

MESSENGER

Serving the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky since 1926

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'Emmanuel — God is with us'

The *Messenger* staff wishes you and your loved ones a very merry Christmas and a blessed New Year. This is our final issue of the year. Our next issue — the first issue of the 96th edition of the *Messenger* — will be Jan. 9.

The Curia offices will be closed from Dec. 22 – Jan. 2 for the Christmas season. Many staff members will have limited access to their e-mail during the holiday.

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Christmas 2025

My dear friends,

We missed the Blessing of the Bambinelli this year because of weather. I made the decision myself when I heard that the winter weather would be oppressive. Still, it was sad Saturday afternoon to walk past St. Mary's Park, see the tree ready to be lit, know that one of you had donated that tree from your own farm, and then to see the gates to the park closed and locked with the hasp covered with the first bit of sleet and ice. A long piece of blue tape slashed across the front of the event banner bearing the word CANCELED. Then the note above — "Canceled due to winter weather." I sighed when I saw it to realize that I would be spending the evening watching the slush accumulate rather than being able to greet you and enjoy the warmth of Christmas carols and hot chocolate. But we're all subject to the weather, aren't we.

And that's the beginning of my Christmas meditation this year. You and I are subject to many forces: the weather, illness, gravity, the need for rest, misunderstanding and so much more. It's part of our nature. We have no choice but to accept limitations as they come. But what if we did have a choice? Would we choose to subject ourselves nonetheless or would we prefer to be beyond reach, untouchable, like gods?

We do not have the choice. But the Word of God, through whom all things were made, makes that choice for love of us. Not subject to weather, chill, illness, despair, unfair treatment, rejection, temptation, or any of the other forces that impinge on our lives, the Divine Word chooses to take all of that to himself along with our human nature. He, who is without limitation, voluntarily enters a world in which his plans will be canceled, his teaching will be rejected, his love will be spurned with a lash, his offer of friendship met with betrayal. As an infant he will be needled by rough straw, chilled by the breeze and bound tightly in swaddling clothes. As an adult he will be bound and led to a death he would prefer would pass him by and experience gravity forcing his asphyxiation. Creator and master of the universe, he subjects himself to the vagaries of the fallen world, joining His life to ours, to be our Savior. He does this from the purest of all motivations — selfless love.

The Lord Jesus chooses to be subject to all of this and testifies that the creation we come to know, the life we live, the graces we receive, the relationships we can cultivate, the love we share, even the struggles and losses that tempt us to doubt and despair, are not only worth it but open us to redemptive love and the hope for eternal life with God.

The generosity of the Divine gift staggers the mind. Even the choirs of angels are so overwhelmed by the graciousness of the plan for our salvation that their song breaks, as if spontaneously, into our world and the lives of the shepherds in the field. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Luke 2:14). The angel gives the shepherds a sign and a kind of direction: "you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). St. John Henry Newman said that this instruction was necessary because no one would ever think of looking among the humble, everyday poor for the King of the Universe. They would expect him in palaces or high places. "They would not be able to fancy that He had become one of themselves, or that they might approach Him; therefore the Angel thus warned them where to find Him, not only as a sign, but as a lesson also." (Sermon 17)

Likely, you and I sometimes daydream about being someone else, someone better, someone less subject to limitation, someone whose plans never go awry, someone more powerful, less subject to feeling put upon. God chooses instead to become like us and to take what we consider weakness to himself. I've heard it said, "God is not God in the way I would be God if I were God. Thank God." On this Christmas Day, let us give thanks that God does not deem power and imperviousness something to be grasped after, but humbles himself to join the world of canceled plans and unfulfilled longings.

Merry Christmas everyone! May the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Humility and Joy, be your comfort and your true strength this Christmas and in the coming year.

Yours in the Joy and Love of Christmas,

+ Bishop John Iffert
Diocese of Covington

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec. 21

Fourth Sunday of Advent

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel."

Isaiah 7:10-14



On her feast day, Our Lady of Guadalupe reminds us of our Christian unity, said Bishop Iffert

Maura Baker
Staff Writer

Bishop John Iffert, Dec. 12, visited Cristo Rey Parish, Florence, to commemorate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is regarded as the “patroness of the Americas,” having appeared to Mexican St. Juan Diego in a series of four apparitions in the 1500s — and is now revered internationally, and especially by the Hispanic community, with her shrine being reported as the world’s most visited Catholic pilgrimage site.

The Mass welcomed a congregation that filled the pews of Cristo Rey, with families bringing children in all ages dressed in colorful traditional clothing, such as *rebozo* shawls decorated with images of the Blessed Virgin and roses, a flower commonly associated with St. Mary.

In his homily, after thanking the parish and parochial administrator Father Roberto Becerra for welcoming him, Bishop Iffert elaborated on St. Juan Diego, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the story’s role in the Incarnation of Christ celebrated during Advent and the approaching Christmas season.

“By the Incarnation, God became a human being to raise all human beings from the oppression of sin and death,” Bishop Iffert said, “and today we celebrate another act of God, which follows the pattern of the Incarnation. Jesus sent his mother, the Virgin of Guadalupe, to lift up the downtrodden indigenous people of Mexico and to be an evangelizer for all of the Americas.”

When the Blessed Virgin sent Juan Diego to the Bishop of Mexico with the instruction to build a church, Bishop Iffert said that “it was not to be constructed in the city, among the rich and influential, but in the countryside where the poor indigenous people resided. The church she meant not only as a physical structure, but more importantly, a community of believers.”

This construction, as Bishop Iffert said in his homily, catalyzed the mass conversion of the Mexican people to the Catholic Church.

“By our celebration today,” he said, “we remember not only the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the Mexican people, but also God’s lifting up of all people who have been beaten down — whether suffering from disease, or war, or natural disaster, or poverty — God comes to their aid.”

In the Gospel reading, Mary “openly declares that God has visited in her humble estate, so that she might proclaim his greatness,” Bishop Iffert said. “She delivers the message that God loves all people, especially those whom the powerful do not treat with love and respect. Mary invites all into the shelter of God’s Church and God’s kingdom.”

Quoting Pope Leo XIV as he said in his homily for the feast day, Bishop Iffert asked for Mary’s intercession, that she “teach nations that want to be your children, not to divide the world into irreconcilable factions. Not to allow hatred to mark their history or lies to write their memory. Show them that authority must be exercised as service and not as domination.”

Speaking from this quote and drawing from the current state of immigration law in the United States, Bishop Iffert spoke to the majority Hispanic congregation gathered at Cristo Rey.

“I know, brothers and sisters,” he said, “that many of you do not feel welcomed or protected in the United States today because of the aggressive approach to enforcement of immigration laws. For many, their well-being, the unity of their families, the need to find new opportunities for themselves and their children, to live without threats of violence or the deprivation of liberties. These all seem to be of little importance to the society that we all live in — that you have contributed to, some of you for many years.”

“With the Blessed Virgin Mother,” Bishop Iffert said, “your fellow Christians continue to proclaim the message that we are all one family, each one loved by God — that God’s love contributes to each person here a dignity that cannot be denied or taken away. ... May the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe enfold us all in her maternal and loving care and draw us ever closer to the heart of Christ.”

(right) During the offertory, parishioners offer baskets of gifts such as fruit and flowers to Bishop Iffert.

(below) In commemoration of his visit to the parish, Cristo Rey, Florence, gifts Bishop John Iffert with a framed icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, during her feast day Mass, Dec. 12.



(right) Prior to the Mass, a family dressed in traditional clothing offer flowers to an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

(below left) Flowers arranged in a heart, along with votive candles, poinsettias and other flowers offered by the congregation are arranged before Our Lady of Guadalupe.



(above) A couple leans against each other in the front row pew. Pews were full for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Cristo Rey Parish, with people of all ages coming to celebrate the iconic Mexican apparition.

(left and far left) Parishioners of Cristo Rey present Bishop John Iffert, whose birthday was celebrated in November, with a birthday cake shaped as a Bible.

St. Augustine Parish to celebrate Holy Qurbana in celebration of Father Kinnai's ordination anniversary

Bella Bailey

Multimedia Correspondent

Father Niby Kannai, pastor, St. Augustine Parish, Covington, will be bringing a piece of home to St. Augustine, Jan. 3, as he celebrates the eastern, Syro-Malabar, rite of the holy Mass. The Mass will be celebrated in his native language of Malayalam, with English responses from the congregation. The Syro-Malabar rite is the rite Father Kannai was born and ordained into. With the 20th anniversary of his ordination approaching, Father Kannai wanted to share the rite with his parishioners and the diocese.

Syro-Malabar is one of 24 rites in the Catholic Church, all in full communion with the Pope. It is the second largest of the eastern rites, with the Byzantine Catholic Rite being the largest.

The rite originated in India from the St. Thomas Christians after St. Thomas landed on the coast of the present-day Kerala, India, in 52 A.D. Kerala. It was known then as Muziris, an ancient port on the Malabar coast.

Part of the Syro-Malabar rite's history is their affiliation with the Assyrian Church of the East, of whom they were under jurisdiction. Additionally, Syrian Catholics fled to India to escape persecution in Syria, said Father Kannai. This is where the name of the modern-day rite comes from, with "Syro," recalling the ties to Syria, and "Malabar," commemorating the landing of St. Thomas the Apostle.

The name of the Mass celebrated in the Syro-Malabar rite is Qurbana, translated to mean holy sacrifice, which is a call to the Eucharist. Father Kannai noted the differences between the Mass and the Qurbana.

"Historically, theologically, the Eastern rite is focusing on the mystery. In the liturgy, you will experience a slightly different style, the mystery aspect of the liturgy, or even the transcendental aspect of our liturgy. You will be able to see a little bit more symbols, there is a little more ringing of the bell, and some of the signs are different in Eastern Liturgy," he said.

Perhaps the most notable difference is the standing during the consecration of the Eucharist, rather than the Latin rite tradition of kneeling.

"The altar represents us," said Father Kannai. "The throne of God is almost the same as the Eastern rite, and standing is the primary posture of resurrection."

Over the last six months as pastor of St. Augustine Parish, Father Kannai has shared about the Syro-Malabar rite on an individual level as questions arise. He is looking

forward to sharing his home rite with all his parishioners, he said.

"I wanted to connect with my parishioners in St. Augustine," said Father Kannai. "They may know of Father Niby but they do not know my background or how I grew up, or how I celebrated Mass growing up. I hope people are fascinated by seeing different elements of Mass in a different style, in the Eastern Rite."

A special aspect of the celebration of holy Qurbana is the practice of an ad orientem liturgy following the homily. In the Latin Rite, Mass was traditionally celebrated ad orientem before Vatican II instituted the celebration of Mass versus populum (facing the people.)



The vestments worn by celebrating members of the clergy are different in the Syro-Malabar Rite than the Latin Rite. Perhaps most noticeably is the outermost cloak, known as a *paina*, which symbolizes a priest's pastoral duty as bestowed on him by Christ at ordination.

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.



Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption 2025 Christmas Season Mass Schedule

Wednesday, Dec. 24

5:30 p.m., Mass of the Vigil of Christmas
Music: Organ, Violin, and Cantor

Thursday, Dec. 25

12 a.m., Pontifical Midnight Mass; doors open at 11 p.m.
Prelude Music begins at 11:30 p.m. Music: Organ, Cathedral Bishop's Choir
Midnight Mass will be live streamed online at <https://covcathedral.com> and broadcast live on The CW at 12 a.m.

Thursday, Dec. 25

10 a.m., Mass of Christmas Day
Music by the Cathedral Bishop's Choir

Thursday, Jan. 1

10 a.m., Mass of the Solemnity of Mary, The Holy Mother of God (Holy day of obligation)

Saturday, Dec. 27, 4:30 p.m.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Confessions will be heard:

Friday, Dec. 12, 12-1 p.m.
Saturday, Dec. 13, 3-4 p.m.
Friday, Dec. 19, 12-1 p.m.
Saturday, Dec. 20, 3-4 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 28,

7:30 a.m., The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

10 a.m., The Closing of the Jubilee Year

5:30 p.m. The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

Wednesday, Dec. 31

5:30 p.m., Mass of the Vigil of the Solemnity of Mary, The Holy Mother of God (Holy day of obligation)

The Cathedral will be closed after 10 a.m. Mass on Christmas Day and after 10 a.m. Mass on New Year's Day. The Cathedral Parish Office will be closed on Dec. 22, 2025- Jan. 2, 2026.

Dec. 21

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

Dec. 22 – Jan. 2

Diocesan Curia offices closed

Dec. 24/25

Christmas Mass, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, midnight

Dec. 28

Jubilee Year 2025 closing Mass, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 10 a.m.

Bishop's Schedule

Dec. 31

Mass, Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 5:30 p.m.

Jan. 2-5

SEEK26 Conference, Columbus, Ohio

Jan. 11-15

Region V - Bishops Retreat

Local tree farmer continues tradition of generosity at St. Mary's Park

Maura Baker
Staff Writer

In years past, real Christmas trees decked the halls of local churches — the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington, St. Cecilia, Independence and St. Barbara, Erlanger, to name a few. These trees, some of which were up to 18 feet tall, were grown, supplied and donated by one man — Dr. Ron Lubbe.

And while fire laws have changed, and some of these churches have made the switch to artificial trees, Dr. Lubbe continues to grow Christmas trees annually to sell to families around the Northern Kentucky area — even in his mid 70s.

This year, Dr. Lubbe's generosity to the Church continued with a donation of a tree to stand in St. Mary's Park, Covington — continuing the yearly tradition of this Cathedral Square display, decorated in bulbs representing the Diocese of Covington's parishes, schools and institutions.

Describing himself as a "frustrated farmer," Dr. Lubbe's father, also a farmer, insisted he continued his schooling to afford his farming dreams. After receiving his doctorate in medical school, Mr. Lubbe bought the property that he now lives and grows the trees on to this day.

Originally, Dr. Lubbe's farm kept heads of cattle, chickens and hay, work that got "too demanding" as Dr. Lubbe got older. The switch to growing trees was an idea from a friend, a thought that had Dr. Lubbe think, "That's a good idea!" In addition to Christmas trees, Dr. Lubbe grows other trees from seeds on his property, including chestnuts, persimmons and paw paws.

As for the Austrian pine currently standing prominently in St. Mary's Park, Dr. Lubbe says that he has "two more for the next two years" to help decorate the park for more Christmas seasons to come.

Dr. Ron Lubbe (left) and Jamie Schroeder (right), chancellor, stand beside the tree that would become the Christmas tree standing in St. Mary's Park, Covington.



Baker photo

A gift for Christmas: proper self-love!

Father Jeff Von Lehmen
Contributor

With so much interest in mental health these days due to an increase in self-hatred and self-absorption, a question arises: Do we need to have self-love first before we can love even God as well as others? How can we love God if we hate ourselves, let alone others? Let's dive in, because this is so important in a materialistic and polarized society.

One special gift of Christmas is a proper self-love that frees us from self-absorption. It is a love that leads to authentic personal and social friendships (healthy family, just society).

This means growing from a natural but wounded self-love to a proper self-love. Proper self-love is the direction — actually, a lifelong conversion — toward love of God above self, to love self and others with his love properly. This sounds counterintuitive. How can I love God above self without loving myself first?

Going deeper, proper self-love requires an interior life and natural human growth. It is a process of deep conversion: What defines me is not from this world but from the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. We learn this from cancer patients: "My cancer is not what defines me." Or more specifically, we learn this from St. John Paul II: "We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son."

However, we might try to spiritually bypass the means to proper self-love by ignoring our humanity and natural human processes or human formation. I tell myself I will just pray away self-hatred, self-absorption, self-preoccupation. While prayer is very important, we also need to move from a natural self and natural self-love to a proper self and proper self-love. But how?

I was born a natural self, with natural basic goodness in



Father Jeff Von Lehmen

parts of me.

My natural self must develop with effort (human or moral virtues) an interior strength or self-awareness of these hurting parts of me and move towards them with compassion, calmness and wisdom which comes from the basically good but wounded person I am.

These hurting parts often take on behaviors that act as protectors. But they really are interiorly destroying me from the inside out. We have unholy actions stemming from expectations of an unreal "holy tape measure" to social expectations, which pressure us to be "perfect" in the artificial image of the world.

Think of that part of "Inside Out" in which Riley proclaims: "I am not good enough; I am not good enough!" It is followed by the corresponding behavior of stunting the growth of self as gift. Inner divisions can only lead to outer disunity in friendships, family, church, society — sometimes violently.

the Image of God, but that image is suppressed, wounded and incomplete without total likeness to God. Original wound leaves us divided inwardly. As Thomas Merton has said, if we are divided inwardly, we will be divided outwardly: "The root of war is in the inner division of the human heart against itself."

True, the natural self as the image of God has an innate inclination towards the good. But it is wounded, divided! Part of me might not like myself or my body compared to others. That part may take over the "inner house" as I feel self-hatred, shame or unworthiness. And, as in the movie "Inside Out," Riley has all these emotions and thoughts like sadness, fear, disgust, anxiety, screaming at her from within as she becomes aware of them. So, too, I become aware of these inner dimensions of consciousness or emotions or

So, the natural self with self-awareness — most importantly accompanied by the authentic love, counsel or prayers received from others — moves us towards the hurt or protective parts. These parts of us are to be seen, heard and understood. A door opens gradually in its own time and way. The false mask, self-defeating/self-defending behaviors are open to a new way, the Love of God.

Here is what we call self-transcendence.

We move from natural self-love or self-preservation with all the hurting parts — self-hatred, self-preoccupations, unworthiness, shame, numbness, fear, anger, ego, etc. to love of God more than self.

When this happens, we start the inner and outer work of receiving his love and spreading it to all our parts or layers of consciousness. Christ's birth and coming as man communicates a Divine Love and Truth to our wounded self-love: you are not a burden; you are not alone; your suffering is not a dead-end because you matter to me!

Only when we can love God above self and more than self, do we receive what really defines us: the Father's love for us, divine. As we begin to bring parts of ourselves into that love, we love neighbors as ourselves authentically and charitably. This is what Pope Francis meant as "social friendship."

It is at this level of being love that truly I am becoming the unique self-gift that God wills me to be, as friend of God and friend to humanity in a way no one else can be. Ultimately, I am a Christ-like friend to myself instead of my own worst enemy.

The key to proper love is "as I have loved you." It cannot happen without ongoing human formation to open up natural self-love to divine love. This is why God assumed our humanity.

For Christmas, allow the Lord Jesus to give you this gift we all need for each other, proper self-love. From his heart to yours!

Father Jeff Von Lehmen is pastor, St. Patrick Parish, Taylor Mill, Ky.

Brought to somewhere

The readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent — Cycle A — are: Isaiah 7:10–14, Romans 1:1–7 and Matthew 1:18–14.

“Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.”

Those who pray the Angelus with any regularity will recognize the Collect of the Mass this weekend as its closing prayer. One of the interesting things about this

prayer is the way it connects us to Holy Week, interesting in part because there is no parallel prayer in Holy Week that refers so specifically to Jesus’ birth. The reason for this is probably historical — the Church had been remembering Jesus’ Passion, Death, and Resurrection for three or so centuries before she began formally to celebrate his birth — but it also makes theological sense. Jesus took our

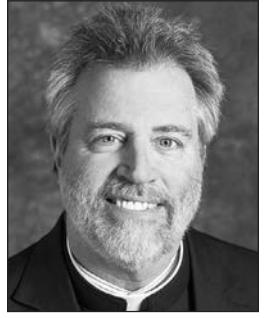
human nature to himself and was born for a specific reason, to accomplish something, and that something was accomplished on the cross, in the grave, and by his Resurrection and Ascension. Read the prayer without the reference to the Incarnation: Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, / your grace into our hearts, / that we may by his Passion and Cross / be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. For those who know the prayer, this version is certainly diminished, but if one did not know something was left out, one could think that it was a perfectly good prayer for the beginning of Holy Week.

The connection between Christ’s birth and death has been noted by many. Some of the Church’s great homilists have remarked on it. A few of our Christmas carols, especially in the tradition of the spiritual, sing of the baby who “was born to die.” The artists who created most of the stained-glass windows in our own Cathedral make the connection in a subtle but unmistakable way. In the Eucharistic Chapel there is a window that depicts the Passover. One of the family holds the platter carrying the Passover lamb, lying on its side with its legs bound. A woman looks down on it, seeming to pray silently. Likewise, in the Nativity window (south side of the nave), we notice a lamb in similar pose, feet bound together. Mary may at first seem to be gazing upon Jesus in the manger, but as we look with more attention, we see that she is actually gazing, hands folded in prayer, upon the lamb. This baby Jesus will be our sacrificial lamb.

Does this remembrance of Jesus’ death lessen our enjoyment of Christmas? If Christmas is Santa Claus and reindeer, perhaps, although it is more likely simply to be ignored. But for those who desire to celebrate the fullness of the Incarnation and birth of our Lord, remembering why he was born makes the most sense of the story. Christ’s birth is not a stand-alone event but is the beginning of something.

Another interesting thing about this prayer is the plea for God to pour his grace into our hearts. It suggests to us that Christmas is not something we fit into our lives, rather, God’s grace pulls us into Christmas. The story of Christ’s life is the world into which we are invited to enter. Beginning with our baptism and continuing

GO AND GLORIFY



Father Stephen Bankemper

even all of creation, is changed. It is something in the air, or maybe the skies. This she is sure of — God is acting now in a new way, and she must find out what it means. Her deepest desire is to be part of it, to have her whole being changed, even cleansed by it.

The Biblical narrative does not specify that the visitors who came to welcome Jesus were kings nor that

there were only three, so I take the liberty of imagining the event in other ways.

Throughout the world or maybe the universe, there is something stirring. The wise sense it and begin to respond. There is a gathering place in a wooded area. Someone is waiting there. But she is not sure what it is she awaits.

If you asked her why she is there, she would only be able to tell you that she knows the world,

A young man arrives and waits with her. Even though they are from different regions without a common language, both recognize that they are seeking something. Each one desires to arrive at a destination that will change all the powers in the world. More importantly, it will change what they value and what they carry as they travel through life. People from far and wide gradually come with seeking, yearning hearts. Where is the peace that their worlds desire? What must change in their lives as they seek?

In another part of the world on a plain that is barren, someone waits and notices that the animals are attentive and still. Is it his imagination or do the skies seem to be filled with songs, glorious songs. The universe is awake and anticipating something new that will bring a harmony never before imagined. This is the desire in his heart

MUSINGS



Sister Fidelis Tracy, C.D.P.

On Dec. 8 we celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. When I worked in parish ministry, some people thought of this feast as the conception of Jesus. No, this feast celebrates the conception of Mary in her mother’s womb. By God’s special privilege to Mary and to us, Mary was conceived without original sin.

It is fitting that this feast of Mary occurs during the Season of Advent. As we celebrate the coming of Jesus into our lives during Advent, we remember his mother Mary and the role she played in our salvation.

Mary’s conception was the heralding of our redemption. God’s plan of salvation had begun in Mary.

Sister Barbara Woeste, OSB



Many Catholics, and I as well, have always had a devotion to Mary. At the wedding feast at Cana in John’s Gospel Mary says, “Do what he tells you.” Mary always points to her son, Jesus.

— harmony, peace, community.

In a swampy area someone waits, listening to sounds of the wild animals. Does she imagine it or did the angry, threatening sounds of the wild ones just change to a quiet murmur? What is this peace that comes into creation? Let it soak into restless hearts with healing, with forgiveness for all the violence and sin that has marked the years and days. She wonders how she might quell the violence in her heart in order to welcome this event into herself.

Somewhere a group is moving up a mountain, trying to see from the exalted vantage point the event that is stirring the trees and the rest of creation to a moment of wonder. All humanity, all creation has waited for peace, a peace that only God can give. The wise move toward it, the wise are ready to welcome it, the wise know to bring their hearts and minds as gifts, the only gifts that are appropriately offered. Much of what they carry becomes a burden on the journey. Piece by piece baggage must be dropped until only their hearts are left to offer.

Is there something you are yearning for, some deep longing that you have not had time to address? Has busyness been a way to avoid looking into your heart? Are you yearning for peace?

You are called to journey to the center, to the place all seekers are moving. Be still and listen to the call to welcome this event, this person who has arrived and is arriving in your heart.

What would it mean for you and me to arrive at the scene of this birth? Would a genuine arrival, a genuine acceptance of the invitation require a change of heart, a willingness to travel to places we have not known, to become persons of peace, joy, welcome, harmony?

You and I are called to welcome this event in our own lives, in our own world. Let us travel beyond our comfort zone, carry the gifts we bring and move to the place where God is entering our world.

Divine Providence Sister Fidelis Tracy is a retired theology professor at Thomas More University, Crestview Hills, Ky.

Advent blessings

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Another interesting thing about this prayer is the plea for God to pour his grace into our hearts. It suggests to us that Christmas is not something we fit into our lives, rather, God’s grace pulls us into Christmas. The story of Christ’s life is the world into which we are invited to enter. Beginning with our baptism and continuing

through the various sacraments and observances of succeeding liturgical years, God’s grace draws us into his story. Christmas without this kind of observance may be pleasant, but allowing ourselves to be drawn more deeply into Christ’s life is transforming. Remember that in this

Collect we are praying to be “brought” somewhere. May your celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ bring you joy now, and also forever.

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

MESSENGER

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Jail Ministry spreads more than Christmas cheer, it spreads the Gospel

Bella Bailey

Multimedia Correspondent

Throughout the year, jail ministry provides a moment of reprieve for inmates, a space to learn and hear the word of God from jail ministers. During December, the same can be said. But, in addition to spreading the word of God, jail ministers spread Christmas cheer with festive goodie bags for the inmates.

Donna Heim, one of the jail ministers in the Diocese of Covington, said the bags bring more than Christmas cheer, they bring Christ.

"It has even inspired some to join our Bible study. Not because we gave out these Christmas goodies, but one person said to me, 'I could tell you care about us, and if you can care about us like that, I want to come and see what this is about,'" said Mrs. Heim.

It is that care and Christ-like love spread in the Campbell County Detention Center that Mrs. Heim believes makes a difference in the lives of inmates.

"These men and these women are so joy filled to receive these Christmas bags. They have told us that they are surprised people care enough about them to provide these good things. Things that we take for granted, they do not," she said.

Jail ministers meet with the inmates of the detention center, some in groups and some one-on-one, and participate in a "very prayerful Bible study," said Mrs. Heim. "We're a safe place for them to share what's going on in their hearts and minds and souls, and then to pray about it



In this 2024 photo, volunteers pose for a photo in front of the completed goodie bags. The bags are handed out in the Campbell County Detention Center. Inside of each is an assortment of treats and a prayer card, leading the inmates closer to Christ.

with them, kind of to accompany them on their journey."

Through the gift of the Christmas bags, filled with candy, a prayer card, Little Debbie snack cakes, and more, the jail ministers share their love of Christ

"We can't change their outer circumstances, but if we can remind them through that prayer card that Jesus can change their inner circumstances and that they can find hope and strength and joy in him, then it's a deeper kind

of joy than just getting all the goodies, and that's what's important to us," said Mrs. Heim.

The jail ministry team and volunteers will be assembling the Christmas goodie bags, Dec. 22, at the Southgate Fire House at 5 p.m. Consider volunteering or donating candy (no nuts, no sticks and no foil wrappers) to make a difference in the lives of the incarcerated. For information e-mail donnakheim@gmail.com.

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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.

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 goat 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.

Wisdom and Creation: Advice for Harmonious Living will be presented by Sister Fidelis Tracy, CDP. Jan. 21 at noon at the St. Barbara Sterling Event Center, Erlanger. Hosted by the Faith and Fellowship Committee. No RSVP needed.

The Office of Catechesis and Evangelization is offering workshops on Books of the Old Testament, presented by Father Timothy Schehr, retired biblical scholar and former professor at Mount St. Mary's School of Theology at the Athenaeum of Ohio. Workshops are all held Saturday morning, 10-11:30 a.m., Diocese of Covington, Curia Office. 2026 Spring Workshops: Job, March 1, session 1; March 14, session 2; April 11, session 3 and April 18, session 4. Cost \$35 per session, cash or checks at the door. Register at covdio.org/bible-workshops.

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



Students from the St. Agnes, Ft. Wright, Junior High Youth Group braved the cold to share a live Nativity Scene outside the K-3 Christmas concert and the next night outside the Parish Advent Social. Their presence helped carry the spirit of Christmas beyond the church and gave families a simple, meaningful reminder of the true reason for the season.

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.

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 kaempfper@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, Cambell 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.



The second annual "Cookie Pack" at St. Henry, Elsmere, was a smashing success. Parishioners of all ages baked and dropped off cookies and sweet treats on Dec. 13, that were then packed into beautiful gift boxes and taken to Baptist Village for the residents and staff. Over 250 boxes of cookies were delivered much to the delight of all the recipients.



Serra Club for Vocations Northern Kentucky

The Serra Club for Vocations Northern Kentucky held its annual priest appreciation dinner, Dec. 11, at Blessed Sacrament Parish, Ft. Mitchell. During the evening, Nick Winnike, president, Serra Club (pictured, center) presented Bishop John Iffert (left) and Msgr. Daniel Vogelpohl (right), vicar of Retired Priests, a check for the Priest Retirement Fund. The Serra Club for Vocations is a group of men and women Catholics dedicated to promoting vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life as well supporting clergy and religious in their ministry. Their work includes not only the annual priest appreciation dinner but also the annual picnic for Women religious and a seminarian BBQ. The Serra Club also assists members in growing their faith life through regular business meetings featuring local speakers. For information <https://serranky.com/>.



Merry Christmas from the school lunch program

Diocesan school lunch managers gathered with staff of the School Lunch Office, Dec. 15, for an annual Christmas party. The party is way to thank lunchroom staff for their hard and dedication to students and school staff. Laura Hatfield, director, diocesan School Lunch Program, said that she and the school lunch managers wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and look forward to seeing students in the New Year.

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For sister who can't see, sculpture in Mexico allows her to venerate Our Lady of Guadalupe via touch

Rhina Guidos

Global Sisters Report, OSV News

Most places don't want visitors to touch the art. But Mexico City's Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe encourages it for one specific religious sculpture. In the back of the cathedral, near the entrance doors, the white sculpture with a protruding face and hands clasped in prayer, goes almost unnoticed. It's there for anyone, but in particular for those who can't see, like Sister María Celina Mota Campos.

It's a treat to touch it, she says.

She lights up when she runs her hands over Our Lady of Guadalupe's face, sliding them down the sides as her fingers outline her mantle. Sister María Celina, who lost her sight 11 years ago to macular degeneration, said it allows her to experience what others feel when they see depictions of Our Lady of Guadalupe inside the basilica that carries her name.

"I'm so happy that someone had this idea of making this (sculpture) of Our Mother, the Lady of Guadalupe so that those of us who can't see with our eyes can still experience the joy of seeing her," said Sister María Celina, of the Order of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament in Mexico City.

A sign next to the sculpture says that the Italian Cultural Institute of Mexico donated the work of art, made in Italy in 2008 by artist Franco Faranda. In 2009, it was sent to Mexico after being blessed by Pope Benedict XVI and installed inside the basilica days before Our Lady of

Guadalupe's Dec. 12 feast day that year. A sign in braille to the left explains some of the symbols on the sculpture.

"I see her with my heart and I see her through touch," Sister María Celina said. "The Lord gives those of us who can't see with our eyes, the ability to see in other ways. I can see her clearly in my heart and to have a sculpture of her that sticks out, that I can touch, it highlights, for me, her face, her beloved image, which I carry in my heart. It helps to touch her because it's a way of seeing that God still pro-



OSV News photo/Rhina Guidos, GSR

Sister María Celina Mota Campos moves toward a sculpture for the blind at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City Nov. 6, 2025. Sister María Celina, of the Order of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament, lost her sight to macular degeneration about 11 years ago, but said she's learned to see Our Lady of Guadalupe with her heart instead of her eyes.

vides."

Though Sister María Celina is legally blind, she once could see. Long ago, she had lost the ability to see out of her right eye after a complication following surgery. She didn't allow the lack of sight in one eye affect her ministry or carrying out the missionary work in southern Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. She proceeded to work "with one eye as if it

were two," and did that for about 40 years, she said. But in 2014, the light around her healthy eye started dimming.

"It happened quickly," said Sister María Celina, describing how macular degeneration took what was left of her sight. By then, however, she had been to the basilica too many times to count and had absorbed a lot of what there is to know about the building and its surroundings.

"Tell me what you see," she asks of those guiding her and then can quickly sketch out a mental map of places visitors should take note of inside and around the basilica. A little bit to the left, near the entrance, there's a bent crucifix, she narrates, damaged in 1921 after a bomb went off near the cloak that bears the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Outside the basilica, she points out how part of the belltower, via animation, retells the story each hour on

(Continued on page 16)

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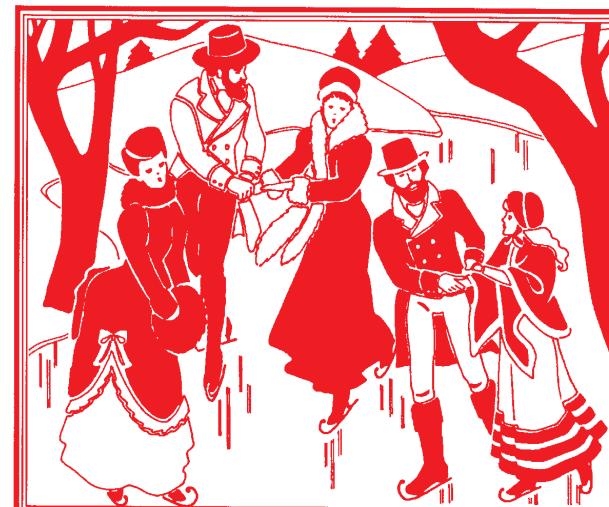
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Best wishes for a happy, healthy and prosperous new year.

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Discovering the Eucharist at Bethlehem

Father Patrick Briscoe, OP
OSV News

"The world into which Jesus was born was harsh, cruel, violent, and unstable," writes acclaimed British journalist and historian Paul Johnson at the beginning of his biography "Jesus." Augustus Caesar (Ovtavian) had been named imperator (commander) by the Roman Senate in 27 B.C. During his rule, the spread of the empire vastly increased trade and Roman influence.

Virgil, Rome's great poet, died just 15 years before Christ was born. Ovid, Livy and Seneca — all of whom were alive during Christ's 33 years on earth — were bringing further glory to Rome's poetry, philosophy and theater. This period of tremendous expansion meant that by the time of Christ's birth, some 50-60 million people were governed under Roman rule, roughly one-third of whom were slaves.

With a historian's precision, St. Luke records the time of Christ's birth. The evangelist writes: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Lk 2:1-2). The context of world history matters to Luke not merely as a detail of historical record; rather, it matters to the Christian understanding of the birth of Jesus.

Pope Benedict XVI notes in "Jesus of Nazareth": "Only now, when there is a commonality of law and property on a large scale, and when a universal language has made it possible for a cultural community to trade in ideas and goods, only now can a message of universal salvation, a universal Saviour, enter the world: it is indeed the 'fullness of time.'" The expansion of empire and the spread of Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, laid the foundation for a still greater king, a still greater peace.

The fabric of human history is redeemed by the designs of the eternal Word. In Jesus' birth at Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, the uncreated Son entered into creation.

Time and eternity touch and mingle in the birth of Christ. And while Christ enters definitely into time in the historical event of his birth, in the liturgy, we continue to enter into the time of Christ, the time of our redemption. Joseph Ratzinger puts it this way: "The liturgy is the means by which earthly time is inserted into the time of Jesus Christ and into its present."

In the Eucharist, Jesus Christ is present to us in time, just as he was present to holy Mary and St. Joseph at the moment he was born. The same Christ, loved and worshipped by his Virgin Mother and her spouse, is given to us when we receive him in the Eucharist under the veil of bread and wine.

Jesus Christ stooped to enter our time under the reign of empire, but was born in a particular place, conceding even to obey imperial decree. The lowliness of the Incarnation meant accepting the full plight of the age.

Luke tells us: "So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of



OSV News illustration/Crosiers

A detail of a stained-glass window from St. Edward's Church in Seattle shows Jesus, Mary and Joseph on their flight into Egypt.

David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child" (Lk 2:3-6). And so it was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth, apparently according to the dictates of Roman rule. By the designs of divine providence, the empire is placed at the service of salvation.

But the significance of Bethlehem not only underscores Jesus' place as the heir of David (cf. 2 Sam 7:11-16) but also has a deeper meaning still. In Hebrew, Beth-lehem is two words and means "house" (Beth) and "bread" (lehem). Thus, St. Bede says, "The place he was born is rightly called 'The House of Bread' because he came down from heaven to earth to give us the food of heavenly life and to satisfy us with eternal sweetness."

Every place the Mass is offered is transformed into a sort of Bethlehem, a place where heaven touches earth, where Christ becomes our food. St. Ephraim the Syrian sings, "You are, O Church — the abiding Bethlehem — for in you is the Bread of Life!" It is just as Jesus told us: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (Jn 6:51).

In Arabic, moreover, the name of Bethlehem, "Bayt La'm," literally means "house of meat." St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote in one of his letters: "I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible."

The Eucharist is no mere bread; it is the very flesh of

Christ, the meat of his sacred body. Jesus emphasizes this fact in St. John's Gospel, saying, "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (Jn 6:55-6).

Because of the fertility of its soil, which in biblical times produced an abundance of grain and produce, the region surrounding Bethlehem was called Ephrathah. Ephrathah means "fruitful, abundant." This food, which is given to us in Bethlehem, is thus given to us in abundance.

Recall that in the Old Testament Naomi and Ruth

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returned to Naomi's home — Bethlehem — empty-handed. And there, God showered upon them many blessings. Similarly, the Eucharist offers unexpected, copious graces.

Had Jesus been born in a great city, men would have attributed his teaching or his success to his noble birth. But by being born in Bethlehem, he allows us to more easily discern that the power of God, rather than the power of men, is at work.

Not only is the time and place of Jesus' birth significant, but it is also meaningful that Jesus was laid in a manger. As Luke's Gospel states: "she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Lk 2:7). Luke uses the word "phatne," meaning feeding trough, three times in 10 verses. The emphasis and use of the relatively uncommon word underscore its significance.

The significance of the manger was not lost on the Fathers of the Church. St. Cyril of Alexandria says, "Whereas we were brutish in soul, by now approaching the manger even His own table, we find no longer fodder, but the bread from heaven, which is the body of life." Cyril recognizes how the Eucharist transforms us from the bestial state of life before Christ.

Similarly, St. Ambrose of Milan writes, "Finally, the spiritual donkey has not been nourished with feigned delights, but with a nourishment of a substantial nature, by the holy manger."

Like the theologian Origen and St. Jerome, Ambrose connects the manger in Luke to Isaiah 1:3: "An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master's manger (phatne); But Israel does not know, my people have not understood." As it was the case of old, there are many today who do not recognize Christ, the Eucharistic food, who was placed in the manger!

The first to adore Christ, lying in the manger, was the Virgin Mary. Her gaze must have been that of a loving mother, entranced by her infant child. Pope St. John Paul II writes, "Is not the enraptured gaze of Mary as she contemplated the face of the newborn Christ and cradled him in her arms that unparalleled model of love which should inspire us every time we receive Eucharistic Communion?" It is the gaze we should foster whenever we are able to gaze upon Christ, present in the holy Eucharist.

Not only does the manger hold significance, but also the newborn Christ's swaddling clothes are imbued with meaning. Jesus was born into the world as a baby, and the swaddling clothes show us that he was cared for like every other baby. They foreshadow Christ's death, when he was wrapped in linen again and laid in a tomb. Thus the

manger becomes a type of altar, bearing the body that will be given up for you. But with a little imagination, we can afford them a Eucharistic symbolism, too. As the swaddling clothes once wrapped the very flesh of God, so the veil of bread wraps the divinity we receive in the Eucharist.

Much is rightly made of the presence of sheep and shepherds at the birth of Christ. The shepherds have come to represent the especially beloved of God, the poor. In the monastic tradition, the shepherds came to exemplify watchfulness.

But most importantly, the shepherds stress that Christ is the heir of David. Recall that when Samuel sought David to be anointed king, David had to be fetched from the fields, where he was out tending the sheep. It is then that David is made king, the shepherd of Israel. And it is Christ who becomes David's heir, the shepherd of all humanity.

But Christ is both shepherd and sheep. He is the lamb found among lambs. The fact that the sheep are the only animals mentioned in the Gospel narrative highlights their importance (ox and ass are included in our nativity scenes because of the verse from Isaiah mentioned above).

It is the blood of the lamb that saves Israel at Passover (cf. Ex 12). When John the Baptist sees Christ he exclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). Christ is our new Passover, the sacrifice offered once for all for the redemption of our sins. The Eucharist is that new Passover meal, the bloodless sacrifice that saves us from death.

In a Christmas homily a few years ago, Pope Francis relayed a delightful legend, which holds that when the shepherds came in search of the baby Jesus, they each brought a gift. Their gifts came from their poverty; most were handmade and simple. But one shepherd stood apart, embarrassed, because he had nothing to give. Needing to free her hands to receive the gifts that were being presented, Mary asked the empty-handed shepherd to draw near. Into his empty hands she placed the child Jesus.

Reflecting on the legend, Pope Francis said: "That shepherd, in accepting him, became aware of having received what he did not deserve, of holding in his arms the greatest gift of all time. He looked at his hands, those hands that seemed to him always empty; they had become the cradle of God." We receive the Eucharist in our poverty, in our emptiness. It is then that the Father desires to fill us, to allow us to cradle, to hold his Son.

The last sign of the nativity story that points to the Eucharist is the presence and song of the angels. The Gospel of Luke says: "And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and say-

ing: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests'" (Lk 2:13-14).

While Octavian received the title "Augustus" (meaning, "worthy of adoration") and left himself a monument dedicated to peace (the Ara Pacis Augusti), the angels sing the praise of God, who alone should be adored, and laud the peace the true Savior of the World brings. Luke is telling us that as great as Augustus is, the child born at Bethlehem is greater still.

Given that the rule of Caesar Augustus was marked by prosperity and security, it would be hard to imagine Christ not providing for his people. But unlike the Roman emperors who provided bread and grain, Christ offers his very self.

In the Old Testament, the manna God sent to sustain the Israelites is called "the bread of angels" (Ps 78:25, cf. Wis 16:20). In the Nativity story of the Gospels, the presence of the angels helps to highlight Christ, the true bread from heaven.

We sing the Christmas hymn of the angels at every Sunday Mass, knowing that they accompany us in our work of praising God. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "The Church joins with the angels to adore the thrice-holy God" (No. 335). With the spirit and joy of the angels then, we should sing in the presence of the Eucharist, "Gloria in excelsis Deo!"

Every Christmas is an invitation to return to Bethlehem. As we relive the beloved Christian story this year, discover anew the Eucharist, hidden at the beginning of the story of salvation. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "Dear friends, let us enter into the mystery of Christmas, now approaching, through the 'door' of the Eucharist; in the grotto of Bethlehem let us adore the Lord himself who, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, desired to make himself our spiritual food to transform the world from within, starting with the human heart."

Emmanuel means "God-with-us." Our loving savior was born 2,000 years ago, in the littleness of Bethlehem. For us, he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Shepherds came before him in adoration and angels sang his praises. And all of this was done, knowing that he would remain with us, in that great gift of himself, the holy Eucharist.

Receive the Eucharist at Mass this Christmas and return again to Bethlehem, where the God of love first became present among men. Run to Bethlehem through the Eucharist.

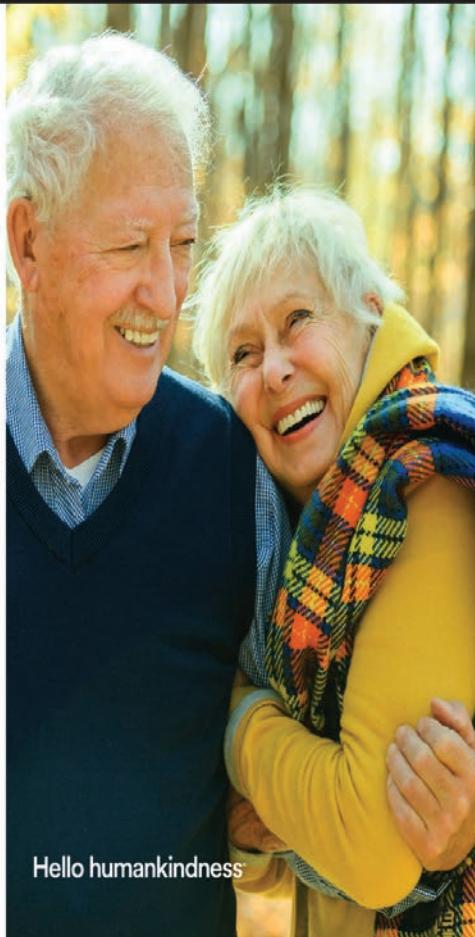
Dominican Father Patrick Mary Briscoe is general promoter for social communication for the Order of Preachers. He was previously editor of Our Sunday Visitor magazine.

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A new cathedral was his dearest wish, but would his people ever see it?

Stephen Enzweiler
Cathedral Historian

This is the first of a four-part series celebrating the Quasquicentennial (125th) anniversary of the Dedication of St. Mary's Cathedral (Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption) on January 27, 1901.

On a hot June afternoon in 1885, a reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* called on the new Bishop of Covington at his episcopal residence on Eighth Street in Covington. It had been six months since the Most Rev. Camillus Paul Maes was consecrated and installed as Covington's third prelate, and the people back home in his old diocese wanted to know how he was getting along in his new post. The reporter was fortunate to find him at home. For the past six months, the bishop had been on the road traveling extensively, visiting the parishes, missions and institutions of his new See.

"How do you like your new field of labor?" the reporter asked, pulling out his notepad and settling himself into one of the comfortable chairs in the bishop's study. Maes, with his customary cheerfulness laughingly replied, "I have to like it! When I was summoned by the Holy Father to assume the great responsibilities of my office, I obediently did so and I will strive to do my best for my people."

But accepting the Pope's appointment hadn't been his first inclination. Writing to a friend just after receiving the appointment, he admitted that as a priest he "had been taught to fear the episcopal state." But little by little, he came to reconsider his position. "I am fully conscious of my own unworthiness," he wrote. "But I may at least lay claim to a sincere determination to work for the greater glory of God and for the salvation of souls."

Privately, he was forced to face his own fears and conclude that it was God's will that he accept. On Jan. 9, 1885, he put pen to paper and wrote his letter of acceptance to Cardinal Simeoni, prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith "accepting the letters which in your kindness you have sent from His Holiness appointing me to the Episcopal See of Covington." Fourteen days later, he was on a train headed south to his new life.

Unlike many newly minted American bishops of his day, Camillus Paul had a head start when it came to how

the episcopacy worked. When the reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* asked him of his expectations, the bishop spoke of having "one great advantage."

"As secretary of the Diocese of Detroit under Bishop Borgess," he explained, "I had opportunities to become thoroughly acquainted with a bishop's duties." Indeed, Father Maes' proximity to the high affairs of the prelature and his charge over the business affairs of the Detroit Diocese gave him ample experience and sufficient confidence in knowing not only how bishops govern, but also in how to manage the ever-present financial challenges, a skill at which he quickly excelled.

"I soon had everything reduced to business principles," he told the reporter. As Covington's new shepherd, he explained that he was determined to conduct diocesan affairs just as a man would look after his business. "This is the only way to succeed."

But as the bishop settled into his new post in the spring of 1885, it became quickly apparent he was facing some very serious problems. Two obstacles stood in the way of his plans to grow and modernize the Covington diocese. The first and most pressing matter was the crushing debt that had been hanging like a Sword of Damocles over the Diocese since the days of Bishops Carrell and Toebe. The other problem was that the people focused their interests on their individual parishes without thinking of themselves as belonging to the Diocese at all.

If there was a symbol of all the problems he was facing, the bishop could find it represented in the edifice of St. Mary's Cathedral. From the moment he first arrived, he was shocked to find it in such a dilapidated condition, which moved him to lament to a friend: "The old Catholic Church is falling in ruin!"

At one time, St. Mary's Cathedral had been a handsome edifice ... practical and efficient to its purpose, sacred in its interior appointments, and considered for years by the community as one of the more beautiful ornaments of the city. It served the diocese and its people as the mother church for 21 years; but by the time Bishop Maes came, many felt its appearance had fallen beneath the dignity of the diocese, prompting calls from most quarters of the city for a new cathedral.



Bishop Maes, 1885.

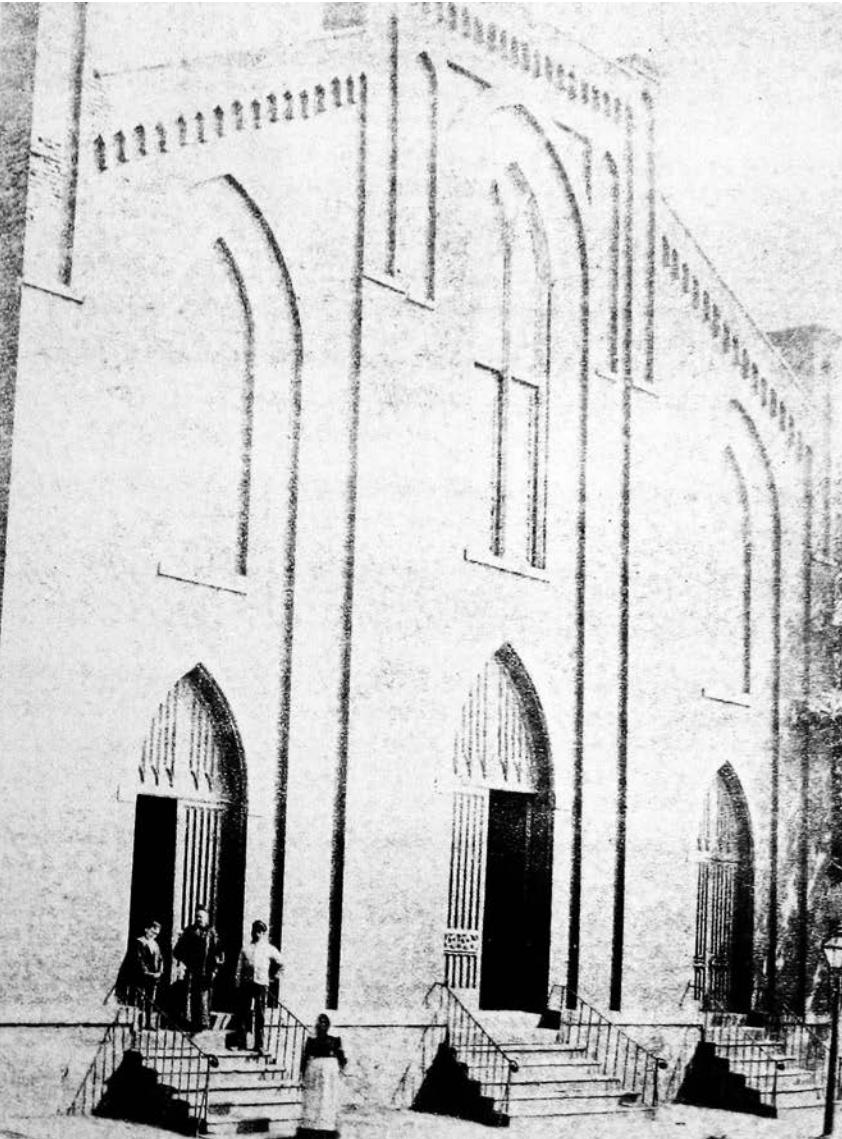
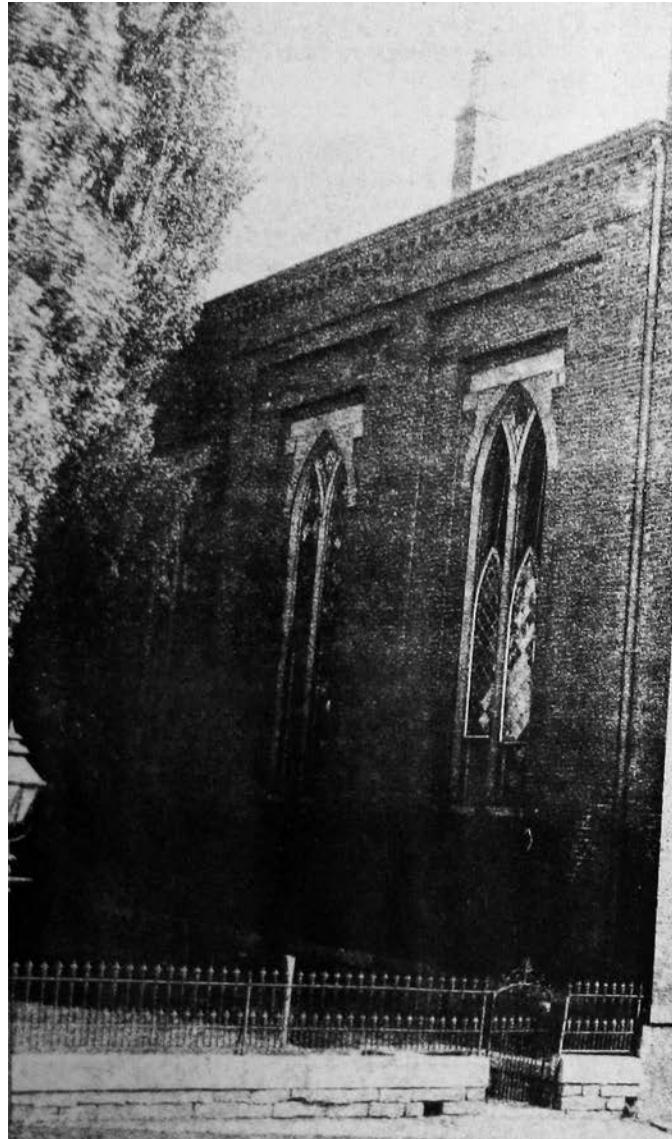
Cathedral Archives

In 1852, Rev. Thomas R. Butler, the pastor of St. Mary's Parish Church on Fifth Street, purchased five lots on the north side of Eighth Street for the purpose of using them as the location for a new and larger parish church. His old church had served a rapidly growing English-speaking Catholic community since 1834. But by 1850, the increase in the volume of parishioners and overuse of the church had caused it to fall into what Father Butler called "a very ruined state."

As he prepared to begin construction on his new church, word arrived that on July 29, 1853, Pope Pius IX, in his Papal Bull *Apostolici ministerii*, had erected a new diocese with its Episcopal See located in the City of Covington. Father Butler and a newly arrived Bishop-Elect Carrell realized there were no more funds available to purchase more property or materials to construct the required Cathedral. This resulted in the decision by both men to use the Eighth Street lots purchased by Butler for that purpose, and they would call the new edifice St. Mary's Cathedral.

According to Rev. Paul Ryan in "History of the Diocese of Covington," it was Bishop-Elect Carrell who drew up the plans for this new house of God, "being as conservative as possible in view of the poverty of the Diocese." The structure was Tudor in its overall design, a brick-and-mortar edifice with tall, stained-glass windows and a bell tower that would call the people each Sunday to what the *Catholic Telegraph* called a "temple to the living God."

Construction began in August 1853, and on Sunday, Oct. 2, Bishop Carrell laid the cornerstone amid great crowds and fanfare. Four to five thousand people poured onto Eighth Street that day. All of the Catholic societies from Covington, Cincinnati and Newport came with their banners, processing through the streets of the city behind



Archives of the Diocese of Covington
Earliest known photograph of the old St. Mary's Cathedral, c. 1867.

bands playing religious hymns. By December the roof was on, and on June 11, 1854, Covington's first cathedral was dedicated at last.

St. Mary's Cathedral was 126 feet long and 66 feet wide and constructed of brick in the English Tudor style. The exterior brickwork had panels, dentils and buttresses framing rows of double stained-glass windows, each opened by pull-chains for ventilation during the hot summer months. The facade held the customary three door entrance and a single central window and included a 150-foot steeple that held a 2,000-pound bell. Inside the front doors was an open vestibule with sturdy columns supporting an ample choir loft above. One could stand inside the front doors and see the entire Cathedral interior at a glance. Three aisles trisected the nave. In the center was a wide central pew section with added rows along each outer wall. Gas lamps mounted every seventh pew provided lighting for parishioners if needed.

Cincinnati church artist Ulrich Christian Tandrop (1819-1899) decorated the walls and ceilings of the nave and painted the large canvas Stations of the Cross that hung on the walls. Beyond a wide gothic communion rail was the sanctuary, adorned with fret work, columns and niches and richly painted. Beneath the high altar was a crypt in which Bishops Carrell and Toebbe's remains were eventually entombed.

It was a handsome structure and became the pride of the city. The *Covington Journal* proclaimed the new



Old cathedral exterior, c. 1887. Note damage and missing bricks.

irregularities began to appear. Structural issues and instability in the church steeple forced its removal. The roof leaked, staining Tandrop's ornately painted ceiling. On the exterior, water incursion from overflowing and leaky gutters and downspouts began eating away at the brickwork.

The death of Bishop Carrell in 1868 and the tremendous diocesan debt he left to Bishop Toebbe postponed any plans of building a new Cathedral. A year later, the *Covington Journal* reported that "the congregation have abandoned the project of building a new house of worship, and will immediately commence the work of repairing and renovating the building now used by them." In 1872, the newspaper criticized it as a "Cathedral building which ought to be the best, but is probably the least imposing."

As he studied the problems set before him, Bishop Maes realized he would never be able to build a new cathedral until he first dealt with the substantial diocesan debt accrued by his predecessors. "The Diocese is poor and burdened with debt," he wrote Cincinnati's Archbishop William Elder. "My debts weigh heavily on my young shoulders, they being little short of \$100,000 in a poor southern diocese!"

He also had to contend with the Cathedral's debt, since parishes were responsible for maintaining their own buildings. Repairs had begun on the structure in 1875, and by 1879, the parish debt had grown to more than \$35,000. From the pulpit each Sunday the bishop pleaded for contributions to both causes. He held fundraising coffees at his residence and petitioned prominent businessmen for assistance. Nothing was enough.

Then in 1886, Bishop Maes convoked a Diocesan Synod, whose purpose was primarily to address the enactments of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, but he also brought up the pressing organizational and financial

issues facing the diocese and especially the problems of the cathedral. Drawing on his experience of reducing everything to business principles, the Synod set into motion a plan that led to the liquidation of the diocesan debt over a five-year period. At another meeting with cathedral parishioners, at the bishop's encouragement, parishioners resolved to form a debt-paying Society at which over 80 members enrolled. In March, the Ladies' Altar Society and Cathedral Church Debt Association was also organized.

It was a good first step. The bishop knew these efforts would work and pay off the debt over time. But that didn't solve the problem of where to find the funds for a new cathedral. This issue would continue to preoccupy the pragmatic and business-oriented Maes for the rest of his episcopacy. He worried constantly over burdening his people with further debt and resolved to build a new house of worship for Christ and "the salvation of souls," one that would last the centuries.

A new cathedral had become his dearest wish, but when would his people ever see it?



Cathedral Archives
Interior of old cathedral, c. 1887.
Stains and water damage can be seen in ceiling.

How celebrating Mary Jan. 1 celebrates the Incarnation

Father Harrison Ayre
OSV News

When Pope St. Paul VI reformed the church's calendar, one of the things he did was restore the solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, back to Jan. 1. This was the more ancient day for this feast, connecting it closely as the culminating celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The veneration of Mary is vital, Pope Paul VI said, because it is an extension of our veneration of Jesus ("Marialis Cultus," No. 5). We would not have Christmas Day were it not for the virginal motherhood of Mary, and therefore if we want to properly celebrate the feast of the birth of Jesus, we must also give thanks and due honor to his mother, Mary.

Pope Paul VI chose to restore this solemnity to Jan. 1 not only for its close ties with the Nativity, but also because it was an ancient Roman tradition to celebrate the motherhood of Mary on Jan. 1. In addition to this, Pope Paul also saw it as fitting as culminating the Christmas octave on the first day of the new year, thereby entrusting the new year to the maternal care of Mary.

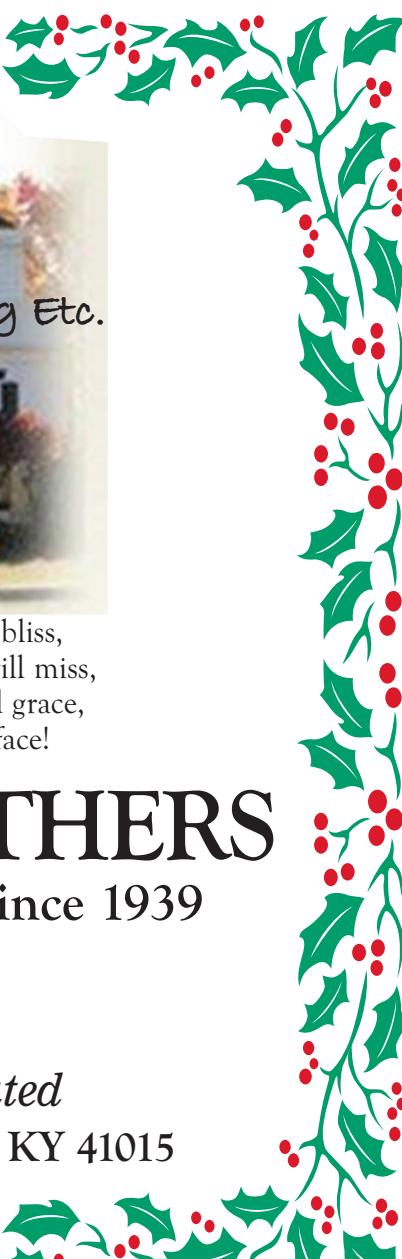
Yet, it is this last point about New Year's, as well as the seeming burden of going to Church four times in eight days, that often this great solemnity gets ignored. Pastors, for example, often offer less Masses for this day, not because they don't want people to come, but because the numbers are often significantly lower than it doesn't war-



OSV News photo/Bob Roller
A statue of Mary and the Christ Child is seen in 2017 at St. Rafael the Archangel Church in Quebradillas, Puerto Rico.

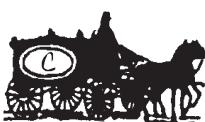
bration of a particular feast with eight days, we are saying in a special way that it is a saving time in the church, that we are mysteriously participating in Jesus' saving activity. The birth of Jesus is itself the beginning of our salvation, and over these eight days especially, the mystery of that celebration is extended.

The eighth day is the new creation. The new Adam comes to us on the first day of this saving time, and the



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rant the efforts to put all the ministries together to make Mass possible.

Of all the holy days of obligation, it seems to be the least observed and the least known to be a holy day of obligation. Yet, this great solemnity ought to be embraced by us by attending the celebration of the Mass on this day and marking it in a special way. By doing so, we will come to a deeper love for Mary, her Son and the church.

The solemn celebration of Mary's motherhood occurs on the eighth day of the Octave of Christmas. Octaves have a special place in the life of the church because they symbolize the extension of the feast: It is too big an event to simply reduce to one day. The number eight symbolizes the new creation, begun on the first day of the week, Sunday, after the seventh day of the old creation, Saturday.

By marking liturgically the cele-

new Eve is celebrated at the end. Without the Savior, there would be no mother, but without the mother, there would be no Savior. They depend upon each other. This is why it's fitting that Mary is celebrated for her cooperation with the Incarnation, just as the Incarnation is what makes the sinless virgin possible in the first place.

By celebrating Mary's motherhood, then, we are completing the more festive celebration of the birth of Jesus. Just as when a mother gives birth to a newborn, friends and family look tenderly at the newborn, but show care and service to the new mother; so it is to a greater degree with Jesus and his mother, Mary.

The next reason this feast becomes so important is that motherhood is deeply tied to our humanity. It is in the womb of a mother that a child is conceived, grows and is given life. So much of what the child is and has comes from his or her mother. The lived biological closeness between mother and child creates a special bond that lasts for their whole lives.

These facts of motherhood speak to a profound truth of the Incarnation. Jesus cannot be without his mother, and his sacred humanity is fully and completely given to him by his mother. Nothing is held back by Mary in giving the Son of God the humanity he desired to take upon himself. The humanity of Jesus is always tied to Mary and imparts on us a need to look to her to know and understand her Son.

If we want to honor God taking on our flesh in Jesus, then we must honor she from whom Jesus received his human nature. By not honoring Mary, we would in many ways be ignoring and dishonoring the radical truth of the Incarnation.

All of the above is vital for the church today. For Mary, as the Second Vatican Council loves to encourage us to understand, is the perfection of the church. In Mary, we see everything of what the church is meant to be. Her "yes" is the yes of the whole church, given perfectly in gratitude to her Son, receiving completely his redemptive act on our behalf.

Since the church is Jesus' mystical body, of which we are all members, then it follows that Mary is the church's mother. Hence, her motherhood never ceases. She is always giving birth to Christ anew in the church through the waters of baptism, conversion of souls, sanctification through grace. Without Mary, the church cannot be, and thus we celebrate her motherhood because she is not only the mother of God, but also our mother through Jesus.

The above are just some of the reasons the church asks us to go to Mass on Jan. 1. It really ought to be a priority for us because it is the natural extension of Dec. 25. By going to Mass, we encounter God in the flesh through the Eucharistic sacrifice, and there is nothing more fitting than the feasts of Christmas and the Mother of God to emphasize the reality of God taking on our flesh.

Other traditions can be established for this time of year as well, though. One could be to see if your parish can host adoration until midnight to bring in the new year. By consecrating the new year to Mary on her feast day by adoring her Son in the Blessed Sacrament, we mysteriously experience her motherhood for the whole church. Parishes, too, could celebrate solemn vespers on Jan. 1 to conclude the Christmas octave.

It goes without saying that setting time aside for the rosary — by yourself or as a family — is an amazing way to celebrate this day. Perhaps, too, it could be a day where mothers can be honored in some way by their spouse and children, emphasizing the deep connection between all mothers and Mary.

These are only a few small suggestions, but the key is to make time for the Lord and his mother on this day, and to add to it your own personal celebrations that really mark the festive character of this day. Then it becomes something the whole family can look forward to each year.

By establishing festive traditions to this day, by thinking of different ways to honor Mary and by celebrating the Incarnation by attending Mass — all of this aids us in encountering Mary more, and it all aids us in helping us experience all the more deeply the reality of the Incarnation, that God is with us in the flesh, and that he continues to take on flesh in us today in the church through Mary his mother.

Father Harrison Ayre is a priest of the Diocese of Victoria, British Columbia.

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The monthly e-mail reminder of a new bulletin posted will come from system@pub.virtus.org.

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■ Wednesday, Jan. 7, 6–8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Tuesday, Jan. 27, 9–11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Tuesday, Jan. 27, 6–8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Monday, Feb. 9, 9–11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Monday, Feb. 9, 6–8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Tuesday, Feb. 17, 9–11:30 a.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

■ Tuesday, Feb. 17, 6–8:30 p.m., Diocesan Curia, Bishop Howard Memorial Auditorium, Covington

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Our Lady of Guadalupe via touch

(Continued from page 1)

the hour of how, in 1531, Our Lady of Guadalupe is said to have appeared to St. Juan Diego on a nearby hill, later producing her image on his cloak.

Just as Sister María Celina said she learned to see Our Lady of Guadalupe through touch, she said losing her eyesight has helped her to see people and other things "with my heart." It's difficult to learn to rely on others, to physically bump into things now and then, and to have one's mobility and independence reduced, she said. But she has chosen to embrace that as part of the poverty she opted for in choosing consecrated life.

Her visual poverty, she said, has been a blessing because it has drawn her even closer to prayer, to more time with God.

"Throughout my life, the Lord has given me joy in my heart, which is a gift of the spirit. And so, I believe that it is his Spirit, with its strength, its fire, its energy, that has kept me like this, with great peace in my heart," Sister María Celina said. "My sadness at losing my sight didn't last very long. It didn't last long because the Lord made me see things differently."

She continued: "You can live happily without sight. Sometimes I say to him: 'Lord, it's good that I cannot see. You are giving me the gift of, so to speak, of turning to my inner vision to discover you.' All this is pure grace."

She hasn't, though, been able to let go of her missionary zeal. She still takes part in Holy Week mission trips to Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, where she once served, visiting Indigenous families and farmers and accompanying catechists in the countryside. She also crochets small tissue paper holders to which she pins a medal of Our Lady

of Guadalupe. Any donations she receives for them goes to her order's missions.

"When I could see, I would crochet all the time. Today, the Lord gives me the gift of being able to continue. I can no longer see the thread, or the color, or anything, but I do what little I can, which is to make little (holders) for tissues. I tell Jesus that, 'Since love is the only thing that matters, accept all these little things with all my love,'" she said. "The only thing that's absolute is the Lord and it's him who fills us with life. Whether you see or don't, it doesn't matter."

This story was originally published by Global Sisters Report, a project of National Catholic Reporter, and is distributed through a partnership with OSV News. Rhina Guidos is the Latin America regional correspondent for Global Sisters Report.

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Obituary

Sister Mary Theresa Bowman, CDP

Sister Mary Theresa Bowman, CDP, died peacefully at Holy Family Home, Melbourne, Dec. 14. She was a professed member of the Congregation of Divine Providence for 68 years. Born in Covington, Ky., in 1939 to Carl and Mary Catherine Simon Bowman, she made her first profession of vows in 1957 and professed her final vows in 1962.

Sister Mary Theresa began her ministry as an elementary teacher at Christ the King School, Lexington, Ky., in 1957. After four years there, she continued teaching primary grades at St. Bartholomew, Bethesda, Md.; St. Leo School, Versailles, Ky.; and St. Thomas School, Ft. Thomas, Ky., until 1973 when she was asked to be directress of junior sisters.

In 1975 she studied at St. Louis University and received certification in spirituality to enhance her ministry with the junior sisters and to offer spiritual direction. In 1980 she studied at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and received certification in pastoral studies. In 1981 she served at St. Francis Xavier Parish, Falmouth, Ky., until 1983 as director



Sister Mary Theresa Bowman, CDP

Parish, Berea and Mt. Vernon, Ky., until 2010. In 2010 she

of religious education as well as pastoral ministry. In 1983 she moved to St. Pius Parish, Edgewood, Ky., until she was elected as the Provincial Superior in 1984. She served two terms as provincial until 1994 when she took some sabbatical time to discern a call to be a missionary.

In 1995 she left for Ghana, West Africa and served as the director of St. Joseph Retreat Center in Sunyani, Ghana until 2005 when she returned to the United States. After some time of rest and sabbatical she returned to pastoral ministry at St. Paul Parish, McKee, Ky., in 2006, followed by ministry at St. Clare

served at Jeanne d'Arc Residence in New York as director of spiritual and social activities until the facility closed in 2021 and she moved back to Kentucky.

Sister Mary Theresa was a woman of deep faith, devoted to liturgical prayer and creatively preparing many services which helped others to worship. She was a kind but determined person who laughed easily and generously shared her time with others.

She was close to her family and despite the distance kept in contact with all of them over the years. She was a faithful letter writer and shared easily the various stories of her involvement with students, parishioners or the people of Ghana or the women at Jeanne d'Arc.

She will be missed by her religious community, the Sisters of Divine Providence, her brothers Tom and Denny Bowman and her sisters, Teresa Bowman, Rose Bowman-Jones and Mary Courtney and her nieces and nephews. Her brothers, Joseph Bowman and Carl Douglas Bowman and her sister, Mary Carol Bishop, all preceded her in death.

Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated in Immaculate Conception Chapel, Melbourne, Dec. 20, 2025. Memorials to the Congregation of Divine Providence, 5300 St. Anne Drive, Melbourne, KY 41059.

Rather than chasing productivity, turn to God to resolve restlessness



Josephine Peterson
Catholic News Service

In today's fast-paced world with pressures for results and efficiency, Pope Leo XIV said many have been stripped of their serenity and ability to live.

"The authentic approach of the heart does not consist in possessing the goods of this world, but in achieving what can fill it completely; namely, the love of God, or rather, God who is love," the pope said in the Dec. 17 weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square.

Furthermore, he said one can feel restless despite completing countless tasks, "because we are not machines, we have a 'heart'; indeed, we can say that we are a heart."

In the final weeks of the Jubilee year, he spoke facing the 82-foot-tall decorated Christmas tree and newly unveiled Nativity scene near the obelisk in the center of the square. Because of the unpredictable weather, sick children and their families, along with elderly and disabled people, sat in the Paul VI Audience Hall where Pope Leo greeted them individually before arriving in the popemobile and waving to the crowd in the square.

Continuing his series of audience talks on "Jesus our hope," the pope focused on turning toward God and his love as the answer to this restlessness. Jesus' incarnation, passion, death and resurrection give us a foundation of hope, the pope said.

"Dear friends, here is the secret of the movement of the human heart: returning to the source of its being, delighting in the joy that never fails, that never disappoints," the pope said. "No one can live without a meaning that goes beyond the contingent, beyond what passes away. The human heart cannot live without hope, without knowing

that it is made for fullness, not for want."

To overcome the "vortex that overwhelms us," Pope Leo pointed to St. Matthew, saying that life's true treasure is the heart rather than achievements or the goods of this world.

"It is therefore in the heart that true treasure is kept, not in earthly safes, not in large finan-

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Pope Leo XIV greets a child from the popemobile as he rides around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience Dec. 17, 2025.

cial investments, which today more than ever before are out of control and unjustly concentrated at the bloody price of millions of human lives and the devastation of God's creation," he said in his main catechesis in Italian.

He went on to refer to St. Augustine, who said that hearts will remain restless until they are with the Lord.

"That restlessness is not arbitrary and disordered; it is oriented toward heaven, whose doors are open to us thanks to the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ," the pope said in his English-language remarks. "If we enter into the dynamism of his love and grace, he will be victorious in us — not just at the hour of our death, but also today, right now and every day hereafter."

Merry Christmas!

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Attending school Christmas concert, pope thanks children for sharing love

Catholic News Service

At the end of his one day off each week, Pope Leo XIV went to the local school in Castel Gandolfo and joined hundreds of excited parents in watching the children's Christmas concert.

After 45 minutes of songs in Italian, Latin, English and Spanish, Pope Leo thanked the children and their teachers for "the invitation that mysteriously arrived at my house, but maybe even more mysterious was the response when you learned I had decided to come."

Shortly after the pope arrived Dec. 16 and school staff convinced the parents to sit down, more than 200 students, from the oldest to the youngest, filed on to risers on the stage in the gym wearing white sweatshirts and dark trousers.

The children all begin studying English in primary school, and the first piece they sang in English was a rousing "Joy to the World." They also sang "The Little Drummer Boy" with drumming hand motions.

At the end of the concert, before leading the children in the Lord's Prayer — which one class did in Italian sign language as well — Pope Leo spoke about the first song, a modern Italian carol, that recounted the angels singing the news of Jesus' birth.

"The most beautiful words were about 'angels who bring love,' and you are the ones who brought love to all of us this evening," the pope told the children.



CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Leo XIV taps hands as he makes his way to his seat for a children's Christmas concert in the gym of the Pontifical Paul VI School in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Dec. 16, 2025.

St. Augustine once said, "One who loves, sings," he told them.

"This is Christmas — God who wanted to draw near to us, especially to the smallest," the pope said, expressing his hope that "we can feel and live this love" all year long.

Pope Leo also thanked the children for singing in several languages, showing that Christmas fills the hearts of believers everywhere with joy and peace.

He also quoted a well-known Italian song that says, "At Christmas you can do more."

"It's an invitation to all of us," the pope said. "Let's do more to proclaim peace, love and unity in the world."

The town's school, the Pontifical Paul VI School, includes a primary and secondary school. St. Paul VI gave the school to the town in 1968 on donated land near the papal summer villa.

The youngsters sang modern Italian Christmas songs as well as religious Christmas carols in a concert broadcast live on the school's Facebook page, which struggled to stream.

In between comments about the video freezing, many grandparents posted notes. One wrote, "Grandma is touched — you are the future, the hope," followed by three hearts. Another wrote, "Carlotta, you are great; grandma and grandpa are watching."



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National/World

God wants all people to be saved, pope says at Jubilee of Prisoners

VATICAN CITY — Even in difficult situations and harsh places, like prisons, when people focus on caring for one another, respecting each other and offering forgiveness, "beautiful flowers spring forth from the 'hard ground' of sin and suffering," Pope Leo XIV said. Dressed in rose vestments for Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, the pope celebrated Mass in St. Peter's Basilica Dec. 15 for the Jubilee of Prisoners. Inmates and former inmates — both adults and juveniles — from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Malta and Chile accompanied by guards and chaplains participated, as well as representatives from 85 other countries. It was the last of the major Jubilee events before Christmas and the closing of the Holy Year Jan. 6. The hosts consecrated during the Mass were made by inmates at the Italian prisons of Opera, San Vittore and Bollate. They are part of a project that involves more than 300 inmates in prisons throughout Italy that regularly make hosts for 15,000 churches and parishes.

Amid 'fragile' ceasefire, Caritas Jerusalem seeks to 'replant hope' in Gaza this Christmas

JERUSALEM — As Christians prepare to celebrate Christmas, Caritas Jerusalem launched a "Christmas of Hope" campaign to bring joy amid ongoing suffering in the Holy Land. During a Dec. 16 meeting at the Vatican, Pope Leo XIV reflected on the Christmas tree as a symbol of life and hope, even in winter's cold — a message echoed by Caritas' campaign. Launched throughout December, the initiative brings modest celebrations, spiritual support, and humanitarian aid to Christian communities in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the West Bank, and even Gaza, where conditions remain dire despite a fragile ceasefire. Caritas Jerusalem secretary general Anton Asfar told OSV News that bombardments, movement restrictions, and shortages of food, shelter, and medical care persist,

with civilians still at risk. While Christians in Gaza continue to pray and celebrate Mass, many are now processing deep trauma. Asfar thanked Pope Leo XIV and Catholics worldwide for their prayers and solidarity, which he said are essential as Caritas plans future medical and rehabilitation efforts. "We couldn't convey the love of the Gospel to others without their support, whether with their prayers or with their financial support," he said.

Trump, lawmakers call for Jimmy Lai's release after 'unjust conviction'

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump, the State Department, and members of Congress expressed concern after Hong Kong's prominent Catholic, media tycoon and pro-democracy campaigner Jimmy Lai was convicted of national security offenses under the city's controversial national security law. Lai, who founded the now-defunct pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily, protested in favor of democratic freedoms — such as freedom of the press and expression — in Hong Kong, which was designated a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997, ending British rule of that area after more than 150 years. In response to a question on Lai's conviction at the White House Dec. 15, Trump said, "I feel so badly. I spoke to President Xi (Jinping) about it, and I asked (him) to consider his release." U.S. lawmakers have called the charges Lai has now been convicted of trumped up, arguing they are evidence the Chinese Communist Party is seeking to silence dissent. "Jimmy Lai's unjust conviction shows how much the totalitarian regime in Beijing fears free people and free speech," Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., the former Republican leader of the upper chamber, wrote on X. "I'll continue to push for my friend's release."

USCCB president expresses Church's solidarity with Jewish community

WASHINGTON — Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, expressed the Catholic Church's solidarity with the Jewish community in the wake of a Dec. 14 terror attack by two gunmen that targeted Jewish beachgoers at an event celebrating

the first day of Hanukkah at Sydney's Bondi Beach. The shooting left 15 dead, including one of the gunmen, and more than 40 wounded. Archbishop Coakley made the comments in a letter to leaders of the Jewish community in the U.S., following condemnations of the attack and prayers for those affected by Pope Leo XIV and Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney. "The festival of Hanukkah begins this year for the Jewish community with a moment of profound sorrow," Archbishop Coakley wrote. "The shooting in Sydney, Australia is a painful reminder that hatred remains a threat to our lives, our communities, and the bonds that unite us." The text of the archbishop's letter was released by the USCCB late Dec. 15. "At the same time, the selfless intervention of a Muslim man who disarmed one of the gunmen stands as a sign of hope that compassionate concern for others can still prevail," the archbishop continued. "On behalf of the Catholic community in the U.S., I promise our prayers and our solidarity at this difficult moment."

Increase in US executions largely driven by Florida, year-end report says

WASHINGTON — Although there was a significant increase in executions in the U.S. in 2025, a smaller number of new death sentences was imposed, a new report from the Death Penalty Information Center found. The year-end report, published Dec. 15, found there were 48 executions expected to take place in the U.S. in 2025, while there were 22 new sentences imposed. Robin Maher, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, "These striking numbers tell us that new death sentences are becoming vanishingly rare." In January, President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing the U.S. attorney general to "pursue the death penalty for all crimes of a severity demanding its use," and to "seek the death penalty regardless of other factors for every federal capital crime" that involves the "murder of a law-enforcement officer" or a "capital crime committed by an alien illegally present in this country." Just four states — Florida, Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas — were responsible for nearly three-quarters (72%) of executions in the U.S. in 2025. Florida, the report said, was the primary driver of the uptick in executions, expected to carry out 19 executions by the end of 2025, 40% of the year's total.

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