



Fourth Sunday of Advent C

December 23, 2018

Welcome!

- ◆ **Our broken and wounded Church and yet a very active, praying and caring parish**
- ◆ **Christmas of the Soul**

I am glad you joined us this Christmas season for the awesome moment in time when God amazingly decided to join our human family in a most unusual way. More on this later.

As we gather together this Christmas, we as Catholics in America are aware of the very bad news about the clergy sex scandals in America and in other parts of the world. As a priest, I found it VERY hard to read the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report this past summer. It left me feeling ashamed, saddened and angry, especially the unconscionable conduct of some bishops in covering up misdeeds by priests. Hopefully, this terrible chapter in our Church's history is now behind us. I think it is safe to say that all dioceses in our nation now have in place very strict policies for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. As you probably know, most of the bad stuff happened in the last century. All known offenders are now either deceased or out of ministry. Nevertheless, this has been a horrible period in our Church's history.

What gives me hope?

In the midst of the bad news, three things give me hope:

- ◆ Jesus' promise to be with his Church until the end of time
- ◆ Vibrant parishes where great things are happening
- ◆ The stream of non-Catholics, including non-Catholic clergy, who are moved to join our Church

Before returning to his Father in heaven, Jesus promised to be with the Church he founded until the end of the world. And Catholics believe that we are the Church Jesus founded. Peter, who himself sinned grievously, was our first Pope. In the past 2,000 years, the Church Jesus founded has been attacked from within (e.g., by Martin Luther, once a Catholic monk) and from without (persecution). The Church not only survived every

attack, but she has grown from strength to strength. In her 2,000-year history, our Church, though "a Church of sinners", is also "a Church of thousands of saints. The presence of Jesus in our Church always *guarantees* her survival *and* growth.

We do not quit on our American dream just because of the sins and crimes committed by some of our Presidents and other leaders.

Vibrant parishes

Despite all the horrid and embarrassing incidents in our Church, vibrant parishes abound across our nation. And I can humbly suggest that Ascension is one of those dynamic parishes.

- ◆ Our top-rated PreK3 to 8th Grade School has produced outstanding students in the last few decades.
- ◆ Hundreds of parishioners are involved in one or more of our many ministries. They gather together to grow in faith, build spiritual friendships, and help with a massive outreach to the less fortunate, both locally and overseas. For example, our **Thrift Store** on Aurora Road raises about \$400,000 a year. A big portion of that money goes to **Social Concerns**, our Food Pantry, which helps about 20,000 needy individuals and families in various ways.

In our Annual Parish budget, about \$100,000 is set aside to help the less fortunate at home and abroad. I could go on and on writing about the many good things that occur in our parish. Yes, we belong to a universal Church where bad things have happened—and will continue to happen, but this should not cause us to be discouraged. With God's grace and each other's support, we should keep doing the best we can to serve our loving God and do our little bit to make a positive difference in the lives of thousands.

What about you? Where are you in your faith journey for Christmas?

Many of you—perhaps most of you—reading this column have a pretty active, dynamic faith life.

- ◆ You have a personal relationship with Jesus.
- ◆ You belong to a faith community.
- ◆ You do what you can to share your material and spiritual blessings with others.

Or maybe, this Christmas your faith journey is not in such a good place.

- ◆ Maybe God and the values of Jesus do not play an active role in your life.
- ◆ Maybe you do not belong to a faith community.
- ◆ Maybe sharing your spiritual and material blessings is not one of your priorities.

If the above is true, might our good Lord be calling you to have a change of heart, to make a fresh start? If so, what might be some starting points for you? The following are a few suggestions:

- ◆ Begin to pray a bit more. There are 96 fifteen-minute periods in every day. Is it too much to ask that you give the One who created you and keeps in being every moment of your life, one fifteen-minute prayer period each day? You have most likely heard the saying “*Life is fragile. Handle it with prayer.*” A part of your daily prayer could be reading the Gospel of the day—the words of Jesus.

Speaking of prayer, we have 370 parishioners who help us to have prayer on our campus 24/7 by signing up to spend one hour a week in our Adoration Chapel.

- ◆ If you are interested in reconnecting with the Church and, specifically, with Ascension parish, and/or have questions, I would love to meet with you. Don’t even think I might be too busy to meet with you. See my email address below.
- ◆ Contact Monica Sutton, Volunteer Coordinator of our 80 parish ministries. She can help you find your place in our parish. Getting connected to a parish ministry can be a life-changing move. Monica can be reached at msutton@ascensioncatholicsch.org.

As you know, we can all spend time obsessing about all the bad things in our world and in our institutions, or we can spend our time growing in our relationship with Jesus and making a positive difference in our little part of God’s world.

Mission trip to Uganda next summer

We are planning to join Blessed Trinity parish in Ocala on a mission trip to Uganda next summer. They have been going there for 13 years. If you are interested in finding out more about this mission trip, contact Maria Sittig at the Parish Office (321-254-1595 ext. 3072 or msittig@ascensioncatholicsch.org). Maria will email you my recent column with a lot of information about the mission trip.

Christmas of the soul

The following *beautiful* reflection was written by Father Nicholas Maestrini, P.I.M.E.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), a mystic and one of the greatest German theologians wrote: “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 was later developed by another mystic, Angelo Sitesio, (16th century) who wrote: “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 a 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 comprised of all our Christmas activities from the writing of Christmas cards to the Christmas decorations and 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.

The historical birth of Jesus is an event that, yes, took place in time, and as such, happened only once about 2000 years ago in Bethlehem. But his spiritual birth in human souls is an eternally repeated event because it is through it that Christ enters our souls and accomplishes our salvation through an exchange of love by inspiring and helping us to live as his disciples and to grow in his love and service. It is this living reality of the birth of Jesus in our souls that may transform Christmas from a merely nostalgic and material celebration to a real encounter of love that will enrich our lives and stimulate our relationship of love with him and our neighbor.

The Incarnation and birth of Jesus are cosmic events that have affected and continue to influence the whole of mankind because when Jesus became one of us, he also became our brother, making all of us his own real brothers and sisters, and therefore, children of God,

who is his Father and the common Father of all people. Through this miracle of love, Jesus made every human life sacred and made everyone who suffers, who is sick, who is poor, who is 'little' in the eyes of the world, even a human wreck, worthy of all care, dignity, and respect as a child of God, as his brother or sister. This is the real basis and foundation of true human solidarity and Christian brotherhood that can bring hope to the world. Without this, all our efforts to improve human relationships are like the chasing of windmills. This is the true spiritual and authentic Christmas message of love that Christ brought to the world.

In daily practice Christmas of the soul means to accept the truth of Christian brotherhood and live accordingly as Jesus' disciples. If we really see Christ's features in every human being, then we have to reject every bias and discrimination and to love all people in the world with the universal love with which Christ, himself, loves us.

Christ's love for us is sincere, unselfish, tolerant, forgiving and always ready to serve and to sacrifice oneself for others because God is our common Father, the father of all people, and we all are part of his beloved family.

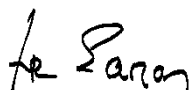
To imitate this kind of love in our lives is our lifelong task, and every Christmas is an opportunity to celebrate the Christmas of the soul by a growth in love for Jesus and our neighbor.

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If you like the above article, please share it with your friends.

If you like the Morning Prayer, please know that I have a *Treasury Booklet of Beautiful Prayers* on the website.

A most blessed Christmas,



Morning Prayer

**Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
I come into your loving presence
with gratitude for another day.**

**I thank you for the blessings in life
that I tend to take for granted:
food, shelter, health, family,
work, and faith in you.**

**May I live this day
in a manner that pleases you,
and helps me to become the person
you created me to be.**

**Help me to recognize and respond generously
to the promptings of the Holy Spirit
in the events and encounters of this day.**

**May I live this day
with the dispositions of heart
that reflect the values of Jesus:
love, truth, compassion, mercy,
justice and kindness.**

**When decisions need to be made,
help me to choose well.**

**When asked to walk the extra mile,
grant me generosity of heart.**

**Protect me from the false ways
of the Evil One**

and help me to live in your truth.

Expand my capacity for love and joy.

In all things, may I give you honor and glory.

Amen.

- Fr. Eamon Tobin