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At the newly blessed altar, Bishop Iffert lifts the Eucharist during the consecration.

St. Augustine celebrates rededication of the parishes 'temple of living stones,' blessing of refurbished altar

Maura Baker
Staff Writer

A cold Sunday, January 12, marked a special celebration for St. Augustine Parish, Covington, as the pews were filled in honor of the re-dedication and the blessing of a new altar for the more than 100-year-old Church.

Father Daniel Schomaker, pastor of St. Augustine, began a capital campaign in February of 2018 with the goal of restoration, conservation and renovation of the church and other parts of St. Augustine's campus. And now, after the trials of COVID-19 which interrupted and delayed parts of the project's progress, St. Augustine was able to celebrate these achievements with the final piece — a new frontal was added to the Altar of Sacrifice, featuring

the Eucharistic symbol of a mother pelican, and the whole of it was accentuated with gold ornamentation and a reliquary vault. First class relics, including examples of those such as St. Andrew, St. John Vianney, St. Pius X were entombed in the reliquary vault as part of the altar's blessing.

Bishop John Iffert celebrated the Mass as well as blessed the updated altar and re-dedicated the Church, in choro with Bishop Emeritus Roger Foys and concelebrated with Father Michael Grady, pastor, St. Therese parish, Southgate; Msgr. Kurt Kemo, vice rector of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, and Father Stephen Bankemper, pastor, St. Catherine of Siena Parish, Ft.

(Continued on page 8)

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Missed an edition? Current and back issues of the *Messenger* are available online at covdio.org/messenger.

St. Charles Communities geographic footprint expands to current site of St. Joseph Heights

Bella Bailey
Multimedia Correspondent

In a joint statement by the Sisters of Notre Dame and St. Charles Community, it was announced that the two organizations had "reached a preliminary agreement for an expansion of the St. Charles' ministry to take place on the Dixie Highway campus of the SND."

The Dixie Highway campus is known by many as the beloved St. Joseph Heights, Park Hills. With St. Charles Community acquiring the property, it was announced that St. Joseph Heights will be razed this summer.

In January of 2023 the Sisters of Notre Dame began officially moving out of the historic, storied home at St. Joseph Heights. Though the physical moving process began in 2023, the spiritual process of discernment began many years ago as the Sisters' need for physical space began to diminish.

As the average age of the sisters grew, so too did the number of sisters whose level of care exceeded the capabilities available at St. (Continued on page 4)



St. Joseph Heights, Park Hills

Bailey photo

You're invited

The World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life is Feb. 2, which is also the feast of the Presentation of the Lord. Celebration of this day of prayer is Feb. 1-2, to allow parishes to highlight the gift of religious life and pray for those discerning a religious vocation.

The Diocese of Covington will honor its women and men religious with **Mass on Saturday, Feb. 1, 10 a.m., Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington.** Bishop John Iffert is the celebrant. A reception will follow in Bishop Howard Memorial Hall. All people are cordially invited to attend.

Pray for all those who have made commitments in the consecrated life and be sure to thank them on this special day. May they continue to be inspired by Jesus Christ and respond generously to God's gift of their vocation.



Catholic Charities of Northern Kentucky Mental Health First Aid training

February 18

Catholic Charities, Diocese of Covington,
Covington

9 a.m.–3:30 p.m.

Registration required online at
<https://form.jotform.com/243105347336149>.

Mental Health First Aid helps reduce stigma, teach signs and symptoms and prepare first aiders to use a 5-step action plan to use in the event of a mental health crisis.

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."



January 14, 2025

Dear Faithful of the Diocese of Covington,

I am writing to you today to advise you that the Missionaries of St. John the Baptist (the MSJB) has been suppressed. The group no longer has a connection with the Diocese of Covington or the Roman Catholic Church. Former members retain all the rights and obligations associated with their vocational state — layman or diocesan priest.

The MSJB were a group of men — two priests and several laymen — who hoped to establish a religious order in the Catholic Church. They were established as a public association of the faithful here in the Diocese of Covington on an experimental basis. The priests of the MSJB contributed substantially to the founding of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish and members of the association ministered in the parish.

The suppression of the association has no canonical effect on the status of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish. The parish is a personal (non-geographic) parish that celebrates the Holy Mass and other liturgies entirely contained in the Roman Missal promulgated by Pope Saint John XXIII in 1962. I intend to continue this pastoral accommodation to Catholics who are attached to this liturgy, always in accord with the direction and guidance of the Holy See.

This process began in April 2024. Between April and July, I consulted with the diocesan Presbyteral Council and members of the MSJB about the future of the association. After much deliberation and prayer, I issued a decree suppressing the association on July 1, 2024. That decree is published in this edition of the *Messenger*.

I delayed publishing the decree of suppression in the *Messenger* because the MSJB had the right to request that I reconsider this action. They had the further right to appeal the suppression prior to the decree taking effect. With the time limit for further recourse having expired, I now confirm that the decree in question has become effective, and the public association has been extinguished.

I communicated this confirmation to members of the former association in November 2024. They are released from all promises and commitments in relation to the extinguished association. Lay members are encouraged to continue to pursue their vocational discernment with a diocese or an institute of consecrated life. Priest members remain incardinated priests of the Diocese of Covington. Restrictions upon priestly ministry that were in place prior to this action remain in place.

Thank you for your prayers for the Universal Church, the Diocese of Covington, the former members of the MSJB, and all who love them and have been grateful for their ministry. Please continue to hold us in prayer.

Devotedly yours in Christ,

Most Rev. John C. Iffert
Bishop of Covington



Bishop's Schedule

Jan. 20

Diocesan Curia offices closed in observance of the Martin Luther King holiday

Jan. 21

Sacrament of Confirmation, Holy Cross Parish, Latonia, 7 p.m.

Jan. 22

Villa Madonna Academy building blessing and ribbon cutting ceremony, Villa Madonna Academy, Villa Hills, 9 a.m.

Jan. 22 (continued)

Sacrament of Confirmation, St. Anthony Parish, Taylor Mill, 7 p.m.

Jan. 23

Sacrament of Confirmation, St. Cecilia Parish, Independence, 7 p.m.



JOHN CURTIS
 BY THE GRACE OF GOD
 AND THE FAVOR OF THE APOSTOLIC SEE
 BISHOP OF COVINGTON
DECREE

The Missionaries of St. John the Baptist were erected as a public association of the faithful subject to the Bishop of Covington on September 5, 2019. The association was established with the intention of becoming a religious institute in which the celebration of the prior form of the Roman Rite was normative. In light of the apostolic letter *Traditionis custodes* and in response to the consistent disparagement of the current form of the Roman Rite by members of the association and a lack of suitable clerical leadership for the association, I have decided to suppress the Missionaries of St. John the Baptist. In accordance with can. 50 and can. 320 §3, this decision was made after consultation with all the members of the association, as well as with the diocesan presbyteral council.

Therefore, in accordance with can. 320 §2, I hereby suppress the Missionaries of St. John the Baptist.

According to can. 1734 §§1-2, the emendation or revocation of this decree may be sought within ten useful days of its notification.

Given at the Chancery of the Diocese of Covington on the first day of July in the two thousand twenty-fourth year of our Lord.

John C. Iffert
 Most Reverend John C. Iffert
 Bishop of Covington
Jamie N. Schroeder
 Mrs. Jamie N. Schroeder
 Chancellor

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity to focus on Creed

Cindy Wooden
 Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — As Christian churches prepare to mark the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity will focus on affirming the Nicene Creed and its expression of the faith Christians share.

Materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Jan. 18-25 are prepared each year by the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.

Pope Francis is scheduled to close the week with an ecumenical prayer service at Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls Jan. 25.

The pope and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople also have expressed a hope to mark the anniversary together in May in Iznik, Turkey, the site of the ancient city of Nicaea.

The theme chosen for the 2025 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, underlining the importance of making a profession of faith, is Jesus' question to Martha of Bethany: "Do you believe this?"

In the Gospel of John, Martha tells Jesus that if he had been there, her brother Lazarus would not have died. Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live," and then he asks if she believes. Martha responds with a declaration of faith: "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

In the materials for the week, the Vatican and the World Council of Churches said the Nicaea anniversary "provides a unique opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the common faith of Christians, as expressed in the Creed formulated during this Council; a faith that remains alive and fruitful in our days."

organized a shoe drive.

"I got the idea because I volunteered at the CCRU clinic, which is through the University of Kentucky, Northern Kentucky University College of Medicine. They would see 4-5 patients a night that would come into the Emergency Shelter of Northern Kentucky in Covington, and I noticed that one common thing among all the patients was that they really needed a new pair of shoes," said Ms. Birtcil. "The people that come to the shelter," she continued, "do a lot of walking so it felt like a really important need for them."

While the Compassion Pantry primarily serves the immediate Thomas More community, Ms. Birtcil and Mr. Francis saw this as the perfect opportunity to give back.

"We receive a lot from our greater community," said Mr. Francis, "we have partnerships with Panera, they donate all of their leftover bread every Sunday night. Master Provisions lets us come in and do some grocery shopping. We get donations from High Schools and the alumni all the time. It is all one big family in Northern Kentucky. I think that, as much as people have helped us, we should also help people."

Giving back to the community that has given the Compassion Pantry so much is a hallmark of the shoe drive. All of the shoes that are collected are going to be donated to the Emergency Shelter of Northern Kentucky, to help them combat cold related injuries and illnesses.

The coordination of Ms. Birtcil, Mr. Francis, the Compassion Pantry team and the Emergency Shelter of Northern Kentucky is a testament to the Northern Kentucky community and Mr. Francis said, their faith.

"I would say faith does drive us in all aspects," he said. "Ultimately, at the end of the day, Christ died for us, showing that love back into the community is our goal. I would say that is why we do everything."

For those interested in donating to the shoe drive the drop off box is located inside the doors of the Mary, Seat of Wisdom Chapel, Crestview Hills, and to the left. The Chapel is on the campus of Thomas More University. The donation box will remain in the Chapel until Friday, Jan. 24.

"I hate when my feet are cold," Mr. Francis said, "So I can only imagine what it is like for other people that don't have roofs over their heads to not have shoes and warm feet."

TMU Compassion Pantry co-directors, organize shoe drive to help the most vulnerable

Bella Bailey
 Multimedia Correspondent

As part of the Diocesan-wide Campaign of Mercy, the *Messenger* has been highlighting a different work of mercy each month. For the month of January, the focus is on the corporal work, clothing the naked.

In conjunction with the



December work of mercy, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked focuses on aiding the most vulnerable. With temperatures falling, and snowbanks piling high, those without consistent shelter are at risk of frostbite and hypothermia, making warm clothes a necessity. Unfortunately, those that need warm clothes the most often have the least access. Whether it is low volume and high demand, or even cost, access to warm clothes is limited.

Thomas More University, Crestview Hills, students

MaryKay Birtcil and Noah Francis, co-directors of Thomas More University Compassion Pantry, took note and are doing what they can to help. The Compassion Pantry typically focuses on nonperishable food items for students on campus, but the heart of the organization is in giving back. Ms. Birtcil and Mr. Francis met with their team of students and, in an effort to combat the lack of access,



(above left) The Compassion Pantry sign outside of the room on campus

(above right) Shoes that have already been donated to the shoe drive sit in front of the donation box.

St. Charles Communities

(Continued from page 1)

Joseph Heights. As a result, the hallowed halls of St. Joseph Heights became increasingly empty as did the need for such a large space.

“Two years ago, that was a big piece of it, where we had to come to grips with what was happening. Here we had a big building, the number of sisters was shrinking, the expense was beginning to outweigh the gift of what was happening ... We realized that it’s too big for us, and also, not necessarily the best for us,” said Notre Dame Sister Shauna Bankemper, assistant provincial and Leadership Team Member.

“The upkeep of such a large building, we felt, was not a good use of resources ... Ten years ago Pope Francis declared the Year of Consecrated Life and one of the things he said to religious communities is look at your buildings and see how they need to be repurposed ... For him and for us it is always how can that promote the mission? How can it serve the mission? Because that is why we exist in the first place,” said Notre Dame Sister Marla Monahan, vicar for religious, Diocese of Covington.

“All of us realize that the brick and mortar of this building holds beautiful memories, but we also want our mission of the Sisters of Notre Dame to go forward and if we can provide an environment for that mission ... to thrive that’s, what I think, the future of this property is about,” said Sister Shauna.

Sister Marla added to this sentiment, “For us, we tried to see if there was a potential other use for the building. The cost of renovating an old building and what would be the mission needs. To be good stewards of resources, to keep the focus on mission, we first reached out to Notre Dame Academy to see if their future plans might include something of the property or building and it did not. Secondly, we reached out to our sponsored ministry, St. Charles Community.”

St. Charles Community is one of several sponsored ministries of the Sisters of Notre Dame, and where many of the sisters now live after moving from St. Joseph Heights.

“We made a decision that we would send our skilled care, our infirmary, to St. Charles. They have a wing called the Homestead available and we wanted to be able to pro-

vide for our sisters there in that facility and we would bring our own staff... We have 18 sisters that live there and are getting the skilled care that they need,” said Sister Shauna. In addition to the sisters needing skilled care, other sisters wished to be close to health-care and their fellow sisters.

“We realized that the future of our sisters would be on the St. Charles campus and so the sisters moved to St. Charles Lodge,” said Sister Shauna.

St. Charles Lodge is the assisted living facility of the St. Charles Community. Its residents are independent enough to live on their own but need more support than what is typically practical at home.

In total, there are 38 sisters now living in the St. Charles Community at either the Lodge or Homestead.

Sister Shauna said that while the decision to move was not an easy one, the 38 sisters now living at St. Charles feel at ease in their new home. “It was a communal decision that we would be moving from the building, that was two years ago, that made the move a little bit easier. The sisters at St. Charles are very happy and content, that makes it a little easier.”

While the Sisters of Notre Dame may not have a use for the building they used to call home, St. Charles Community has found a use for the property on which the building sits.

“We believe that this expansion will enable us to reach more seniors in desperate need of compassionate care and



Bailey photo

The St. Joseph statue stands tall on the campus of St. Joseph Heights.

services, while honoring and preserving the legacy of the Sisters of Notre Dame,” said Nichole Smith, executive director of the St. Charles Community, in the joint statement.

Sister Shauna assured those who love St. Joseph Heights that while the building will no longer be standing, the mission for which it stood will remain steadfast.

“In making decisions about the future, our goal is to maximize our mission-related impact and to continue to strengthen our existing ministries. We believe that transitioning the St. Joseph Heights property to St. Charles will provide significant benefits to both the sisters and St. Charles, and to the broader Covington/Park Hills communities,” she said in the joint statement. “This is the next step in St. Joseph Heights’ further service to mission.”

St. Joseph Heights, a brief history

Bella Bailey

Multimedia Correspondent

It is hard to imagine a time when St. Joseph Heights was nothing more than an idea. In 1907 however, it was just that. Reverend Mother Cecilia, superior general of the Congregation of Notre Dame, was the first to propose the idea of a convent outside the city of Covington. It was in that same year she proposed the purchase of a plot of land on Lexington Pike, which is currently known as Old State Road, and what the city of Park Hills calls, “the forerunner of Dixie Highway,” on its website.

Sister Marla Monahan recalled a humorous story about the purchase of the original tract of land. The farmer from whom the land was bought, originally did not want to sell his land. “So, the sisters buried a statue of St. Joseph on his farm and it was all over for him,” Sister Monahan said with a laugh. Not long after the statue burial he agreed to sell his property.

Unfortunately, World War I led to the postponement of all plans until 1921 when Reverend Mother Cecilia approved the first plans for a building. In 1922 an organization of laity was created, the “St. Joseph Heights Home Association,” was approved with ecclesiastical advice and support.

Reverend Mother Cecilia passed before the final approval for St. Joseph Heights. Under the new direction of Sister Mary Angela, the first superior of the Covington Province, Bishop William Howard granted permission for the building of a Provincial House in 1926. Work started right away, and ground was broken on March 19, 1926. In September of that year the cornerstone was laid and on Nov. 13, 1927, Bishop Howard dedicated the New St. Joseph Heights Provincial House and Convent.



A photo of St. Joseph Heights from a 1949 edition of *The Gavel*, a newsletter of the Sisters of Notre Dame.

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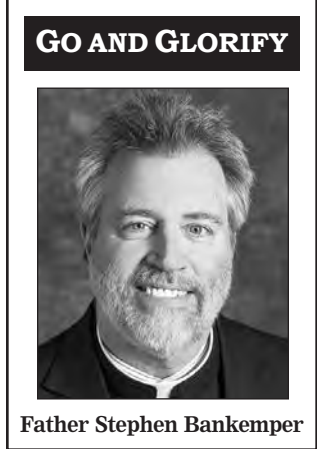
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Trusting in Him

The readings for the second Sunday in Ordinary Time — Cycle C — are Isaiah 62:1-5, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and John 2:1-11.

The Gospel for today, about Jesus and Mary at the wedding feast at Cana, contains some of the richest theology we could find in a Gospel pericope, and scholars and spiritual writers have written much about this incident in Jesus' life.



Father Stephen Bankemper

There are connections with the great feast of Epiphany (Hippolytus and St. Peter Chrysologus, for example), hints of Jesus' relationship with the Church as bridegroom (Dr. Brant Pitre), and many homilies focusing on details of the story that can be seen symbolically,

such as running out of wine, the six stone water jars, and the comment from the headwaiter that the bridegroom "kept the good wine until now." I would like to bypass these more usual meditations on this story and suggest a line of meditation less from a scholar and more from a spiritual guide or pastor.

"When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine...' [And] His mother said to the servers, 'Do whatever he tells you.'" What do you think Mary thought Jesus would do?

To get the full impact of the question, put aside what the Church knows about Jesus from 2,000 years of meditation and study. Mary certainly knew something of Jesus, but even if she knew He was the Messiah, it is unlikely that she knew fully what that meant. (See Luke 2:17-19 or Mark 3:20-21 and 3:31) Also, we have no record that she had seen any miracles (this was the "beginning of his signs"). So, what did Mary think Jesus would do?

Whatever answer we might suggest to this question, we must admit that it will be an answer based on speculation. Speculation is not bad, as long as we follow some ground rules. For example, we must admit that we are speculating. Second, since we are speculating, we must hold our conclusions lightly, so to speak, not insisting that we have the truth. Third, our speculation must have some basis in either what is given to us in Scripture, what is taught authoritatively by the Church, or what we know about human nature.

With these rules in mind, allow me to share a plausible answer, and the action it suggests to our lives. My answer is this: that Mary would not have known exactly what Jesus was going to do — not even that his action would be miraculous — but trusted him enough to leave the problem in his hands and tell the waiters, "Do whatever he tells you."

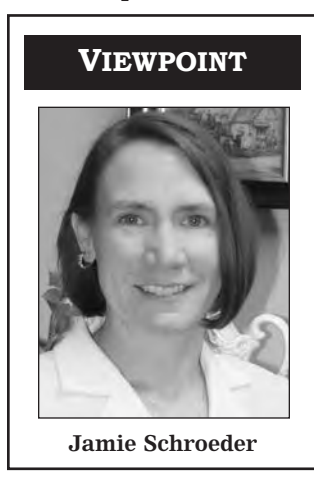
How do we ask for things? Do we not often, not only tell God what we want or need Him to do, but also how to do it? Recall some of the petitions you have heard in the Universal Prayer at Mass — and I have been guilty of this myself: how many are long and involved and spell out exactly what God should do, even including an agenda? Do we trust God enough simply to mention our difficulty and believe He will take care of it? I try to use this formula for prayers: For _____ (for example, for our Holy Father Francis), let us pray to the Lord. I have no idea what Pope Francis needs, so why not simply entrust him into God's hands? Further, how do I know what is good or bad for someone? I cannot even be certain that I know what is good or bad for myself.

I am not criticizing anyone's prayers of petition. I am merely meditating on Mary's statement to Jesus and asking myself, do I trust God enough merely to place my or another's difficulties before him and surrender myself to his love, wisdom, mercy and compassion?

I have mentioned the so-called Surrender Novena in this column before. Instead of, "God, Cindy is having this problem. Please do this and this to bring about this," what if we prayed, "Jesus, Joe is having heart surgery today. I surrender him to you, take care of everything?" Or "Jesus, my marriage is in trouble. I surrender it to

It's never too late for

As I write, it is just two days into the new year, still New Year's resolution season. However, by the time this column is published it will be halfway through the month



Jamie Schroeder

of January. I wonder how many New Year's resolutions will already be a distant memory? I have never been one to make New Year's resolutions with any seriousness. But this holiday season, several things happened that changed my mind.

The Sunday before Christmas, I injured my back. It was the worst pain I can remember feeling, and I spent my Christmas and New Year recovering with rest, medication, physical therapy and visits to various doctors. As I cried and prayed through the pain, I recognized the injury as a wake-up call to take better care of my physical health. God had been trying to tell me for some time, through physical signs and through my family, coworkers and friends, that I needed to do this, but I stubbornly turned a deaf ear. Boy am I listening now!

On New Year's Eve, the daily reflection I pray with detailed how to make good, holy, life-changing resolutions from a Catholic perspective. It seems obvious that a Catholic would take a spiritual approach to this annual exercise, but I would venture that many engage in it with a purely secular view. On the heels of the daily reflection, a friend sent a podcast on the same topic but with different, though complementary recommendations. And my pastor's homily at Mass on New Year's Day only confirmed what the Holy Spirit was saying to me. I share a summary of my takeaways here:

1. Get to the root of the behavior I want to change instead of focusing on the behavior itself.

2. With what areas in my life am I really struggling? What vices keep me from living the way God wants? Focus on developing the opposite virtue.

3. The desire to change is from God — a call to be more like Christ. I must turn my mind and heart to God to discover what change is necessary.

4. What is my motivation for the change I desire and is it in line with God's will at this time?

5. Have I prayed about the resolution, and will I continue to pray for the determination to see it through?

6. Follow the process of assessing the prior year (highlights and lowlights), identifying lessons learned, naming what I need to stop doing and what I am being called to add, and creating a plan.

So, on New Year's Day I took the time (or I should say God gave me the time due to my injury) to pray about and write out my resolutions for 2025. It was a fruitful activity that I hope to make an annual tradition. Practically speaking, it will mean spending less time on the things that do not bring me closer to God and the people I love and more time on things that will help me be a more effective disciple of Christ and member of my family and community.

For example, as I am exercising five times a week, I will be building my strength to serve my family and the Church. As I am denying myself the sweets I love to eat to lose weight, I will be offering it as a sacrifice for family members dealing with gastrointestinal disease. And as I am being faithful to fulfilling my weekly spiritual commitments, I will be growing in my relationship with Christ.

The key for me will be perseverance. I will be praying for that virtue in the weeks to come. May I ask that you say a prayer for me for that intention? And I will be praying for perseverance for you with your own New Year's resolutions. If you didn't make any this year, it's not too late! It's never too late to resolve to grow in the Lord!

Jamie Schroeder is chancellor for the Diocese of Covington, Ky.

Answering my quarter century question

By the time this paper has hit most everyone's doorsteps, I will be only a few short days away from celebrating my 25th birthday.



Maura Baker

A quarter of a century, and everyone that I mention it to seems keen to point that out. In the grand scheme of things, my lifetime is just a drop in the sea. I've lived less, seen less, than most of my colleagues and even most of my friends. (I've always been a bit of an "old soul.")

But 25 years is a long time. Having just one computer in our home was a novelty when I was a child, and I was a teenager by the time I held my first personal, pocket-sized screen. I remember the first class I took that integrated digital learning, how much I loathed it, and the way every student in my high school watched captively the inauguration of Pope Francis on the two, small screens mounted outside the cafeteria. Twenty-five years is just long enough to see the world change, for better or for worse.

It's not a secret that most folk in my age range suffer from some mental affliction. Anxiety and depression run like a fever through anyone under 30. It's a sign of the

times, maybe, but when I think about my 25th birthday I think about how a 16-year-old me would never believe that I'd make it this far. It's a horrible thought, but to her, there was nothing good at the end of the road.

Luckily, I've been blessed with the most wonderful and patient of family and friends, and, more than that, the question of "how" I made it through the shadow of my teenagehood is answered very simply — hope.

"Pilgrims of Hope" is the theme of the 2025 Jubilee year, as declared by Pope Francis. Jubilee has always been one of my favorite words, from my first exposure to it as the name of a sparkly X-men character, to now, celebrating my 25th year on the longest and hardest pilgrimage I will ever take. It's such a playful, happy word, down to the way it sounds when you speak it aloud.

I learned something very special as I got older, and I've come to embrace my status as a pilgrim, walking together with all of humanity towards the kingdom, towards the warm embrace of Christ, towards peace and joy and unity.

It was when I looked to Christ at the end of the road that I found my perseverance that brought me through my lowest points. Hopefully, I keep my chin up and eyes forward for the rest of the journey, though I know the road is long and treacherous ahead.

Love is a shield, and hope is a sword, and there is nothing we can't overcome when we walk together, brothers in arms with Christ, into the light.

Maura Baker is a staff writer for the Messenger, the Catholic newspaper for the Diocese of Covington, Ky.

you, take care of everything."

Not only would those prayers express trust in Jesus (the Divine Mercy prayer), but perhaps they would help

us grow in trust as well.

Father Stephen Bankemper is pastor, St. Catherine of Siena Parish, Ft. Thomas, Ky.

SEEK25 energizes young Catholics to share hope in Jesus

Becker photo

Linda Petersen, Laretta Brown
OSV News

SALT LAKE CITY — The excitement in the air was palpable as more than 17,000 Catholics, including 11 students from Northern Kentucky University Newman Club and one student from Thomas More University, Crestview Hills, descended on the Salt Palace Convention Center in Salt Lake City Jan. 1-5 for SEEK25.

This year's SEEK conference, organized annually by the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), also had a satellite conference attended by more than 3,000 people in Washington Jan. 2-5, and another in Cologne, Germany, attended by nearly 500 people from Dec. 31 to Jan. 2. This was the first year SEEK was held in three separate locations — and the first in Europe.

"The adventure of seeking is no stranger to Utah," said Bishop Oscar A. Solis of the Diocese of Salt Lake City. He presided at the conference's opening Mass where he was joined by 489 concelebrating priests from across the U.S. In his homily for SEEK25's opening Mass, Bishop Solis highlighted the historical significance of seekers in Utah, from Indigenous peoples to early Catholic explorers and pioneers as he welcomed participants to the conference.

Over the course of SEEK, participants had the opportunity to join daily liturgies, engage in Eucharistic adoration and receive the sacrament of reconciliation. They also heard profound messages from inspiring keynote speakers, such as that shared by Father Mike Schmitz of *The Bible in a Year* and *The Catechism in a Year* podcasts.

God's children need him no matter how often they, in their words and actions, ask him to leave them alone, said Father Schmitz. The podcasting priest was the keynote speaker on Jan. 2 for the Salt Lake City SEEK25 conference. Through original sin, he said, all mankind inherits a

brokenness which can only be overcome by Jesus Christ. "Sin is when I say, 'Listen God, I know what you want. I don't care, I want what I want,'" Father Schmitz said. When people sin, he explained, they attempt to find happiness without God — but true happiness can only be found

in him. Conference participants were also instructed and inspired in their faith. The Making Missionary Disciples track had presenters ranging from Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, to Trent Horn. Bishop Cozzens is board chairman of the National Eucharistic Congress Inc., while Horn is a convert to the faith and works for Catholic Answers as a staff apologist.

Collectively, the presenters explored SEEK25's theme "Follow Me" in 42 impact sessions.

Among the topics addressed in the sessions were gen-

(Continued on page 12)



The contingency from the Diocese of Covington at the SEEK25 conference in Seattle, Washington.

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PEOPLE AND EVENTS

The weekly TV Mass from the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption is broadcast locally on The CW, Sundays, 10—11 a.m. Viewers can tune-in on the following channels: antenna 12.2; Spectrum 117 or 25; Cincinnati Bell 17 or 517; and DirectTV 25.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus is central to the Christian faith. **In this series of talks, Father Michael Comer takes us deeper into the mystery of Jesus' Passion, from Gethsemani to Jesus' crucifixion and death, by exploring the "Passion Narratives."** In the "Resurrection Narratives" Father Comer will take us from the tomb to Jesus' victory over death and the promise of eternal life. Free and open to all. Come and bring a friend. All talks are held at Mother of God Church, Covington, 10:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. on the following dates: Passion Narratives, Jan. 23, 30, Feb. 6, 13 and 20. Resurrection Narratives, March 6, 13, 27, April 3 and 10. If you missed Father Comer's talks on the Infancy Narratives find them at mother-of-god.org under Father Mike's Talks.

St. Augustine Church, Augusta, bingo social. Jan. 26, 1–5 p.m., Clooney Community Center, Augusta, bingo, pull tabs, split the pot raffle, drinks and snacks. \$10 entry fee at the door, additional bingo cards optional. Must be 18 or over to participate. Meal following for players. Weather permitting.

In recognition of the World Day for Consecrated Life, the Diocese of Covington will honor its women and men religious with Mass Feb. 1, 10 a.m., Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington. Bishop John Iffert is the celebrant. A reception will follow in Bishop Howard Memorial Hall. All people are cordially invited to attend.

Auditions and informal singing Feb. 1, 2:30-3:30 p.m., or by appointment. Location will be given to participating families. Northern Kentucky Youth Choir (NKYJC), a regional choir serving people ages 7 to 17 and their families. Rehearsal schedule will be Saturdays or Sundays – best day for all/most – through Feb. 22. The final Saturday (required) is the Choir Festival American Federation Pueri Cantores, when choirs from across the region join in a full day of singing and Festival Mass at Cincinnati's Cathedral Basilica of St. Peter in Chains. The repertory is beautiful, exciting and challenging. Directors Carly Robinett and Pierre Joseph are experienced teachers completing degree work (CCM/Music Ed/Baccalaureate). Singers ages 7-17, be prepared to sing a simple song that you know well and also sing a few notes we will give you. Bring a copy of your music only if you have it. Singers do not need to be Catholic to participate. For information e-mail: nkyYouthChoir@gmail.com or text/call, Rebecca Wells, (859) 240-3738. Facebook: Northern Kentucky Youth Choir.

Newport Central Catholic High School announces its 24th class of inductees into its Athletic Hall of Fame: Tony Bacigalupo, '00; Dr. Grady Gibson, '72; Greg Ladenburger, '67 (posthumously); Drew McDonald, '15; Kristen Schreiber Payne, '15; and Kaitlin Smith Marks, '08. Also being honored as the "Team of Distinction" is the 2010 Football Class 2A State Champion Team. Additionally, Dan Wagner, '78, will receive Coach Jim Connor Award and Dr. Richard Schuck will receive the Fr. John Hegenauer Community Service Award. The induc-



Christmas around the world

St. Pius X, Edgewood, kindergarten students went on an adventure around the world learning about Christmas celebrations in other countries. They heard the story of Las Posadas while "visiting" Mexico and reenacted Mary and Joseph searching for a place to stay by knocking on classroom doors and asking if they had room.

tion and award ceremonies is Feb. 15, Newport Central Catholic gymnasium, social hour, 6 p.m.; dinner and ceremony at 7 p.m. Cost \$30. Reservations accepted prior to Feb. 1 online at <https://ncchs.com/events>. For information call (859) 292-0001.

In 2021, 12.7 million adults thought of, planned or attempted suicide. **Mental Health First Aid helps reduce stigma, teach signs and symptoms and prepare first aiders to use a 5-step action plan to use in the event of a mental health crisis.** Autumn Ruehl will present Mental Health First Aid, Feb. 18, 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m., Catholic Charities, 3629 Church St., Covington. Register at <https://form.jotform.com/243105347336149>.

Parents of Addicted Loved Ones, (PAL) is a support group that meets on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays, 6:30–8 p.m. at Catholic Charities, Latonia. It provides continuing education and support, at no charge, for parents with a son, daughter or spouse suffering from addiction to alcohol or drugs. No cost. Just come — 3629 Church Street, Latonia. For more information contact Client Care at (859) 581-8974.

Bishop Iffert and the priests of the Diocese of Covington will pray a Holy Hour for survivors of sexual violence and for the sanctification of priests, 3 p.m., every third Thursday monthly, at the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington. All are welcome.

The Diocese of Covington, in partnership with Franciscan University's Catechetical Institute is offering FREE in-person Mentor Training Workshops. These workshops will take place through February 2025. Register at <https://covdio.org/register/>. For information contact Isaak A. Isaak, Office of Catechesis and Evangelization, (859) 392-1529 or

iisaak@covdio.org.

That Man is You, fall 2024 and spring 2025 schedule: Mon., 8 p.m., Blessed Sacrament Parish, Undercroft, Justin.jehn@thinkchamplin.com; Tues., 6 a.m., Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish at Linneman Funeral Home, blind@covcath.org; Wed., 6 a.m., Mary Queen of Heaven Parish, gym, tim@ryanlandsurveying.com; Wed., 6 a.m., St. Agnes Parish, Murphy Hall, hebsfarm@gmail.com; Thurs., 6 a.m., Blessed Sacrament Parish, undercroft, bill@deltarealtyusa.com; Thurs., 7 p.m., Divine Mercy/St. Bernard Parishes, Garvey Hall, Dayton, dmsb.nickolas@gmail.com.

Catholic Charities volunteer opportunities: Volunteer Receptionist — Be the welcoming face for visitors and clients. Most shifts are four hours long. Mason County Jail Ministry Volunteers - Prayer/Scripture Ministry — Join a group of inmates in the detention centers for prayer and Scripture discussions during scheduled evening sessions. Commitment is flexible; volunteers are not required to attend every week. Visit <https://covingtoncharities.org> and click on the volunteer tab, or e-mail jwalch@covingtoncharities.org.

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.

St. Augustine celebrates blessing of refurbished altar

(Continued from page 1)

Thomas. The ceremony was joined by many of St. Augustine's parishioners participating as well.

In his homily, Bishop Iffert emphasized the importance of Christ's baptism — a feast day celebrated the same day as the re-dedication. "People were coming from all over the region to be baptized," he said, "... amid all the people, Jesus is revealed to be the new temple of God and the hope of divine life for all."

He mentioned how the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus during his baptism, and that that "same spirit descends upon Christ's holy people gathered in prayer ... it will be made manifest that the same holy people gathered by Christ are the Church. That is the holy people." Of course, representing the mirror event of the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples at Pentecost.

"The Church has also been the name given to the buildings in which the Christian community gathers to hear the word of God," said Bishop Iffert, "and, so, we gather this morning, on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, to rededicate this lovingly restored building and the temple of living stones that worships here, and goes out into the world from here to be the living mission of Jesus."

"May the renewal of this building bring restored life to the temple ... remind us to embody St. Augustine's sacred truth, 'One loving heart sets another on fire,' and may God continue to pour out graces upon the people of St. Augustine and the Diocese of Covington ... May the Lord make you and me his Eucharistic people and missionary disciples and use us to convey his peace to our neighbors and to all whom seek the truth."

At the conclusion of Mass, Father Daniel Schomaker, pastor of St. Augustine, Covington, thanked all who came together for the celebration, but, also, in a special way the bishops present — both Bishop Iffert and Bishop Emeritus Foys, who initially gave Father Schomaker permission to begin the restoration project in 2018.

The bishops were presented with gifts from the parish, including ornaments from St. Augustine's "Be Their Light" ministry, who care for sick and homebound parishioners, but this year honored specifically parishioners who had passed with ornaments on a tree at the front of the Church. The ornaments given to the bishops included the names of both of Bishop Foys' late parents, and Bishop Iffert's mother who passed in 2022.

The bishops were also both presented with images of commissioned pectoral crosses that they will soon be receiving on behalf of St. Augustine Parish. The crosses include a shell-engraved image of the Restless Heart of Jesus, a symbol pertinent to St. Augustine's patron.



(left) An altar server lights a candle which would be used to light the rest of the candles in the Church, following.

(above) The new altar design at St. Augustine Church, Covington, featuring the imagery of a pelican and her chicks — a symbol of the Eucharist and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

(below left) Bishop John Iffert pours Holy Chrism onto the altar as part of the anointing.

(below right) Father Schomaker thanks those who assisted with the ceremony at the end of the Mass.

(bottom right) Parishioners carry in linens for the altar.





(above) Father Daniel Schomaker, pastor, helps parishioners unfold a new altar linen to be placed on the altar.

(left) Deacon John Leardon places a smoking brazier on the altar. The incense rising from the altar signifies the ongoing sacrifice of the Mass, offered forever.

(right) A young family brings forward the gifts for the Eucharist.

(below) The celebrants and servers of the St. Augustine Parish re-dedication and altar blessing.



Pope Francis to celebrate Jubilees for communications, and many other vocations throughout the Jubilee Year

Maura Baker
Staff Writer

With the opening of the 2025 Jubilee Year, the Papal Bull by Pope Francis announced the year to be marked by the “hope that does not fade, our hope in God. May it help us to recover the confident trust that we require, in the Church and in society, in our interpersonal relationships, in international relations and in our task of promoting the dignity of all persons and respect for God’s gift of creation.”

This hope is especially highlighted as part of the Jubilee Year’s theme, “Pilgrims of Hope,” which likewise highlights our collective role as pilgrims.

As part of the Jubilee Year, the Holy See has declared special Jubilees through the holy year — each of which promote a different vocation, a different stage of life or a particular theme of the Jubilee. Notably, one of the first jubilees celebrated will be the Jubilee of the World of Communications, celebrated January 24–26. This jubilee will open with a Mass celebrated by Pope Francis, followed by cultural meetings, dialogues and round tables all in celebration and correspondence with the role of media and communications professionals as they relate to the Jubilee — a pattern that will repeat for each special jubilee throughout the year.

Jim Hess, director of Stewardship and Mission Services, describes these jubilees as a way that the “Church is celebrating different vocations and pathways we take in the world,” he said. “The jubilees celebrate holiness in these different stages of life.”

Following the Jubilee of the World of Communications, the next jubilees to join in the celebration are the Jubilees of Armed Forces, Police and Security Personnel, Feb. 8–9, and of Artists, Feb. 15–18. The faithful are encouraged to take moments of prayer and celebration during their respective jubilees, and to offer prayers in support of loved ones during theirs.

A full list of jubilees can be found on the jubilee calendar online at <https://www.iubilaeum2025.va>. For more information on jubilee celebrations in the Diocese of Covington, visit <https://covdio.org/jubilee/>.



CNS photo/Paul Haring

People pass through the Holy Door of the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome after its opening by Pope Francis for the Jubilee of Mercy in this file photo from Jan. 1, 2016. During jubilee years, Holy Doors are opened at the Basilica of St. Peter at the Vatican, and the Rome basilicas of St. Mary Major; St. John Lateran and St. Paul Outside the Walls.



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Divest from companies that exploit children, pope says

Justin McLellan
Catholic News Service

People and institutions can protect children by changing what they buy and what they invest in, Pope Francis said.

“Fighting exploitation, particularly child exploitation, is the high road to building a better future for all of society,” the pope said Jan. 15, speaking about child exploitation during his audience for the second consecutive week.

Hundreds of thousands of children are subjected to dangerous working conditions, sex trafficking, pornography or forced marriages, the pope said, but “child abuse, in whatever form it may be, is a despicable and heinous act. It is a most serious violation of God’s commandments.”

Pope Francis urged all people to consider what they can do as individuals to respond to the societal problem of child exploitation.

“First of all, we must recognize that, if we want to erad-

icate child labor, we cannot be complicit in it,” he said, explaining that people support child labor “when we buy products that employ child labor.”

“How can I eat and dress myself knowing that behind that food or those clothes, there are exploited children who work instead of going to school?” he said. “The knowledge about what we buy is the first act in not being complicit. Look at where those products come from.”

Likewise, institutions, including church bodies, have a “responsibility” to act against the exploitation of children “by shifting their investments to companies that do not use and do not allow child labor,” he said.

After his main talk, a circus performed tricks for the entertainment of the pilgrims gathered in the St. Paul VI Audience Hall. Pope Francis joined the act by tossing a ball for a show dog to catch.

In his speech, the pope spoke about the many factors that lead to the exploitation of children, such as widespread poverty, lack of social support for families and rising unemployment and job insecurity.

As a result, children in cities, where social divides and moral degradation are most present, become active in dealing drugs and other illicit activities, he said, to the point of becoming “executioners of their peers.”

Putting aside his prepared remarks, the pope recalled the case of a 5-year-old boy, Loan Danilo Peña, who disappeared in Argentina in June 2024. Police suspect that he was kidnapped for human trafficking purposes, possibly related to the harvesting of organs.

Pope Francis, returning to his text, said it is difficult for most people to recognize the social injustices that drive two children toward different paths, creating an “unacceptable human and social divide between those who can dream and those who must succumb.”

“But Jesus wants us all free and happy; and if he loves every man and woman as his son and daughter, he loves the little ones with all the tenderness of his heart,” he said. “Therefore, he asks us to stop and listen to the suffering of the voiceless.”

After greeting the visitors in the audience hall, the pope prayed for peace in Ukraine, Myanmar, Palestine, Israel and all nations at war.

“And also, let us pray for the conversion of the hearts of



CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Francis kisses a Ukrainian flag at the conclusion of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Jan. 15, 2025.

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SEEK25 energizes young Catholics

(Continued from page 6)

der identity, sexual brokenness and social narcissism, drug use and the rise of artificial intelligence. Other sessions focused on relationships: healing them when they are broken, accompaniment and the sanctity of life and of marriage. Still other sessions provided tools lay leaders could utilize in their home parishes with sessions on presenting the Gospel, teaching individuals to pray, building missionary disciples, leadership and the priesthood.



Callahan photo

Evan Callahan, NKU Newman Club poses for a picture with Benedictine Father Augustine Wetta, who Evan refers to as one of the "Catholic celebrities" he met at SEEK25.

Presenters also outlined what the Church has to offer today; how the Savior heals; loving your neighbor; the pure love of Jesus Christ; along with what the examples of the saints, the Virgin Mary, and the life of Christ can teach the faithful.

In the conference's Mission Way hundreds of vendors connected students to religious orders, educational and service opportunities and other Catholic organizations.

FOCUS was founded in 1998 to promote encounters like these, founder Curtis Martin said at a SEEK25 press conference.

ference. "My experience is that the vast majority of Catholics never get a chance to share their faith, never be able to talk about why Christ is important," he said.

He noted the evangelizing impact that millions of college-age young people can have today, especially on the handful of people close enough to them to notice and follow their choices.

"That's called discipleship: I'm following you as you follow Christ," Martin said.

Deacon Brian Cox, chaplain for the Northern Kentucky University Newman Club, his wife, Jennifer, and 11 members of the NKU Newman Club and one student from Thomas More University attend the SEEK conference in Seattle. Three attendees from the Diocese of Covington shared their experience at this year's SEEK.

"Seek was wonderful," said Evan Callahan, a freshman at NKU. "It was truly wonderful how God was able to work through the conference and help not only me, but 20,000 other Catholics encounter Him and grow closer to Him. I met so many amazing people at SEEK and they have been so wonderful in helping me along my journey. I could not be more convinced that God had led me there and placed these people in my life so that He could place in my heart a burning desire to grow closer to Him and to love Him more fully."

Macie Becker, NKU Newman Club member, has attended SEEK before and while the format of SEEK hadn't changed, each year brings its own blessings and challenges. "I was definitely not expecting to get stuck in Salt Lake City for an extra day because of the snow in NKY," said Ms. Becker.

Besides the travel delay, "I think God kept me there that extra day for a purpose," Ms. Becker said. "This year felt a little different than last year because I felt more secure in my faith than I did last year. I found myself having more conversations about my faith with people I met at SEEK, rather than keeping to myself. SEEK has helped me understand that there is no reason to be scared to give my life fully to God. God will accept you with open arms, no matter who you are or your background. I left with a fresh perspective on my whole life: my routines — my friendships, even how I think."

Nikki DeWard, NKU alumna, decided to attend SEEK this year as a graduation gift to herself. "I just graduated college this past December and what better way to celebrate than by going to a conference to deepen your relationship with Jesus and doing it all with your friends."

Ms. DeWard has attended SEEK conferences in the past



(from left) Rebecca Eder, Sister of Life Mary Grace, one of the keynote speakers at SEEK25, and Nikki DeWard share a photo together.

and it has offered new opportunities for her to grow and share her faith.

"One of the biggest blessings that I have received was an invitation to participate in a program that FOCUS puts on called Summer Projects," said Ms. DeWard.

FOCUS stands for "Fellowship of Catholic University Students" and is the Catholic outreach program that organizes the SEEK conferences and hosts other disciple-making programs.

"What Summer Projects entails is moving to a whole new state for the summer, in my case Maine," and working at a resort with the opportunity to go to Holy Hour and Mass every day as well as weekly Bible studies and discipleship meetings.

"If it would not have been for SEEK, I would never have found out about Summer Projects and had the best summer of my life and grown in my faith in more ways than I could have ever imagined," said Ms. DeWard. "I highly recommend attending SEEK and looking into Summer Projects. It could be the best summer of your life and give you more blessings than you could have ever imagined."

FOCUS announced that SEEK26 will take place at three U.S. venues — Columbus, Ohio; Denver, Colorado and Fort Worth, Texas — Jan. 1-5, 2026.

Bishop Earl K. Fernandes from the Diocese of Columbus said at a press conference Jan. 3 that he was excited his diocese would host SEEK next year.

"As a diocese, I don't think we can be reactive; we have to be proactive," he said. "And I see SEEK bringing a lot of energy, spiritual energy to our diocese, elevating our whole diocese."

The Messenger staff contributed to this article.

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Paris has a new minor basilica — Notre Dame de Boulogne

OSV News

PARIS — After Notre Dame Cathedral’s splendid reopening, the attention of Paris Catholics turned to the nearby Church of Notre Dame de Boulogne Jan. 12 as it was solemnly elevated to the rank of minor basilica, following a decree from Pope Francis, signed June 29.

Bishop Matthieu Rougé of Nanterre, whose diocese includes the town of Boulogne-Billancourt, presided over the elevation Mass, in the presence of the apostolic nuncio to France, Archbishop Celestino Migliore.

“Notre Dame de Boulogne is much smaller than Notre Dame de Paris, but only a little younger!” Bishop Rougé told OSV News. “I asked the pope for this title with the approval of all the bishops of France, to strengthen its missionary influence.”

The new basilica takes its name from the ancient town of Boulogne-sur-Mer, a port in northern France, separated from England by the English Channel. In the year 633, an empty boat ran aground on its shore. It contained just a wooden statue of the Virgin and Child. This led to the creation of a sanctuary.

“It had a huge influence in the Middle Ages, so much so that later on, Philippe le Bel, king of France, wished to have a reproduction of it next to Paris,” Bishop Rougé explained.

Philippe le Bel, or King Philippe IV, was well acquainted with this shrine, where his daughter was married off to the king of England in 1308. He looked for a place around Paris to organize similar pilgrim-

ages as those to the northern sanctuary.

He died before the project was accomplished, but his son Philip V fulfilled his wish. In 1319, he laid the foundation stone for a new church next to a village on the banks of the Seine River. This new Notre Dame de Boulogne-sur-Mer became the main place of pilgrimage for Parisians.



OSV News photo/courtesy Facebook of Notre Dame de Boulogne

The Church of Notre Dame de Boulogne in Paris is seen in an undated photo. On Jan. 12, 2025, the church was solemnly elevated to the rank of minor basilica following a decree from Pope Francis, signed June 29, 2024.

For Bishop Rougé, it was important to revive this church’s original vocation 700 years later.

“The town’s mayor himself encouraged me to do so,” he explained. “It is this little church that gave its name to the modern town of Boulogne-Billancourt, which became famous in the 20th century for its large factories of the car manufacturer Renault.”

On Jan. 12 Notre Dame de Boulogne became the 176th church to join the list of basilicas in France, and the first to represent the dynamic Diocese of Nanterre.

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Protecting God's Children for Adults Safe Environment Trainings

For all employees and volunteers of the Diocese of Covington who in any way provide a safe environment for children.

Step 1: Contact parish/school institution leader to review the Policies and Procedures and fill out the Application and Acceptance Forms.

Step 2: Go to www.virtus.org and click on Registration. Follow the prompts to create an account and to request a background check. Selection.com is a secure site; the background check is posted on your account and you receive a copy if you request it during the

registration process. You will sign up for a VIRTUS training class during theregistration.

Step 3: Your account becomes active when your background check, VIRTUS session and Acceptance Form are posted on your account. You will receive 12 bulletins per year. You will receive e-mail notices at system@pub.virtus.org unless your computer program blocks them.

Bulletins:
 ■ January bulletin: posted Sunday, Jan. 5;
 ■ due Tuesday, Feb. 4.
 The monthly e-mail reminder of a new bulletin posted will come

from system@pub.virtus.org.
www.virtusonline.org, enter your user id and password.

If your account is suspended contact your primary location where you volunteer or are employed. Your primary location contact information is found under your Contact Tab.

VIRTUS Training:

■ Thursday, January 30, 9-11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Thursday, January 30, 6-8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Thursday, February 13, 9-11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Thursday, February 13, 6-8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Wednesday, February 26, 9-11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Wednesday, February 26, 6-8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Tuesday, March 5, 6:30-9 p.m., Diocesan Catholic Children's Home, Training room, Miller Building, Ft. Mitchell

■ Tuesday, March 11, 9-11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Tuesday, March 11, 6-8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Wednesday, March 26, 9-11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Wednesday, March 26, 6-8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

Note: If your Training Tab is missing or you cannot access your account, contact your parish, school or institution. For other difficulties, contact Marylu Steffen at (859) 392-1500 or msteffen@covdio.org

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National/World

Christian persecution on the rise worldwide, new report says

MALMÖ, Sweden — In its annual “World Watch List 2025” report, Open Doors International reveals that over 380 million Christians faced persecution and discrimination in 2024, marking a 15 million increase from the previous year. The report highlights the top 50 countries where Christians face the most severe oppression, based on data from October 2023 to September 2024. It shows that Christians worldwide are often denied basic legal rights, and violence against them is rising. Among the most troubling findings, 4,476 Christians were killed, with Nigeria, which ranked seventh, seeing the highest number of deaths at 3,100. Christians in countries like India, Eritrea, and Iran are also facing imprisonment for their faith. North Korea remains the most dangerous country for Christians, a position it has held nearly every year since 2002. The report also points to alarming trends in Central Asia, particularly Kyrgyzstan, where violence against Christians has surged. Autocratic regimes and restrictive laws are major drivers of this persecution, especially in countries like Algeria, where authorities target online Christian activities and close Protestant churches. Open Doors calls for global awareness and advocacy to push governments to respect human rights, urging action to support persecuted Christians worldwide.

Cuba to release 553 prisoners for Jubilee at pope’s request

VATICAN CITY — Taking up the spirit of the recently inaugurated Holy Year 2025, the Cuban government has announced the release of 553 people currently serving prison sentences. Cuba said it would gradually release the prisoners “in the spirit of the Ordinary Jubilee of the year 2025 declared by His Holiness” following a “thorough analysis” of the legal and humanitarian avenues to enact their release. Cuba’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in a statement Jan. 14. The statement did not specify who would be among the 553 prisoners designated to be released. That same day, the White House announced that it will no longer designate Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism and that it would eliminate some restrictions on Cuba. The White House said the actions were steps “to support the Cuban people as part of an understanding with the Catholic Church under the leadership of Pope Francis and improve the livelihoods of Cubans.” Following the announcement, Cardinal Seán P. O’Malley, retired archbishop of Boston, said that for the last several years he had carried messages from Pope Francis to the presidents of the United States and Cuba “seeking the release of prisoners in Cuba and improved relationships between the two countries for the good of the Cuban people.”

Texas Supreme Court hears arguments in AG’s attempt to shut down Catholic ministry to migrants

AUSTIN, Texas — The Texas Supreme Court on Jan. 13 heard oral argument in a case concerning Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton’s attempt to shut down El Paso’s Annunciation House, a Catholic nonprofit serving migrants. In court filings and press statements since February 2024, Paxton’s office has alleged Annunciation House runs “stash houses,” facilitates illegal border crossings, conceals “illegally present aliens from law enforcement” and did not turn over documents it sought in their investigation. But Annunciation House and its attorneys denied wrongdoing or illegal conduct and said Paxton’s office did not adhere to appropriate legal processes for requesting documents from them. During arguments, Assistant Attorney General Ryan Baasch said Annunciation House “is not immunized because of its religion.” But Amy Warr, an attorney representing Annunciation House, said the attorney general’s office used “rhetoric” rather than evidence in its claims, and there is no evidence of illegal conduct on the ministry’s part. Catholic leaders, including Pope Francis and El Paso’s Bishop Mark Seitz, have argued against Paxton’s effort.

Vatican diplomats discuss paths toward peace in Middle East

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican’s top diplomat met with papal representatives to various Middle Eastern countries to discuss possible avenues toward peace in the region and the state of the Catholic Church there. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, met in Amman, Jordan, with the Vatican ambassadors to: Bahrain, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Syria and Yemen. The meeting took place as part of the cardinal’s visit to Jordan to consecrate a new

church built on the site traditionally believed to be where Jesus was baptized along the Jordan River. During their Jan. 13 meeting, the diplomats discussed the “ongoing crisis in the region, the political and ecclesial condition of each country, the signs of hope that can be glimpsed in some, the serious humanitarian situations faced by the people most affected by the conflicts, and the need for solidarity from the international community,” the Vatican said in a statement. On the same day, Cardinal Parolin also had a phone call with Joseph Aoun, president of Lebanon and a Maronite Catholic, to congratulate him on winning election and taking office Jan. 9.

Kidnapped Nigerian nuns released unconditionally, congregation says

UFUMA, Nigeria — Two Nigerian women religious who were kidnapped Jan. 7 as they returned home from a meeting in Ogboji, a town in Anambra state in Nigeria, were freed Jan. 13 with no conditions, their congregation said. Sister Vincentia Maria Nwankwo and Sister Grace Mariette Okoli, who were returning from a vocational associations’ meeting and were taken along Ufuma Road, are members of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Mother of Christ of Onitsha, in southern Nigeria. “We are happy to announce that our dear Sisters ... have been released without any conditions and are in good health,” the congregation said in a statement, expressing gratitude “to God and all of you for your prayers and support during these difficult and uncertain days.” Sister Vincentia Maria is principal of Archbishop Charles Heerey Memorial Model Secondary School in Ufuma, and Sister Grace Mariette is principal of Immaculate Girls Model Secondary School in Nnewi. In a Jan. 7 statement shared with OSV News Sister Maria Sobenna Ikeotuonye, the congregation’s secretary general, had said she was saddened at the news of the kidnapping, and called for “fervent prayers and supplications to God” for their release. The earlier prayer of the congregation that they “be released unconditionally” was heard.

Biden awards pope Presidential Medal of Freedom

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden awarded Pope Francis with the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction, the nation’s highest civilian honor; the White

House said Jan. 11. Biden, the nation’s second Catholic president, spoke with the pontiff to name him a recipient of the award, the White House said. It marked the only time in his presidency Biden bestowed that award “with distinction,” the announcement added. On Jan. 8 Biden canceled a trip to Italy that had been scheduled for Jan. 9-12. It would have included an audience with Pope Francis and would have been his final foreign trip as president. The cancellation came in the wake of the devastating wildfires raging in California. The Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction has been rarely bestowed in recent decades. But Biden himself is one such recipient. Then-President Barack Obama awarded Biden, who was then vice president, with such a medal in 2017. Another pontiff has also received the award. Then-President George W. Bush awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction to St. John Paul II in 2004.

Russia killing clergy, banning religions in occupied Ukraine

KYIV, Ukraine — As Russia cracks down on religious freedom in occupied areas of Ukraine, the country’s ministry of foreign affairs is calling on the international community to condemn “flagrant human rights violations” while tightening sanctions and expediting justice for breaches of international law by Russia. In a Jan. 10 statement, Ukraine’s foreign ministry said that since the start of their February 2022 full-scale invasion, Russian forces have killed close to 70 clergy and destroyed more than 630 places of worship in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has been banned by Russia in occupied areas of Ukraine, and OSV News previously reported on two UGCC priests, Redemptorist Fathers Ivan Levitsky and Bohdan Geleta, who endured 18 months of Russian captivity and torture prior to a June 2024 prisoner exchange. Researcher Felix Corley of Forum 18 recently told OSV News that religious freedom in Russia itself is declining. Ukraine’s foreign ministry said Russia has weaponized the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has staunchly supported Russia’s invasion. “Despite the war conditions, Ukraine remains steadfast in its commitment to protecting and upholding religious freedom, adhering to the principles of international law that govern freedom of religion or belief,” said Ukraine’s foreign ministry.

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