

CLOSING PRAYER:

~ Prayer for Christmas ~

**From ancient days,
you promised to send your people
a savior in the fullness of time.**

**To a people in bondage,
you promised a liberator;
to a people enslaved to sin,
you promised a redeemer;
to a people victim to violence,
you promised one who bring peace.**

**In this child,
born this day,
we see the face of God,
and in gazing upon him
in the manger
we have laid eyes
upon the Lord's faithfulness.
He is the Promised one,
and he is rightfully called Emmanuel,
for he is truly God with us.**

**With the shepherds,
we come to give homage
to the newborn king,
and we bring to him
the gifts of our zealous love
and undivided allegiance.**

[to be continued next week]

Our Lady Chapel



Our Lady Chapel is a Roman Catholic community founded in the love of the Father, centered in Christ, and rooted in the Holy Cross tenets of building family and embracing diversity. We are united in our journey of faith through prayer and sacrament, and we seek growth through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in liturgy and outreach, while responding to the needs of humanity.

CAMPUS MINISTRY OFFICE:

The Campus Ministry Office is located in **Our Lady Chapel**.
phone: [440] 473-3560 [office] or 216-570-9276 [cell].
e-mail: blazekj@gilmour.org

THE CHRISTMAS STORY:

Each year we hear again the ancient yet timeless Christmas story. Each year we retell the astonishing entrance that God made into our broken world, and we are moved in the very bowels of our being by God's capacity to surprise us with love. Something brand-new had happened — something original and fresh and pristine had been revealed — nothing would ever be quite the same again. God made the crucial choice to break the silence of the ages to give himself away in a Word. The most important Word that God has ever spoken took flesh in the womb of a teenage woman, and like all human flesh was born as a fragile bundle of new life.



The mystery of God was somehow concentrated in a child. The length, breadth, depth and height of God's love was somehow expressed in this little one. God was choosing to visit his people — not through dreams and words of the prophets, but in human flesh and bone and sinew. The God who lived in the highest heavens above, chose another address — He decided to pitch his tent among us.

The Christmas story we hear each year is the same, but we are different. Our world is different. Joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, sickness and health, life and death have all wrought changes — for better or for worse in our lives. But no matter what changes we have undergone, what losses we have mourned, what gains we have celebrated, the Christmas story speaks to us again of new birth, and the possibility of our own rebirth. It tells us that things can be different; it gives substance to our hope that life is possible because God was prepared to reduce Himself to the dimensions of a new-born child over 2000 years ago.

In a very real sense, the birth of every child is a small protest against the tired, cynical world that there is nothing new under the sun — that we are condemned to a future which only repeats the stupidities of the past. Moreover, the birth of Jesus is God's heartfelt protest against letting things be, abandoning people to their own devices, leaving people to fall back on the threadbare poverty of their own resources. Jesus is the saving, dynamic help of God among us — he is the one Word on God's telegram of hope.

With the birth of this child a new adventure in faith begins. A new approach to God is opened up for us, a new way of relating to each other is asked of us. It may be an old story, but it is one that is always pregnant with new hope. That is why we make the journey back to Bethlehem each year — to rediscover our own roots in the gift of God, wrapped in swaddling clothes. For us, it is a journey home.

CELEBRATE THE NEW YEAR — BEGIN WITH MASS:

It has been a long-standing tradition here at Our Lady Chapel that we begin our New Year's Eve celebration by first coming to Mass before going out for the evening. This affords us a great opportunity to begin the New Year with a time of prayer and worship of God. This year, New Year's Eve falls on a Saturday. **Our Mass on Saturday, December 31st is at 5 PM. Our Mass on New Year's Day will be as usual — 10 AM.** Please plan on joining us.

**CHRISTMAS FLOWERS:**

During this Christmas season, we again are accepting memorial donations to help deflect the cost of our Christmas Flowers. We pray that our floral decorations and this season remind all of us of those special relationships which we hold close to our heart. Please keep the following people in your prayers: **In memory of Roger Mallik, Gil Plavcan, Sadie Tackla, Thomas Hughes, the Blazek and Rezabek Families.** If you would like to make a memorial offering, please place it in an envelope marked "Memorial Offering, Christmas Decorations", along with the names of your loved ones that you would like to remember, and give to Father John or place it in the offering basket. **The collections baskets are at the center doors of the chapel.** God bless all of you.

**PRAYER REQUESTS:**

Jesus calls us to pray for one another. Please keep all these people in your prayers.

PRAYERS FOR THE SICK:

- For Kim Clark, who is undergoing treatment for an aggressive form of cancer.
- For Beverly Jacklitch, mother of Kitchen Associate, Susan Jacklitch, who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For Paula Smith, mother of Tyler [*10] and Alec [*13] Smith, who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For Jacqueline Schmidt, [*13], Lower School toddler instructor, who is recovering from foot surgery.
- For Findley Stay, husband of former Gilmour Instructor, Emily Stay, father of Allen Stay [*87], who is undergoing treatment for a serious blood disorder.
- For Andy Andino, Sr., father of Music Director, Andy Andino, who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For Jill Shemory, mother of Adam [*08], who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For David Martin, who is recovering from triple Bypass Surgery
- For Bill McGinley, father of Chief Academic Officer, Elizabeth Edmondson, and grandfather of Mollie [*21] and Abby [*23] Edmondson, who is hospitalized with a serious infection

FOR THE DECEASED:

- For John Morley, grandfather of Sadie [*23] and Henry [*28] Morley.
- For John Murphy [*58], brother of Michael Murphy [*60]
- For Todd King [*87], brother of Christie King Cox [*91], brother-in-law of Rob Cox [*80]
- For Sister Marcelle Frizzie, C.S.C.
- For Tina DiBona, aunt of Kayla Channell [*25]
- For Sister Margaret Lavonis, C.S.C.
- For Brother Thomas Moser, C.S.C.
- For Margaret Kahl.
- For Sister Esther Black, C.S.C.

PRAYERS FOR OTHERS:

- For the Holy Cross Religious in Haiti, and for the people of that country, which is under siege because of political and civil strife.
- For a person who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For a family going through a difficult time.
- For an end to violence and racial injustice in our society.
- For an end to sexual abuse and lack of respect for human persons.
- For a greater respect for human life, from the moment of conception until natural death.
- For all caregivers.
- For all service men and women serving our country, and for their families.
- For a greater awareness of our call to create a more humane and just society.

BE FREE:

The great spiritual task facing me is to so fully trust that I belong to God that I can be free in the world — free to speak even when my words are not received; free to act when my actions are criticized, ridiculed, or considered useless; free also to receive love from people and to be grateful for all the signs of God's presence in the world. I am convinced that I will truly be able to love the world when I fully believe that I am loved far beyond its boundaries.

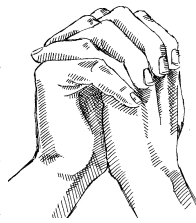
—Henri Nouwen

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Jesus calls us to pray for one another. Please keep all these people in your prayers.

PRAYERS FOR THE SICK:

- For Ethel Nagy, mother of Lazlo Nagy, grandmother of Rich ['16] and Josh Nagy., who is seriously ill.
- For Carol Lowen, mother of Denise Shade, grandmother of Madeline, Michael, and Charles Shade, who is undergoing treatment for Breast Cancer.
- For Sue Elliott, who is critically ill with complications of Parkinson’s Disease.
- For Cameron Monesmith, who is preparing for surgery on Wednesday for a brain tumor
- For Lyle Schulte, who is recovering from Lung Transplant surgery.
- For Baylea O’Brian, friend of former Gilmour Teacher, Erin Thompson, who is undergoing treatment for Hodgkins Lymphoma
- For Walter Carey, who is undergoing treatment for leukemia.
- For Pat Malak, who is seriously ill.
- For Carol Triplett, sister of Linda McGraw, who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For Judy Collins, aunt of Chief Academic Officer, Elizabeth Edmondson, great-aunt of Mollie ['21] and Abbie ['23] Edmondson, who is undergoing treatment for brain cancer.
- For Madeleine Popp, mother of Gilmour CFO, Kathy Popp, who is ill.
- For Marina McCarter, grandmother of Aaron ['25] and Mason ['28] McCarter, who is ill
- For Michael Bares, brother of James ['80] Bares and Religion Instructor, Eileen Pryatel, uncle of Michael ['08, Meghan ['13] , and Kevin ['15] Pryatel, who is undergoing treatment for cancer, and recovering from cancer surgery.
- For Susan Plavcan, sister-in-law of Linda McGraw, who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For Matthew Gebhart, who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For John Roddy, brother of Tim Roddy ['87], brother of Mary Roddy-Stretar, Marketing Associate at Gilmour, and cousin of Daniel ['83], Mike ['85], and Matt ['86] Roddy, who is undergoing treatment for cancer.
- For James Law, husband of LS resource associate, Elana Law, who is undergoing treatment for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- For Fletcher Linsz, brother of Logan Linsz ['26], who is undergoing treatment for Hodgkin Lymphoma.
- For Michael Nestor ['98], who is undergoing treatment for a rare form of cancer.
- For Joseph Borkey ['82], brother of Jeff ['80] and Jerrod ['87] Borkey, father of Christian Borkey ['16], and uncle of Jerrod ['12] and former Gilmour student, Ian Borkey, who is undergoing treatment for cancer
- For Bernice Girgash, aunt of Basketball Coach and Counselor, Dan DeCrane, and great-aunt of Mackenzie DeCrane ['36], who is undergoing treatment for cancer..
- For Karuna Singla, Sister-in-law of Science teacher, Neena Goel, aunt of Nikhil ['13] and Nupur ['17] Goel, who is undergoing treatment for bone cancer.
- For Melita Chiacchiari, mother of Mark ['94], mother-in-law of Michelle DeBacco ['96], grandmother of Aurelia ['28], and Olivia ['30] Chiacchiari, who is undergoing further treatment for cancer.
- For Mike Heryak, husband of Janet, father of Lillian ['09], Rosa ['12] and Edwin ['17] Heryak, who is seriously ill.
- For Tom Podnar, father of Lower School art teacher, Eileen Sheehan, who is awaiting a heart transplant.



THANK YOU:

A special note of “thanks” goes out to all of you who participated in our **Giving Tree** and our **Adopt a Family** programs. Many families, in addition to literally hundreds of gifts for children from the giving tree were gathered again this year. Thank you and God bless each of you for sharing your life with someone else. A special thank you to **Patty Szaniszlo, Lois Boyer, Tina Newton, Sharon Fidele, and Nora Joyce** for all their hard work in coordinating these projects. Again, thanks to all who participated. As usual, your generosity in reaching out to others has been marvelous. Thank you. You are special.



FAITH EDUCATION:

Faith Education meets next on Sunday, January 8th] and then again on Sunday, January 22nd at 8:45 AM. There will be no class on Sunday December 18th and 25th or January 1st due to Christmas Break. As has been our custom in the past, our Faith Education Classes are followed by our 10 AM Mass which is held in the chapel. **If you have any questions, please contact Patty in the Chapel Office [440-473-3560].** Thank you.



SCHEDULE FOR THE WEEK:

Sunday, December 25: Christmas Day	10:00 AM In Person & Live Stream
Monday, December 26: St. Stephen	NO MASS
Tuesday, December 27: St. John	NO MASS
Wednesday, December 28: Holy Innocents	NO MASS
Thursday, December 29:	NO MASS
Friday, December 30: Holy Family	NO MASS
Saturday, December 31: New Year’s Eve	4:00 PM In Person & Live Stream
Sunday, January 1: New Year’s Day	10:00 AM In Person & Live Stream

THE REAL STABLE:

Jesus was born in a stable, a real stable, not the bright, airy portico which Christian painters have created for the Son of God — as if ashamed that their God should have lain down in poverty and dirt. And not the modern Christmas Eve “holy stable” either, made of plaster of Paris, with little candy-like statuettes — the holy stable clean and prettily painted with a neat, tidy manger, an ecstatic ass, a contrite ox, and angels fluttering their wreaths on the roof. This is not the stable where Jesus was born.

A real stable is only four rough walls, a dirty pavement, a roof of beams and slate. It is dark, reeking. The only clean thing in it is the manger where the owner piles the hay and fodder.

A REFLECTION ON THIS WEEK'S THEME:

Each of us has a birthday. For us being conceived and born is a necessary step to fuller human life. But God did not need to be conceived and born in order to exist — let alone in order to be happy. Actually, it is precisely by being born as a human child that God became vulnerable and capable of suffering and dying. Being human and humanly limited is not a bad condition; in fact, God's humanity is an example and a challenge for us to accept our own humanness and limitedness.

In becoming human, God so identified with our human nature, that God would seem to hide. This is what Elie Wiesel expressed by sharing with us an old Hassidic tale:

Rebbe Barukh's grandson, Yehiel, came running into his studio on day in tears. "Yehiel, Yehiel, why are you crying?" the grandfather asked. In his sobbing, Yehiel said: "My friend cheats! It's unfair. He left me all by myself, that's why I am crying!" "Would you like to tell me about it?" the grandfather inquired. "Certainly, grandfather. We played hide-and-seek and it was my turn to hide and his turn to look for me. So, he gave up. He stopped looking. And that's unfair." Rebbe Barukh began to caress Yehiel's face and tears welled up on his eyes. "God too, Yehiel," he whispered softly, "God, too, is unhappy. God is hiding and we are not looking for God. Do you understand, Yehiel? God is hiding and we are not even searching for God."

All that we remember and celebrate on this Christmas Day is just way too much for words. As any gift given in love falls so short of expressing accurately the whole of the love which lies within the gift, so we offer our poor worldly gifts to each other. By our giving gifts at Christmas time, we attempt to remember how many minutes ago, a gift was wrapped in paper-thin skin, and given so as to say everything there is or could be said. Our little gifts try to say something, but they never are able to completely capture the depth of love that this one gift possesses.

We wrap our gifts to heighten the expectation — but also to hide the poverty of the attempt at saying such dramatically human sounds, such as: "I know you, and love all that I know and will know of you." Giving gifts to those we love deeply is such an embarrassing thing. In this way, giving is better than receiving. To receive might be humbling, but to not be able to speak appropriately the intimate truth can shame the poor giver.

Shame, humiliation, and embarrassment are put aside by the Giver Who says it all and means it all in love. There was a stable — poor, empty, and available. The Gift was sent not to shame or embarrass, but to claim the poverty of the human stable as home. The Gift was wrapped in the flesh He came to embrace. The poverty of the stable remains — it is ours. God's love for us is still too much for words, so God keeps sending the same gift — not each year, but each "now" or moment of our lives. We do get tempted to avoid the messiness of the stable, but that is the precise spot where our rebirth takes place. To avoid Christ's birth in our personal stables is a "chris-miss", but the Giver never stops giving the shameless love which instead of embarrassing the Giver, ennobles and reveals that Love.

In our northern culture, where it is colder, and the trees and bushes lie dormant until the warmth of the sun brings them back to life, we bring trees right into our homes. They have needles and are green. We decorate their boughs with round ornaments of various colors, and little bulbs of light also of differing colors. The entering of the tree begets some temporary rearranging of the furniture. This Christmas tradition is a very powerful symbol of what we are recalling and reenacting.

By nature, such a big tree does not belong in a house; it is foreign and an intruder. We drag it in to stand as a sacrament of sorts. Jesus, divinity, a seeming foreign presence, makes a silent intrusion and



HOW WOULD WE WRITE THE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH TODAY?

Have you ever noticed the contradictions in the two gospel narratives of Jesus' birth? Perhaps one of the most significant disagreements revolves around where Joseph and Mary lived before their son's birth. In Luke's Gospel [2:1-14], Mary and Joseph originally reside in Nazareth, and temporarily end up in Bethlehem because of a return-to-hometown-census decreed by Caesar Augustus — an improbable census which no historian has yet been able to track down. After a short stay in David's city, the three return to Nazareth where Jesus spends his childhood.

In Matthew's Gospel [2:1-23], Joseph and Mary already live in Bethlehem. Their roundabout path to Nazareth is triggered by King Herod's slaughter of children in an attempt to kill the Messiah — an atrocious action which even National Geographic claimed several years ago most probably didn't happen. The Holy Family first flees to Egypt, then, instead of returning to Bethlehem, eventually decide to settle in Nazareth.

We've traditionally gotten around these contradictions by combining the two narratives into a third account which we use for our school Christmas plays and display in the crib sets under our Christmas trees. Since we're so unfamiliar with Scripture almost no one notices this crime against divine inspiration. [I trust over the centuries that God has mercifully been shielding Matthew and Luke in heaven from this atrocity].

Having heard these gospel birth stories all our lives, most of us believe we're listening to historical, accurate accounts of this important event. Yet we're actually coming into contact with each evangelist's unique theology — not unbiased history. If we only had one gospel, we might be excused if we think we're listening to history. Thankfully we have two narrating the circumstances of Jesus' birth. The contradictions are one proof that we're dealing with theology — not history. It's one thing to see something happen, and quite another to understand the meaning of what happened. Theology's main goal is to convey meaning. That's why we almost always find contradictions in biblical theology. There's always more than one set of implications for any given event.

Like most Christians of his day and age, Luke was theologically convinced that Isaiah was speaking about Jesus as Messiah when he proclaimed the Messiah's Prince of Peace "dominion" over all people [Isaiah 9:1-7]. No wonder Luke calls upon angels to announce "peace to those on whom God's favor rests." If you've experienced such peace in your following of Jesus, then you theologically insert something about that peace in your birth narrative.

Paul's letter to Titus throws another twist into this picture [Titus 2:11-14]. Because he theologically interprets Jesus' death and resurrection as a cleansing of ourselves from "lawlessness," he encourages his readers to "reject godless ways and worldly desires," until the day when the risen Jesus returns in glory. It's important to note that as meaningful as this theology is for many Christians, it significantly differs from Luke's theology of the same event.

Perhaps one way to avoid the "schmaltz" accompanying our modern celebrations of Christmas would be to create our own theology of Jesus' birth. Imitating Matthew and Luke, we shouldn't start our theologizing with Bethlehem and Nazareth, angels and shepherds, but with our own personal, unique experience of the risen Jesus in our daily lives. With what would we compare that experience? Is there anything we've read or seen that would help others know what happens when we daily imitate Jesus? Or even better, what would help us to more deeply understand that experience ourselves?

Jesus' birth not only had meaning for people 2,000 years ago; it should also have meaning for us today. If on this special day we don't explore that significance in our own lives, then we're simply freeloading on other peoples' experiences.

—taken from the writings of Father Roger Karban, which appear on the internet

CHRIST IN THE FLESH:

Which Christmas Mass are you going to? When I was a child, we went to an early morning Mass — before we could see what Santa brought. Whichever celebration you choose, unless perhaps the Mass at Dawn, you know it is going to be crowded. Everything about Christmas is sacramental — awakening the Catholicism in folks who may exhibit little interest in religiosity during most of the year. What is so beautiful about Christmas is that so many people want to celebrate God's love — even if not on a regular basis.

Christmas invites everybody to feel at home. As we set up the nativity scenes and contemplate the characters, I suspect we often feel at most at home with the shepherds. It's delightful to think of those folks who were just going about their business — expecting nothing more than another long night — when suddenly they became the audience for an angelic chorus. The words are so familiar — we sing or recite them almost every weekend when we pray the *Gloria* at Mass.

What a sign! A baby wearing diapers! Yet that's the message of this feast. The Gospel of John gives us all the solemnity we can handle with the solemn proclamation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" [John 1:1-18]. But that glorious declaration simply tells us that the Word of God became mortal, limited, and needy. Jesus the Christ, the Word of God incarnate, needed someone to change his diapers.

We have five sets of Scripture Readings for the feast of the Nativity of the Lord — including the Vigil Mass. The Gospel for the Vigil comes from Matthew, recounting the genealogy describing Jesus as a descendant of Abraham and David, then telling last Sunday's story of Joseph's dilemma [Matthew 1:1-25].

The Scripture Readings for The Mass during the Night begins with Isaiah's promise that the boots that tramped battle and the cloaks rolled blood will be forgotten and the people who walked in darkness will see a great light [Isaiah 9:1-6]. Imagine how Ukrainians hear that! Luke's Gospel accompanies this with the story of Jesus' birth to the homeless pilgrims, Mary and Joseph, and the announcement to the shepherds [Luke 2:1-14]. During the Mass at Dawn, we sing Psalm 97: "A light will shine on us this day," and we hear of the shepherds' visit to the newborn child and his parents [Luke 2:15-20].

Finally, in the Mass during the Day, Isaiah proclaims: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings" [Isaiah 52:7-10], and we sing: "All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God" [Psalm 98]. Then we hear John's solemn proclamation that includes the terrible truth: "He came to his own, but his own people did not accept him" [John 1:1-18].

The baby creates the charm of Christmas. Babies promise a future and inspire our tenderness and protectiveness. We are awed at their fragility. The scandal of Christmas is that it reveals that this is how God comes — vulnerable and fragile, unwelcomed at home while revered by the poor and strangers.

All our Nativity stories include hints of the end — both the cross and resurrection, Jesus' rejection and love's triumph through him. Christmas reminds us that God remains among us weak and mild. The baby Jesus can represent a sweet message and also the earth-shattering revelation that God's power is the antithesis of domination. The shepherds and Magi, Caesar and Herod, remind us that not everyone desires Emmanuel, God-with-us, and that those who reject Emmanuel will stop at nothing to carry out their plan. The coming of Christ, then and now, is what the poet William Butler Yeats called "a terrible beauty."

Today, it is we who must incarnate the promise of peace to people of goodwill. In a world in which at least 30 nations are at war, we who flock to the manger are called and empowered to become sacraments of Emmanuel. Let us wonder at the babe and remember that we must be the body of Christ today. That's why he came in the first place.

—taken from the writings of Sister Mary McGlone, C.S.J., which appears on the internet



immediately begins rearranging human furniture. The stable had to be arranged for a birth. The shepherds had their nightly-watch interrupted, and the lives of Joseph and Mary were being intruded upon daily and nightly. That which was distant and outside, came intimately close and the strange "pitched His tent among us."

These ornaments and lights play their parts in God's Christmas story. In the pre-Christian days, a tree was decorated with real fruit — foretelling the fruitfulness which would be produced as a result of the sun's returning at the winter solstice. The sun was alive and so the crops would come alive, as well as the people stay alive. The fruited tree became a promise and life was enriched again.

The ornaments on our trees are a promise of the fruitfulness which the Tree of God — Jesus Christ, the Son of God — has come to produce in those who are suspended in Him. Jesus came that we might have life, and how we live those lives is the brightness and roundness and oddness of His life within us. We are the brightness in our unique ways foretelling to "the people who walked in darkness" that the "great Light" is still shining. The "Light" is come to those in "gloom", and we, looking at those many bulbs on our tree, say: "yes! That's me right there. That's what I want to be and do."

The gifts, the tree, the decorations make Christ's Mass a celebration — not just for children any more. It is way too much for words, so we have to have some visual and touchable ways each year to take it all in. That is what Mary did — took it all in. That's what the stable did — took it all in. We take in what we can this day because the Giver of This Gift keeps on giving. Though Christmas comes but once a year, Christ has come to stay, and we as gifts and ornaments and lights are the fruitfulness of His promise.

— taken from the writings of Father Luis Rodriguez, S.J., and Father Larry Gillick, S.J., which appear on the internet

SERVING THE LORD IN THE POOR — JANUARY 21st:

Our Savior Lutheran Church, across the street from Gilmour, has a Food Pantry which distributes food to the community on **the third Saturday of each month**. They welcome volunteers. If you want to volunteer, they have instituted some **new procedures** because of the Coronavirus. **Thus they help pre-pack nonperishables in bags on Thursday evening beginning at 5 PM**. They continue this prepacking on Friday if needed. Check with Elina Gurney on this. **On Saturday morning at 9 AM, they need help putting items from the foodbank into the prepacked bags**. Only volunteers will be allowed in the Church building, so you will be protected against the virus. Clients will remain outside in their cars. **The food pantry is then open from 9:30 AM—1:30 PM on Saturday**.

Our Savior Lutheran's Food Pantry was formed to serve those in emergency situations and/or with on-going need in the cities of Mayfield Heights, Mayfield Village, Highland Heights and Gates Mills. The Food Pantry respects social and cultural diversity and upholds the worth and dignity of those it serves. All those in the area with need will be served equally, as supplies allow. The food pantry is a member of the Greater Cleveland Food Bank.

Please let Elina Gurney know if you would like to help. You can do this through the chapel office [440-473-3560] or by emailing Elina Gurney at gurney.oh@gmail.com. This is a wonderful way to serve others. Please consider this opportunity.

WE NEED HELP:

Gilmour Academy is looking for reliable, skilled maintenance workers to perform upkeep and essential tasks throughout our campus. In this position, you will be responsible for a variety of duties, including repairs, and event set-ups and take-downs. Candidates must be reliable and self-motivated. The schedule for this position can be flexible — full-time, part-time, days, evenings, weekends. Contact Gilmour Academy's Human Resources Department at (440) 473-8000 x1004 or visit gilmour.org/about/careers for more details.



THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS:

As we endure a constant barrage of bad news, we are blessed with the opportunity to celebrate the good news of Christmas. The promised Messiah has arrived. The Word became flesh. The infant in the crib is the Son of God — the definitive Prophet, the Savior of the world. The Word assumed human nature to reconcile us to the Father, to make us partakers of the divine nature, to be our model of holiness. This is the best of news as we face the challenges of life.

When we feel alone and abandoned, Christmas reminds us that Christ is our constant companion on our earthly journey. When the dark forces threaten to overwhelm us, Christmas assures us that Christ’s grace is more powerful than all the demons that assail us. When it seems that our chaotic history just might be a “tale told by an idiot,” Christmas tells us Christ is the true Lord of History who will bring it to an ultimate, triumphant fulfillment. When we are tempted to become cynical about life, Christmas celebrates Jesus Christ who reveals the true potential of human nature and guides our quest for meaning, purpose and commitment.

Attending Christmas Mass remains a powerful expression of our Catholic faith — both for those who attend regularly and those who go once or twice a year. The Church is beautifully decorated, the assembly is in a festive mood and the children are full of anticipation. The hymns are familiar, and more people sing. The scripture readings are designed to highlight the true meaning of Christmas as a celebration of the birth of Jesus in fulfillment of the scriptures. For example, the Scripture Readings for the Christmas Eve Liturgy begin with the Prophet Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone” [Isaiah 9:1-6]. The people, freed from the yoke of their oppressors, rejoice because a child is born named “Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.” As Christians, we see this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ who calls us to renounce violence and do our part to establish God’s reign of justice and peace.



The Gospel of Luke recalls the familiar and comforting story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem [Luke 2:1-14]. Most of us first heard it as youngsters and associated it with the child-like joy of Christmas. As adults, we might get more out of the story by noting the social context for the birth and life of Jesus Christ. The Roman census, which forced Mary into an arduous and dangerous journey in late pregnancy, reminds us that Jesus lived his whole life in an occupied country, subject to the burdens of unjust taxation. “No room in the inn” foreshadows the itinerant ministry of Jesus who sometimes had no place to lay his head. Eyes of faith see the newborn infant placed in a feeding trough for animals as the Lord who fed thousands and continues to nourish us in the Eucharist today.

The angelic message to lower class shepherds that a savior has been born helps us appreciate the special care Jesus demonstrated for the poor and marginalized. The sudden appearance of a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God suggests the birth of Jesus is a cosmic event and the pivotal point in all human history. Prayerful reflection on the social context of Luke’s story could encourage us to practice the Christmas message in our own real-life situation, with its distinctive cultural, social and political context.

What part of the Christmas experience is most meaningful to you?

—taken from the writings of Father Jim Bacik which appear on the internet

THIS IS REALITY:

Until we meet a benevolent God and a benevolent universe, until we realize that the foundation of all is love, we will not be at home in this world.

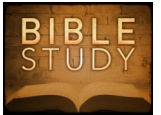
—Richard Rohr

When I was child, each advent my mother used to set out a little manger for us, and ask us to place a little piece of straw in it every time we made some small sacrifice — “To make a bed for the baby Jesus.” That’s not bad piety — it’s good theology!

—taken from the writings Father Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I., which appear on the internet.

NEXT BIBLE STUDY — WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 28th:

Our next Virtual Bible Study will be on Wednesday, December 28th at 6:30 PM. Bible Study continues to meet bi-weekly. The Bible Study is open to everyone — all middle and high school students, college students, young adults, and all adults. We will all come together to be enriched by God’s word. It’s a great time, and a good witness of our faith to others. If you can’t come at 6:30, come when you can. Gather your favorite snack and/or drink, but be prepared to be nourished on God’s word.



Our topic: Jesus as Emmanuel — God with us

We also need your help — we need future topics. **So, if you have a topic that you would like us to discuss, please let Father John know.** Mark your calendars and be part of this wonderful activity that will deepen your spiritual journey. **We will meet every other week — topic to be decided at the end of the previous meeting.** Join us. You’ll have a blast, and celebrate your faith along the way..

READINGS FOR THE WEEK:

Monday: Acts 6:8-7:59, Matthew 10:17-22

Tuesday: 1 John 1:1-4, John 20:1-8

Wednesday: 1 John 1:5-2:2, Matthew 2:13-18

Thursday: 1 John 2:3-11, Luke 2:22-35

Friday: Sirach 3:2-14, Colossians 3:12-21, Matthew 2:13-23

Saturday: 1 John 2:18-21, John 1:1-18

Mary, the Mother of God: Numbers 6:22-27, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:16-21

CHAPEL ENVELOPES:

There are many ways that you can support our Holy Cross Mission and support Our Lady Chapel. You can place your offering at the door of the chapel as you enter; you can use our on-line donation link; or you can mail in your offerings to the Chapel itself — whatever best serves your needs. If you need a supply of envelopes, please pick them up off the table in the Narthex of the Chapel when you come to Mass. Or you can call the office or stop in to request them. **If you would like us to send you a supply of**

WEEKLY OFFERING:

Thank you to those who have begun to send in weekly offerings. We really appreciate it. Thanks for not forgetting about us.

Offerings-----[Saturday, December 17]-----[Mass, Online, Mail-in]----- \$ 265.00

Offerings-----[Sunday, December 18]----- \$ 395.09

THIS IS WEALTH:

You only have what you give. It’s by spending yourself that you become rich.” —Isabel Allende 15

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS:

Christmas is like a diamond you hold up in the sun. Every time you move it even a little it gives off yet a different sparkle. It is inexhaustible in the meanings it generates. As we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas, let me speak of one of its sparkles that we too rarely examine.

Several years ago, I attended an international symposium on Church in Belgium. It had been organized by Christiane Brusselmanns. One of the speakers at that conference was Michael Rodrigo — an Oblate Priest from Asia who several years later was to be martyred as he said Mass in Sri Lanka. In his address, Michael challenged the churches — especially the First World churches — to examine themselves as to whether they were unhealthily turned in upon themselves as opposed to being truly missionary and other-centered. At one point, he highlighted the following statement of Christ: “My flesh is food for the life of the world” [see John 6:55]. Father Michael went on to ask this question: “What are we trying to do within the life of our churches? Do our churches exist for the life of the world or for their own sake? When we establish any program in our parishes, what really is our aim? Are we trying to better the life of the world or are we trying to simply better the life of our own parish? Is our aim as a church community really to let ourselves be eaten, killed, consumed, so that the world, not we, ourselves, might live?” Christ, he re-iterated, gave his body as food for the life of the world and not just as food for the life of believers.

What has all this to do with Christmas and our preparations for it?

The church exists for the sake of the world — not the other way around. Jesus was born in a manger — a place where brute animals, oxen and ass, come to eat. That symbolism is not accidental. Jesus was born in a trough — a feeding place. This already shows us what Jesus will later on explicitly tell us — namely, that his life and his body are food for the life of the world. Christ exists to be eaten — and to be eaten, first of all, by the world, not by the churches. If that is true, then all of church life and ministry exist for that same reason — they are food to be eaten by the world. Christ lay in a manger, a trough, as a sign that he is food for the ox, sheep, and ass, and the world. There is both a challenge and a consolation in that.

The challenge, obviously, is that, as church communities and as individuals, we should never succumb to the temptation of narcissism — that is, we should never become so excessively absorbed with ourselves so as to forget that we exist, precisely, to be eaten by the world. The primary agenda for the church must always be the survival, well-being, and consolation of the world. The church doesn't exist so that it can thrive and the world can, so to speak, go to the eschatological place of the wicked. The church exists for the sake of the world — not the other way around. Jesus showed us this by lying in a bed of straw.

The consolation is less obvious, but not less important. If we meditate on the image of Jesus lying in a manger we will, perhaps, feel less sorry for ourselves at those times when we feel like we are being eaten up — literally — by the demands of ministry, family, justice, and the like. When we feel the most sorry for ourselves — when we are over-tired and feel that others are simply eating us alive and that we are not being given the chance to have the kind of life and freedom we would like, we might profitably reflect upon the fact that Jesus was born in a manger, a trough, a place where animals come to feed. The Christ child is meant to be eaten by the world. That, too, is central to the meaning of Christmas and what it implies vis-a-vis our vocation should also be central in our preparation for Christmas.

Scripture says that “Mary gave birth to her first-born and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger” [Luke 2:7]. There is an entire ecclesiology and pastoral theology in that line. Christmas is a time to eat and celebrate, but it is also a time when we should realize more deeply that our vocation, like that of Jesus, is to let ourselves be eaten, as Christ's flesh which is food for the life of the world.



THE GRAND ILLUSION:

We are easily misled. Media stories often leave us wondering what really happened. Faked photos of astounding things go “viral” and many believe they are real. The internet can be a confusing and often a misleading place to find what is true. Is what we are seeing or hearing the truth or simply some illusion created by an imaginative or devious mind? We tend to follow the masses, and are easily convinced of something's authenticity when it is seemingly verified by a majority of folks. This is the case for fashion trends, the latest figures of speech, philosophies or social styles. We need a yardstick to measure whether what we are buying into is authentic, trustworthy, and real — or just something trendy and illusory. Perhaps we do not need to be too careful about the trustworthiness of matters like fashion and style, but we certainly ought to be when it comes to understanding ourselves as human beings. The World Wide Web may affirm what we want to hear, but it cannot tell us who we really are.

Who are we? To what reliable and trustworthy source do we look to understand ourselves? We live in a consumption based, disposable world. If something breaks, we buy a new one. In our materially dependent world, it is easy to cast aside the permanent in favor of the changeable and replaceable. Everything becomes fluid. What worked yesterday is replaced with a new and improved version tomorrow. We fill our lives with business. Often feeling stressed, what is immediately before us is enough to attend to. It is no wonder that many choose not to explore deeper existential questions. Human life runs the risk of being viewed with the same lens as everything else — disposable, replaceable, and changeable.

However, there is one interesting fact about life that is most certain: none of us chose to be here. We simply are. Taking the world at face value, one can certainly conclude that human life is just a random affair. Make the best of it, get whatever you can, avoid hardship and suffering. Soon enough, the ride will be over. Is this true?

“But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God” [John 1:1-18]. The birth of Jesus Christ reveals God's greatest accomplishment. With the birth of Jesus, humanity knows that it is not here by some random act or by pure human choice — it is because of a divine blessing! The humble birth of Jesus Christ shows the world that every human being is a unique, incredible, blessed and infinitely loved child of God. God wants us to be who we are! There is no way that the world can reveal this eternal truth to us. All the world can do is offer us illusions and myths that entertain us but do not redeem us.

Much of the violence we see in the world occurs at the hands of people who do not know they are loved. Loving well can only happen when a human soul first knows that it is loved by God, and then realizes his or her sacred obligation to love others. Rooting the gift of love in God is the only way to perfect it. Sadly, due to centuries of sin and error, human love has been distorted, and the unloved and unaccepted now walk among us. Consider what life would be like if Advent's peaceful and harmonious vision could be tasted just a bit as we walk through this world. Life would look so different if we only believed, with our whole hearts, minds, and souls in God's vision for who we are meant to be. Harmony, gentleness, and peace would more easily be found. Christmas would not be something we simply celebrate, but actually live.

If a person takes their cues about who they are solely from the secular world, they will most certainly be lost. Many people aren't willing to give up on the whole “god-idea”, but are very reluctant to invest themselves completely into specific ideologies, conceptions, and theologies about God. Hence, we find the growing popularity of the phrase “spiritual but not religious.” Instinctively they realize there is something more to who they are but are hesitant to commit to what precisely that is. Given the growing popularity of this illusion, it is no wonder why in many parts of the world — including here —



institutional Christianity is in decline. Yet, in the midst of all that captures and intrigues us in our self-created virtual worlds, this longing for the anchor of faith that makes sense of it all still pulses within each soul.

In order for the birth of Christ to have power and effectively mean something, it cannot be something that is just celebrated once a year. We have to completely buy into what God is saying to us today and find the courage to allow it to change our lives. How do we live the incarnation? Do we really have faith that God became one of us in Jesus Christ? If we do, we will see that it is a game changer for sure. A real living faith in the incarnation means that our lives need to change. Our priorities have to shift, how we understand our identities in God becomes clearer, our life goals, and our souls all take on a crisper importance. As we sing *Silent Night, O Holy Night, Joy to the World*, and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* with fervor these next couple weeks, we also ought to be thinking about how all this talk can translate into greater action.

Christianity is in decline. That is for sure. There is a reason why people are no longer finding faith, hope, and love within our walls and in our lives. The birth of Christ will not fit into a neat little box like those we find under our Christmas trees — it never did and it never will. The incarnation is always carried forth by the creative and rejuvenating power of God’s Holy Spirit. The message today confirms that God never abandons his people, he is always with us. And so, God is with us even in the confusing moments of where the tides of life are bringing us today. The silence is not really silent as it speaks softly to us and always calls. There are people, who may not call themselves Christian, who are living the Beatitudes and the unconditional love taught and embodied by the Son of God. There is something instinctual about the incarnation. God does not leave his people.

If the systems around us — both secular and religious — are losing their effectiveness and relevance, then what are we going to do about it? This question needs to be at the heart of dialogue in the Church’s magisterium, dioceses throughout the world, every parish in every town and in every home. We have been given the gift of a message today that God wants the world to hear. If it remains just a pious sentiment with little relevance or purpose, then the sights, sounds, and smells that lift up our souls today will soon become a nostalgic memory. Trusting in the guidance that led that first star to Bethlehem, we have to trust that if we can remain open and listen, God will bring us where we need to be. We need to trust. Faith inspired Joseph and Mary to leave their home, love brought them to Bethlehem and hope was brought into the world. People need this. People need to believe in the Gospel. People need a Church that can bring that Gospel into the world. People want what is real.

—taken from the writings of Father Mark Suslenko, which appears on the internet

BREAKING THE STABLE TRADITION:

The Vatican is not usually recognized as for its innovation. Usually when the Holy Father speaks, it is to reaffirm some belief or practice of the past rather than proposing some change in the future. But a few years ago, for the first time in its history, the Vatican replaced its traditional manger scene in St. Peter’s square with a radically new one. And as it turned out, a lot of heads were raised and a lot of questions were asked.

The traditional manger scene is the one we have here in the church and the one many of you have in your own homes. It is based upon the Gospel of Luke [2:1-14]. In it, Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of the world-wide census, Jesus is born in a stable and laid in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn, and the angels appear to shepherds in the fields announcing the savior’s birth. We all know that story.

But some of us might not know that there is an alternate version of Jesus’ birth which comes from the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew’s Gospel Joseph and Mary do not travel to Bethlehem. Joseph receives a message from an angel to take Mary as his wife. When he does so, Jesus is born in Joseph’s home. Now it was this version — Matthew’s version — that the Vatican chose to be its Christmas

the messiness of all people’s lives. He told us that the main concern of the Church must be to bring the joy of Jesus Christ to the entire world.

Our beautiful Catholic Church continues to renew itself. Read what the author to the Book of Hebrews writes: “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever” [Hebrews 13:8]. It’s like what St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*. Perhaps you remember this passage — it is a great Christmas gift that St. Augustine has left us:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

This is the joy that Christ brings to the world. And we are called to be instruments of His joy. But how can we do this? We must begin with Jesus Christ. He is our joy. Remember what Jesus told the messengers that John the Baptist sent to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah: “Tell John what you hear and see: the blind have their vision restored, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the poor have the good news preached to them” [see Matthew 11:4-6]. Jesus has brought joy to the world.

One of the signs of the presence of the Messiah — the proof that His joy has come to the world — is that the poor have the good news preached to them. Many have said and written that a society is as strong as the way that it treats its weakest members. The world is as strong as its care for its infirm, its weak, its poor. It is the mission of the Church to assume the responsibility of caring for the poor of the world with the joy of Jesus Christ.

There are two primary ways that the Church must continue to do this. The first is caring for those with immediate needs. Here in the United States this is the mission of Catholic Relief Services or CRS. The generosity of Catholics towards this work is exhibited over and over whenever disasters effect any part of the world. Catholic Relief Services is the jewel of the American Catholic Church.

The second way of caring for the poor is to give them the means of stepping out of poverty. Here in the United States this is the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, or CCHD. Many of our people — particularly our young — have given a year or more of their lives to the missions — domestic and foreign — working to break the cycle of poverty by teaching the poor how to help themselves. They do this not just as humanitarians, but as Christians, respecting the dignity of all made in the image and likeness of God. In the poor they and we must see Jesus Christ, who proclaimed his union with the suffering — “As often as you did this for me” [see Matthew 25:40]. It is by caring for others that the Church makes real the joy of the Gospel. **Indeed, it is by caring for others that the Church becomes relevant.** Our young people return from their mission trips with the experience of joy, joy they found by caring for others, and joy they experienced in the love the poor have for them, and for each other, and, mostly, joy they all experience in living in the presence of the Lord.

It is simply not enough to sing Joy to the World. We must bring joy to the world.

May you all have a beautiful celebration of Christmas. Enjoy Christmas, but do not be satisfied with the warm feelings generated by the carols, the liturgical appointments or even the sincere hospitality of those with whom you are worshiping today. Instead, be determined to join the Church in making the Gospel of Joy a reality in the world.

—taken from the writings of Monsignor Joseph Pellegrino, which appear on the internet

BRING JOY TO THE WORLD:

This is a great time of the year to drive through neighborhoods. It is wonderful to see all of the Christmas lights and decorations. I am sure that many of you have also decorated your homes with lights and nativity scenes, Santas and reindeer, and all sorts of displays.

Why do we decorate at Christmas? We do this as an expression of our Christmas joy.

Joy — Joy to world. We sing that there is joy because the Savior has come. The world waited for its Savior for ages. In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve were told that One would come who would crush the head of the serpent with his heel [see Genesis 3:15]. 1000 years before Christ, David heard that his kingdom would be eternal. Later we would realize that the One who would be king forever would come from the line of David. 750 years before Christ, King Ahaz heard a prophecy. Isaiah told him that a virgin would be with child [see Isaiah 7:14]. He did not say that a virgin would get pregnant — there would be nothing exceptional about that — but that a virgin girl would be with child. How could she be with child and still be a virgin? God's hand had to be here. The prophet said that the child would be called Emmanuel — a name that means God is with His people.

The ages waited. The time finally came. It was a little over 2000 years ago. The center of humanity, Jesus the Christ, was born. And the world entered a new age, an age of joy.

Joy is real in our lives, even when we are saddened by the loss of those who are very close to us. Christmas is a wonderful time, but it can also be a difficult time. We all carry the memory of loved ones who will never again be at Christmas dinner. We tell stories about Grandma and Grandpa, Mom or Dad, husband or wife, or — and this is the greatest sadness — the antics of a beautiful child. And we are grieved. But we do not allow grief to determine the course of our lives. We are people of faith. We are convinced that there is infinitely more to the reality of our loved ones who have died than simply our memory of them. We have faith that through the mercy of God they are still alive. We believe that we will once more be fully united with them. Our acceptance of Jesus Christ has given us eternal life. Nothing — not even death — can destroy the joy of the Lord.

There are many in the world who have no real experience of the joy of Jesus Christ. So many people live with a fear that the only true happiness is manufactured happiness. Perhaps we all do this. We spend a whole lot of money at a place in Orlando which is billed as the happiest place on earth. I really do not mean to denigrate *Disney World* — and I do hope you enjoy visiting the mouse — but the joy that is found there is bought, temporary, and shallow.

We should be in fear if this is as good as life gets. If joy has to be bought, then billions of people are too poor to have joy. We know that this is not true. Some of the poorest people in the world are only poor in the way that the world defines poverty. For they have lives full of joy. They experience joy in their families, and they experience joy in the Lord. They are rich. What a horrible world this would be if happiness depended on what we are able to buy.

People need to hear, feel, and know the joy of the Gospel. Perhaps it would be good to remember Pope Francis' first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* — the Joy of the Gospel. This exhortation promoted the mission of the Church. He called us to communicate the joy of the Gospel to the world. No longer should the leaders of the Church be perceived as unapproachable guardians of the faith. He counseled the hierarchy to refrain from insulating itself from the realities of daily life. He said that the Church must at times get messy. By that he meant that the Church needs to be present to all — even in the mud of those who have no floors in their home. Deeper than that, the Church needs to be involved in



scene.

And so, if you would have visited St. Peter's Square, you would not see a stable with a donkey and an ox; you would not see shepherds and sheep; you would not see a baby in a manger. What you would see is a baby with his mother in Joseph's home. You would see Joseph's carpentry shop where he works. Adjacent to that shop is a small outdoor patio, and next door a pub in which people are drinking and celebrating around a fireplace. Now you might find an angel or two, but no shepherds, no manger.

Why move from Luke's gospel to Matthew's gospel? Why move from a stable to a carpentry shop? Because the whole meaning of the feast that we celebrate tonight is the Jesus must move from the manger to our home. As exotic and romantic as it may be to picture Jesus surrounded by shepherds and sheep, it is more important to find Jesus where we live, where we work, and yes at times where we relax with friends and a few drinks. The gospel of Matthew challenges us not to keep Jesus in a manger but to bring him into our lives, to bring him home.

Now what does it mean to bring Jesus home? It means to make his priorities our priorities. What are Jesus' priorities? Let me give you the top three.

[1] **Jesus puts people first.** We who bring Jesus home are asked to do the same. We must realize that there is nothing more important than the people in our lives. They are more important than the money we make, than the work we do, than the comforts we enjoy. There is no more important thing to do than to spend our time with people, to share ourselves and our wisdom with them, to let them know that we love them and are thankful for them. Jesus makes people a priority. In his great commandment he says that we are called to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we bring Jesus home, we must put people first.

[2] We must also turn the other cheek and **forgive our enemies.** Each one of us carries some resentment, some anger towards someone who has hurt our or disappointed us. We have all the reasons why they were at fault and why it is their responsibility to come and ask us for forgiveness. Jesus says we must take the first step to forgive them. We must make the first step toward reconciliation. We do not do this because the person who hurt us deserves it. We do it because it is simply God's way. When Jesus teaches us to pray he says: "forgive us our trespasses, our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us" [see Luke 11:4]. If we bring Jesus home, we must forgive our enemies.

[3] We must also **care for the weakest among us.** Jesus calls us to care for the unborn, for the poor, for the sick, for the imprisoned. It is not enough for us to say: "Look I'm taking care of my life and my family, let those people care for themselves." Jesus measures us against the way we care for the most vulnerable and the weakest among us. He says: "Whatever you do for the least of those among you, you do for me" [see Matthew 25:40].

Putting people first, forgiving our enemies, caring for the weakest among us, those are Jesus' priorities. If we are to bring him home, they must be our priorities as well. And that is not easy. I suppose it is for this reason that many people at this time of year choose to keep Jesus in the manger. They string up the Christmas lights, turn on the Christmas music, wrap the Christmas presents, and look fondly upon the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. The Gospel of Matthew calls us in a different direction. It invites us to take Jesus home. It calls us not to leave him in the little town of Bethlehem, but to bring him to our town, to bring him into our lives. It calls us not to keep him away in a manger, but to let him rule our hearts and to fill our hearts with love, forgiveness, and service.

So, let us do that. Let us open our hearts and let him in. For only those who do so will know the true joy of this season and the wonder of Christ's birth. Merry Christmas.

—taken from the writings of Father George Smiga, which appear on the internet

THE CHRISTMAS HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS:

“Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” [Isaiah 9:1-7]. These words of Isaiah were fulfilled in the Gospel — “as shepherds kept watch over their flocks by night, the glory of the Lord shone around them [Luke 2:1-14]. In the midst of our earthly night, a light appeared from heaven. What is the meaning of this light that shone in the darkness?”

Saint Paul tells us: “The grace of God has appeared”. The grace of God, “bringing salvation to all” [Titus 2:11-14] has shone on our world this night. But what is this grace? It is divine love, the love that changes lives, renews history, liberates from evil, fills hearts with peace and joy. On this night, the love of God has been revealed to us — it is Jesus. In Jesus, the Most High made himself tiny, so that we might love him. But we can still ask ourselves: why does Saint Paul describe the coming of God into our world as “grace”? To tell us that it is utterly free. Whereas on earth everything seems to be about giving in order to get, God comes down freely. His love is non-negotiable — we did nothing to deserve it and we will never be able to repay it.

The grace of God has appeared. Tonight, we realize that, when we failed to measure up, God became small for our sake; while we were going about our own business, he came into our midst. Christmas reminds us that God continues to love us all, even the worst of us. To me, to you, to each of us, he says today: “I love you and I will always love you, for you are precious in my eyes”.

God does not love you because you think and act the right way. God loves you, plain and simple. His love is unconditional; it does not depend on you. You may have mistaken ideas, you may have made a complete mess of things, but the Lord continues to love you. How often do we think that God loves us if we are good, and punishes us if we are bad? Yet that is not how he is. For all our sins, he continues to love us. His love does not change. It is not fickle; it is faithful. It is patient. This is the gift we find at Christmas. We discover to our amazement that the Lord is absolute gratuity, and absolute tender love. His glory does not overwhelm us; his presence does not terrify us. He is born in utter poverty in order to win our hearts by the wealth of his love.

The grace of God has appeared. Grace is a synonym of beauty. Tonight, in the beauty of God’s love, we also discover our own beauty, for we are beloved of God. For better or worse, in sickness and in health, whether happy or sad, in his eyes we are beautiful, not for what we do but for what we are. Deep within us, there is an indelible and intangible beauty — an irrepressible beauty — which is the core of our being. Today God reminds us of this. He lovingly takes upon himself our humanity and makes it his own, “espousing” it forever.

The “great joy” proclaimed tonight to the shepherds is indeed “for all the people”. We, too — with all our weaknesses and failures — are among those shepherds, who were certainly not saints. And just as God called the shepherds, so too he calls us, for he loves us. In the dark night of life, he says to us as he did to them: “Be not afraid!” [Luke 2:1-14]. Take courage, do not lose confidence, do not lose hope, do not think that to love is a waste of time! Tonight love has conquered fear, new hope has arrived, God’s kindly light has overcome the darkness of human arrogance. Humankind, God loves you; for your sake he became man. You are no longer alone!

Dear brothers and sisters, what are we to do with this grace? Only one thing: accept the gift. Before we go out to seek God, let us allow ourselves to be sought by him. He always seeks us first. Let us not begin with our own abilities, but with his grace, for he, Jesus, is the Savior. Let us contemplate the Child and let ourselves be caught up in his tender love. Then we have no further excuse for not letting

ourselves be loved by him. Whatever goes wrong in our lives, whatever doesn’t work in the Church, whatever problems there are in the world, will no longer serve as an excuse. It will become secondary, for faced with Jesus’ extravagant love — a love of utter meekness and closeness — we have no excuse. At Christmas, the question is this: “Do I allow myself to be loved by God? Do I abandon myself to his love that comes to save me?”

So great a gift deserves immense gratitude. To accept this grace means being ready to give thanks in return. Often we live our lives with such little gratitude. Today is the right day to draw near to the tabernacle, the crèche, the manger, and to say thank you. Let us receive the gift that is Jesus, in order then to become gift like Jesus. To become gift is to give meaning to life. And it is the best way to change the world: we change, the Church changes, history changes, once we stop trying to change others but try to change ourselves and to make of our life a gift.

Jesus shows this to us tonight. He did not change history by pressuring anyone or by a flood of words, but by the gift of his life. He did not wait until we were good before he loved us, but gave himself freely to us. May we not wait for our neighbors to be good before we do good to them, for the Church to be perfect before we love her, for others to respect us before we serve them. Let us begin with ourselves. This is what it means freely to accept the gift of grace. And holiness is nothing other than preserving this freedom.

A charming legend relates that at the birth of Jesus the shepherds hurried to the stable with different gifts. Each brought what he had — some brought the fruits of their labor, others some precious item. But as they were all presenting their gifts, there was one shepherd who had nothing to give. He was extremely poor; he had no gift to present. As the others were competing to offer their gifts, he stood apart, embarrassed. At a certain point, Saint Joseph and Our Lady found it hard to receive all those gifts — especially Mary, who had to hold the baby. Seeing that shepherd with empty hands, she asked him to draw near. And she put the baby Jesus in his arms. 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. He felt himself loved and, overcoming his embarrassment, began to show Jesus to the others, for he could not keep for himself the gift of gifts.

Dear brothers and sisters, if your hands seem empty, if you think your heart is poor in love, this night is for you. The grace of God has appeared, to shine forth in your life. Accept it and the light of Christmas will shine forth in you.

—Francis

LIFE TEEN and EDGE:

Our Life Teen and EDGE youth group is meeting in-person again. We will meet for an hour beginning at 11:30 AM following our 10 AM Sunday Mass in the Lennon Board Room. If you are unable to join us, there are many resources available for you on the Life Teen website — lifeteen.com. There are numerous blogs and videos for you to connect with. The Life Teen national office continues to release many new programs. **Please contact Father John for more information. And please join us each Sunday for our Mass at 10 AM — in person or live-streamed, and then come to our Life Teen/EDGE gathering after Mass.** And above all, let us continue to join each other in prayer. **Father John is available for you. Please contact him [cell: 216-570-9276].**



SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION:

Father John is available to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with you. Please call him [440-473-3560] to arrange for this experience. All social distancing will remain in place. Always remember the Lord’s invitation: “I will give them a heart with which to understand that I am the Lord. They shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart” [Jeremiah 24:7].

