

| | |
|----|---|
| 2 | Live Nativity |
| 2 | Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception |
| 3 | Diocesan Service Awards |
| 3 | Give Catholic NKY Thanking you for your generosity |
| 6 | Thomas More University Center of Faith, Mission and Catholic Education |
| 16 | TGIF Thank God It's Free |

Moving? Wrong address?
Call the circulation desk,
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| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Bishop's Schedule | 3 |
| Commentary | 5 |
| People and Events | 7 |
| Classifieds | 12 |
| Shopper's Guide | 14 |
| VIRTUS | 14 |
| News Briefs | 15 |

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

As the year comes to a close, Bishop reflects on Jubilee, Christ's mercy and love

Maura Baker
Staff Writer

The 2025 Jubilee Year — Pilgrims of Hope — will soon be coming to a close, with the doors of St. Peter's Basilica to be sealed on the celebration of the Epiphany, Jan. 6 as the official end of the Jubilee. For the rest of the dioceses around the world, Holy Doors are set to close Dec. 28 — with the Diocese of Covington closing its during the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption's 10 a.m. Mass.

With the doors having opened during the first Sunday of Advent last year, it's been a total of 13 months since the Jubilee celebrations began.

"I think people entered into this Jubilee with a good spirit," Bishop John Iffert said, reflecting on the past year. "I encounter people all the time who are visiting the Cathedral, visiting the other churches we designated and who are seeking the Jubilee indulgence. It's an opening of the font of mercy, and I think people have engaged that around the diocese, and that has been important."

The Jubilee indulgence is a plenary indulgence that can only be granted during the Jubilee year by visiting St. Peter's Basilica or any designated holy site — including in one's own diocese. The Jubilee Year closing Mass on Dec. 28 will be the last opportunity to receive this indulgence.

Another key aspect of the past Jubilee year has been the theme of pilgrimage, as established by the late Pope Francis during the year's beginnings, according to Bishop Iffert.

"We're developing that theme of pilgrimage here in the diocese, both with our downtown churches pilgrimage on the Saturday before Palm Sunday," a tradition that had already grown in the diocese prior to the Jubilee year, but saw record attendance during the celebration, "and then our international pilgrimages and local pil-




grimages ... and I think that's fruitful for us all to remind ourselves that we're a pilgrim people moving through the world, and that we rely on God's mercy."

As the Jubilee year draws to a close, Bishop Iffert invites the faithful to "keep the Advent season, and, as we always do, remember God's mercy. Continue to read and pray and think around that theme of God's mercy ... we celebrate it in a particular way during these Jubilee years, but that doesn't mean that it's closed off to us. These Jubilee years are about emphasizing the centrality of mercy, in our beliefs and in the way God works with us."

The Jubilee "points us towards our constant," he said, "our call to constantly be moving towards sanctification. Events like the Jubilee Year point us towards the end, where Christ will gather us together in his mercy and his love."

Jubilee Year Closing Mass
Dec. 28, 10 a.m.
Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington

Join Bishop John Iffert and the Diocese of Covington as we joyously end the 2025 Jubilee Year with a procession during the Cathedral's 10 a.m. Mass.



Military archbishop urges respect for rule of law after follow-up strike on alleged drug boat

Kate Scanlon
OSV News

The head of the U.S. military archdiocese on Dec. 3 urged respect for the human person and the rule of law amid new questions about the legality of a deadly U.S. military attack Sept. 2 on a boat in the Caribbean.

The Trump administration has carried out multiple deadly strikes on what it alleged were suspected drug vessels in the Caribbean in order, it said, to combat drug trafficking into the U.S. One of those strikes has come under newfound scrutiny after an alleged order was given to leave no survivors and allowed a second strike to carry it out.

"In the fight against drugs, the end never justifies the means, which must be moral, in accord with the principles of the just war theory, and always respectful of the dignity of each human person," Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services said in a statement.

"No one can ever be ordered to commit an immoral act, and even those suspected of committing a crime are entitled to due process under the law," he said. "As the moral principle forbidding the intentional killing of noncombatants is inviolable, it would be an illegal and immoral order to kill deliberately survivors on a vessel who pose no immediate lethal threat to our armed forces."

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has



OSV News file photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services delivers his reflection during the annual prayer service for United Nations diplomats at Holy Family Church in New York City Sept. 8, 2025. The event, hosted by the Vatican's permanent observer mission to the U.N., took place on the eve of the opening of the 80th session of the U.N. General Assembly.

pointed to Adm. Frank Bradley, the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, as being behind the decision to carry out the second fatal strike, but some reports suggest Hegseth gave a verbal order that there be no survivors from the strike.

Hegseth uses the moniker "secretary of war" since Trump signed an executive order on Sept. 5 adding the "Department of War" as a secondary, ceremonial title for the Department of Defense.

"Adm. Bradley made the correct decision to ultimately sink the boat and eliminate the threat. He sunk the boat, sunk the boat and eliminated the threat," Hegseth said Dec. 2 at a Cabinet meeting at the White House. "And it was the right call. We have his back."

Such an order may be unlawful and expose those involved to prosecution, multiple reports said.

"We do not know if every sailor on a vessel presumed to be carrying illegal drugs knows the nature of the cargo," wrote Archbishop Broglio. "We do know that there is a legal way to intercept a suspicious vessel, board it, and have members of the Coast Guard on hand who have the authority to make arrests. Then, the courts function in determining the guilty and the appropriate punishment. Due process must apply to everyone, regardless of his or her role in illegal activity. The rule of law

(Continued on page 12)

With live Nativity walls raised, Knights of St. John prepare for another Christmas season

Maura Baker
Staff Writer

In front of the rectory of St. Pius X Parish, Edgewood, on Dec. 6, a 50-year tradition spanning multiple generations began again. The Knights of St. John (KOSJ), an organization of Catholic men, have been setting up and running the diocesan live Nativity since the 1970s — and now, with the wooden walls raised, another year of celebrating the season begins.

Tim Ryan, the current acting president of KOSJ and member of 20 years, regarded fondly the Nativity’s mission. “It warms my heart to see the children see these animals and see Mary and Joseph,” he said.

“What that represents is the birth of Jesus,” said Mr. Ryan. “We’re disciples of Jesus, and we’re trying to evangelize. Hopefully they’ll (the children and families) see the Holy Family at Christmas with the animals, and maybe it’ll trigger something in them to come to church and see what Jesus is all about.”

The Nativity, which will feature goat kids and parishioners of St. Pius X fulfilling the roles of Mary and Joseph, will be open evenings, Dec. 20–23, from 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Dec. 20, and 7:30 p.m. on the other days. The display is free to attend and to view.



Baker photos

With teamwork, members of the Knights of St. John raised the walls of the simple stable used for the diocesan live Nativity scene, Dec. 6. While the barn will be visible in front of St. Pius X Parish, Edgewood, all season — the full nativity, which includes baby goats and actors in the place of Mary and Joseph — will be open evenings Dec. 20–23.

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception recognizes Mary as the mother of the world and all redemption

Bella Bailey
Multimedia Correspondent

On the feast of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop John Iffert celebrated Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington, Dec. 8. Concelebrating was Bishop Emeritus Roger Foys; Father Ryan Maher, rector of the Cathedral; Msgr. Kurt Kemo, vice vector; with Deacon Jerry Franzen assisting.

Bishop Iffert spoke to the Diocesan faithful gathered in attendance the evening of the Solemnity, speaking of Mary’s redemptive love and her role as the arc of the covenant, the tabernacle of Christ. It was Mary’s immaculate conception to Sts. Anne and Joachim that put into motion God’s plan for the redemption of sinners, said Bishop Iffert.

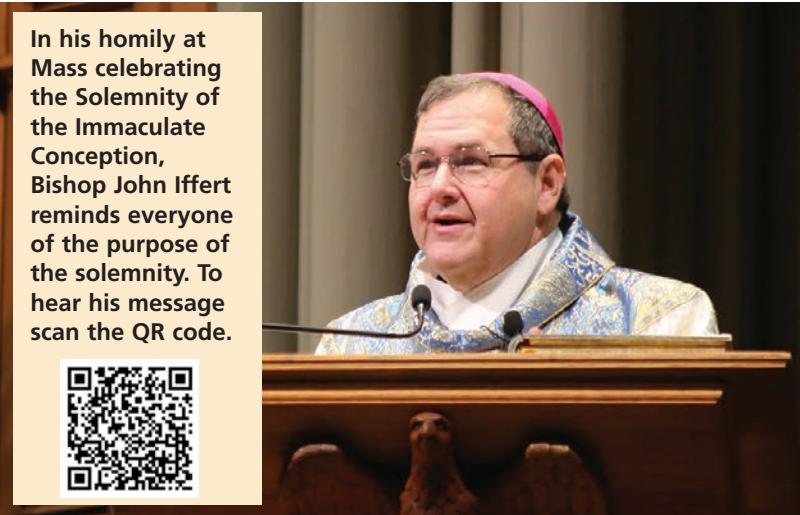
Recalling the first reading for the Solemnity, Bishop Iffert spoke of the fall of Adam and Eve, giving into the temptation of the serpent and casting mankind from the light of God’s grace.

“Because they wanted to be like God, so we became alienated from the Kingdom of God. We no longer walked and talked with God in the Garden. We no longer spoke with him face to face...but we began to sin against one another and against God’s creation,” he said.

It was at that moment, the eating of the apple, the casting out from the garden, said Bishop Iffert, that “God set into motion his plan that would come to fulfillment with the birth of the Divine Word into the world.”

“God the Father sends the Son Incarnate into the world, so that in him, we might be redeemed, that he might offer the redemptive sacrifice for us once and for all,” said Bishop Iffert.

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception celebrates, “the mystery by which, from the very conception of Mary, God protected her from all stain



In his homily at Mass celebrating the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop John Iffert reminds everyone of the purpose of the solemnity. To hear his message scan the QR code.



Bailey photos

(above left) Bishop John Iffert preaches to those gathered at Mass on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Dec. 8, calling them to live in the light of Mary’s redemptive love. “Our mother was chosen by God for the work of salvation, and because you we are here descendants in the order of redemption, you and I receive that same call,” he said.

(above right) The statue of Mary donned a yellow cape, crown, decorative dressing and additional candles as the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception was celebrated.

(left) Father Ryan Maher gives communion to a woman in the front row of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption.

life, maintaining the purity of body, mind and spirit.”

“It is through her, the one whom Jesus gives us to be our mother,” said Bishop Iffert, “the Redeemer acts for our salvation.”

Diocesan Service Awards

The Diocese of Covington Curia gathered with employees of Catholic Charities NKY, Dec. 5, at Edgewood's Summit Hills Country Club, to commemorate employees reaching 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 and 30 years of employment in the

diocese. "I am so pleased to see that so often with this staff, with this family that we have here," Bishop John Iffert commented, "I see people who work here for years, and it draws them closer to their faith ... thank you so much for

your goodness, for your kindness, for your charity, for your forgiveness, for the way you support one another."



Angie Smorey, John Hehman, Mary Murrin and Bishop Iffert



Divine Providence Sister Margaret Stallmeyer, Joy Bricking, Father Ryan Stenger, JV and Bishop Iffert



Bishop Iffert, Don Knochelmann.



Karen Guidugli and Bishop Iffert



Bishop Iffert and Donna Moreland



Bishop Iffert and Shannon Braun

Diocesan Service Awards

5 years

John Hehman, Mary Murrin, Angie Smorey

10 years

Joy Bricking, Divine Providence Sister Margaret Stallmeyer, Father Ryan Stenger, JV

15 years

Don Knochelmann, Peggy Piccola

20 years

Karen Guidugli

25 years

Donna Moreland

30 years

Shannon Braun

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DECEMBER 2, 2025

2025 Giving Tuesday Commitments

| | | |
|--------------|--------|---------------|
| \$570,716.48 | 1,105 | 62 |
| Raised | Donors | Organizations |

Generous donations to Give Catholic NKY appreciated

The Give Catholic NKY donation portal officially closed, Dec. 9, following the successful day of giving, Dec. 2, which raised over \$400,000 in 24 hours. The generosity of the Diocesan community did not end on Giving Tuesday, Dec. 2, with donations continuing to trickle in, putting the total amount raised \$ 572,766.48 from 1,114 donors when the portal closed.

"I thank everyone who participated in Giving Tuesday,

who supported our parishes and schools with gifts large and small," said Bishop John Iffert. "Giving Tuesday has been growing in our awareness for a decade now, and it's exciting to bring that generous impulse into the life of the Church, so that people have an opportunity to direct their Giving Tuesday gifts to the churches and the schools where their hearts are so invested."



Bishop's Schedule

Dec. 13

Vigil Mass, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington, 4:30 p.m.

Bambinelli blessing and tree lighting, St. Mary's Park, Covington, 5:30 p.m.

Dec. 16

Diocesan Review Board Christmas meeting and lunch, 12 p.m.

Dec. 17

Vespers and seminarian social gathering, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 4:30 p.m.

Dec. 18

Holy Hour, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 3 p.m.

Dec. 19

Curia staff Christmas party, BHMA, Covington, 6 p.m.

Dec. 21

Mass, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 10 a.m.

Dec. 22 – Jan 2

Diocesan Curia Offices closed

Jubilee Year Closing Mass

Dec. 28, 10 a.m.

Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington



Join Bishop John Iffert and the Diocese of Covington as we joyously end the 2025 Jubilee Year with a procession during the Cathedral's 10 a.m. Mass.

Live authentically with prayer, letting go of the unnecessary, pope says

Carol Glatz
Catholic News Service

The secret to living an authentic life is praying to understand what is truly beneficial according to God’s plan and letting go of the superfluous, Pope Leo XIV said. In fact, death “can be a great teacher of life. To know that it exists, and above all to reflect on it, teaches us to choose what we really want to make of our existence,” the pope said Dec. 10 at his weekly general audience in St. Peter’s Square.

“Praying, in order to understand what is beneficial in view of the kingdom of heaven, and letting go of the superfluous that instead binds us to ephemeral things, is the secret to living authentically, in the awareness that our passage on earth prepares us for eternity,” he said. It was the pope’s first general audience after returning from his first apostolic trip, a visit to Turkey and Lebanon Nov. 27-Dec. 2. An 82-foot-tall Christmas tree, which arrived Nov. 27 and will be fully decorated and unveiled with the Nativity scene Dec. 15, could be seen near the obelisk in the

square. Instead of using his general audience talk to recap his trip as had been the custom of his immediate predecessors, the pope did so after reciting the Angelus Dec. 7. At the audience, he continued his series of talks on the Jubilee theme of “Jesus our hope,” focusing on “death in the light of the Resurrection.” “Our present culture tends to fear death and seeks to avoid thinking about it, even turning to medicine and science in search of immortality,” Pope Leo said in his English-language remarks. However, Jesus’ victory of passing from death to life with his Resurrection “illuminates our own mortality, reminding us that death is not the end, but a passing from this life into eternity,” he said. “Therefore, death is not something to be feared, but rather a moment to prepare for.” “It is an invitation to examine our lives and so live in such a way that we may one day share not only in the death of Christ, but also in the joy of eternal life,” the pope said. “The event of the Resurrection of Christ reveals to us that death is not opposed to life, but rather is a constitutive part of it, as the passage to eternal life,” he said in his main catechesis in Italian. “He has prepared for us the place of eternal rest, the home where we are awaited; he has given us the fullness of life in which there are no longer any shadows and contradictions,” Pope Leo said. Awaiting death “with the sure hope of the Resurrection preserves us from the fear of disappearing forever and prepares us for the joy of life without end,” he said.



CNS photo/Lola Gomez
An inflatable cross from the faithful of the small Italian island of Ventotene is carried in front of Pope Leo XIV during the weekly general audience in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican Dec. 10, 2025. The island holds a hot-air balloon festival every year around the feast of its patron saint, St. Candida, in September.

Seasons Greetings

from St. Charles Community

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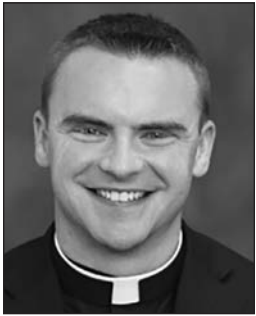
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The coming of the Lord is at hand

The readings for the Third Sunday of Advent — Cycle A — are: Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10, James 5:7-10 and Matthew 11:2-11.

As a kid, I always found the rose candle of the Advent wreath to be the most interesting. It was always a sign that Christmas was so close, building the anticipation. I

GO AND GLORIFY



Father Michael Elmlinger

never understood the meaning of the color rose at the time, but even then, it still gave that sense of anticipation and joy that December 25 was just around the corner.

That is exactly what rose is meant to represent on the Advent wreath. What is interesting about the color rose is that it uses the same dyes as violet (red and blue), but it tones down the blue and focuses more on the red in the product, bringing out the rose color, which

essentially means that it is a toned-down version of violet, but violet nonetheless.

What this is meant to represent for us on this Gaudete Sunday is the very fact that the Advent season (short as it is) is drawing to a close, building up that joy that we feel on Christmas Day as we draw closer to it. However, it also shows that the season is still not over; that there is still time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord. It is similar to how early in the morning, just before the sun is about to break the horizon, it gives off a rose color into the sky sometimes, indicating the night is nearly over, but not quite yet.

In our second reading this weekend from the Letter of James, the Apostle tells us, “You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand” (5:8). During the hustle and bustle of the Advent season, we get this simple exhortation from the cousin of Jesus to take a step back, to recognize the present time that we are in, the time of waiting and preparation.

Christmas Day is indeed close upon us, one of the holiest days of the year, where we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, our God becoming Man. However, that day is not here yet, and because it is not here yet, we are to still take this time to make our hearts firm.

What is interesting about this command is that this is the same activity as when Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem and “makes his face firm.” (Luke 9:51) Once he does this, his focus is entirely shifted towards one thing: fulfilling the will of his Father by his sacrificial act of love that he will perform on the Cross. Nothing makes him waver from this determination. He is single-minded in this regard, his heart firm.

During these final days of the Advent season, anticipation is indeed building as we get closer to Christmas, but we must always keep our minds and hearts firm, fixed on Christ. So, we are to be patient, and to continue to journey during this Advent season in the present, preparing our hearts to receive the Lord.

If we are willing to journey with the Lord during these final days, it does not take away the joy of the Christmas season. Rather, it enhances the joy, because our eyes will have been fixed intently upon him, whose birth we celebrate. This Gaudete Sunday is an invitation to recenter ourselves on Our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may joyfully greet Him when he comes into our hearts at Christmas and when he comes on the Last Day. As St. James says, “Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord ... Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand.”

Father Michael Elmlinger is a priest of the Diocese of Covington, Ky. Father Elmlinger is currently studying Canon Law at the University of St. Paul, Ottawa, Canada.

Give thanks for God’s presence

As we look toward Christmas, I realize that 2025 is quickly coming to an end, and so is the Jubilee Year of Hope. What will be our take-aways from this special time of grace?

GUEST



Sister Constance Veit, L.S.P.

Hope has become more real for me this year thanks to a certain definition I could really lean into: “For a Christian, to hope means the certainty of being on a journey with Christ toward the Father who awaits us,” Pope Francis once said during a general audience. “Hope is never still; hope is always journeying and it makes us journey.”

In his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI defined hope in a similar

way with a quote from St. Josephine Bakhita, a former Sudanese slave: “I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me — I am awaited by this Love. And so, my life is good.”

Benedict elaborated, “We see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well.”

Finally, this famous line from Pope Benedict XVI is one that often comes to mind: “The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”

And so, as the close of this Jubilee Year draws near, let us ask ourselves how we will live differently thanks to hope.

How will we live our lives more fully in the present, while also looking forward in hope to the certain future that awaits us?

One of this year’s defining moments for me was a talk given by a young religious sister to a group of teens and young women at a discernment event this summer.

She suggested that we employ two interrelated practices to prepare the soil of our souls to receive the gift of

hope. They are memory and gratitude.

She suggested that we make a list of 15 or so extraordinary moments in our lives and that we read through them on a regular basis to bring to mind the presence of God on our journey and to express our gratitude to him.

Through gratitude, she said, we fix our gaze on God; we see him at work in our lives, creating for us a positive reality and a certain future.

Each of us has a number of these extraordinary events in our lives – when Jesus became real to us in a personal way, when he showed us our vocation, or changed us in some way, when the Lord visited us at a difficult time.

Pope Francis also encouraged the faithful to think back on such moments of inspiration and to relive them in order to find strength and to be able to continue moving forward, even when the journey is difficult.

“Christian memory is the salt of life,” he said. There are a number of passages from Scripture that can help us to remember and give thanks.

Psalms 103 invites us, “Bless the Lord my soul, and do not forget all his gifts ...;” and Psalm 136 repeatedly evokes the everlasting mercy of God.

We can make both psalms our own as we incorporate our experiences into the texts.

An uplifting passage from the prophet Isaiah (63:7 ff) may serve as an introduction to our own prayers of gratitude: “The loving deeds of the Lord I will recall, the glorious acts of the Lord, because of all the Lord has done for us, the immense goodness to the house of Israel which he has granted according to his mercy and his many loving deeds.”

But my favorite Scripture passage for remembering and expressing gratitude is Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), in which Our Lady recalls the amazing things God has done for her and her people. May each of us be able to say, “The Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name!”

As you prepare for Christmas this year, take time to remember and give thanks for God’s loving presence in your life. Encourage those with whom you gather to do the same.

And may you take hold of hope in a future of unending life with God!

Sister Constance Veit is the communications director for the Little Sisters of the Poor in the United States and an occupational therapist.

Why authentic friendships outshine AI companions

There is beauty and value to friendships. Friends offer support in trials, increase happiness and reduce stress. Some friendships are temporary while others endure a lifetime. As human beings, we are created to be in relationship. We are social beings oriented to form emotional

GUEST



Sister Nancy Usselmann, a Daughter of St. Paul

bonds in friendship with other persons.

As the world experiences a loneliness epidemic, the yearning for companionship increases. Many people, including three out of four teenagers, have used AI chatbots for relationships, using apps such as Character.AI, Replika, Anima, ChatGPT and anime-inspired Grok Ani.

Users turn to these apps for emotional support, seeking deeper connection without the complications of human relationships.

Yet human beings are wired for something more than connection; we are created for communion. In this digital culture, authentic friendships are necessary for full human flourishing, and the theological virtues of faith, hope and love provide the resilience AI chatbots

lack.

Humans are social beings, the imago Dei, made in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:27) with qualities of intellect and free will oriented to divine communion. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three divine persons in a communion of love. Human beings participate in that intimate union of trinitarian love as friends of God. Christ calls us his friends (Jn 15:12-15) and commands us to love as he loves us, which makes friendship a path to holiness and integral growth.

The problem with artificial relationships with machines is that AI lacks a soul. It may mimic human intelligence but it lacks the spiritual qualities needed to form relationships based on divine communion. It blurs reality offering lifeless images and soulless conversations that can lead to greater digital isolation. The antidote lies in human friendships that embody the virtues of faith, hope and love.

The theological virtues form the foundational pillars of resilient companionship infusing human bonds with a transcendent purpose. This contrasts with their absence in chatbots. These virtues express an endurance and selflessness that elevates human friendships beyond utility and orients them toward their eternal purpose. Chatbot companionships, in comparison, superficially express what the user wants to hear, void of genuine care.

Faith gives human relationships inherent dignity and a capacity for spiritual and moral growth. St. Thomas

(Continued on page 13)

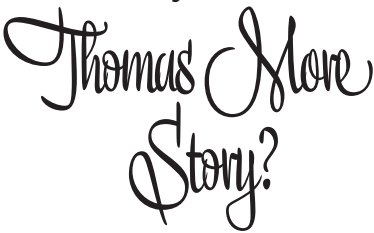


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Founded in 1921, Thomas More University stands as a beacon of academic excellence and innovation, challenging students to Make It More. Deeply rooted in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, this timeless foundation supports a transformative educational experience as students looking to Be More are guided in the pursuit of knowledge, ethical leadership, and the integration of faith and reason. Through the high-quality, liberal arts education provided at Thomas More, students examine the ultimate meaning of life, their place in the world, and their responsibility to others which leads to the ability to think critically and contribute meaningfully to the world. Serving more than 2,300 students, Thomas More takes its place as the premier Catholic university in the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky region, being named one of the 2025 Best Colleges in the U.S. by the Wall Street Journal. For more, visit thomasmore.edu.

What is your



Alumni can share their recent news, milestones, or update their information by visiting thomasmore.edu/alumni

More impactful programming planned
for winter and spring 2026

Thomas More University
Contributor

The mission of the Center for Faith, Mission, and Catholic Education (CFMCE) is to cultivate an authentic Catholic culture throughout Thomas More University by serving as a catalyst for transformative faith experiences, intentional mission integration and creative Catholic educational programs — both on campus and in the wider community. The CFMCE hosted a dynamic slate of panels, lectures, film screenings and other interactive events throughout the fall, bringing this mission to life.

The CFMCE’s first event of the 2025-26 academic year was “A Heart of Service,” a presentation by Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow held on Sept. 11. MacFarlane-Barrow, founder of Mary’s Meals, returned to campus for this event just as his nonprofit reached an extraordinary milestone — feeding three million children every school day across 16 countries. MacFarlane-Barrow demonstrated how small acts of love, by anyone, can create profound change.

This event was followed in October by a visit from renowned artist Holly Schapker. Members of the Thomas More University community gathered in prayer as Schapker’s portrait of St. Carlo Acutis was installed and dedicated on the second floor of the Academic Center. After the dedication, Schapker gave an inspiring presentation about the creation of the portrait and her once-in-a-lifetime visit to the Vatican in September for the canonization of St. Carlo Acutis and St. Pier Giorgio Frassati. A screening of “Roadmap to Reality,” a film that offers a reflection on the life and message of St. Carlo Acutis for modern youth and young adults, followed Schapker’s presentation.

Another film screening was held in November, in tandem with Veterans’ Day. “Fighting Spirit,” which was presented by the Angelico Project, honors combat chaplains as unsung heroes who bring courage and comfort to the front lines and highlights Servant of God Emil Kapaun, who bravely served as an Army chaplain during the Korean War. Following the film screening, Scott Carter, who is leading the cause for Father Kapaun’s canonization, led a Q&A session, and Father Ray Enzweiler, Ph.D., gave a blessing to all veterans and active-duty military personnel.

The final event of 2025 was presented by Wm. T. (Bill) Robinson III ‘67 Institute for Religious Liberty (IRL), which is a part of the CFMCE. The IRL hosted its keynote event on Nov. 19, honoring the 10 years since its founding and celebrating its mission to advance the American concept of religious freedom as an inalienable right. This special anniversary event featured Rabbi David Saperstein, the former U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom and the first guest speaker for the IRL a decade ago, together with Monsignor William Cleves in conversation about the present condition of religious freedom both domestically and around the world.

As the calendar turns to 2026, the CFMCE seeks to present even more engaging programming, with an impactful lineup of events scheduled for the winter and spring.



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“It is wonderful to see, and to share with our students, how faith in Christ touches every aspect of reality — from politics to world hunger, to art and beauty, to our use of technology,” says Hannah Keegan, director of the CFMCE. “I am excited to continue this event series to try and keep shedding light on the fact of Christ alive in our midst, inviting us to live in the world in whatever way we are called with a new horizon.”

A significant spring event planned is a panel on civic engagement entitled: “Humble Conviction: True Engagement in a Polarized World.” This event will take place on March 26, 7 p.m. in Zeigler Auditorium and will feature Justin Giboney and Father Aaron Wessman. Mr. Gibony is a founder of the AND Campaign, dedicated to educating and organizing Christians for civic and cultural engagement, and Father Wessman is the director of Glenmary Home Missionaries. Their contributions will focus on what Christian engagement looks like in this polarized world and what it means to be called to serve and work for the common good. This event will be free and open to the public to attend.

Two additional events affiliated with the CFMCE in the 2025-26 academic year will be presented by the Angelico Project. On Feb. 26, Ziegler Auditorium will host “The Way of Beauty: Seeking God through Art and Music,” featuring David Clayton. Creator of “The Way of Beauty,” Mr. Clayton will share a powerful vision for spiritual and artistic renewal. And on April 23, author and poet Sally Read will present “Poetry: The Language of God,” highlighting poetry as a pathway to God, based on her own experiences. Both Angelico Project events are ticketed and those interested in attending can visit angelicoproject.org to RSVP.

“Welcoming the Angelico Project on campus and supporting our community’s attendance at their events has been a huge gift,” Mrs. Keegan says, adding: “Their work to introduce these encounters with what is True, Good and Beautiful in our local community is essential for the renewal of a Catholic culture — beginning from a renewal of our own faith and affection for Christ.”

For more information about the Center for Faith, Mission and Catholic Education (CFMCE), upcoming events, and ways to get involved, please visit the Center’s web page at tmuky.us/cfmce.

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.

Festivals, prayer services, etc. Parishes, schools and Catholic organizations of the Diocese of Covington can now have their event featured on the Diocesan online calendar. Submit your event at <https://covdio.org/calendar/>.

The Knights of St. John Commandery #94 based at Mother of God Church, Covington, will organize the Diocesan Nativity once again at St. Pius X Church, Edgewood. Setup is planned for Dec. 6, weather permitting. Live Nativity dates are: Dec. 20 (after 4:30 p.m. Mass until 8 p.m.), and 21, 22 and 23, 5–7:30 p.m. This baby goats will be a special feature.

Please join the Mother of God music ministry for a Lessons and Carols concert Dec. 20, 3 p.m., Mother of God Church, Covington. Experience the joy of the season through Scripture and song, with organist, Meg Booker, and special performances by violin, piano and trumpet.

In January a Survivors of Suicide Loss Support Group begins at Mother of God Parish, Covington, for family members and friends of persons who have ended their own lives. Group meetings will be held on the first Wednesday of each month at the parish office in the St. Aloysius Conference Room. The first meeting will be Jan. 7, 6:30–8 p.m. For information contact Jeff Duell at (859) 801-8213.

The Diocese of Covington is offering 63 FREE in-person adult Catholic faith formation workshops, June 8–11, 2026, at Thomas More University, Crestview Hills, Administration Building (Library classrooms). All workshops are broken into two parts and scheduled for two consecutive days, 1.5 hours per day. Instructors will provide topical information, video content, and time for open discussion. Create a free account under your parish or school to access these and 200+ additional workshops at <https://franciscanathome.com>. The workshops are open to everyone who wants to learn more about their Catholic faith. There is something for everyone. Visit <https://covdio.org/register> or contact Isaak A. Isaak at (859) 392-1529 or iisaak@covdio.org.

The Diocese of Covington is coordinating a pilgrimage to World Youth Day 2027 in Seoul, South Korea, for young adults ages 18 to 35. Bishop John Iffert hopes to join the pilgrims along with a few priests and deacons from the diocese. The estimated cost is \$5,500.00 per person and includes round-trip airfare, transportation, lodging, meals (from WYD) and tours. To reserve your spot, the initial payment of \$350 is due Dec. 31, 2025. The full amount must be paid by March 15, 2027. If you are interested in attending, leading a group, or making donations to help the young adults of our diocese attend, contact Isaak Abraham Isaak at (859) 392-1529 or e-mail iisaak@covdio.org.

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 Holy Face of Jesus devotion, every Tuesday 6 p.m., St. Cecilia Church, Independence, with Benediction 7 p.m., for reparation of sins against the first three commandments: denial of God, blasphemy and the profanation of Sundays and Holy Days; includes praying the Litany of the Holy Face of Jesus, the Holy Face Chaplet, prayers of petition and silent devotion, all during Exposition.

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.



The students of St. Pius X School, Edgewood, will be participating in “The Journey of the Three Wise Men” this year for Advent. Each classroom received a map at the school Advent Prayer Service that they will use to walk the journey with the Wise Men. Short reflections will be read each morning and afternoon, and the classes will locate the Wise Men some-time throughout the day and read a short reflection and complete some lesson or activity. The journey will end at the all school mass on January 7.

Zoom Support Group for family, relatives and friends of victims of clergy sexual abuse, second Monday of the month, 6:30–8 p.m. CST; 7:30–9 p.m. EST. Most often family members, relatives and friends do not have anyone to talk with about their loved one’s abuse. They are considered secondary victims of abuse. These meetings are confidential and no one is forced to contribute unless they want to. The support group is not there to give answers but to share experiences. Participants are free to bring a friend if that makes them feel more comfortable. Everyone is welcome to attend no matter geographical location. For information contact Paula Kaempffer, coordinator of Restorative Practices and Survivor Support, for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, at kaempfferp@archspm.org or call (763) 688-3978.

Are you interested in helping men and women change their lives? Catholic Charities **Jail Ministry Program is looking for people willing to volunteer to minister one of the county detention centers** (Boone, Kenton, Campbell and Mason Co). We are especially in need of Spanish-speaking volunteers in Boone County detention center. All training is provided. For information go to

www.covingtoncharities.org/volunteer or contact Jill Walsh at (859) 581-8974 jwalch@covingtoncharities.org.

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.



Our Lady of Fatima pilgrim statue visits Northern Kentucky
The Our Lady of Fatima pilgrim statue was brought to a family home in Crestview Hills, Nov. 5, promote family and prayer. More than 40 guests attended and prayed the rosary. For information, call (859) 663-7008.

Analysis: Pope Leo spends 2025 steadily navigating church, global waters

Michael R. Heinlein
OSV News

Jubilee years, typically scheduled for every quarter-century in the life of the church, are always meaningful occasions. But a jubilee with two popes is an extraordinary occasion, one which last occurred in 1700.

This year has been extraordinary not just because of the papal transition, but because of the election of Pope Leo XIV himself.

As for any pope, the papacy inherited by Pope Leo on May 8 comes with both the burdens of the office and the opportunities that come from being the new kid in town. The temptation to compare and contrast Leo with his immediate predecessor has occupied the imaginations and pens of many analysts. His short tenure in the Roman Curia and years of missionary experience as a priest and bishop meant then-Cardinal Robert Prevost was relatively

has been) overplayed — especially by those who appreciated the avant-garde style or supported the more controversial aspects of the Francis era — and remain hopeful that those same areas of focus will remain.

Continuity with the best of Francis — incidentally, where he, too, was in continuity with his predecessors — should define that conversation. By way of continuity, in the first year of his pontificate, Leo has kept the events and audiences added to the papal calendar before the conclave, and has brought to conclusion various documents already in preparation before his election. He has championed synodality, while also simultaneously subtly shifting the conversation surrounding it. There have also been signals of a more unifying approach toward more traditionally minded adherents to the pre-conciliar liturgy.

Those who knew him best before his election have spoken of Leo's patient deliberateness, evidenced in taking

plush likenesses of himself thrown at him as he is driven around St. Peter's Square, Leo always appears gracious and kind — even exhibiting the American-born baseball fan's talent for catching.

Both at the Vatican and abroad, as seen in his recent trip to Turkey and Lebanon, he carries himself with a unique steadiness and calm. He doesn't shoot from the hip, and he hasn't yet uttered any memorable quips or created any real controversies, despite what some commentators said during the Cupich-Durbin episode.

Yet at the same time, he is not afraid of speaking. His gaggles with the press outside Castel Gandolfo on Tuesday evenings have become something of a standing engagement, and he has shown that he plans to continue in-flight news conferences during papal trips. He also has a clear affection for young people and a desire to connect with them, as seen at the Jubilee of Youth over the summer and at Pope Leo's recent livestream appearance in Indianapolis where he answered questions at the National Catholic Youth Conference for more than 45 minutes.

As a global figure, he is both tireless in his pursuit and advocacy for peace but also realistic and honest enough, by his own admission, not to pretend it's left to him to solve the world's problems.

What has become most interesting to observe about Pope Leo is his apparent, rare combination of authenticity and integrity of life. Such as on those occasions he's had time to spend with young people, Leo has come across as a skilled teacher and pastor — answering questions posed by one audience yet able to balance a synthesis of the faith with such substance and simplicity that he skillfully responded in a way that benefitted all.

Consider, too, Leo's emphasis on piety and devotion. He talks about regular confession, frequent participation in Eucharistic adoration, the value of praying the Rosary, outreach to the poor, and working for peace and unity. And there is something one can't help but admire about his alternating use of two pectoral crosses which contain relics of various holy figures, one featuring those exclusively from Augustinian spiritual family.

From the beginning, Leo has been his own man. Succeeding the man who opted out of the traditional vesture of popes from the start, Leo donned the red mozzetta

when he appeared on St. Peter's loggia. That has become a symbol for a man who respects custom and tradition. But more than that, it seems to represent Leo's preference to avoid putting himself at the center. Instead, from his preaching, speeches and interviews, it's clear he wants Christ at the center.

Instead, ultimately much of what we have seen from Leo — what he is putting at the center — was summed up in the prepared remarks he delivered just after his election. Peace. Unity. Christ. How Leo responds to what awaits him in 2026 will inevitably reveal more of the cards in his hand — and how he will play the cards he's been dealt.



CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Leo XIV processes out of the Sistine Chapel May 9, 2025, after celebrating his first Mass as pope with the cardinals who elected him at the Vatican the previous day.

unknown.

While this can be a vulnerability, as various ideologues are vying to claim Leo as one of their own — similar to what happened with his predecessor — it is also a strength. And Leo has shown it to be, as he weaves the complex threads of office and history, and endeavors to be a leaven for the Church and world.

Since May 8, continuity has been a popular word — whether perceived to be present or not present — when inevitably comparing the Leo and Francis pontificates. Papal continuity is important in many ways, because the Successor of Peter should strive to refrain from polarization and division. The continuity card, though, can be (and

his time to appoint his own successor in the Dicastery for Bishops. And that choice of Carmelite Archbishop Filippo Iannone, a veteran curial insider without ideology in his portfolio, also speaks of Leo's preference to avoid fanning the flames of division. And for those who regard episcopal appointments as a bellwether of the pontificate, Leo has not, as yet anyway, given prominent roles to divisive figures.

It's become clear Leo isn't flashy. His presence and persona is presented with a ready, if perhaps shy, smile. His heavy schedule and public comportment shows a man of availability. Anyone watching the long lines at general audiences can see that too. And when regularly having



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2025 brought new pope, new president and immigration as key issue

Kate Scanlon
OSV News

In a year that brought both a new U.S. president and a new pope, the issue of immigration emerged as a flash-point between them and as a key issue for the U.S. Church. President Donald Trump was sworn in for a second, nonconsecutive term in the White House Jan. 20, becoming the nation’s 47th president four years after he left office as its 45th. In his second inaugural address, Trump said he would begin “the process of returning millions and millions of criminal aliens back to the places from which they came.” Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrests have increased since then. However, as the Trump administration seeks to meet a goal of 3,000 such arrests per day, many of the individuals impacted have never been

OSV News Pope Leo is “adhering to the Gospel message.” “I think that he is a very careful man. He’s a very deliberate man,” White said of the pontiff’s approach. “I think one of the things that is so interesting here is that Pope Leo has both South American roots, but also American roots; he speaks perfect English, obviously, and directs that message toward American Catholics, which I think is important.” In November, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved a “special pastoral message on immigration,” voicing “our concern here for immigrants” at their annual fall plenary assembly in Baltimore. The statement came as a growing number of bishops acknowledged that some of the Trump administration’s immigration policies risk presenting the Church with both practical challenges in administering pastoral care

nately praised and criticized various provisions in the legislation, with some arguing its cuts to Medicaid and SNAP would harm the poorest families, while others pointed to a provision stripping Medicaid funding from entities that perform abortion — such as Planned Parenthood — for one year. However, as of the beginning of December, that provision remained blocked by a federal judge. Craycraft argued, “It’s been a very disappointing and disconcerting first year” of the second Trump administration. “The president’s erratic behavior, name-calling, and Truth Social rants indicate a person who is neither psychologically nor morally fit for the most important political office in the world,” he said. “Many Catholics were hoping that holding their noses and voting for him would yield some affirmative pro-life policies and measures. But the President endorses IVF, surrogacy and mifepristone, all very much in conflict with Catholic moral theology.” The Food and Drug Administration’s approval of a new generic form of mifepristone — a pill commonly, but not exclusively, used for early abortion — was met with pushback from pro-life groups who argued that the administration should review the safety of the original drug instead. The Trump administration also moved to formally dissolve the U.S. Agency for International Development and move a small number of its remaining functions under the purview of the State Department. Cuts to funding for the government’s now-shuttered humanitarian aid agency in countries all over the globe included funding for efforts by Catholic and other faith-based humanitarian groups such as Catholic Relief Services, the overseas charitable arm of the Catholic Church in the U.S. The issue of political violence was another that colored 2025. Charlie Kirk, a conservative activist and founder of Turning Point USA was killed Sept. 10 during an event at Utah Valley University in Orem. After his death, Kirk received praise from his allies in conservative politics for his willingness to debate and his advocacy for their cause. However, in discussions about his legacy, his critics also pointed to his controversial political rhetoric on subjects including race, persons experiencing same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, and immigrants. “The assassination of Charlie Kirk has contributed to the further decline in American political discourse,” Craycraft said, adding, “It’s a very sad episode in American public life.” The targeted killings of Minnesota House of Representatives Speaker Emerita Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark Hortman, and the firebombing of the Pennsylvania governor’s mansion, which is being investigated as the attempted murder of Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro, were among other instances of political violence. In a message released in October, Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services — who, until the U.S. bishop’s plenary in November, was the president of USCC — urged every American to “reflect on the value of every human life, see Christ in each person, even those whose politics you oppose.” After Pope Leo released his first apostolic exhortation, “Dilexi Te” (“I have loved you”), about love and care for the poor on Oct. 9, Archbishop Broglio issued a statement at the time urging the faithful to engage the document “on the challenges we face with contemporary migration,” and said Pope Leo “encourages us to respond with four actions: welcome, protect, promote and integrate. This is a sharp contrast to the culture of fear being imposed upon our sisters and brothers in Christ.”



OSV News photo/Saul Loeb, pool via Reuters

Donald Trump is sworn in as the 47th U.S. president in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington Jan. 20, 2025.


charged with a crime, arrest data shows. On May 8, Pope Leo XIV was elected pontiff following the death of Pope Francis on April 20. Ever since, Pope Leo has navigated the immigration issue “very effectively, I think,” Kenneth Craycraft, a professor of moral theology at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary and School of Theology in Cincinnati and author of “Citizens Yet Strangers: Living Authentically Catholic in a Divided America,” told OSV News. “He has condemned the hateful rhetoric and lack of due process for immigrants, while also defending the rights of nations to control their borders. His statements have been careful, circumspect and wise,” Craycraft said. John White, a professor of politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, concurred, telling

and charitable endeavors, as well as religious liberty challenges. At least one member of the Trump administration, “border czar” Tom Homan, called the U.S. Catholic bishops “wrong” in comments to reporters at the White House Nov. 14. “The Catholic Church is wrong,” he said. “I’m a lifelong Catholic, but I’m saying it not only as a border czar, but I’m also saying this as a Catholic, I think they need to spend time fixing the Catholic Church.” The bishops’ message marked the first such message by the U.S. bishops in over 12 years, coming after a 2013 response to the federal government’s contraceptive mandate. Pope Leo praised the message, telling reporters, “I would just invite all people in the United States to listen to them.” White cited dispensations from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass for the faithful if they fear for their well-being in San Bernardino, California, amid immigration enforcement raids as among “one of the biggest stories and through lines of the year” for the U.S. Church. Trump’s return to the White House was marked by a slew of executive orders in addition to his birthright citizenship order, such as one withdrawing from the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate, another to expand the use of the federal death penalty, and another directing the U.S. government to only recognize two sexes, male and female. On July 4, Trump signed “the One Big Beautiful Bill Act,” a reconciliation bill enacting much of his legislative agenda on taxes and immigration. Catholic leaders alter-


cy for their cause. However, in discussions about his legacy, his critics also pointed to his controversial political rhetoric on subjects including race, persons experiencing same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, and immigrants. “The assassination of Charlie Kirk has contributed to the further decline in American political discourse,” Craycraft said, adding, “It’s a very sad episode in American public life.” The targeted killings of Minnesota House of Representatives Speaker Emerita Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark Hortman, and the firebombing of the Pennsylvania governor’s mansion, which is being investigated as the attempted murder of Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro, were among other instances of political violence. In a message released in October, Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services — who, until the U.S. bishop’s plenary in November, was the president of USCC — urged every American to “reflect on the value of every human life, see Christ in each person, even those whose politics you oppose.” After Pope Leo released his first apostolic exhortation, “Dilexi Te” (“I have loved you”), about love and care for the poor on Oct. 9, Archbishop Broglio issued a statement at the time urging the faithful to engage the document “on the challenges we face with contemporary migration,” and said Pope Leo “encourages us to respond with four actions: welcome, protect, promote and integrate. This is a sharp contrast to the culture of fear being imposed upon our sisters and brothers in Christ.”

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From Nigeria to Belarus, 2025 marks a grim year for religious freedom

Paulina Guzik
OSV News

As 2025 draws to a close, the plight of persecuted Christians around the world remains dire — and in many places, deeply forgotten. The year has exposed how fragile religious freedom is, even as the faithful strive to survive with courage, hope and community.

Church leaders like Regina Lynch, executive director of Aid to the Church in Need pontifical charity, warn that “there are more cases, there are more countries where religious freedom doesn’t exist or ... is being eaten away.”

Nigeria: Ground zero for Christian persecution

As the 2025 Jubilee Year drew to a close, nowhere was the crisis of Christian persecution more visible than in Nigeria, where militant Islamist groups and extremist herding militias continue to ravage Christian villages, abduct clergy and laity, and destroy homes and churches.

In the latest sign of Christian tragedy in the country, Father Emmanuel Ezema was abducted late on Dec. 2 from his residence in St. Peter’s Catholic Church in Rumi, in Kaduna State, the Diocese of Zaria said on Dec. 3, according to Reuters.

On Nov. 21, in one of the worst cases of kidnappings in the recent history of Africa’s most populous country, more than 300 children were taken at gunpoint, along with their teachers, from St. Mary’s Catholic School in Papiri, in central Nigeria. Fifty managed to escape and were reunited with their families, and Nigeria secured the release of 100 more, Reuters said Dec. 8, but the rest of their colleagues remain in captivity.

For the kids’ parents, anxiety turned into anger as they watched the government’s slow response to the crisis.

Sunday Gbazali, a father of 12 whose 14-year-old son was among those seized, told Reuters two weeks into the kidnapping he barely sleeps and his wife constantly cries



OSV News photo/Marvellous Durowaiye, Reuters

Schoolchildren from St. Mary’s Catholic School in Papiri, Nigeria, arrive at the Niger State Government House Dec. 8, 2025, after being freed from captivity following their abduction by gunmen Nov. 21.

thinking about their boy.

In the northeast — particularly dioceses such as Maiduguri — Christians live under constant threat from militants and violent herdsman. As Bishop John Bogna Bakeni of Maiduguri put it, “Every day is a grace ... because we never know what will happen in the next hour.”

On Oct. 31, President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. would again designate Nigeria a “country of particular concern” for religious freedom and threatened to suspend non-humanitarian aid and take “action” if the Nigerian government did not act swiftly to protect Christians from extremist violence.

The latest Intersociety advocacy group report revealed that an average of 32 Christians are killed in Nigeria every day. The report published in August indicates that as many as 7,000 Christians were massacred across the country in the first 220 days of 2025.

Amid this horror, faith persists. Surveys show that up to 94 percent of Nigerian Catholics claim to attend Mass weekly or daily.

For a brief moment, the Trump Administration move put Nigeria in the spotlight of mainstream media reports — otherwise the atrocities were mostly forgotten by global media companies.

“It’s difficult to get the secular media to report on

these situations,” ACN’s Lynch told OSV News. “Occasionally the BBC will say something, but it’s really a battle to be that voice there.”

She said she looks with hope of parliamentarians in the European Union, and members of the U.S. Congress — “people who are ready to listen, who do believe that there is persecution of Christians in some of these countries.” She said the job of organizations like ACN is to “to move them ... to do something about this.”

“What’s really a big concern for us today is the growing jihadism in West Africa, in the Sahel region,” the official said, calling “atrocities” in Nigeria but also Burkina Faso “really, really horrible.”

Lynch underlined that in countries like Nigeria, “all people are being attacked, not just Christians, but anybody who does not accept this form of jihadism,” ACN’s executive director said.

Syria and Gaza

Over the past months, Christians in Syria — along with other religious minorities — have faced a sharp increase in targeted violence, insecurity and displacement. A brutal reminder came on June 22, when a suicide bomber attacked Mar Elias Church, a Greek Orthodox church in the Dweila neighborhood of Damascus, during Divine Liturgy.

At least 20 worshippers were killed and more than 60 injured. The attacker, reportedly linked to Islamic State group, opened fire before detonating his vest. According to witnesses, around 350 people were present inside the church at the time.

But that was not an isolated incident. In the southern district of Sweida — a region with substantial Christian and Druze populations — a wave of sectarian violence erupted in July 2025. Militias attacked Christian and Druze neighborhoods: in the village of Al-Sura, the Greek Melkite Church of St. Michael was burned down, while 38 Christian homes were also destroyed by fire, leaving many families homeless. As one displaced Christian recalled, “This community has lost everything.”

Religious-freedom advocates describe the security situation for Christians and other minorities as “disastrous.” According to ACN’s statistics, the Christian population in Syria has shrunk from roughly 2.1 million in 2011 (before the war) to about 540,000 today. The sense of vulnerability and fear among survivors and remaining Christians is deep.

Syrian Archbishop Jacques Mourad of Homs warned that the “Church in Syria is dying,” lamenting that many



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OSV News photo/courtesy Aid to the Church in Need

The Greek Melkite Church of St. Michael in the Sweida village of Al-Sura, in Syria, was attacked and set ablaze by unknown assailants, according to witness accounts made to the pontifical charity Aid to the Church in Need on July 15, 2025.

believers feel they have no future in their homeland under the new Islamist-led government of Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Still, Church leaders insist on the importance of Christians remaining in their ancestral lands. “These are the living stones. These are the roots. They carry the roots of our faith,” Lynch said.

Mentioning Gaza, where a 400-strong flock still shelters in the premises of Holy Family Catholic Parish and St. Porphyrios Orthodox Church, amid difficulties of winter and as a ceasefire was reached in October after two years of constant Israeli bombardment of the enclave, Lynch said, “They manage, but it’s not easy. ... It’s terribly sad.”

Belarus

While the Nov. 20 release of two priests offers a rare glimmer of hope, for most Christians in Belarus the situation remains bleak — marked by harsh sentences, legal restrictions and suppression of independent religious life.

The release of Fathers Andrzej Juchniewicz and Henrykh Akalatovich came only after a visit in October by the papal envoy Claudio Gugerotti.

It was described as a “gesture of mercy,” interpreted as linked to high-level Vatican intervention. While it was a joy that the outspoken priests supporting freedom in Belarus have been freed, Szoszyn recalled, the most prominent group of political prisoners — many of them Catholics — is still behind bars.

Among them is Ales Bialiatski, winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize. His supporters have urged Western church leaders to take up his cause four years after he was detained and jailed in Belarus on trumped-up charges.

Overall repression remains widespread as Catholics face sweeping legal and administrative restrictions, such as the 2023 religious-freedom law under which all parishes must re-register or risk liquidation; this law curbs missionary activity, religious education, minority-language worship and monastic life.

Dozens of clergy — Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant — have been arrested on vague charges ranging from “extremist material” or “subversive activity” to treason and espionage. Political prisoners arrests occurred after the rigged 2020 and 2022 elections and the subsequent crackdown on civil society and dissent.

Prominent lay Catholics are also targeted. Andrzej Poczubut — a journalist and member of Belarus’s Polish minority — remains imprisoned since 2021. In December

2025, the European Parliament awarded him the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, making him a “symbol of the struggle for freedom and democracy” in Belarus.

From India to Nicaragua, religious freedom shrinks

In 2025, religious oppression in India has also taken damaging forms. In one high-profile case, two Catholic nuns from Kerala, Sisters Vandana Francis and Preeti Mary, along with an Indigenous youth, were arrested in Chhattisgarh on charges of “human trafficking and forced religious conversion.”

Their detention sparked outrage, with religious leaders and civil-society figures calling the charges “unlawful,” and demanding their immediate release.

A special court granted them conditional bail in August 2025 — but the case remains a stark reminder how legal and administrative tools can be used to harass Christians, stigmatize their humanitarian work, and suppress minority faiths.

In a scathing editorial on Aug. 3, Deepika, a Malayalam daily published by the Catholic bishops in India’s Kerala state, slammed the growing Hindu fundamentalism in the country under the patronage of governments in different states, reminding that Hindu fundamentalism had gained a presence in the country and was suppressing the voices of minorities, especially Christians.

Christians.

Persecution against Christians has steadily increased since 2014 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power, according to the United Christian Forum, based in New Delhi, the nation’s capital.

Some of the patterns in persecution have changed dramatically. “It’s become, in some countries, more sophisticated,” Lynch said, citing India and China and coordinated extremist networks.

On the other side of the world, in Central America, the situation for Christians is also catastrophic — though less visible. In Nicaragua, a systematic crackdown on religious institutions has unfolded under the authoritarian regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

Over the past years, more than 200 clergy and religious leaders have been detained, expelled or forced into exile. Churches and charitable organizations have had their legal status revoked, properties seized and worship restricted severely.

Although reported attacks in 2025 dropped to just around 3 dozen compared to 321 in 2023 — experts warn that this “decline” masks a deeper reality: the Church has been decimated. Many clergy no longer dare report harassment or violence.

Religious freedom report alarming

A 1,200-page Religious Freedom Report, published by ACN Oct. 21, is drawing urgent warnings from Catholic aid officials who say persecution is expanding across continents and deepening in severity.

“There are more cases, there are more countries where religious freedom doesn’t exist or is being eaten away and

is less than was before,” Lynch said.

She emphasized ACN is sending humanitarian and logistical help as needed but “prayer is something that those persecuted communities appreciate most.”

Travelling the world, “I’ve heard myself how much it means to the local Christian population to know that there are Christians elsewhere in the world praying for them,” she said.

Advocacy is another pillar. “Being a voice for the voiceless is a very important aspect,” Lynch said.

At the same time, rising secularism in the West is making raising awareness more difficult. “With the secularization that we have in our so-called Western countries today, it’s not always easy to ... raise the awareness that ... Christians are being killed.”

Yet those experiencing persecution firsthand offer a sharp contrast in conviction. One man falsely accused of blasphemy in Pakistan refused to renounce his faith despite torture. Lynch recalled: “He looked at a crucifix on the wall behind me and said: ‘But he suffered so much more than I did.’”



OSV News photo/courtesy ACN

Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris is lit up in red Nov. 20, 2024, to mark the annual Aid to the Church in Need “Red Wednesday” commemoration for persecuted Christians. In 2025, Red Wednesday was observed Nov. 19 and Red Week is Nov. 15-23.

Military archbishop urges respect

(Continued from page 1)

must guide all actions; abandoning due process undermines human rights, erodes public trust, and risks harming innocent people. True justice is achieved through transparent legal procedures, accountability, and respect for life — not through violence outside the law.”

Archbishop Broglio added, “Our Nation has a long tradition of responding to injustice, liberating the oppressed, and leading the free world. We cannot tarnish that reputation with questionable actions that fail to respect the dignity of the human person and the rule of law.

“Efforts to end the drug trade and their illicit use must never exclude employing the rule of law,” he said. “To be the best, we must give example and do what is right. When we allow the moral law to guide our actions, we not only

protect the innocent, we protect our men and women in uniform. These principles have nothing to do with partisan politics, right, left, or

center.

“I call on our Nation’s leaders, legislators, and those specifically charged to direct our Armed Forces to respect the consciences of those who raise their right hands to defend and protect the Constitution by not asking them to engage in immoral actions,” he said. “Show the world our respect for human dignity and the rule of law.”

Bishop John Iffert of the Diocese of Covington called Archbishop Broglio’s statement “prophetic.”

“I thank Archbishop Broglio for his clear and prophetic words about the dignity of all our neighbors and the exercise of virtue that makes military service honorable,” said Bishop Iffert. “I thank him for offering this clear teaching and inviting us to reflect on how we take our place among

the community of nations.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states legitimate authorities are entrusted with preserving the common good by “rendering the unjust aggressor unable to inflict harm,” and toward that end they “have the right to repel by armed force aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their charge.”

Legitimate defense by military force, it says, is only morally permissible under strict conditions that are all present at one and the same time: the “lasting, grave and certain” damage from the aggressor; the exhaustion of all other efforts to end such damage, “serious prospects of success,” and the use of arms such that graver evils and disorders are not produced.

The Messenger newspaper of the Diocese of Covington contributed to this article.

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Faithful urged to return to Fatima message about First Saturdays devotion on its centennial

Kimberley Heatherington
OSV News

Your mother would like a word about some unfinished business — your Blessed Mother, that is, who in 1925 asked the faithful to fulfill the First Saturdays devotion.

It's a request that — on its Dec. 10 centennial — is often referred to as “forgotten” among the supernatural events surrounding Fatima. But following the better known 1917 apparitions, Sister Lúcia de Jesus Rosa dos Santos — one of three Fatima visionaries, who later became a Carmelite nun — revealed Mary returned to her twice while she was boarding at a convent in Pontevedra, Spain, and specifically requested the practice.

Catholics worldwide were asked to dedicate the first Saturday of the month — for five consecutive months, thus “Five First Saturdays” — to confession, reception of holy Communion, and the rosary and meditation on its mysteries.

“I think 100-year anniversaries are significant because it helps remind a new generation of these devotions that don't die off,” Barbara Ernster, communications manager and editor for the World Apostolate of Fatima USA, told OSV News.

While no canonical inquiry was made, the First Saturdays devotion was approved by the bishop of Leiria, Portugal, on Sept. 13, 1939.

“Our Lady asked us to do this, and the Fatima message is timeless,” said Ernster, “because it is the Gospel message. It's never going to be outdated.”

Speaking from Fatima — where she was participating in a centenary program and conference as part of the World Apostolate — Ernster reinforced the message of peace.

“One of the things that Lúcia had said so often, is that it could help stave off wars and help contribute to the peace of the world. And we see ourselves in situations now where we hear of a third world war — anything could spark it. Even in our own country, there's so much division ... And so,” Ernster concluded, “we do this so that we can help bring about peace — peace to our families, to our nations, to our church.”

St. Carlo Acutis shared that, in a dream after Sister

Lúcia's death, she told him, “The practice of the five First Saturdays of the month could change the destiny of the world.”

Cardinal Raymond L. Burke — former prefect of the Vatican's Supreme Tribunal and archbishop of St. Louis from 2004-2008, has urged greater participation in the First Saturdays devotion, backing a French-led initiative known as the “Alliance of the First Saturdays of Fatima,” which also launched the “First Saturdays of Fatima Jubilee 2025” on Jan. 4.

“The approaching centennial of the apparition of the infant Jesus and his Most Holy Mother to Sister Lucia at Pontevedra on Dec. 10, 1925, invites the faithful to renew, with deeper faith and greater fervor, their practice of the First Saturdays Devotion of Reparation,” Cardinal Burke said in a message sent to OSV News.

“This devotion, insistently requested by Our Lady herself as an act of loving reparation to her Sorrowful and Immaculate Heart, remains of enduring importance for the salvation of souls and for peace in the world,” added the prelate, who, as bishop of La Crosse, Wisconsin, (1995-2004), founded the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe there.

On Dec. 10, the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe will celebrate Mass to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the apparitions at Pontevedra.

“I encourage all to persevere in this devotion,” invited Cardinal Burke, “with Our Lady's confidence in God's fidelity to his promises of victory over sin and the victory of eternal life.”

Father Edward Looney, secretary of the Mariological Society of America, also said the faithful should heed Mary's petition.

“When it comes to Fatima, we all strive to pray the rosary every day as she requested. The diehards observe the First Saturday devotion,” he shared. “If all practicing Catholics kept to this request, as a priest, I would be very busy with confessions.”

Noting that First Saturdays are also meant to be in reparation for offenses against Our Lady, Father Looney added, “We've seen statues that have been vandalized and people speaking ill of Mary. The First Saturdays call us to renew our love for Mary and to spread it so that her



CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Francis leaves a rosary before a statue of Mary in the Chapel of the Apparitions at the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Fatima, Portugal, Aug. 5, 2023.

immaculate heart will triumph!”

For those who can't make a trip to Fatima or Pontevedra, the World Apostolate of Fatima USA is offering a virtual First Saturday Pilgrimage to 12 sacred sites related to Fatima and the three visionaries. Short videos filmed on location will include a reflection on the events and the devotion.

“The biggest thing is that this was the part that we were supposed to do, that was given to us,” Ernster emphasized. “The church was given its part at Fatima, but the laypeople were given their part — and so we do this to help respond to the message that Our Lady brought to us.”

Why authentic friendships outshine AI companions

(Continued from page 5)

Aquinas says that human relationships are naturally ordered to communion, and we cannot separate human love from our ultimate end of union with God. Faith within relationships allows for the ability to overcome conflicts in light of the story of salvation and growth in holiness. Chatbots are without faith because they are soulless machines that cannot transcend the material world. They simulate empathy but lack authentic compassion and trust that faith provides.

Hope sustains friendships through perseverance even amid challenges. For example, we hope for the good of our friend now and in eternity. Relationships sustained by hope lead to resilience and commitment for the good of the other. AI chatbots, however, lack the capacity to long for a future or desire the well-being of others that is outside of a static or goal-oriented focus. Hope in relationships is instead directed to a person's entire well-being, body and soul.

Charity (love) is the expression of self-sacrifice that reflects the communion of love in the Trinity. Aquinas speaks of charity as friendship with God, which extends to other relationships that express genuine affection and moral responsibility. This virtue involves forgiveness as a God-like quality that dispels animosity through self-giving love. AI mimics empathy but cannot love in a sacrificial way or make moral choices for the good of another. As merely transactional conversations, chatbots are unable to form deep ties reflective of divine love. Authentic friendships require “the richness of being with others in their pain, their pleas, and their joy” (Antiqua et Nova, no. 58).

Artificial intelligence may be useful as a sounding board for our ideas and thoughts, but it lacks any rela-

tional depth or emotional connection. The Church warns against anthropomorphizing technology (giving an inanimate object human qualities).

Without clear discernment and reflection, AI use can lead to emotional dependency, erode true relationships and hinder spiritual growth.

Nurturing real friendships rooted in the virtues leads to lasting relationships that support our human and spiritual development, something no AI can do.

Here are some ways virtues uplift our relationships: FAITH: Join prayer groups and attend events at the church. Praying together as friends centers the relationship in God.

HOPE: Seek out the sacraments during hardships and invite others to join you. Offer encouragement to seek life's meaning in God.

LOVE: Practice active listening and forgiveness in daily life. Volunteer when feeling isolated or alone.

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VATICAN CITY — The evening before meeting a group of conservative European politicians, Pope Leo XIV expressed disappointment at what appears to be a weakening alliance between the United States and Europe. Meeting reporters Dec. 9 outside the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo, where he had met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy earlier in the day, Pope Leo was asked again about his opinion of U.S. President Donald Trump's proposed plan to end Russia's war on Ukraine. Pope Leo responded that he did not want to comment since he had not read the whole plan. But, as he had told reporters returning to Rome with him from Lebanon Dec. 2, the pope said he was concerned about the initial lack of European input into the plan. "Unfortunately, some parts of it that I have seen make a huge change in what was for many, many years, a true alliance between Europe and the United States," he said.

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican's fat red yearbook, known as the *Annuario Pontificio*, will now be available and updated regularly on an app and online. The digital platform "will guarantee reliable and immediate access to certified content, promoting an accurate and documented account of the life of the church," the Vatican Secretariat of State said in a press release Dec. 9. The pontifical yearbook lists: all Vatican offices and staff; the world's dioceses and mission territories; bishops, cardinals and international religious orders of men and women; papal diplomats and ambassadors to the Vatican; historical notes, such as a list of the popes and their years in office, and more. After creating an account online and paying the annual subscription fee (\$79), the online version is available at annuariopontificio.catholic.org or on an app optimized for smartphones and tablets. After the initial rollout, the platform will add expanded capabilities, such as other languages and past data for archival purposes. The hardcopy volume will still be published, the secretariat said, because of the historical value of such documentation.

BATON ROUGE, La. — Amid immigration detention sweeps in Louisiana — part of an ongoing nationwide campaign by the Trump administration — Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond of New Orleans and Bishop Michael G. Duca of Baton Rouge have each issued dispensations to faithful in their respective dioceses from the obligation to attend Mass for those concerned for their safety. The dispensations, announced Dec. 4 by Bishop Duca and Dec. 8 by Archbishop Aymond, apply to Sundays and holy days of obligation, and remain “valid until the individual Catholic determines it is safe to attend Mass again or this dispensation is revoked or amended.” Both bishops exhorted those staying at home to gather as families in prayer, reflecting on the Mass readings, praying the rosary and other prayers. Both bishops acknowledged the fear and anxiety sparked by the ICE raids, which have targeted a number of U.S. cities, and pleaded for respect for human dignity and immigration reform. “National security and the protection of human dignity are not incompatible,” said Bishop Duca. “We must advocate for a just solution to this difficult situation in our country.” Catholic social teaching on immigration balances three interrelated principles — the right of persons to migrate in order to sustain their lives and those of their families, the right of a country to regulate its borders and control immigration, and a nation’s duty to regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

WASHINGTON — In a Dec. 8 statement marking the feast of the Immaculate Conception, President Donald Trump he called it “a Holy Day honoring the faith, humility, and love of Mary, mother of Jesus and one of the greatest figures in the Bible. On the day “Catholics celebrate what they believe to be Mary’s freedom from original sin as the mother of God,” the statement said. “She first entered recorded history as a young woman

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The upcoming SEEK 2026 conference is inviting young Catholics and attendees of all ages to embrace its theme inspired by St. Pier Giorgio Frassati: “To the Heights.” “St. Pier Giorgio called (young people) to go into the heights,” Curtis Martin, founder of FOCUS, which organizes SEEK annually, told OSV News. “He wants them to realize that God is worth the climb and worth the sacrifice — so are our brothers and sisters.” Martin described the recently canonized 20th-century saint who enjoyed mountain climbing before dying at the young age of 24 as someone who lived for Christ and for others “in a powerful way.” From Jan 1-5, 2026, tens of thousands of Catholics nationwide are expected to attend SEEK. The five-day experience promises to unite people of faith to encounter Christ through prayer, adoration, the sacraments and inspiring speakers. It will take place simultaneously in three cities: Columbus, Ohio; Denver; and Fort Worth, Texas. Martin revealed that 24,000 people, including about 50 students from Thomas More University, Crestview Hills and Northern Kentucky University Newman Club, have already signed up to attend SEEK 2026. The Fort Worth and Denver locations are nearly full. Among the three locations, SEEK 2026 can accommodate a total of 28,000 people.

A young child with dark hair and eyes, wearing a light-colored sweater, holds a lit candle in their hands. The child's face is softly lit by the candle's glow. The background is dark, making the child and the candle stand out. The text 'Shine the light of life.' is written in a cursive font to the left of the child. Below the text is a QR code. At the bottom, there is a line of text about gifts received by December 15 and a website URL.

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‘Thank God It’s Free’ event gives back to those in need ahead of Christmas

Bella Bailey
Multimedia Correspondent

In 2009 a parishioner of Immaculate Heart of Mary Church, Burlington, attended a weekend retreat where he became reignited in his faith. He gathered a group of men from the parish and convinced them that they needed to be doing more in their community. The group started by doing individual projects like taking down trees, raking leaves or cleaning up yards. All of this, however, did not satiate the groups desire to do good for their community. That is where the annual Thank God It’s Free Event was born.

Thank God It’s Free (TGIF) is an annual event hosted by an informal group of parishioners at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish. This year the event will be Sunday, Dec. 14, in

the cafeteria of Immaculate Heart of Mary School, Burlington, from 2-4 p.m. The concept is simple, collect donations and give them away for free.

“We feel like it makes a really good impact on people. So many people show up, you wonder if they’re living in their cars. Theres always one person every year that melts your heart to where you almost want to cry,” said Rick Lawrence, Immaculate Heart of Mary parishioner and one of the event organizers.

To pull off such an event is a true team effort, from parishioners to volunteers. “We probably get about 20 or 30 volunteers,” said Mr. Lawrence. “We have a really good support system at the parish. I’m so proud of how generous our parish is. They come out every year, just keep bringing more stuff.”

The volunteers work tirelessly the week leading up to the event, unloading and sorting donations in the back of trailer. On the day of the event, volunteers arrive early to set out the donations, brew pots of coffee and share fellowship with those who come early to secure a spot in line.

“When you see the reactions on people’s faces when they’re able to load stuff up that they can take, it just touches your heart,” said Mr. Lawrence. “You know that it’s God kind of working through you. You get to see how it affects somebody else, and how grateful these people are. They don’t have much but they are truly grateful,” he said.

TGIF is accepting donations until Saturday, Dec. 13, as well as volunteers from 4-7 p.m., on the weeknights leading up the event.

“On Sunday, the spirit is so alive, the spirit is so evident in the air. The joy of seeing all that behind the scenes work ... labeling stuff, carrying it into the cafeteria and unpacking it again, all the little labor, it all comes to fruition in the end,” he said.



From the TGIF Facebook page, it is evident the immense volume of donations provided for the event by Immaculate Heart of Mary parishioners and community members.



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