished expression as we do so, we should turn our faces purposely to God, and as we pray, we should allow our yearning for God to surface. C.S. Lewis told us that the aching of the heart for God — and it is a real suffering — is properly called “joy.” Prayer, in a way, is the cultivation of precisely that sublime form of joy. One of the very best ways to practice this form of spiritual attention is to spend an uninterrupted hour or half hour in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

A second Advent suggestion is this: wear the world lightly. The reason that we feel spiritual anguish is that the deepest desire of our heart cannot be met by any merely worldly good. We look to something beyond our ken and capacity precisely because we realize, consciously or unconsciously, that the hungry soul cannot be satisfied by any amount of esteem, riches, power or pleasure.

The attainment of any of these goods produces a momentary bliss followed by a letdown, a disappointment. But this truth mustn’t be allowed to depress us; rather, it should compel us to adopt the spiritual stance that the spiritual masters call “detachment.” This means enjoying wealth and then letting it go; using power for good but not clinging to it; taking in honor and not caring a whit for it. It is to adopt the attitude that St. Ignatius of Loyola calls “indifference.” Advent is a privileged time to practice this virtue.

A third and final suggestion is this: we should devote ourselves to doing one of the corporal works of mercy. These acts — feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, etc. — are concrete acts of love. It is easy enough for religious people to speak of love in an abstract manner; but to love means to will the good of the other. Therefore, it is dense, real, particular; something that shows up. And heaven — that ultimate joy that we long for — is nothing other than love, love in the fullest possible sense, love without limit. Aquinas says that in heaven, faith will fade away (since we will see God face to face) and hope will disappear (since we would have attained what we hoped for), but love will remain (since heaven is love). So, when we love someone here below, in even the simplest way, we anticipate our return to the homeland, we stir our craving for heaven.

So, as we move into the spiritual space of John the Baptist, as we enter the season of Advent, we should pray, we should let go, and we should perform the works of mercy.

Bishop Robert Barron is the founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries and bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester in Minnesota. This article was originally published at WordOnFire.org.

‘Longing’: Learning about Eucharistic desire from St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

My family made a recent visit to the new museum at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

GUEST



Michael R. Heinlein

I’ve always been drawn to St. Elizabeth’s story. I remember how it fascinated me as a child that she was both a mother and a nun, not to mention the first canonized saint born in our land.

The newly redesigned museum has much to offer any pilgrim. I went there that day hoping to find something about her life that could inspire our oldest son as he prepares for

his first Holy Communion in the spring. And, by God’s grace, something that stuck me anew on this visit was the love St. Elizabeth had for the Lord’s real presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

Something that particularly stuck out to me, thanks to one of the exhibits, was how significant St. Elizabeth’s first Holy Communion was in her life. Digging into this pivotal day in her life a bit more later, I came to learn that St. Elizabeth had so longed for the Lord the night ahead of her first reception of the sacrament that she lay awake

“burning” with desire. And as she made the 2-mile journey so quickly to the church that next morning, she wrote, it seemed her feet barely touched the ground.

Now this is no hyperbole by a pious biographer, but her very written words, preserved at the Maryland museum. These words and experiences left me with ample fodder for prayer and reflection, and still do.

Remarkably, this newfound love for the Eucharist, rooted in her newfound love for the Catholic faith, came about only by providence and through much suffering. At 29, Elizabeth and her oldest child accompanied her husband to Italy in hopes his tubercular lungs might recover there. Those hopes were dashed, though, after the state quarantined them in such harsh conditions that Mr. Seton’s death was hastened.

But she was not left in despair: God burst into her life in a most amazing and transformative way. A woman of faith already, raised in the Episcopalian tradition, Elizabeth was dumbstruck by the experiences she had at the Italian estate of her husband’s friends — the Filicchis — where she became acquainted with Catholicism.

“[H]ow happy we would be,” she wrote her sister-in-law, “if we believed what these dear souls believe, that they possess God in the sacrament and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick.”

Her Episcopalian sensibilities maintained no strength against the power of the Eucharist. Witnessing firsthand

a Eucharistic procession, Elizabeth would later recall, “I fell on my knees without thinking ... and cried in an agony to God to bless me if he was there, that my whole soul desired only him.”

As I looked at the rosary St. Elizabeth received at her first Holy Communion, I wondered what might come of my son’s some day. Then I looked at what she wrote, in her own hand, about that very day: “At last GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS.” This is the beauty of a soul who longed for total union with Christ and found it only by passing through great suffering. But once she did, she couldn’t keep it to herself. She set out to transform the world, nourished and sustained by the fullness of love contained in that tiny host.

Standing there, recalling St. Elizabeth’s first Holy Communion, I said a prayer for our son, that he might come to experience just that. And I longed to realize the full power of those words in his life and mine. That we might be so utterly transformed in the Eucharist, as was St. Elizabeth, that we might evermore long be made worthy to enter his kingdom in her footsteps.

Michael R. Heinlein is author of “Glorifying Christ: The Life of Cardinal Francis E. George, O.M.I.” and a promised member of the Association of Pauline Cooperators.

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Laura Keener Editor, General Manager
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Maura Baker Staff Writer

Slow down!

The readings for the first Sunday of Advent — Cycle B — are: Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 and Mark 13:33-37.

This weekend the holy season of Advent commences. This is a season of longing — of longing for the coming of the Lord Jesus into human history. The very last word of the Gospel for this first Sunday of Advent is “Watch!”

This word needs to echo in our ears throughout these next four weeks. To watch for something requires that we be awake, that we are observant, that we are vigilant, lively and strong. We have to be alert and on our guard.

In many places over the next four weeks of Advent we will hear that familiar hymn: “Veni, Veni Emmanuel” (“O Come, O Come Emmanuel”) It is a hymn of anticipation. It should be a giddy anticipation, like that of a child waiting to open presents on Christmas morning. It is not enough to just call out for the Lord to come into our lives, we must be ready to greet him when he comes, and we must recognize him when he comes. Hence the need for us to be watchful.

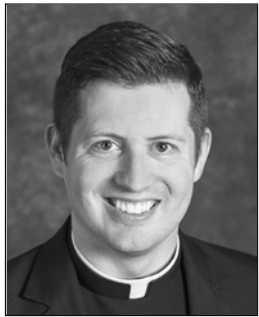
The world, however, is a distraction from this watchfulness. Our lives are so busy, often doing good things. But, this holy season is given to us by the Church to slow down, to refocus.

Have you ever been in a rush to get somewhere and find the person driving in front of you going EXTREME-ly slow? Sadly, this happens to me all too often. After I’ve made my “comments” to the driver (windows closed of course), I’m usually reminded that I’m in the wrong and beg forgiveness through a mea culpa (or a mea maxima culpa), and that the Good Lord has placed that slow car in front of me for a purpose — that I slow down. This slowing down is of course for my own safety and the safety of those around me, but it is also, I believe, to slow me down interiorly — to focus my mind and heart on that which is important. It is in a real way, my own “advent.”

We all need to slow down, both with the externals and the interior life. Let this holy time give us the time to watch for the coming of the Lord. If we aren’t careful — if we are going too fast — if we are too busy, we may miss the Lord when he comes. Not only in the celebration of Christmas, but in those ever numerous “God moments” that occur each.

Father Daniel Schomaker is pastor, St. Augustine Parish, Covington and director, Office of Worship and Liturgy for the Diocese of Covington, Ky

GO AND GLORIFY



Very Rev. Daniel Schomaker

VIEWPOINT



Sister Dorothy Schuette, O.S.B.

This past weekend was our annual retreat for oblates culminating in the Oblation Ritual on Sunday at Noonday Prayer and dinner with the sisters’ community. I was privileged to lead the 10 women gathered on Friday evening through Saturday in presentations, discussions and activities in order to get to know Saints Benedict and Scholastica better, to understand the Rule of Benedict that was the fruit of the saints’ mutual endeavor in the 6th Century and to discern how those norms apply to our lives today.

The oblates themselves had chosen the topic for the retreat, which I agreed is a good way to enter into the world of our founder

It’s time for a family and spiritual reset

Back in 2015, newly engaged, I signed on the dotted line (and initialed about 135 times) before departing from the cozy conference room with a new-to-me house. Before I left, the former owner looked at me and said, “What are you going to do with all that space?”

I looked at him, looked at my ring, smiled and said, “Fill it up.”

Eight years, one fabulous wedding and three beautiful gifts from God later, I look back at that moment with great gratitude to God for his tremendous blessings, but also with a certain irony. The once-echoey house is most certainly filled — to the point of being stuffed. Stacks of papers, boxes of

books never unpacked, and unused furniture clogs our space and robs our peace. Over time, the sunroom has morphed into a playroom; the dining room into a schoolroom. Despite our best efforts, toys and kid books are spread throughout the house. The spare bedroom is covered with stuff, we used to be able to see the small seating area in the master bedroom, and the socks — oh, the tiny socks — are the gifts that keep on giving. And there are only five of us.

When I finally reached my limit, I decided I was going to take small steps to order our house to reflect the current priorities of our family. My husband, plenty tired of not being able to step foot in our closet, was more than game. So we began strategizing. I shifted some storage around in the kitchen, allowing for a little more counter space. My husband purchased school desks for the kids and created their own work spaces. We tackled the closet in tandem, being rewarded with seven bags of clothes for the local Catholic charity. “Ruthless,” we said to each other. “We have to be ruthless.”

My brain kept coming back to one central point: This home reset, as we have taken to calling it, isn’t just about cleaning out drawers, having additional counter space, or

shows us the way of life.” (Prologue, Rule of Benedict)

I approached the topic by preparing a Power Point presentation with photos of the various locations where Benedict lived, learned, prayed and counseled others, eventually founding several monasteries and seeing to it that the monks/nuns who came to seek God found a conducive environment. Unfortunately, my USB drive broke, so I really had to rely on the Holy Spirit to help me interact with the women in a more informal presentation. God is good! Sister Mary brought out the photo album of her 1999 Benedictine Pilgrimage to Italy and was able to make the world of Benedict and Scholastica as “real” as it could be for our purposes.

It delighted my soul to hear the wisdom of the participants throughout our time together. They have truly taken to the monastic way of life, which the sisters follow, and each one shared something of how she experiences for herself the spiritual elements of stability, obedience and conversion of heart. The eight seasoned oblates supported and affirmed the two candidates for First Oblation in this final phase of discernment.

What a joy it was on Sunday, Nov. 12, to witness the ceremony in which our retreatants plus seven other oblates made their oblation here at St. Walburg Monastery to live as lay persons following the Rule of St. Benedict.

Benedictine Sister Dorothy Schuette is a professed member of the Benedictine Sisters of St. Walburg Monastery, Villa Hills, Ky

being able to actually sit on a chair (although those things are very nice); it’s about being thoughtful about how we want to live as a family. It’s about the kind of priorities we want to share (and, for the grown-ups, model). It’s about showing respect to those who share a common space, about valuing the investment we have made in our family living space, and allowing order, and the peace that inevitably follows, to reign in our hearts and our home.

Of course, there are many parallels to the spiritual life here. When we don’t take the time to examine and, if necessary, reset our relationship with God — when we cover him up with stacks of books, or toss him into a pile of clutter in the corner — everything suffers. When we don’t give God our attention and our hearts, it becomes easier to forget how important it is to give our attention and our heart to others. We fall into self-absorption, where our own needs and wants become the priority, and thus a barrier to harmony in community.

Like with our homes, when we feel our lives spinning out of control spiritually or emotionally, or if we notice our relationships suffering, we need to take time for a reset. We must stop, pray, go to confession, go to Mass, resolve to do better, make a plan of attack and begin again. Small steps, simple actions. We won’t remain perfect because we are imperfect human beings, but at least we won’t remain stuck in the muck — not to mention drag others there with us.

This commitment allows us to, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, “put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth” (3:22-24).

So maybe it’s time to clean out the clutter — in our homes and in our hearts. We might consider: What is one thing I could do to adjust my physical environment to bring more peace to my life, and what is one thing I could do to make more time for God during my day?

Advent is here; a new year and a new start. Let’s get cleaning.

Gretchen R. Crowe is editor-in-chief for OSV News. Her column has been provided by OSV News.

Reporting Misconduct in the Diocese of Covington

Anyone who has experienced sexual misconduct by a cleric, employee or volunteer of the Diocese of Covington is asked to contact Ms. Julie Feinauer, diocesan victims assistance coordinator (859) 392-1515. Professional assistance and pastoral support will be provided in confidentiality and with respect.

A copy of the “Diocesan Policies and Procedures for Addressing Sexual Misconduct” is available by contacting the Chancery, (859) 392-1510 or visiting www.covdio.org and going to “Sexual Misconduct Policy.”

Informando sobre conducta inapropiada en la Diócesis de Covington

Cualquier persona que haya experimentado conducta sexual inapropiada por parte de un clérigo, empleado o voluntario de la Diócesis de Covington está invitada a ponerse en contacto con Ms. Julie Feinauer, coordinadora diocesana para dar asistencia a las víctimas. Teléfono (859) 392-1515. Asistencia profesional y apoyo moral serán ofrecidos de una manera confidencial y con respeto.

Una copia de “Normas y Procedimientos sobre Conducta Sexual Inapropiada” está disponible poniéndose en contacto con la Cancillería, Teléfono (859) 392-1510, o visitando www.covdio.org y marcando “Sexual Misconduct Policy.”

Catholic Schools in Action



Catholic Schools in Action



(above left) Fourth grade students at St. Mary School, Alexandria, delivered hundreds of Shelter Care kits that their entire school packed and provided to the Hosea House to be distributed to those in need. Each kit has water, snacks, treats and a hopeful message to help the recipient nourish themselves and feel loved and blessed. (above right) St. Mary School celebrated all their veterans with a special prayer service to honor their sacrifices and blessings they have bestowed on us all by serving for the United States. Students gathered photos of their family members who are veterans on the altar, honored their service through patriotic music and inspirational readings, learned about the significance and importance of our flag and ended outside with a honorable gun salute performed by the Campbell County VFW.



(above) Mrs. Whaley's 7th grade English Language Arts (ELA) class at St. Henry Elementary, Erlanger, invited Father Lange and Mrs. Wagner to participate in a final book club discussion about the classic allegorical book, "At the Back of the North Wind."

(above) Second grade students at St. Henry wore special hats they made for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi and the blessing of pets.



Service is one of the Benedictine values upon which Villa Madonna Academy, Villa Hills, was founded. Each year students contribute thousands of service hours to the community. (left) Tommy Wenning '24 (left) and Adam Kolar '24 (right) recently served as tribal leaders at Vacation Bible Camp. (above center) Oliver Heuer '27 helped make blankets at Disabled American Veterans. (above right) Quinn Holtzman '23 collected gently used Halloween costumes for distribution to families in need in Cincinnati.

For more information about the Department of Catholic Schools, call (859) 392-1500 or e-mail asmorey@covdio.org.

PEOPLE AND EVENTS

The weekly TV Mass from the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption is broadcast locally on The CW, Sundays, noon to 1 p.m. Viewers can tune-in on the following channels: antenna 12.2; Spectrum 117 or 25; Cincinnati Bell 17 or 517; and DirectTV 25.

Broadcast Mass time change

Beginning Sunday, Dec. 31, the time of the Sunday broadcast of the TV Mass from the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington, will change from 12 p.m. to 10 a.m. Viewers will continue to tune-in to the Mass on The CW on the following channels: antenna 12.2; Spectrum 117 or 25; Cincinnati Bell 17 or 517; and DirectTV 25. The Mass is also streamed live with a recording available on the Cathedral’s website covcathedral.com.

Newport Central Catholic is offering a two-hour course designed to help prepare any eighth grader for the High School Placement Test (HSPT). The same HSPT prep course will be offered on two different days, Dec. 3 and Dec. 5, 4:30-6:30 p.m. Cost \$20 and includes printed course materials. Pre-register and pay: <https://gofan.co/app/school/KY6479>. Day of registrations will be accepted, and payment can be made by cash or check.

Women’s Advent Day of Recollection with the New York Sisters of Life is offered free of charge by St. Joseph Parish, Crescent Springs, women’s Friends in Faith, Dec. 9, 9 a.m.– 3:30 p.m. Lunch is provided. Check-in at church starts at 8:30 a.m. Register by Dec. 5 to mamamet@yahoo.com and include name, phone number and any dietary restrictions.

Enjoy a Breakfast in Bethlehem with the Comboni Missionaries at their Cincinnati Mission Center; Saturday, Dec. 9, 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. There will be a pancake breakfast, crafts and games, and a viewing of the animated Nativity—a Cincinnati tradition for 76 years. Suggested donation of \$5 per child/ \$20 per family.



Saints serving community

On Tuesday, Oct. 10, 2023, Thomas More University closed normal daytime activities on campus, allowing faculty, staff, and students to participate in the third annual Saints Serve, a day of service benefiting local non-profits and charities. The campus-wide event encourages the Thomas More community to come together and assist those in need throughout northern Kentucky and the greater Cincinnati region.

The International Nativity Display will be showcased every Sunday in December, 10 a.m.–4 p.m., at Bishop Brossart High School, Alexandria, featuring nativity sets made by artists and craftsmen from 82 different countries with 200 nativities on display. Admission is free and open to the public. Handicap accessible.

The Sisters of Notre Dame will have an Adventures to Give day Dec. 10, 1–3 p.m., St. Joseph Heights, Park Hills. All are welcome to come and help put items together for local immigrant brothers and sisters in need of help, bake cookies, and participate in a prayer service. If you cannot come but would like to still participate mone-

tary donations are accepted. To register or if you have questions, email rlubbers@sndusa.org or call (859) 750-8190.

Sacred Heart Church, Bellevue, will be holding a candlelight Advent Rorate Mass to Our Lady, Dec. 16, starting with rosary service at 7 a.m. The Mass, open to all, is sponsored by Sacred Hearts’ Catholic Men’s Group and the Knights of Columbus. Free will donations accepted.

St. Mary’s Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington, offers Veneration of a relic of the True Cross, on the first Friday of every month, from noon–1 p.m. Confessions are offered concurrently. The monthly veneration is held in silence and concludes with a blessing and the opportunity for the faithful to come forward to personally venerate the True Cross relic. The monthly veneration is sponsored by the Knights and Dames of the Covington-Lexington section of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem.

The Sisters of Notre Dame introduce their new online year-long program called “Give God a Year.” This program has been created in response to the significant number of young women who are feeling “stuck” in their vocational discernment. Each monthly session will include shared conversation and prayer as together we strive to deepen our relationship with God in order to better follow the path that leads to greater peace, joy and true inner freedom. The first online session will be on Jan. 7, 7:30–9 p.m. and will continue on the first Sunday of each month for the year. Women in their 20s and 30s are invited to contact Sister Jenny Zimmerman at jjzimmerman@sndusa.org or at (419) 438-6056 to sign up or to find out more information.

New Beginnings is an 8-week program for separated or divorced individuals, which provides an opportunity to heal and move forward despite a complicated situation. Led by facilitators who have been through their own personal losses, this program invites participants to move toward their own new beginning. The next session will be held on consecutive Thursdays – Jan. 25, Feb. 1, Feb. 8, Feb. 15, Feb. 22, Feb. 29, March 7, and March 14, 2024, 7–8:30 p.m., Holy Trinity Elementary, Bellevue. Register at covidio.org/new-beginnings.

DCCH Children’s Home Flea Market, Ft. Mitchell, year-round, 8:30 a.m.– noon, Monday, Thursday, and Saturday; (Dec.– April, Monday, Thursday and every 3rd Saturday). Donation drop-off during Flea Market hours or at drop-off box anytime.



Crubotics qualify for State

St. Henry District High School’s “Crubotics” team 5631A, secured a second-place finish at the VEX Robotics Competition in Lexington, Nov. 18. Students competed with and against 38 teams from Kentucky. As a tournament finalist, Crubotics has qualified for the Kentucky State Championship, extending their journey as they seek to qualify and compete in the VEX Robotics World Championship. SHDHS VEX Robotics Competition team members are: Elizabeth Addington, Cameron Darnel, Spencer Gearding, Karissa Schmidt and Colin Witkowski.



Fundraising as a community for ACUE schools

Two volunteers for the Alliance of Catholic Urban Education (ACUE) Appeal, appeal chair Juan Aviles and honorary chair Paul Smith, both employees at Bishop Brossart High School, Alexandria, reached out to their school’s staff requesting contributions to the ACUE Appeal. While no minimum donation was specified, a goal of 100 percent participation among staff members was achieved, raising over \$500 dollars for Catholic urban schools.

A decade later, Pope Francis’ ‘Evangelii Gaudium’ continues to resonate

Maria Wiering
OSV News

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew,” Pope Francis wrote in the opening of “Evangelii Gaudium,” a 2013 document many have interpreted as the new pope’s presentation of his vision for the contemporary church.

Released 10 years ago Nov. 24, the document’s message is as relevant as ever; several theologians and evangelization experts told OSV News.

“Jesus is the son of God who took flesh to be with us. ... It’s this reality that I think Pope Francis has in a deep, deep level in his personal life, and it does radiate out through the document,” said Curtis Martin, founder of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, or FOCUS, a Denver-based organization for evangelizing college students.

“Evangelii Gaudium” — subtitled “On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World” — is widely considered Pope Francis’ first major document. The encyclical “Lumen Fidei,” released five months earlier in June, was signed by Pope Francis but largely drafted by Pope Benedict XVI before his February 2013 resignation.

The title of “Evangelii Gaudium” comes from the Latin translation of its opening phrase: “The Joy of the Gospel.”

“I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation,” Pope Francis wrote.

The apostolic exhortation followed the October 2012 XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization, over which Pope Benedict presided. Its publication also coincided with the end of the Year of Faith.

Martin was among the lay observers participating in the synod. Notably, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio — the future Pope Francis — was not among its bishop members, but “Evangelii Gaudium,” while not labeled a “post-synodal” exhortation, reflects both the conversation at the synod as well as Pope Francis’ vision for the church, Martin said.

“It is my favorite of Pope Francis’ documents,” he said, noting FOCUS asks its campus missionaries to read the document — which runs about 50,000 words — “cover to cover.”

“The theme of the joy of the Gospel is so, so critical,” Martin said. “My experience is that Catholics know the

Gospel, they know that Jesus died for our sins, they know that he rose from the dead. They know that. But it doesn’t necessarily become the central part of their lives.

“And the whole point of the document was, if Jesus becomes the central reality, central person, of your life, you will begin to experience joy,” Martin continued, “because when you allow Jesus in the center of your life, you also bring the Father and the Holy Spirit. And the fruits of the Spirit are love and joy and peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness. ... Joy is the one gift that you can’t get away from. Everyone wants to be joyful.”

The document emphasizes the centrality of the “kerygma,” the proclamation of the Gospel message. “On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you,’” Pope Francis wrote.

Organized into five chapters, “Evangelii Gaudium” is wide ranging, with comments on the poor and consumerism, welcoming Muslims and the importance of beauty.

It ends with a reflection on Mary, with Pope Francis noting, “There is a Marian ‘style’ to the Church’s work of evangelization. Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness.” It closes with a six-stanza prayer for Mary’s intercession, culminating in “Mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones, pray for us.”

Massimo Faggioli, a professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University in Philadelphia, who studies Pope Francis, described “Evangelii Gaudium” in 2013 as “the manifesto of Francis.” He told OSV News that it has stood the test of time.

“What stood out to me 10 years ago was ... a natural

(Continued on page 12)

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Calling down the Holy Spirit: the Epiclesis

Father Luke Spannagel
USCCB

What is the “Epiclesis”? How do we even pronounce it? (A common pronunciation is Epp-eh-clee-sis.) Charles Belmonte teaches, “In the Epiclesis, the priest requests God the Father to send the Holy Spirit so that the bread and wine offered may become Christ’s Body and Blood and so we may be able to celebrate the Eucharistic mystery, and

to make all the effects of the sacrament operative in us. At the same time, the priest extends his hands, palms downward, over the chalice and host, and traces the sign of the cross over them. With this gesture, he asks God to pour his blessing over the gifts offered and to turn them into his Son’s body and blood” (<<Understanding the Mass>>, p. 135). That is a lot of action for a few quick words! This is an important moment because it gives us notice about what is



(“A Study of the Mass,” p. 14). This might be a good time to mention the use of bells which, depending on your local traditions, you may hear a few different times during the Eucharistic Prayer; including at the Sanctus, Epiclesis, elevation of the Body and Blood of Jesus after Consecration, and after the priest receives Communion. Why bells? Perhaps especially our students will recognize the importance of bells (or similar signals), which help call our attention to a significant moment. For me, during my school years, the lunchtime bell was always a welcome sound! Similarly, during the Eucharistic Prayer, the sound of a bell can direct our attention to important moments, such as kneeling in preparation for Jesus who is to become present, asking the Holy Spirit to make our gifts of bread and wine worthy for the sacrifice of Mass, looking upon our Lord truly present in adoration elevated above the altar, or in our immediate preparation for Holy Communion. Although some may note that the bell is a tradition from times past when people often didn’t know the language of the prayers, in humble honesty, many of us will recognize that we still often need a call to attention so we don’t miss these important moments.

Although we normally think of the Epiclesis as the calling down of the Holy Spirit in anticipation of the changing of the gifts into the Most Holy Eucharist, as is often the case with the prayers of the Mass, there is even more there. Fr. Guy Oury explains, “The sign of acknowledgment and acceptance by God will be fruitful union with the sacrifice... But there can be more than one reason for this prayer. It may be to ask for acceptance of the sacrifice. It may also be to ask for fruitful participation in the sacrifice through Holy Communion. Or it may be to ask for the Consecration” (The Mass, p. 100). The bottom line is that we know we need the Holy Spirit’s help! To celebrate the Mass faithfully, receive Communion faithfully, and live faithfully: for all these acts, we need the Holy Spirit.

So, the next time you hear that bell or see the priest extend his hands palms-down over the offering, remember that we are asking the Holy Spirit to sanctify the gifts and each one of our hearts.



soon to come: the changing of the bread and wine into the very Body and Blood of Jesus.

According to the Diocese of Peoria, “The Epiclesis is the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts to be offered... It is through the power of the Holy Spirit who descended upon the apostles at Pentecost that the priest, through his hands, offers the human gifts and earthly elements to be consecrated into Godly gifts and heavenly realities. Often we may hear the ‘sanctus bell’ to call our attention to this invocation and calling down of the Holy Spirit”



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Formerly enslaved Catholic married couple are recognized as Underground Railroad agents

Ruby Thomas
OSV News

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The late James Madison Smith Sr. and Catherine “Kitty” Smith, formerly enslaved Catholics, are being recognized as agents of the Underground Railroad.

The Smiths, a freed married couple, are buried in St. Louis Cemetery in Louisville in a once-segregated section of the cemetery.

The U.S. Department of the Interior’s National Park Service announced in late September that the Smiths’ burial site would be included in the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. Its mission is to “honor, preserve and promote the history of resistance to enslavement through escape and flight,” according to its website.

During the 1850s, worsening conditions for Black people in the South led the Smiths to move from Louisville to Jennings County, Indiana. Their farm — located about 29

miles from the Ohio River — became a shelter for enslaved people fleeing for freedom, said Deacon Ned Berghausen, who led the effort to recognize the Smiths.

Years earlier, James Madison Smith had purchased his freedom and that of Catherine Smith and they were married in 1837 at St. Louis Church, now the site of the Cathedral of the Assumption.

In a recent interview with The Record, Louisville’s archdiocesan newspaper, Deacon Berghausen said that historical records show the couple were part of a community of free and enslaved Black Catholics who worshipped at St. Louis. The community “supported each other in faith and the fight for freedom,” he said.

The Smiths “risked their lives for freedom for others,” said Deacon Berghausen, who serves at St. Agnes Church. “I think they were moved by the Gospel,” particularly the Gospel of Luke where Jesus Christ said he’s come to proclaim liberty to captives.



OSV News photo/Ruby Thomas, The Record

A headstone seen in an undated photo marks the burial site of the late James Madison Smith Sr. and Catherine “Kitty” Smith, formerly enslaved Catholics, in St. Louis Cemetery in Louisville, Ky. The free married couple are being recognized as agents of the Underground Railroad by the U.S. Department of the Interior’s National Park Service.

M. Annette Mandley-Turner, executive director of the Archdiocese of Louisville’s Office of Multicultural Ministry, said she received news of the recognition with excitement because it’s what the Black community needs to help them “keep on keeping on.”

“We as a church will receive it as good news,” said Mandley-Turner.

The Madisons had “vision” and the kind of faith that helped many African Americans believe that “God would always be there to bring us through it no matter what,” said Mandley-Turner. “They (Smiths) had a life and they lived it as fully as they could, given the time.”

For Mandley-Turner it prompts the question, “If they could do that, what does it mean for us?”

She said the answer may be: “We have to keep on keeping on. We can’t allow what appears to be hopelessness to take away our dream.”

Deacon Berghausen — who is researching the history of Black Catholics and slavery in the archdiocese — agrees the Smiths’ story is good news.

“This is a story of freedom and a story of faith,” he said. “It’s a story about people whose story has been forgotten but deserves to be remembered and recognized.”

Starting in the late 1830s, the Smiths lived in downtown Louisville in a community of more than 1,500 free Black individuals. The city’s population was 43,000 and an additional 5,432 enslaved people lived in the city, Deacon Berghausen said.

James Madison Smith owned a hardware store in the city.

“I think of Madison, who owns this store in downtown Louisville without full rights,” and how individuals could have taken advantage of that, he said.

He noted that historical records describe a fight in the streets outside the store between James Madison Smith and another individual.

“You get a sense of why they’d have to leave for Indiana when things get too oppressive,” said Deacon Berghausen.

Though they left Louisville, the couple remained connected to the Black Catholic community.

Historical records show them returning to the city to witness weddings and baptisms of friends. The Smiths’ 23-year-old son, James Madison Smith Jr., died in 1868. He was buried in St. Louis Cemetery in the same plot as his parents, said Deacon Berghausen.

The couple also had a daughter, Mary Laurinda Smith, who became a well-known suffragist in Oregon.



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Women break stereotypes to encourage interreligious dialogue in violence-torn Nigeria

Valentine Benjamin
OSV News

While religion was not originally an issue linked to conflicts in the country, deeply rooted religious hostility has in recent decades created a divide between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation.

Now, when the state of religious freedom in the country is called “abysmal,” an interreligious duo is working together to make a push for religious tolerance.

“It’s not a Christian and Muslim conflict but a group which feels the way others are practicing religion isn’t the right way,” Sister Agatha Chikelue said.

Sister Agatha is a Nigerian Catholic woman religious from the Congregation of Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy. Along with her counterpart, Alhaja Bola Usman, a Muslim woman who is a retired Nigerian Customs officer, they are building a movement of women of faith to stand up against violence and to search for peaceful coexistence in their country — Nigeria Women of Faith Peacebuilding Network.

The duo started their efforts in 2008, just one year before the insurrection by Boko Haram terrorists in the northeast region of Nigeria. In 2012, Sister Agatha and Usman institutionalized the network.

The terrorist group has since targeted and killed Christians. In 2014, the group abducted 276 students from a girls’ school in Chibok, and nine years later, 98 girls are still being held by Boko Haram. Other groups such as Fulani herdsmen are violently targeting Christian communities, killing people and forcing them from their villages.

The security situation has further been complicated by other militia groups targeting Christians. In the most recent gruesome news from the country, a Catholic novice of the Benedictine monastery in Nigeria’s northern Iruku Kwara State, Brother Mark Onyekachi Godwin Eze was abducted and killed by his kidnappers, and his body was thrown into the river. He was buried Nov. 22. Terrorism and persecution of Christians are constantly a great concern for Nigerian citizens.

A new report released by Open Doors, an international network monitoring global Christian persecution, said that more than 360 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith in countries across the world.

No fewer than 5,621 Christians were killed for their faith last year. Ninety percent of these were from Nigeria alone, with the country’s levels of violence toward Christians marked as “extreme” by Open Doors.

“The jihadist movement, which seeks to expand Sharia (law) across the continent, has forced Christians into constant motion, from their homes to displacement camps, or to other countries,” Open Doors said.

“The insecurity stemming from this experience of forced displacement makes Christians even more vulnerable to further violence. Christian women, in particular, can



Alhaja Bola Usman, a Muslim woman who is a retired Nigerian Customs officer, and Sister Agatha Chikelue, a member of the Congregation of Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy, pictured in an undated photo, are building a movement of women of faith to stand up against violence and search for peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

be easily targeted for sexual attack, while men are more likely to lose their lives,” the organization added.

Nigeria is about equally divided: a little more than half the country’s 225 million people are Muslim, a little fewer than half are Christian.

Sister Agatha, who has read the Quran and has made many Muslim friends, told OSV News she doesn’t see the terrorist sect as a force but as misguided fanatics. “It’s a fallacy that doesn’t exist anywhere in the Quran, when you kill one person unjustly; it’s as if you have killed the whole nation.”

She added that the holy book of Muslims states that “even if you kill mistakenly, you’ll have to do a lot of atonement.”

Born in the eastern part of Nigeria into a family of six in 1973 in Anambra, in the southeastern region of Nigeria, Sister Agatha is the director secretary of the Interreligious Dialogue Office of the Archdiocese of Abuja and co-chair of the Nigeria Women of Faith Peacebuilding Network.

The activity of the network focuses on bringing Muslim and Christian women together to tackle issues tied to interreligious conflicts and domestic violence against women — two topics that are deeply woven into the fabric of the northern region.

“When we started ... there were challenges; it was more

difficult to get Christian women than Muslims. Eventually, when we all came together, it was more like an eye-opener,” Sister Agatha said.

Over time, she said, “we discussed issues that were affecting us as Nigerians; we discussed issues of social injustices, bad governance, economic breakdown, insecurity, abuse and misuse of religion. Gradually, these women began to trust us; the wall of fear began to collapse.”

The interfaith network organizes annual fellowship programs on interreligious dialogue and mediation to build the capacities of religious leaders to become peace builders in their respective communities and also mediate and dialogue for peace during conflicts with all representatives of different religious organizations in Nigeria.

The network also offers training in bread making, fashion design and other activities to make women come together and invite coexistence.

Co-founder Usman may be from a different religion, but one thing the 62-year-old grandmother has in common with Sister Agatha is her thirst for humanity.

“Alhaja Bola would wear her hijab and walk into the church. And when they obstruct her at the gate, she won’t get angry or go back, rather she would smile and give me a telephone (call), while I wear my habit, and walk into the mosque with the rosary and Bible,” Sister Agatha said.

“All these happened at the peak of the Boko Haram attacks,” she said.

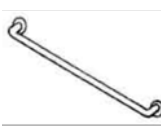
Usman was educated at St. Bernard Catholic School in southwestern Nigeria. This gave her a vast understanding of the Bible and exposure to how to override negative impressions and perspectives between Muslim and Christians.

She prays the Hail Mary and recites the Angelus, a Catholic devotion commemorating the incarnation. “When I was saying Hail Mary full of grace, Sister Agatha was amazed that a Muslim woman was saying the rosary,” Usman said.


Their work is being supported by the Swiss Embassy and the Cardinal John Onaiyekan Foundation For Peace, an organization working for peace in northern Nigeria.

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Pope Francis’ ‘Evangelii Gaudium’

(Continued from page 8)

instinct to reappropriate, in a very open way, the legacy of the Second Vatican Council,” he said. “You have this document of this new pope, who says basically, Vatican II was good, but we haven’t implemented everything that Vatican II was about.”

“Evangelii Gaudium” expressed the “idea that the church needs to be credible and to be visible and to be active in this world,” Faggioli said. “It’s not a church locked in the sanctuary.”

Kelly Wahlquist, founder of Women in the New Evangelization, considers “Evangelii Gaudium” a seminal document for the Minnesota-based women’s ministry, which was beginning to take shape in 2013.

“It was really the bridge that brought us from this concept of what is the Lord asking us to do as women, because the Holy Father had called for a deeper, more profound theology of women, and it ... brought us to Women in the New Evangelization, because what we were talking about was the importance of evangelizing from heart to heart,” she said.

The document “talks about that missionary joy — that it’s something that brings people in,” she said. “It’s not just a happiness, not a human happiness — like you’re having a nice glass of wine and a big steak, and you’re happy for a little bit — but it’s a joy where you recognize they have something.”

The document is more important today than ever, Wahlquist said, “because of what we’re living in around us can seem so joyless.”

But, she said, “I see that the Gospel has been proclaimed and that it’s bearing fruit, and you know that’s a result of joy.”

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Pope, still suffering from the flu, urges prayers for peace at audience

Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

With a soft and raspy voice, Pope Francis began his weekly general audience by making the sign of the cross and explaining that “I’m still not well with this flu, and my voice isn’t great,” so he would have an aide read his catechesis and greetings.

The gathering, in the Vatican’s Paul VI Audience Hall Nov. 29, was held the morning after the Vatican announced that Pope Francis had accepted his doctors’ advice and canceled plans to travel to Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Dec. 1-3 to join world leaders in addressing COP28, the U.N. climate conference.

Before the general audience, the pope met briefly with members of the Scottish soccer team Celtic F.C. There, too, he apologized for having an aide read his prepared text. “With this cold,” he said, “I can’t speak much, but I’m better than yesterday.”

The pope’s main general audience talk, part of a yearlong series about evangelization, was read by Msgr. Filippo Ciampanelli, an official of the Vatican Secretariat of State.

But at the end of the audience, the pope took the microphone back to urge people to pray for peace.

“Let’s continue to pray for the serious situation in Israel and Palestine. Peace, please, peace,” the pope said. “I hope that the cease-fire in Gaza continues so that all the hostages (taken by Hamas) are released, and access is allowed for the necessary humanitarian aid” in Gaza.

Pope Francis, who speaks regularly by telephone with priests at Holy Family parish in Gaza City, told people at the audience, “I’ve heard from the parish there. There is a lack of water; a lack of bread. The people are suffering. The simple people. The people are suffering, not those who are making the war. We ask for peace.”

“And speaking of peace, let’s not forget the dear Ukrainian people who still are suffering so much because of the war,” he said. “Brothers and sisters, war is always a defeat. Everyone loses. Well, not everyone; there is one group that earns a lot— those who manufacture weapons. They

make a lot off the death of others.”

Pope Francis also used the opportunity to thank a group of circus performers— acrobats, skaters, clowns and jugglers— who had entertained the pope and the crowd for a few minutes. They train hard and bring joy to people, the pope said.

In his main talk, read by Msgr. Ciampanelli, Pope Francis focused on how salvation in Jesus is as necessary

as ever and that people today need to hear the Gospel proclaimed even if society tries to convince them that “God is insignificant and useless.”

Simply repeating formulaic expressions of faith will convince no one, the pope said. And neither will shouting.

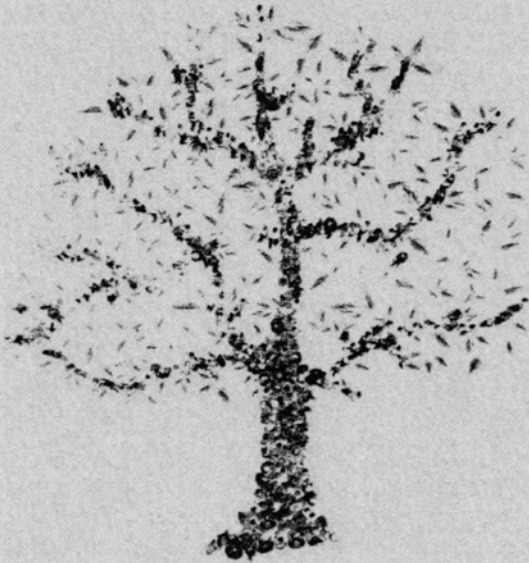
“A truth does not become more credible because one raises one’s voice in speaking it, but because it is witnessed with one’s life,” the pope’s text said.



CNS photo/Pablo Esparza

Pope Francis watches circus performers entertain him and the crowd at the end of his weekly general audience in the Vatican’s Paul VI Audience Hall Nov. 29, 2023.

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NEWS BRIEFS

National/World

Ave Maria University offers free Catholic online courses

AVE MARIA, Fla. — Ave Maria University this year has begun offering “The Pursuit of Wisdom,” a series of free online courses presented by university faculty that provides practical wisdom and insights on interesting topics and themes to help Catholics contemplate the true, good and beautiful. The series of seven video courses thus far, which can also be accessed at thepursuitofwisdom.org and via apps, covers a variety of subjects with broad appeal. Each video course is between one to three hours and broken down into segments for ease of viewing, addressing such themes as artificial intelligence and computer science; motherhood and relationship; stewardship and environment; scholars and saints; and the foundations of America. “We want to be a resource and a haven for the life of the church and society,” Roger Nutt, Ave Maria’s provost and professor of theol short courses is “to provide Catholics with edifying content that helps them to joyfully recognize the truth, beauty and goodness we all crave.”

Texas immigration bill will likely face legal challenge

AUSTIN, Texas — Gov. Greg Abbott, R-Texas, is expected to sign a controversial immigration bill that would make it a state crime to cross into Texas from Mexico. Catholic organizations including the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops have opposed the legislation. The bill, Senate Bill 4, was passed by Republican majorities in both the state House and Senate in November, making unlawfully crossing Texas’ international border a state crime separate from a federal one. Supporters of the legislation argue that it would combat unauthorized entry into the state by empowering law enforcement, while opponents argue it is unconstitutional and inhumane. Jennifer Allmon, executive director of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, wrote on the group’s website that the legislation is “grossly imprudent and could have deadly consequences for innocent migrants.” She added it is unlikely to survive a challenge in federal court. Justin Estep, senior director of Immigration and Refugee Services at Catholic Charities of Central Texas in Austin, told the Texas House State Affairs Committee in Nov. 9 testimony that while “the church supports the right of a sovereign nation to control its borders,” the “obligation to control the international border lies with federal authorities.” He added, “Immigration enforcement should be exercised in a way that is targeted, proportional and humane.” It was not immediately clear when Abbott may sign the bil.

Remembering Moscow’s campaign of ‘death by hunger’

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian church leaders have joined anniversary commemorations of the 1932-1933 Holodomor, or Great Famine, in which millions died in a disaster deliberately engineered by Soviet Russian rulers. “Ninety years ago, Ukrainians were killed in cold blood under the direct order and elaborate plan of (Josef) Stalin’s totalitarian communist regime, which aimed to destroy our people and their identity,

forever ending their hopes of freedom,” said the country’s Greek Catholic bishops. “The genocide of Ukrainians was not an accidental deviation from Moscow’s historical tradition — on the contrary, it was the bloodiest embodiment of a centuries-old ideology of Russian imperialism, which eternally burns with hatred for Ukraine, despises neighboring nations and greedily encroaches on the world’s space.” The declaration, issued ahead of Nov. 25 commemorations, said “killing by starvation” had been chosen as a “weapon of mass destruction” to ensure long-term domination, while erasing Ukraine’s “language, culture and memory” and “sinking its people and land into the abyss.” The pope said after his Nov. 26 Angelus prayer the “genocide perpetrated by the Soviet regime” had inflicted a “lacerating wound,” which had been made “even more painful due to the cruelty of the war.” The Holodomor claimed the lives of at least 3.5 million people.

Israel-Hamas truce has been extended by two days; 11 other hostages freed

JERUSALEM — A spokesperson for Qatar’s foreign affairs ministry said Nov. 27 on X an agreement has been reached to extend the Israel-Hamas truce for another two days. The announcement came on the final day of a four-day cease-fire in which some hostages abducted by Hamas in October have been released in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. The Hamas militant group agreed with Qatar and Egypt to extend the cease-fire “under the same conditions reached before,” CNN reported. Under the agreement, at least 50 Israeli hostages — civilian women and children under age 19 — from among the 240 or so kidnapped by Hamas Oct. 7 — were released in batches over four days during a pause in the fighting. The release of every additional 10 hostages will result in one other day in the pause. In the exchange, besides releasing at least 150 Palestinians, Israel also has allowed fuel, medicine and other humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. Late Nov. 27, the Israeli military said 11 hostages were released and were being transported by the Red Cross in Gaza and to Israel. Since Nov. 24 — the first day of the truce — 69 women and children hostages have been released. So far, 117 prisoners — women and children but also teenage males, according to media reports — have been released from Israeli prisons. Israel was to release 33 Palestinian prisoners later on Nov. 27, AP reported.

Russian drone damages Kyiv Catholic cathedral

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia’s extensive drone attack on Kyiv Nov. 25 damaged the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ. Russia launched close to 75 Iranian-made Shahed drones at Ukraine’s capital, as Ukrainians marked Holodomor Remembrance Day, which commemorates the 7 million to 10 million victims of an artificial famine waged by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin from 1932-1933 against Ukrainians. No fatalities were

reported in the Nov. 25 attack but five individuals suffered injuries. The assault was Russia’s largest drone attack on Kyiv since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022. Ukraine’s forces said 74 of the drones had been successfully eliminated. Kyiv remained under an air raid alert lasting more than six hours. One Shahed drone was shot down in the Dniproviskyi district of Kyiv, beside the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ and the residence of Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, or UGCC. The debris impacted doors and shattered windows within the cathedral. A nearby multi-story building sustained even greater destruction, according to the UCGG information department. Major Archbishop Shevchuk’s residence also suffered damage. Experts have noted that at least 500 religious sites in Ukraine have been destroyed, damaged or looted by the Russian military since the start of Russia’s invasion in February 2022.

After 191 years, Oblate Sisters are honored for heroic ministry during cholera epidemic

BALTIMORE — The cholera epidemic that ravaged Baltimore in the summer of 1832 was one of the worst public health crises the city ever faced. The horrifying diarrheal disease afflicted countless people, ultimately claiming the lives of 853 Baltimoreans — more than 1% of what was then the second-largest city in the country. It was in that milieu that two women’s religious communities ministered to those afflicted with the disease: the Sisters of Charity, a religious community founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg that was then limited to whites; and the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the world’s first sustained religious community for Black women founded in Baltimore by Mother Mary Lange, a candidate for sainthood who in June was declared “venerable.” Both communities made heroic contributions trying to save lives, but the white religious community received most of the accolades, yet the Black religious sisters did not receive the same level of public acknowledgment. Adrienne Curry, director of the Archdiocese of Baltimore’s Office of Black Catholic Ministries, said it’s “obvious” racism played a role. Now, more than 190 years later, Catholic and civic leaders are rectifying that disparity. The City Council passed a resolution Oct. 30 honoring the Oblate Sisters of Providence for their 194 years of service.

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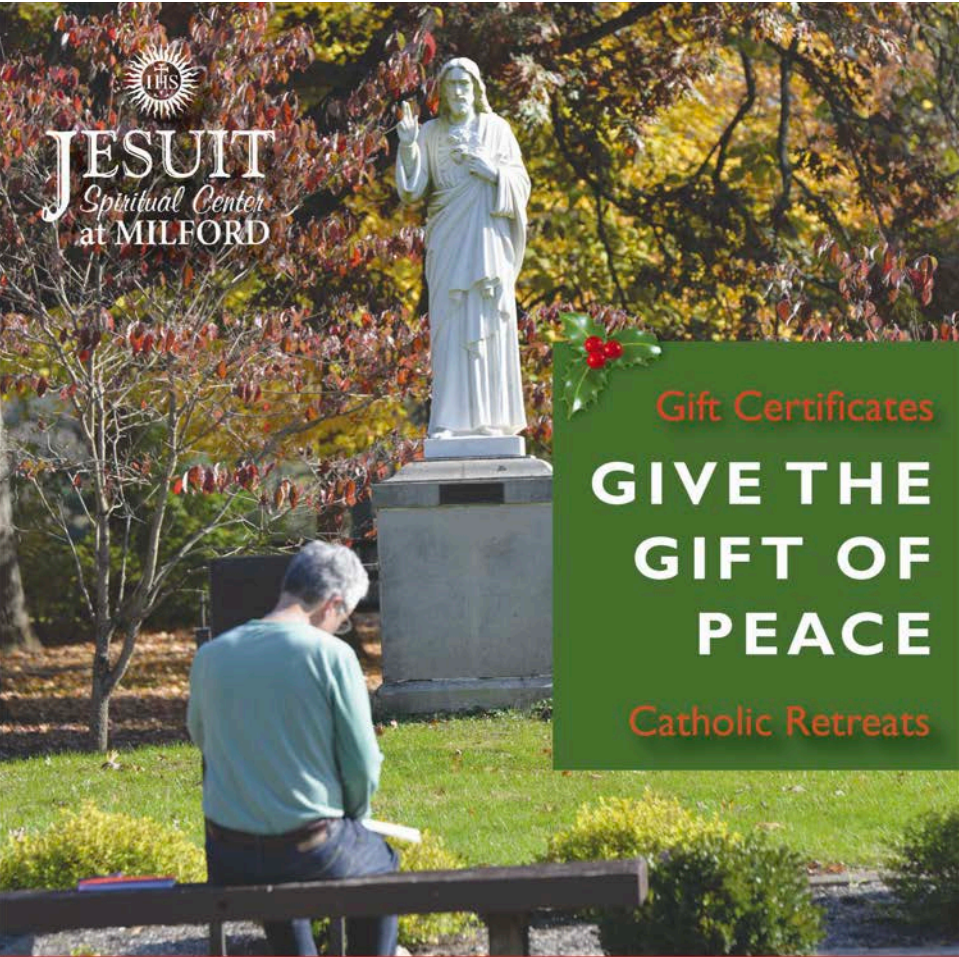
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Thanksgiving — many are blessed

Pickup day for the Catholic Charities Thanksgiving Meal giveaway, Nov. 20, was rainy but that did not dampen the spirits of volunteers and donors. Meal pickups were held at Catholic Charities in Covington, St. Edwards Church, Owenton, St. James Church, Brooksville and Holy Spirit Church, Newport. Donations were received from St. Pius X Parish and Blessed Sacrament Parish to provide 165

meals to families across the Diocese of Covington. “This outpouring of love from the donors and volunteers is overwhelming, and such a great example of serving others in need,” said Vicky Bauerle, institutional advancement manager, Diocese of Covington. “Our friends receiving the meals expressed words of gratitude for the donors and volunteers, ‘you all are like little angels

running around out in the cold and rainy weather for us, thank you so much,’ and ‘we would not have had a traditional Thanksgiving meal this year without your help, thank you and have a blessed day.’ We are all so fortunate in so many ways to be part of this generous community.”



(above left) Father Benton Cliff welcomes and blesses volunteers at St. Edward Church, Owenton.

(above right) Volunteers at Catholic Charities, Diocese of Covington load a truck with food that will be distributed to families at St. James Church, Brooksville, for their Thanksgiving table.



(left) Father Suraj Abraham, parochial vicar, Blessed Sacrament Parish, blesses a truck full of Thanksgiving provisions headed for distribution at St. Edward Parish, Owenton.



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