



## Fourth Sunday of Advent December 20, 2015 C

### **Welcome and Blessed Christmas!**

- 🕯 **Reflections on the Christmas event**
- 🕯 **Two stories of people leaving the Church and returning**

**Merry Christmas to all!** This is our church bulletin for the Fourth Sunday of Advent and for Christmas Eve/Day.

### **God with skin on**

A young mother was tucking her child into bed, and the child begged his mother to hold him tight in her arms. The mother hugged her little boy and assured him that the arms of God would be around him all night. The child replied: “I know that, but tonight I need a GOD WITH SKIN ON.”

God fully realized we would all need a “God with skin on”—someone we could reach out and touch, someone we could care for and love—and he gave us His Son, Jesus Christ.

*“The Word became flesh (skin) and lived among us. He enables all who accept him to become children of God.” (John 1:12, 14)*

This year take time to be present to the God who comes to us with “skin on.”

Reflecting on the words **“The Word became flesh (skin) and lived among us,”** the late Fr. William Freebarger writes:

*The Word was made flesh. Think about that. No, not just think about it—feel it. Put your left hand into your right hand and squeeze. That’s flesh: skin and muscle and bone. That’s what the Word became in order to dwell among us.*

*Our flesh allows us to dwell with each other—in love or in hatred, because flesh can go either way. For us human beings, flesh can be our glory or our shame. The triple formula, “the world, the flesh and the devil,” highlights the dark side of our carnal existence. There is much evil we can do in the flesh to the flesh with the flesh.*

*The Word was made flesh, just as we are. He experienced all the processes that make our flesh live and grow. He knew the decay and replacement by which our flesh maintains itself through time, in short, the divine Word was human too.*

*His coming in the flesh—his birth—makes a difference for us, we say. We celebrate Christmas with joy beyond the ordinary and with unaccustomed emotion. For some of us, adult concerns mingle with childhood nostalgia on Christmas. For others, the accumulated memories of Christmases past can lead to a deepened sharing in the feast.*

*But we must remember this is a very earthy feast. We celebrate the flesh, Jesus’ and ours. Jesus’ embracing of flesh proclaims the nobility of all flesh. Christmas invites us to be more comfortable with life in the flesh because, in spite of death, it is now, through Jesus, an eternal reality.*

*In our time, Christmas is an especially poignant feast. Here is an age when human flesh has known unparalleled aggression. Twentieth-century wars have devastated entire human populations. Domestic violence scars the flesh of children and adults. The depressing litany could go on and on: lust and violence, overeating and alcoholism, smoking—all the unnatural attacks to which we subject our flesh.*

*Because the Incarnation teaches us to hold all human flesh in greater reverence, the Christmas mystery shines all the brighter in the darkness that has fallen over our flesh. The light has shone in that darkness. The Word will never cease to be flesh.*

### **Other related reflections**

The late Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J., writes:

*God has entrusted his last, deepest, and most beautiful word to the world, in the Word made flesh. This Word says: “I love you world, man and woman. I am here. I am with you. I am your life, I am your time. I weep your tears. I am your joy. Do not be afraid. When you do not know how to go any further, I am with you. I am in your anguish, because I suffered it myself. I am in your need and your death, because today I began to live and to die with you. I am your life. I promise you:*

*for you, too, life is waiting. For you, too, the gate will open.”*

Meister Eckhart, 1260-1327, a mystic and theologian writes: *Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, as God-made-man in time; but if his birth is not ‘reproduced’ in my soul, what advantage is this celebration to me?”* His thought is later developed by another mystic, Angelo Silesio, who writes: *“Even if Christ were to be born a thousand times in Bethlehem, but is not born in my soul, I am lost forever.*

It is obvious, therefore, that besides the physical birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, there is also the *spiritual birth* of Jesus, which takes place in our soul. This is what we call the *Christmas of the soul*, as opposed to the external Christmas celebrations comprising all our Christmas activities from writing Christmas cards to putting up decorations and organizing parties. It is this spiritual birth that affects our soul and enables us to partake of the eternal salvation that Jesus brought to us through his birth.

Christian Rossetti writes:

***What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd  
I would bring Him a lamb;  
If I were a wise man,  
I would do my part;  
But what can I give Him?  
Give Him my heart.***

Thomas Merton writes: *Into this world, this demented Inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, who are tortured, bombed and exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.*

### **How odd of God**

When God decided to join our human race, he chose a people, very small (i.e., a nation) and preoccupied. He joined a low-income family who could only afford the offering of the poor when they went to the Temple (Luke 2:24). He chose to be born not in a nice hospital or home, but in an abandoned cow barn. Just imagine

the Creator of the world choosing to be born in a cow barn. His first visitors were not the important people in town but lowly shepherds from nearby hills. Shepherds were considered outcasts. Talk about God’s way not being our way. As an infant, his parents had to flee with him to a foreign country—not in fancy transportation but on a donkey. For the first few years of his life, he, Mary and Joseph were immigrants who spoke with a “funny accent.” Our God, who could literally have enjoyed the lifestyle of the rich and famous, chose instead to live as an outcast.

### **TWO STORIES OF PEOPLE RETURNING TO CHURCH**

Too often we hear stories of people leaving the church. But, sadly, we do not hear stories of people returning to the church. The following are two stories of people who left the church or, more accurately, stopped coming to Mass—and what motivated them to return.

#### **Meet Anne Schneider**

***Growing up,** I was raised Catholic in NY, and I am the youngest of four by my Irish immigrant parents. I attended 12 years of Catholic School. As a young child, I can remember accompanying my mother, my aunt, and our next door neighbor to the Novenas at our parish church, just two blocks from home. I saw my mother praying often and we always said bedtime prayers.*

***Living** during my teens, however, I was more focused on the upcoming weekend social calendar. By senior year in high school I was hardly going to Mass at all. I think what caused me more than anything to drift further away from my faith was my rebellious attitude as a teenager, moving far away from all of my family and close friends, and going through a rocky marriage at a young age. I felt abandoned by the divorce. I was a single mother and still ashamed by my past decisions. My father had written to me very soon after I moved away to Florida and he told me the day would come when I would be back at home with tears in my eyes. My father was a wise man! Feeling a bit like the black sheep in the family, I didn’t feel like I fit in anywhere. For the next several years I became less concerned about practicing my faith and only attending Mass at Christmas, Easter or an occasional Sunday. I was not consistent with going to Mass at all, and never thought about my own personal spiritual growth.*

***Returning.** It wasn’t until my second child was nearing first grade in 2011 that I felt that parental responsibility through the Holy Spirit telling me I needed to raise my children in the faith. I drove up to Ascension and walked into the religious education*

office. It was there where I was greeted by a very friendly Shelly Wackley who joyfully explained the religious education program to me for my son. She also mentioned the FISH ministry to me where I could meet with other pre-school children for a few hours. I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit with me that day and spent a few hours at Ascension also re-registering with the parish office as a parishioner. As I drove away feeling awesome, I called my mother right away to let her know. She was so happy and she told me her prayers had been answered.

**Since returning** I have been active in my faith and my life has changed in many ways. I finally set aside time for my own personal spiritual growth. It was very healing for me to address the bad feelings I harbored for so many years. After making new friends in the FISH ministry I began to feel like I belonged somewhere again, and it was here at Ascension. I have to add that I was so glad Fr. Tobin was still the Pastor upon coming back, and he has made me and our family feel very welcome. I have also participated in other ministries and study groups and I have realized we are all sinners. I no longer allow bad feelings from the past to take over, and have become a much more thankful mother, wife, daughter, sister, and friend. For my high school yearbook back in 1987, I chose the following quote that at the time I didn't realize what it would mean to me, until I came home. "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know this place for the first time" (T.S. Eliot).

### **Meet Peggie Kaluscak**

Peggie was born and raised in the Catholic Church and had 12 years of Catholic education. She was married in the Catholic Church, but after her marriage broke down, she believed that she could no longer receive the sacraments. Peggie continued to attend Mass with her children who were now attending a Catholic school.

For Peggie to continue to have her children in a Catholic school, she would need tuition assistance. When Peggie went to see the priest, Father said (after he learned she was divorced) that there was "nothing he could do for her." After the priest repeated his rejection of Peggie, she took her children by the hand and walked out, staying away from church for 40 years.

**Peggie's return.** After Peggie retired, she was led to call Ascension to inquire about their Singles Group. In that group, she heard about the *Military Ministry* and soon after, struck up a friendship with Kate Midden. Gradually, Peggie found out that Kate had been away from church for many years, but has now returned. Peggie mentioned that she was spiritually confused and

did not understand what was going on with her. Kate convinced Peggie to come and see Fr. Tobin at the church.

Father and Peggie had a wonderful visit. He helped her to see that the Holy Spirit was at work in her life. Through his guidance and understanding, Peggie returned to church.

After having been back a year, Peggie was drawn to attend our Newcomers Breakfast and met Colleen who was leading the *Women of Faith Ministry* group. Attending this group has been a huge blessing in Peggie's life. She has learned so much and met some lovely ladies. Peggie also loves going to our Adoration Chapel where she can spend some quiet time with the Lord. She is also involved in our Door-to-Door Ministry where she is glad to share how she was away from church for 40 years and is now glad to be back.

### **CRHP (Christ Renews His Parish)**

CRHP is a two-day retreat weekend for men and women, which has touched thousands of lives. It is hosted by hundreds of parishes across America, and presented by parishioners for parishioners and for their friends and co-workers, for churchgoers and non-churchgoers.

#### ***Two Key Components***

" ***Witness talks by members of the presenting team.*** Each team is made up of about 15 to 20 people. During the course of the weekend, ten of them give a *witness talk* concerning their spiritual journey. Witness talks usually focus on growing up within or without a faith environment; how one stayed or didn't stay connected to God and church; how one had fallen away from God and church and returned; how one dealt with painful experiences in his/her life. Witness talks are usually a very powerful part of the weekend.

" ***Table Discussions.*** Retreatants are broken down into groups of five or six and seated around a table. Discussions are facilitated by a team member. The questions asked are ones that everyone feels comfortable with and can respond to. Everyone can share as little or as much as he/she likes. While no one is pressured to talk, table discussions are frequently the highlight of the weekend.

#### ***Other dimensions of the weekend***

There is time to spend in the Adoration Chapel. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is available for those who wish to receive it. Invariably, on each of these retreat

weekends, there are participants who come to receive this sacrament for the first time in 30+ years. We have two Masses on the weekend. Wonderful meals are cooked by members of former CRHP teams.

### ***A wonderful weekend***

*Nearly all* who have attended a CRHP weekend are glad they came. They see it as a great way to take a break from a busy schedule and family obligations to renew their spiritual life and meet other men and women from the parish. It is seen as a time to examine, rediscover, and/or intensify one's personal relationship with Christ. The atmosphere is welcoming, non-judgmental and affirming.

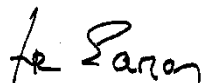
### ***Testimonials***

*"This weekend really changed my life."*

*"Even though I am a lifelong Catholic and go to Mass every Sunday, I really loved this weekend. It was a wonderful way for me to deepen my faith and meet some wonderful people from every walk of life."*

A big thank you to all who worked hard to make our Advent and Christmas liturgies prayerful and beautiful

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Aaron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.