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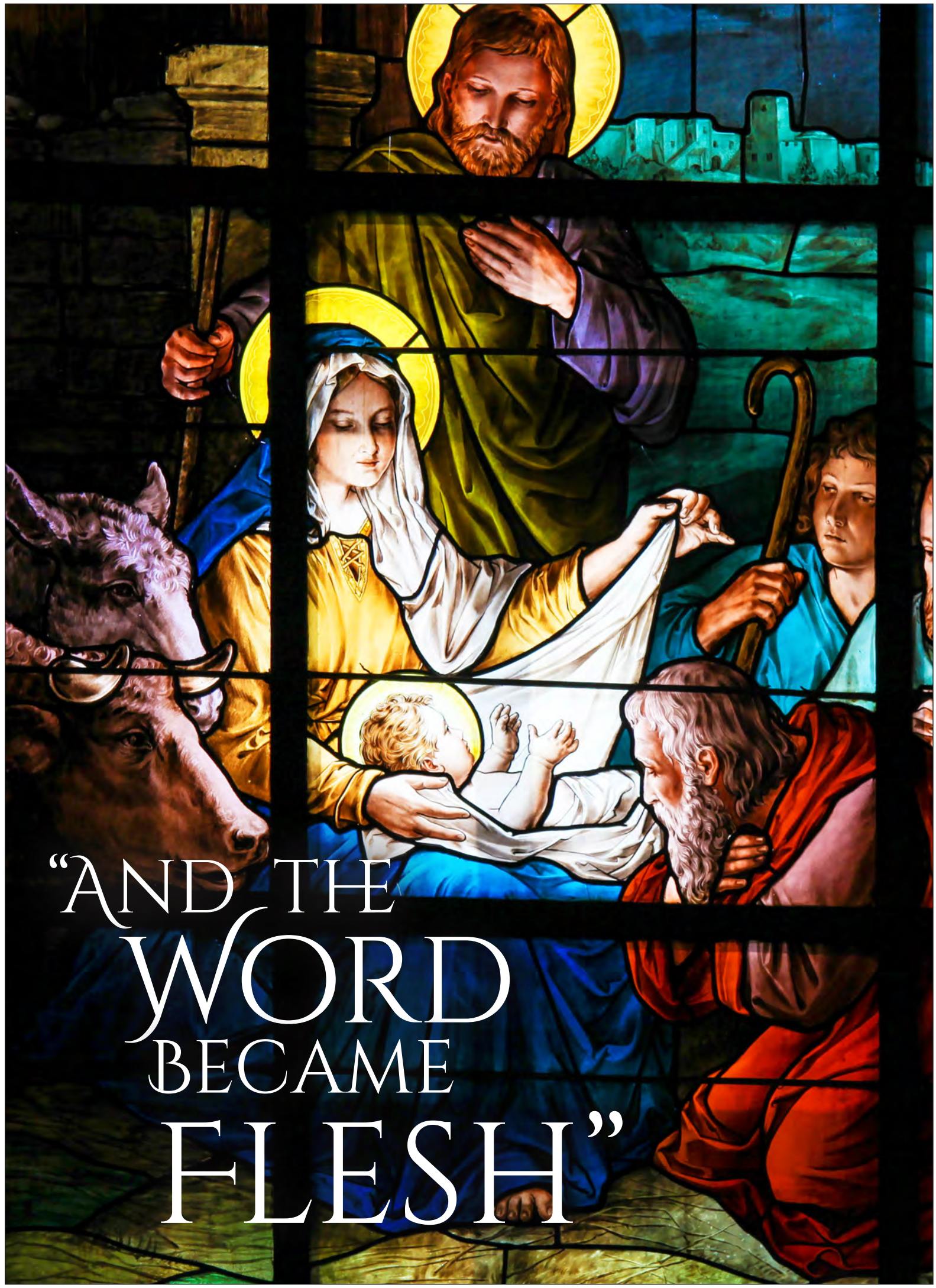

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The
Diocese of
Fort Wayne-South Bend

All Christians are earnest to speak the truth in charity and join with all peace-loving people in pleading for peace and trying to bring it about.
— Gaudiem et Spes, 78

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A Joyful Celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Bishop Rhoades Joins St. Michael Parish Community in Plymouth to Honor the Patroness of America

BY SCOTT WARDEN

Photos by Scott Warden

Worshippers gather at St. Michael Church in Plymouth on Friday, December 12, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Nearly 500 years ago, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to an Indigenous peasant who was walking to Mass in Tepeyac, Mexico – on the outskirts of what is now Mexico City. Dressed as an Aztec princess, Our Lady spoke to St. Juan Diego, a 57-year-old widower, in his native language. She told him to have the local bishop build a chapel on the site of the apparition.

But the bishop didn't believe Juan Diego, and so Mary appeared to him once again and told him to gather flowers – roses, specifically, which didn't grow in the winter, even in Mexico. Juan Diego collected the flowers in his cloak and presented them to the bishop. When he opened his cloak, the roses fell to the ground, and an image of Mary appeared on the inside of his tilma. The bishop fell to his knees, and a shrine was indeed built.

The story of Mary's appearance to Juan Diego in December of 1531 sparked what has been reported as the largest mass conversion in history, and the Church continues to reap its benefits, as today, nearly 80 percent of the population of Mexico is Catholic, and those waves of faith have spread throughout Latin America.

At St. Michael Catholic Church in Plymouth, hundreds of the faithful – largely multiple generations of Hispanic families – gathered to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalup on her feast day of December 12.

Bishop Rhoades celebrated Mass in Spanish and was joined by the parish's priests – Father Fernando Jimenez, the community's pastor, and Father Jose Arroyo, its parochial vicar.

In his homily, Bishop Rhoades drew from the first reading, comparing the pregnant woman in the Book of Revelation with Our Lady of Guadalupe – both dressed in the sun, with the moon beneath their feet, wearing the crown of stars (in Revelation), and the stars on the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe, both pregnant, with the woman in Revelation giving birth to Jesus, and Our Lady of Guadalupe giving birth to the Church in America.

"What I love most (about our Lady of Guadalupe) is her face," Bishop Rhoades said at Mass. "It is tender and calm, sweet and serene. The Mother of the true God appeared with a mestizo face, and she spoke the language of the Aztec people. Her humble and compassionate gaze gave Juan Diego and all the recently conquered people true hope and comfort. Maria gave them a sense of their dignity as beloved children of God. Her presence and words dispelled the darkness of superstition and fear. Our Lady of Guadalupe was the messenger of God – a messenger of the Gospel of her Son, who teaches the people that the true God is a God of love and mercy."

Bishop Rhoades continued, saying: "Our Lady has blessed all of America (Central, South, and North America) with her presence on this continent. She still blesses us with her presence and her love."

Father Jimenez told Today's Catholic that Bishop Rhoades' homily "focused on how Mary is a symbol of love that conquers evil, and I think that was very powerful, especially in these times in the world. But it seems like a lot of people have forgotten the essence of humanity, which is love. We were created in the image of God, and God is love. So, Mary, the woman in the Book of Revelation, is the sign of that love that comforts us."

The Hispanic community at St. Michael in Plymouth packed the pews to honor Mary, as they placed dozens of vases of flowers beneath a painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe and a statue near the altar that was adorned with flowers surrounding her.

"Their devotion to Mary is very genuine," Father Arroyo told Today's Catholic. "The community here in Plymouth is diverse. We have a large Mexican community, but the majority of Hispanics here are actually Honduran. It's beautiful how Our Lady unites us all."

Both Father Arroyo and Father Jimenez said it was uplifting for the community to have Bishop Rhoades come and celebrate the Mass – and preach his homily – in their native language of Spanish.

"As he pointed out in his homily, when Mary came to the natives of these lands, she spoke in their mother tongue," Father Jimenez said. "It was a way to communicate with them. So, for us, having our bishop come and speak in the language that we grew up with is also very important. You know, you may understand the message, but when it is in your language, it touches your heart."

Asked why the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe is so celebrated at St. Michael, especially among the Hispanic community, Father Jimenez said that gathering to venerate the Blessed Mother and worship her Son reminds them of being in their native countries.

"One of the most common comments that I hear from our community is that with these feast days, especially Marian feast days, is that they feel at home," Father Jimenez said. "And even though we may not be in the place that we were born, when we come to celebrate Christ and His mother, it feels like home."

Bishop Rhoades greets people as they exit the church following Mass at St. Michael Church in Plymouth on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Scott Warden is editor-in-chief of Today's Catholic.

Bishop Rhoades Extends Christmas Greetings to All

BY BISHOP KEVIN C. RHOADES

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

"Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord."

On Christmas Day, we rejoice in the wondrous gift of our salvation. Christ, our Savior, has entered our world – God's eternal plan of loving goodness made visible in a newborn child.

In our time, we are surrounded by distractions and anxieties that can dim our awareness of this central truth of our faith. Yet Christmas reminds us that God has not abandoned us. He draws near to us in Jesus, who comes to bring hope, healing, and the promise of His unfailing love.

We give thanks to the Father for sending His Son, and we marvel at the way our long-awaited Messiah chose to come – not in power or grandeur but in poverty and humility; not as a conqueror but as a vulnerable child entrusted to the care of Mary and Joseph.

As we face the challenges of our world and the personal trials of our own lives, may we look to the Holy Family as a model of humble trust in God's plan. Let us proclaim the Good News of Jesus – through our words, certainly, but above all through our actions. I invite you to participate in God's work in our world by loving one another as Christ loves us and by bringing Christian hope into your families and communities.

Because on Christmas Day our Savior comes, we can truly say, "Merry Christmas."

May the joy of Christ's birth fill your hearts. Merry Christmas to you all, and a blessed New Year.

PUBLIC SCHEDULE OF Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades

Veritatem In Caritate
(Truth in Charity)

- **Wednesday, December 24, at 10:30 p.m.** – Christmas Eve Mass, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Fort Wayne
- **Friday, December 26, at 3 p.m.** – Holy Hour and Mass for Vocations, Oratory of Saint Francis, Fort Wayne
- **Sunday, December 28, at 11:30 a.m.** – Closing Mass of the Jubilee Year, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Fort Wayne

'Dream Bigger': Following St. Joseph into Christmas

BY FATHER ZANE LANGENBRUNNER

On the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, the Church invites us to listen to the story of "how the birth of Jesus Christ came about." The Christmas story is so familiar to us that we could probably recite it word for word, like Linus in the famous scene from "A Charlie Brown Christmas." This familiarity, however, breeds not contempt, nor even mere nostalgia. Hearing the story again and again, year after year, only makes us grow in affection for it, because we recognize that it is our story, too. Every family is meant to become a Holy Family; every home is meant to welcome the Christ Child.

In this Sunday's Gospel, we hear a portion of this great story, told from St. Joseph's perspective. Joseph is described very simply by Matthew as "a righteous man" – dikaios in Greek or tzaddik in Hebrew. This term appears frequently in the Old Testament to describe law-abiding, Torah-observant Jews, as well individuals who serve as authentic models of piety. In Matthew's Gospel, however, "righteousness" refers above all to obedience to God's will (see Matthew 3:15; 5:20; 6:33; 21:32). The one who is "righteous" is the one who cooperates with the salvific plan of God as it unfolds in his or her particular circumstances.

St. Joseph is righteous in both senses. It is his fidelity to the precepts of the Law that motivate his decision to divorce Mary, and to do so "quietly" rather than "exposing her to shame." But it is his deeper righteousness, his unwavering obedience to the plan of God unfolding in his own life, that allows him to receive the message of the angel and change his course of action. Joseph could

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Priests, Seminarians Prepare for 11th Cupertino Classic

BY ERIC PEAT

Eric Peat

Priests, at left, and seminarians pose following the 2024 Cupertino Classic, which was won by the seminarians.

He's had the honor of meeting our late Holy Father, Pope Francis. He's chanted the Exsultet at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City for the Easter Vigil Mass – an experience he called "the most nerve-wracking thing I've done in my entire life."

Little did Father Zane Langenbrunner know that these anxiety-filled moments were preparing him for an equally daunting test of nerves: taking the court for the Cupertino Classic.

"I said to myself, I'll never be nervous to sing anything as a priest, because that's kind of the mountaintop," Father Zane said of chanting the Easter Proclamation. "But I will say, being a priest and a public person in front of crowds, it does help you to handle the moment when the pressure is on."

The pressure will certainly be on at the 11th Cupertino Classic, the annual basketball game pitting diocesan seminarians against our parish priests. This year's installment will be held on Friday, December 26, at Bishop Luers High School in Fort Wayne with free admission for all.

Seminarian Michael Hickey, who is helping to organize the event, stressed that its mission is to shine a light on vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

"It is a great opportunity for young men and women to see that priests, seminarians, and religious sisters are people, too, who like to have fun," said Hickey, in his third year of configuration stage at St. Meinrad Seminary in southern Indiana. "I think a lot of people only see or know their priest in the sanctuary at Church, and that is important – but this basketball game allows for an encounter with priests and religious in a different way."

The event will begin with a Holy Hour at the University of St. Francis Oratory from 3-4 p.m., led by Bishop Rhoades. Bishop will then celebrate Mass at the Oratory at 4 p.m., leading up to the 6:30 tip-off. The presence of Bishop Rhoades, who has been unable to attend the Cupertino Classic for a handful of years, has both the priests and the seminarians buzzing.

"We are so excited to have Bishop Rhoades at the Holy Hour, Mass, and game!" Hickey said. "It is special because Bishop Rhoades is our spiritual father, our shepherd who guides the flock of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. We all know the feeling of having our parent come to our athletic games when we were younger – it is kind of like that."

The teams will look to break a 5-5 tie in the all-time series when they take the court. Despite their thinning roster, the seminarians have managed to win three of the past four meetings, including last year's 52-42 victory at Marian High School in Mishawaka. Seminarian Matt Henry, in his first year of discipleship stage at St. Meinrad, believes his team's superior conditioning can offset its lower numbers.

"I think the key to beating the priests is going to be our fitness level, given that we don't have a lot of substitutes," said Henry, who will be playing in his second Cupertino Classic. "We'll have to play smart and not waste energy and avoid any injuries, but if we can do that, I think we can keep up."

The seminarian squad will once again be led by Deacon Greenan Sullivan, who played collegiately at Ave Maria University in Florida, and Michael Florin, who is now fully recovered from an ACL tear he suffered last spring. They will be joined by Deacon Patrick Ernst, whose "college rugby experience will be evident in his game play," according to Henry. Rounding out the roster will be Deacons Sam Martinez and John Hickey, along with seminarians Thomas Bundy, D'Angelo Marazita, and crowd-favorite Mason Bailey.

For the priests, victory hinges on slowing the aforementioned Deacon Sullivan – a task that Father Ben Landrigan admitted is challenging, due to his combination of speed, strength, and ball handling.

"He's immovable when he gets in the lane, and even if he misses, half the time he gets his own rebound," said Father Landrigan, who has played in every Cupertino Classic since its inception in 2014 – six as a seminarian, and now five as a priest. "If there's a way to stop him, we've got to double down on not letting him get second chances."

The priests boast a squad with an impressive balance of youth and experience. Although Father Dan Niezer is on injured reserve this year, Father Paolo Degasperi is back from Italy and will have homecourt advantage as the chaplain at Bishop Luers. Also, Father Andy Barnes has joined the team via the ordination transfer portal. They will be joined by Father Langenbrunner and a host of Cupertino veterans in Fathers Terry Coonan, Brian Florin, Jake Schneider, Drew Curry, Thomas Zehr, and Ryan Timossi. And, according to Father Landrigan, there may be another unnamed face on the priests' bench.

"I don't want to give away too much, but we're hoping to get a coach," said Father Landrigan, declining to reveal the identity of the hopeful individual. "If we had a little direction, a little strategy, someone managing the team, that would be great."

In addition, the Sisters of Saint Francis of Perpetual Adoration will once again provide halftime entertainment, and members of the diocesan Vocation Office will be selling T-shirts to help support seminarian education. Regardless of the outcome of the game, the Cupertino Classic promises an environment that not only displays the beauty of joy of religious vocations but also one that highlights the love that the diocesan laity has for its clergy.

"The game is decent basketball; we kind of know what we're doing," admitted Father Langenbrunner. "It's that level of basketball, and yet there's always so many people, and it's so loud whenever anyone scores, whether it's the seminarians or the priests, all the people in the crowd go crazy. I really love the enthusiasm. It just shows how much people love their priests and seminarians. It's like a family reunion."

"For anyone discerning a vocation that is worried that their friends or family may not support them, they can see a gym full of people that are there supporting them in prayer every step of the way through their discernment," Henry said. "Additionally, for me, it has really emphasized the joy of religious vocations seeing fraternity of the priests and seminarians as well as the joy of the sisters; it's hard to not want to be a part of that."

Eric Peat

Father Zane Langenbrunner, left, and Father Drew Curry smile from the bench at last year's Cupertino Classic in Mishawaka.

Mary Beth Greer

Seminarian Matt Henry blocks a shot by Father Ben Landrigan during the 2024 Cupertino Classic.

Mary Beth Greer

Father Ben Landrigan drives to the basket during the 2024 Cupertino Classic, which was won by the seminarians.

School Spirit

Your Schools, Your Stories

This academic year, Today's Catholic is partnering with the student media programs at all four Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. Each week, student writers, editors, and photographers from Bishop Luers and Bishop Dwenger in Fort Wayne, Saint Joseph in South Bend, and Marian in Mishawaka will share their work on this new page, School Spirit, dedicated to telling the stories of their school communities.

Dwenger Seniors Savor Championship Run

BY COURTNEY HAYNES

Photos provided by Bishop Dwenger High School

Bishop Dwenger principal Jason Schiffli, center, head football coach Jason Garrett, right, and players pose with the state championship trophy at a pep rally.

Members of the Bishop Dwenger football team have put their blood, sweat, and tears into trying to achieve one of the most difficult tasks in high school athletics – namely, advancing to the state finals and, ultimately, winning a state championship.

Although it is an extremely challenging goal, with determination and hard work, Dwenger's football team won the Class 4A state championship on Saturday, November 29, at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, defeating the Roncalli Royals 36-29.

With the score tied at 29 in the middle of the fourth quarter, Bishop Dwenger kicker Lucas Nguyen completed a pass to AJ Shefferly on a fake field goal. Shefferly caught the ball and broke several tackles on his way to the game-winning touchdown that clinched the program's sixth state title.

Most of the players have played together or competed against one another since they were little kids, dreaming of playing for a championship at Lucas Oil Stadium one day.

"Having played with and against my teammates since third grade, it is something we have all dreamed of since then," said senior quarterback Henry Jordan. "The brotherhood that this senior class has is like no other."

This team deserved every bit of making it to state, playing at the Lucas Oil Stadium, and going home with a win. They have spent many months building up to this moment, preparing for the best possible outcome.

"We work together every week and watch film together and just build good chemistry together throughout the week," said senior Gus Tippmann.

Having a bond that makes it easier to perform flawlessly on the field is crucial to a strong and successful team. This team has worked together through thick and thin in order to get as far as they did.

"Football has brought me so close to many of my teammates and created friendships that I wouldn't have otherwise," Shefferly said. "Without football, I don't think I would be the same person I am today."

Being their last year at Dwenger, these seniors are reminiscing about every memory made on the field together – and what it means to be a BD football player.

"Playing football at Dwenger is one of the biggest blessings because of the traditions that have been carried on since the beginning," said senior Nick Tippmann.

Every game, the players catch a glimpse of their future and look back on their past in seeing the many different people who surround the program. They inspire the young kids who look up to them and can imagine what future saints will see when they become alumni.

"It is cool always seeing the alumni and future saints at our games," said Nick Tippmann.

Football comes with many hardships, and the team has to work hard to achieve the goals they've set before themselves. They are constantly practicing and learning how to become better at the sport they know and love.

Coach Jason Garrett speaks at a pep rally celebrating the Saints' 4A state title.

"To be a Bishop Dwenger football player, you have to have that gritty, never-quit attitude," Shefferly said. "Everyone works together for the team to go; everyone needs to have trust, unity, and toughness," he said.

It is not just one person who makes the team flourish, the seniors said; it is everyone working together and putting in the effort to make the team the best it can be. The relationships created while on the team are like no other and are never taken for granted.

"Football has brought me so close to all my teammates and helped me realize how strong our brotherhood is. It is my favorite thing ever," said Gus Tippmann.

The seniors are leaving Dwenger with many practices filled with laughter, many exciting games, and many bonds created through friendship and football.

Throughout the season, the seniors said, each member of the football team stayed focus on the main prize: winning state. Having lost to Roncalli in the regular season opener gave the Saints an idea of how difficult the task was going to be in the state finals.

"After we lost 3-0 in the first game of the season against Roncalli, I'm sure the whole team can remember the feeling and the promise we made that we would remember this feeling and it wouldn't happen again," Jordan said. "We all told ourselves that we would see them again in the postseason, and God lined that up perfectly in the state final game."

The team knew it was going to be a tough game, but with their nonstop persistence, they knew they could accomplish anything they put their minds to.

"You have to have a work ethic that can never be turned off," Nick Tippmann said. "We have been training for this since January, and we have kept training. It has never stopped. This has helped us go this far into the playoffs."

The football program at Dwenger is one filled with faith, love, trust, and family. On the team, the players treat one another like brothers, and the relationships made will last a lifetime.

Courtney Haynes is a sophomore at Bishop Dwenger High School.

News Briefs

Pope: Christmas Calls Us to Encounter Christ in the Ordinary

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

The Christmas tree is lighted in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Monday, December 15. Christmas is a reminder that people can encounter God in ordinary, everyday places, Pope Leo XIV said on Saturday, December 13. Born as a baby in Bethlehem, God chose to "reveal himself in a human setting," the pope said. "He does not use impressive scenery, but a simple home; he does not show himself from afar, but draws near; he does not remain in an inaccessible place in heaven, but reaches us in the very heart of our little stories."

Notre Dame Granted More Than $5 Million in Lilly Endowment Funds

(OSV News) – In 1937, leaders of the pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly and Company in Indianapolis established a philanthropic foundation created to support Christian seminaries. Lilly Endowment Inc. recently announced 45 recipients of its Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative, which aims to help theological schools in the U.S. and Canada strengthen their abilities to prepare ordained and lay pastoral leaders. The University of Notre Dame was among the schools awarded grants, as it received more than $5 million to make two different forms of theological education accessible to future Church leaders, said Holy Cross Father Kevin Grove, associate professor of theology. "The master of divinity forms lay ecclesial ministers in person alongside Holy Cross seminarians and brothers," he told OSV News. "The MA (provides) ministers who are already in the field and in need of continuing education the opportunity to take online courses during the year and spend modules at Notre Dame during the summers."

'Enough' of Antisemitic Violence Pope Says after Australia Attack

SYDNEY (OSV News) – After two gunmen targeted Jewish beachgoers at an event celebrating the first day of Hanukkah in terror attack at Sydney's Bondi Beach, Pope Leo XIV highlighted God's closeness to humanity and called for prayers for those who suffer on account of war and violence, especially the victims from the Jewish community in Australia. "Enough with these forms of antisemitic violence!" Pope Leo said on Monday, December 15, speaking with the groups that donated this year's Vatican Christmas Tree and Nativity Scene. "We must eliminate hatred from our hearts," he highlighted. In a December 15 statement, Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney called for an end to an "atmosphere of antisemitism" in Australia. He added that, as Christians, "an attack on the Jews is an attack on all of us." Just hours after the shooting and an initial report of 12 dead, the death toll rose to 15. The Guardian reported a 10-year-old girl, a rabbi, and two Holocaust survivors were among victims. The second gunman, police confirmed, was in custody and in critical condition. According to authorities, more than 40 people were wounded and taken to St. Vincent's Hospital. In the wake of the attack, Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, expressed the Church's solidarity with the Jewish community in a letter to leaders of the Jewish community in the U.S. "The festival of Hanukkah begins this year for the Jewish community with a moment of profound sorrow," Archbishop Coakley wrote. "The shooting in Sydney, Australia is a painful reminder that hatred remains a threat to our lives, our communities, and the bonds that unite us."

Rhode Island Bishop Offers Prayers in Wake of Shooting at Brown University

PROVIDENCE, Rhode Island (OSV News) – Bishop Bruce A. Lewandowski of Providence offered prayers for "all affected by this tragedy" in the wake of a December 13 shooting at Brown University that left two students dead and nine others injured. Officials said on Sunday, December 14, that a person of interest in connection with the shooting was in police custody, but around 11 p.m., they announced evidence was pointing in a different direction, and early on December 15 they released the person being held. The manhunt continued for the suspected shooter. The shooting took place just after 4 p.m. on December 13 at the Barus and Holley building, which houses the university's School of Engineering and its physics department, WCVB-TV reported. Students were attending a review session for the final exams. "As are many, I am deeply saddened and troubled by the senseless shooting today at Brown University in Providence," Bishop Lewandowski said in a statement. "Let us unite in prayer for those who lost their lives, for the injured, for the Brown University community, and all affected by this tragedy." "May God continue to guide our elected officials, law enforcement, and first responders as they work to keep everyone safe," he added.

Illinois Legalizes Assisted Suicide

CHICAGO (OSV News) – Illinois has become the 12th state, along with the District of Columbia, to legalize assisted suicide, amid outcry among the state's Catholic bishops and other pro-life and disability advocates. On Friday, December 12, Governor JB Pritzker signed SB 1950 into law, allowing terminally ill adults who are Illinois residents to end their lives through self-administered lethal drugs prescribed by a physician. Pritzker's approval of the measure comes after a number of efforts to prevent the bill from becoming law. On December 10, the Illinois Catholic bishops sent a letter to Pritzker urging him to veto the bill and to instead ensure the state's residents have "compassionate, loving care provided by trained professionals and/or loving family members" at the end of their lives. The following night, dozens of the measure's opponents braved the damp chill to hold a vigil outside the governor's downtown Chicago office. Doctors and advocates for persons with disabilities spoke out against the bill, pleading that Pritzker veto it. In their letter, the Illinois bishops said, "Real compassion demands we invest in and ensure access to excellent pain management and holistic support for the terminally ill, allowing them to live their final days in comfort and peace, surrounded by family, friends and other emotional supports." They also predicted that the law "will also lead to more suicide in Illinois."

God Wants All People to Be Saved, Pope Says at Jubilee of Prisoners

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Even in difficult situations and harsh places, like prisons, when people focus on caring for one another, respecting each other, and offering forgiveness, "beautiful flowers spring forth from the 'hard ground' of sin and suffering," Pope Leo XIV said. Dressed in rose vestments for Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, the pope celebrated Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on Monday, December 15, for the Jubilee of Prisoners. Inmates and former inmates from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Malta, and Chile accompanied by guards and chaplains participated, as well as representatives from 85 other countries. It was the last of the major Jubilee events before Christmas and the closing of the Holy Year on January 6.

Hong Kong's Jimmy Lai Convicted in 'Farce' National Security Trial

HONG KONG (OSV News) – Hong Kong Catholic media tycoon and pro-democracy advocate Jimmy Lai has been convicted under the city's sweeping national security law, a verdict critics are calling a political show trial. American theologian George Weigel told OSV News the outcome was expected, describing it as a display of authoritarian power rather than justice. "Everyone knew what the 'verdict' in this farce of a show trial would be," Weigel told OSV News on Monday, December 15, right after the news of the conviction broke. Lai, founder of the now-shuttered "Apple Daily," was arrested in 2020 after Beijing imposed the security law following mass pro-democracy protests. He has pleaded not guilty to charges including colluding with foreign forces and publishing seditious material. The conviction could carry a life sentence, with sentencing expected in early 2026. A British citizen and lifelong Catholic, Lai refused to flee Hong Kong, saying leaving would mean abandoning his faith. He has spent nearly five years in solitary confinement, creating religious artwork while imprisoned. U.S. officials, Catholic leaders, and international advocates have called for his release, framing his imprisonment as a test of religious freedom, press freedom, and human dignity.

Honoring the Patroness of the Americas

St. Joseph Church in Fort Wayne Reenacts the Story of Our Lady of Guadalupe

BY TODAY'S CATHOLIC

On the December 12 feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the community from St. Joseph Catholic Church in Fort Wayne gathered to reenact Our Lady's appearance to Juan Diego in Tepeyac, Mexico, in 1531.

Jessi Camacho played the Virgin of Guadalupe, while St. Juan Diego was played by Leonel Lozano Vargas. Father Kevin Bauman, pastor of St. Joseph Parish, played the role of the Franciscan Bishop whom Juan Diego visited to relay the Blessed Mother's request to build a chapel at the site of the apparition.

Following the reenactment, children dressed in elaborate costumes celebrated by performing cultural dances down the main aisle of the church before Father Bauman celebrated Mass for the feast day.

The evening ended with a community potluck at St. Joseph Catholic School, which included food and additional performances by the young dancers.

Girls dressed in traditional costumes wait to perform at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Fort Wayne on Friday, December 12, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Photos by Joe Romie

Our Lady of Guadalupe, left, played by Jessi Camacho, puts flowers into the cloak of St. Juan Diego, played by Leonel Lozano Vargas, during a reenactment at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Fort Wayne on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Roses fall from the cloak of St. Juan Diego, played by Leonel Lozano Vargas, during a reenactment of the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Fort Wayne on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Young dancers dressed in traditional garb perform during a celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Fort Wayne on Friday, December 12.

Bishop: Gifts of the Holy Spirit 'Sustain Our Moral Life'

26 Members of the University of Notre Dame Community Come into Full Communion in the Church

BY LISA KOCHANOWSKI

Snow-lined walkways, brisk air, and rays of sunshine adorned the landscape at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at the University of Notre Dame on Sunday, December 7, a day of celebration where 26 students embarked on the Rite of Reception into full communion in the Catholic Church.

"At this liturgy, 26 of our brothers and sisters in Christ will receive through the Sacrament of Confirmation the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit," said Bishop Rhoades, who celebrated the Mass. "They will receive an increase and a deepening of the grace they received at baptism. They will become more firmly united to Christ and more perfectly bound to the Church."

The first reading from Isaiah reflected on the sprout of Jesse.

"On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom," Bishop Rhoades said in his homily. "That shoot, of course, is the Messiah, a descendant of David. He will be different from other kings because the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge."

In Psalm 72, King Solomon asks God to grant him wisdom to defend the poor and oppressed. "O God, give your judgment to the king; your justice to the king's son; / That he may govern your people with justice, your oppressed with right judgment" (Psalm 72:1-2).

"In Advent, we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Messiah, the new king, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Mary, and the Son of God," Bishop Rhoades said. "We have been called to live in His dream, to spread it. To carry out the will of His Father, Christ inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth. In His signs and in His miracles, Jesus manifested that

Photos by Lisa Kochanowski

Members of the University of Notre Dame community who are coming into full communion in the Church stand during a Mass at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart on Sunday, December 7.

the Kingdom was present in Him, that He was the Messiah, and He instituted the Church as the seed and beginning of that kingdom. By His death and resurrection, Jesus accomplished the coming of His kingdom. But we still pray the High Kingdom come, since, as is all too evident in the world, His kingdom has not yet fully come. This will only happen when Christ returns to glory. And the Advent season is not only about the celebration of Christmas but for His second coming."

According to Bishop Rhoades, we're called to extend Christ's kingdom until it is brought to perfection by Christ at the end of time, when He will judge the living and the dead and pronounce the final word on all of history. The last judgment, which John the Baptist alluded to at the end of the Gospel reading, will reveal that God's justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by His creatures, and that God's love is stronger than death. At the end of time, the kingdom of God will come in its focus. After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul, and the universe itself will be renewed. Scripture calls this marvelous renewal the new heaven and the new earth. Human beings and the whole cosmos, the visible universe, will be transformed. The prophetic message of Isaiah will be fully realized, and the words of his Psalm 72 fulfilled.

During the homily, Bishop Rhoades reminded everyone that the gifts the prophet Isaiah proclaimed as belonging to the Messiah are also gifts bestowed on us, His people.

"It's these gifts that sustain our moral life," Bishop Rhoades said, noting the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord. "It's good for us, all of us, to reflect on these seven gifts that we receive in baptism and confirmation."

Bishop Rhoades continued, saying: "The saints our candidates have chosen for their confirmation names, as their special patrons, were men and women who opened their minds and hearts to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to the graces that they received at baptism and confirmation," said Bishop Rhoades. "The saints are models and intercessors for you who will be confirmed today. Models of openness to the Holy Spirit of living a life in the Spirit."

Bishop Rhoades told the candidates that in the Sacrament of Confirmation, the Holy Spirit equips them for the mission to witness Christ in all their words and deeds, to spread His kingdom on earth. All were instructed to follow St. Paul's lists of 12 fruits of eternal glory that the Holy Spirit forms in us – charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control, and chastity.

"Dear candidates, if you live by the Spirit, your Christian lives will bear these fruits. And you know what will happen? You will become saints," Bishop Rhoades said. "And that's my prayer for every one of you. … In this season of Advent, may the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Queen of all Saints … intercede for all of us, especially those who will now be received into full communion in the Church, who will receive her son's body and blood in the Eucharist for the first time, and for all who will be strengthened by the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

'Let the Child Jesus Illuminate Our Lives'

BY CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

Catholic News Service

The Nativity scene and the Christmas tree are signs of faith and hope, Pope Leo XIV said. "As we contemplate them in our homes, parishes, and town squares, let us ask the Lord to renew in us the gift of peace and fraternity," he said, calling for prayers for all those who suffer because of war and violence. "We must eliminate hatred from our hearts." The pope was speaking on Monday, December 15, during a meeting with the government representatives, artisans, and donors responsible for providing the Christmas decorations in the Paul VI Audience Hall and in St. Peter's Square. Pope Leo thanked the Costa Rican artist who created the Nativity scene for the audience hall, titled "Nacimiento Gaudium." Created by Paula Sáenz Soto, it features a pregnant Virgin Mary and 28,000 colored ribbons, each representing a life saved from abortion thanks to the prayers and support provided to many mothers in difficulty by Catholic organizations, according to a news release by the Vatican City State's governing office. "I thank the Costa Rican artist who, together with the message of peace at Christmas, also wanted to launch an appeal for the protection of life from the moment of conception," Pope Leo said. "The Nativity scene and the Christmas tree are signs of faith and hope," he said to all those present. "Let the tenderness of the child Jesus illuminate our lives. Let God's love, like the branches of an evergreen tree, remain fervent in us."

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surpass the demands of ordinary justice because of his strong and serious devotion to the living God. He could dream bigger because his righteousness was motivated by love.

In a wonderful catechesis from December 1, 2021, Pope Francis spoke about St. Joseph as a just man. His remarks focused first on how "God's voice intervenes in Joseph's discernment," pointing to the need for all of us to "cultivate a just life and, at the same time, to always feel the need for God's help to broaden our horizons and to consider the circumstances of life from an always different, larger perspective." Indeed, we must live a righteous life, free from grave sin, to properly discern God's will; it is a prerequisite. But we will never really know God's plan for our lives until we allow Him to summon us out of our smallness. This requires listening to His voice in the intimacy of prayer, and even in our dreams, just as St. Joseph did.

> "But we will never really know God's plan for our lives until we allow Him to summon us out of our smallness."

Pope Francis goes on to apply St. Joseph's righteousness to the context of marriage. Addressing newlyweds, the pope speaks of the importance of passing from "the logic of falling in love" to "the logic of a mature love." His words are worth quoting at length.

He said: "Precisely when falling in love with its expectations seems to come to an end, that is where true love begins or true love enters in there. In fact, to love is not the pretension that the other person, or life, should correspond to our imagination. Rather, it means to choose in full freedom to take responsibility for one's life as it comes. This is why Joseph gives us an important lesson. He chooses Mary with 'his eyes open.' We can say 'with all the risks.'"

This makes me think of another quotation from C.S. Lewis' book, "The Four Loves," on the vulnerability of love. Lewis writes: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."

St. Joseph's heart was not wrapped up, locked away, or unbreakable. He loved "with a father's heart" – Patris Corde, to quote Pope Francis's title for his apostolic letter on St. Joseph. This is a heart full of courage and a keen sense of justice, yes, but it is also a heart full of vulnerability, a heart open to something deeper, greater, and more mysterious than it could ever dream up on its own. In a word, Joseph loved with a heart open to God and to His Son.

At the end of this Advent season, we must ask for hearts like St. Joseph's. We have heeded John the Baptist's call to "repent" of our sins and to turn away from the "hobbies" and "little luxuries" that entangle us. But we must now turn with tenderness toward the vulnerability of Divine Love, the Love that makes itself little for our salvation at Christmas. And only then, with St. Joseph, will we begin to understand the biggest dream of all: the dream of God, fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Father Zane Langenbrunner is parochial vicar at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church in Fort Wayne.

Vincentian Mass Honors Those Who Serve the Needy

BY TIM JOHNSON

Photo by Tim Johnson

Leaders at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul – Fort Wayne announced the 2025 recipients of the Top Hat Awards, which honors Vincentians whose faithful service reflects the society's long tradition of quietly "tipping one's hat" in gratitude for Christ-centered charity offered with humility and love. Pictured during the society's breakfast at St. Therese Parish in Fort Wayne on Saturday, December 13, from left, are Sam Schenkel, district council president; John O'Boyle from the St. Gaspar del Bufalo Conference in Rome City; Peter Walters from the St. Francis of Assisi Conference at St. Anthony Parish in Angola; Bishop Rhoades; Bob Felicichia from the St. Therese Conference; Tom Ryan from the St. Vincent de Paul Parish Conference in Fort Wayne; and Lara Schreck, executive director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society – Fort Wayne. Not pictured is Top Hat Award recipient Mary Ann Welling of the St. Charles Conference.

As members of the Fort Wayne chapter of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul gathered for their annual Vincentian Mass and breakfast on Saturday, December 13, at St. Therese Church in Fort Wayne, the focus was less on another year coming to a close and more on the people whose quiet service continues to sustain neighbors in need.

With Bishop Rhoades celebrating Mass, about 200 Vincentians from across the region came together to give thanks, honor outstanding volunteers, and reflect on how faith-driven service has met rising needs in the community over the past year.

During his homily at the Vincentian Mass, Bishop Rhoades placed that work of charity within the broader mission of the Church, particularly as the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend prepares for its first diocesan synod in 100 years. Drawing on the biblical image of fire – from the prophet Elijah to Pentecost – Bishop Rhoades reminded the faithful that all Christians are called to carry the fire of the Holy Spirit into the world.

Bishop Rhoades said, "I also chose as the theme of the synod 'Spreading the fire of God's love' because this is our mission as Christ's Church: to spread the truth, beauty, and joy of the Gospel."

"I see the St. Vincent de Paul Society as an integral part of the diocesan synod," Bishop Rhoades said. "The fifth synod priority – serving the poor, the suffering, and the vulnerable – is actually at the heart of your mission as Vincentians."

In quiet, often unseen ways, Bishop Rhoades added, Vincentians are already "spreading the fire of God's love" through their service.

Lara Schreck, executive director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul – Fort Wayne, said the need in the community continues to grow.

"There is just so much need in the community right now," she said. "We are seeing more people than ever calling the Society of St. Vincent de Paul asking for help."

At the breakfast, Schreck shared highlights from the society's work over the past year. The society provided more than $500,000 in rent and utility assistance to help families remain housed, while food and nutrition assistance was provided more than 70,000 times across the district – a 27 percent increase from the previous year.

"We're hearing heartbreaking stories," Schreck added. "People living in their cars, people having their utilities shut off in cold weather, working families who simply can't keep up with the cost of living."

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul operates 12 food pantries in the region.

"We provide rent and utility assistance, free clothing and furniture vouchers, and we've launched a Build-to-Work carpentry program to help people find better-paying jobs," Schreck said.

Beyond emergency assistance, the society's ministries address long-term needs with dignity. Its Caravan program provided free medical transportation to more than 500 individuals last year, while volunteers in the district's jail ministry supplied warm clothing to more than 1,400 inmates at the Allen County Jail.

With a staff of just 20 and more than 900 volunteers in 23 conferences, "our volunteers make everything possible," Schreck said. "What inspires me is the way our people serve. Because we are faith-based, we are truly seeing Christ in the people we serve, and that's why I'm part of this organization."

Shreck noted at the breakfast: "It's heartbreaking to realize that some of the people we serve are so used to being overlooked, to being treated unfairly or made to feel like they don't matter. They are often genuinely surprised when they receive care and kindness. Your gentleness, humility, and zeal help them feel seen and loved as children of God."

Schreck shared a story with Today's Catholic of a single mother with two children who was getting by delivering food when her car broke down, leaving her suddenly without income.

"One of our parish conferences stepped in," she said. Volunteers helped with food, assisted her move to a more affordable apartment, connected her with furniture and clothing, and someone even donated a car. "It was a family coming together to help in every way," Schreck said. "It changed her life and the lives of her children, giving them hope and a new start."

Schreck told the volunteers at the breakfast: "You are spreading the fire of God's love through your service. You're changing hearts. You're changing lives. And never forget the impact you make on each person you serve, and how that, in turn, helps you grow in holiness."

The breakfast also included the presentation of the society's annual Top Hat Awards, which honor Vincentians whose service reflects the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul Society founder Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. Several recipients were recognized for decades of quiet leadership – from organizing emergency food supplies at parish churches to accompanying individuals leaving jail as they sought housing and employment.

As the celebration concluded, Bishop Rhoades offered an Advent blessing, praying that the light of Christ would continue to shine through the work of the society. In a season that calls Christians to prepare room for the coming of Christ, the Vincentians gathered at St. Therese were reminded that they encounter Him daily in the faces of neighbors who need hope, help, and human presence.

The Love of Christ, the Joy of Christmas

INTO THE TRUTH

FATHER MARK HELLINGER

We finally come to the great celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. This day, and this season, reminds us of an essential truth – a truth that, like Jesus in the manger, appears small, even insignificant, but one, when it is allowed to grow in our hearts to full stature, has the power to change everything. It is a truth that can be summarized in this way: Christmas teaches us that we were loved by God before we were lovable. Indeed, this is the truth of God's word itself, given to us by St. John in his first letter. God loved us first.

The struggle to understand what this means draws each of us to the manger. If we search the depth of our hearts, I think we find that our failures in love – our rejection of God, our hurting others, our isolation and loneliness in the darkness of this world – are rooted in our lack of acceptance of the love that God has for us. So, we come to manger because there is a restlessness in our hearts – a part of us that cannot understand what it means to be so profoundly loved. Yet, something in our hearts cannot stay away. Something draws us to this celebration – no matter how close or far we feel from God.

In the manager we find the living God – and we find the powerful evidence of the fact that we have been loved before we were loveable. What have you done in your life to earn a Savior such as this? The answer is nothing. And yet, there He is – love in the flesh, the living God come to save you.

That is the power of the name Emmanuel – God is with us. Pope Benedict XVI gave a powerful reflection on the power of this proclamation when he said: "What does it mean when we call this God a living God? It means that this God is not a conclusion we have reached by thinking, which we now offer to others in the certainty of our own perception and understanding. When we talk of the living God, it means this: This God shows Himself to us. He looks out from eternity into time and puts Himself into a relationship with us. We cannot define Him in whatever way we like. He has defined Himself and now stands before us as Our Lord, over us and in our midst. This self-revelation of God, by virtue of which He is not our conception but our Lord, rightly stands, therefore, at the center of our Creed."

Christmas is about that essential truth that we are first loved by a God who is not an idea, or a concept, or a placebo, or distant clockmaker, but a person – one with whom we can relate and over whom we have no control. In His love for each one of us, He took on our flesh to save us. He revealed Himself to us. He died to save us. He rose to offer us life.

So often, when I am with others in the confessional, it is noticeable how Satan deceives us into thinking we have to earn God's love. And it is noticeable how often the experience of doubt or rejection of God really has less to do actual atheism and more to do with being overwhelmed by our sin. So, I say to each and every person: Jesus comes to us as a Child to crush that lie. He comes to us as the proof that we are first loved before we could ever have earned it. He comes to us to love us into being worthy of love.

And when we realize the truth of God's love at Christmas, that is what sustains us in a life given to Him for the rest of the year. We are reminded of the primacy of God's love for us at every Mass, and despite straying far from God because of our sins, we aren't even successfully fooling ourselves.

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Joy and Danger

TRUTH AND LIGHT

LEONARD J. DELORENZO

The question at Christmas is not about whether God will act for us. The babe born of Mary is the answer: God has given everything. The question is really about us. Will we receive Christ?

This is a most magnificent reversal, and a most perilous one. He in whom all things are created – in whom we live and move and have our being – is given into our hands. The host has become the guest, and we, who depend on God for all things, are called upon to become His host.

Christmas is not only a time of great consolation but the beginning of the great decision. God is all in. But do we accept him? Everything depends on our answer.

It is not typical to muse on the parable of the sower during Advent or Christmas, but it should be. "A sower went out to sow his seed," and the seed falls upon all manner of earth: some along a path, some on rock, some among thorns, and some into good soil (Lk 8:5-8). Jesus told this parable to "a large crowd" (Lk 8:4). He then goes on to explain the meaning of His parable, but not to everyone. He opens the meaning to "His disciples (who) asked Him what the meaning of this parable might be" (Lk 8:9).

To His disciples, Jesus teaches that the seed is the word of God. The seed that falls on the path is not guarded, so it gets trampled underfoot and eaten by birds: These are the ways in which the seed is not received deeply and thus subject to the snares of the devil. The seed that falls on the rock cannot lay down roots, even if it is initially received with joy: This is how what seems like faith appears for a time but then passes away because it is superficial.

The seed that falls among thorns has to compete with myriad other desires and preferences and interests: This is how the lack of prioritization deprives the word of the nutrients it needs to grow. But the seed that fell on good soil is the word of God that finds a generous reception, that is nurtured "in a generous and good heart" and brings forth "fruit through perseverance" (Lk 8:15).

There are at least two things that we should not miss about Jesus' parable.

The first is that this is not a question of whether the seed – the

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God Makes Each of Us Beloved Through His Son's Birth and Death

THE SUNDAY GOSPEL

MONSIGNOR OWEN F. CAMPION

This weekend the Church celebrates the fourth and last Sunday of Advent 2025.

For its first reading, this weekend's liturgy offers a reading from the first section of the Book of Isaiah. This reading refers to King Ahaz of the southern Hebrew kingdom of Judah.

Ahaz reigned in the last third of the eighth century before Christ. To be kind, he is not regarded as having been a remarkably successful king. Prompting Isaiah's interest in Ahaz, or in any king, was not necessarily the monarch's obvious power and renown, but rather the fact that the king first and foremost was, or should be, the servant of God.

Urged to be loyal and devoted, Ahaz was promised a sign of God's favor. It was the birth of a son whose mother was Ahaz's young bride, a virgin.

St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans provides the second reading. Introducing himself, Paul firmly states that he is an apostle, called by the Lord to proclaim the Gospel. Above and beyond everything, he insisted, he was God's servant.

For its last reading, the Church presents a section from the Gospel of Matthew. Only two of the four Gospels, both synoptics, recount the birth of Jesus. Matthew is one of these Gospels. Luke is the other.

This weekend's reading recalls the conception of Jesus. It says clearly, as Luke states, that Jesus had no earthly father, but the Lord was the son of Mary, a human being.

In this story, Joseph is concerned – to say the least. He first, understandably, wonders if his betrothed has been unfaithful to him. How else could Mary have become pregnant? An angel, Gabriel, one of God's messengers, relieves Joseph's mind by revealing that the unborn child is in fact the Son of God.

It is more than simply a chronicle of the conception and birth of Jesus, divine though these events may have been. The coming of the Messiah is a sign, perfect and penultimate, of God's everlasting love for humankind. God never fails, is never absent from His people.

Reflection

This weekend the Church calls us to observe the last Sunday of Advent. The season of Advent is the careful and focused period preceding Christmas. In our culture, it is a time to surround ourselves with Christmas symbols.

A symbol frequently seen is the red bird. Why?

Many ancient Christmas symbols refer not to the Lord's birth but to the death of Christ. Holly and wreathes recall the crown of thorns. Red represents the Lord's blood, shed during the crucifixion.

An old symbol is a bird, plentiful in the Holy Land at the time of Christ. Its feathers were dingy. It could not sing. It was seen as a pest, but not by Jesus. He did not force the little bird away. Sensing love and acceptance despite their ugliness and worthlessness, these birds surrounded Jesus, grateful, comfortable, secure.

Following Christ to Calvary, loyal to the end, they landed beneath the cross. A drop of the Lord's precious blood fell upon one of the birds, and the bird became the most beautiful of all birds, brilliantly red, touched by Christ.

At Christmas, Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world. Jesus died for us on Calvary, an act of perfect love. He asks, in return, for our honest, total love, nothing more, nothing less – a love uncompromisingly offered to everyone whom the Lord loves, or every other human, however ugly.

If a person accepts Jesus, and follows Jesus, that person will be touched by Jesus and become beautiful before all in holiness and charity, a testament to the redeeming Savior, born of Mary in Betlehem, as beautiful as the red bird, touched and blessed by the blood of Jesus on Calvary.

READINGS

Sunday: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalms 24:1-3, 4ab, 5-6; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

Monday: 1 Samuel 1:24-28; (Responsorial Psalm) 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-5, 6-7, 8abcd; Luke 1:46-56

Tuesday: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Psalm 25:4-5ab, 8-9, 10, 14; Luke 1:57-66

Wednesday: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29; Luke 1:67-79

Thursday: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalms 98:1-6; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

Friday: Acts of the Apostles 6:8-10, 7:54-59; Psalm 31:3cd-4, 6 and 8ab, 16bc and 17; Matthew 10:17-22

Saturday: 1 John 1:1-4; Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12; John 20:1a, 2-8

Christmas: A Birth and a Wedding

GUEST COMMENTARY

TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY

On this feast of the Nativity, we celebrate a birth and a wedding at the very same time.

The birth is something everyone on earth today knows about. Yet long ago, not everyone knew that the Savior of the world was to appear in a humble manger. The angels knew, singing to the gathered shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Lk 2:14). The shepherds, from whom the kings of Israel once came forth, now hidden alone in a field, knew: "They went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger" (Lk 2:16). The animals gathered around the infant King knew: "O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in a manger" (Responsorial Chant, Matins of Christmas).

His mother knew, keeping "all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). But the powerful of the world did not know. Caesar Augustus, Herod, the powers and principalities – they did not know. For the powerful would never expect a king to be born in a manger. The strong would never expect salvation to take place in weakness.

Still, we do not close our businesses and give gifts simply to celebrate the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ thousands of years ago. We celebrate the wedding that took place that night when humanity and divinity were forever wed.

For as the Gospel announces: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). God's Word, which is itself God, which gave shape to all of creation, now assumes flesh: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw His glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

In that infant born in Bethlehem, humanity and divinity kiss. In that child born in the poverty of a stable, the Son enters into solidarity with men and women. In the child wrapped in swaddling clothes, we encounter the glory of God among us. It is for this reason that we can sing on Christmas night: Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord (cf. Lk 2:11). For what took place on Christmas has never ended. The Son revealed the depths of His love in taking on the humility of human flesh forever.

And now, we, too, can share in the divine life given to us by the Son. In the birth of Jesus, the Son assumed everything about what it means to be human except sin. He experienced the fragility of birth. He knew what it was like to tenderly hold His mother's or His father's hand. He suffered through the death of His father, Joseph. He hungered and thirsted in the desert. He was rejected by the unjust. He died upon the cross. And He was raised again. This is the fullness of a human life. And thus, on the feast of Christmas, we celebrate that it is precisely through the human condition that we will be saved.

So, rejoice this day. For the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning of the wedding feast of the Lamb. And we are guests to both. And in our feasts, and in our opening of gifts, and in our time spent with family, let us remember that on this day: The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see the salvation of our God (cf. Is 40:5).

Timothy P. O'Malley is a theology professor at the University of Notre Dame, associate director for research at the McGrath Institute for Church Life, and academic director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy. He wrote this for Our Sunday Visitor.

SCRIPTURE SEARCH®

Gospel for December 21, 2025

Matthew 1:18-24

Following is a word search based on the Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Cycle A: the story of Joseph and Mary. The words can be found in all directions in the puzzle.

THE BIRTH OF JOSEPH	JESUS CHRIST	MARY
CHILD	BEFORE	WAS FOUND
SHAME	HOLY SPIRIT	HER HUSBAND
ANGEL	DIVORCE	BEHOLD
WIFE	APPEARED	A DREAM
VIRGIN	SAVE	PEOPLE
	EMMANUEL	AWOKE

BIRTH COMING

N A N D E R A E P P A H
A J O S E P H J O D D E
E C E K V I R G I N R F
M R O S H A M E A U E O
M W O H U Y T B D O A H
A I H F A S S B I F M T
N F D N E U C E V S U R
U E G N H B H H O A E I
E E Y R A M O O R W V B
L P E O P L E L C I A E
C H I L D W K D E X S H
E K H O L Y S P I R I T

HELLINGER, from page 12

To accept this love and to learn to abide in it – that is, to live and delight in it, to be made free by it, and to live a life that sees God as a savior and not a taskmaster – is a challenge of humility more than it is of anything else. And we are reminded of this essential reality every time we say the Creed. But in particular, we are reminded of it at Christmas (and the Annunciation) as we genuflect at the mystery of Love's coming in the flesh.

Every time we say the Creed, we are supposed to bow at the words, "and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man." Why? Because it is the reminder that Love humbled itself and came down – Love came down to us who could not reach up to it. And so, every time we do it, and especially as we genuflect at those powerful words, we are reminded of humility: the humility of God and the humility we are called to have before His overwhelming love.

Drawing on the design of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem – a church that is only accessible today by bending down to pass through the doorway, which is maybe 4-feet high – Pope Benedict commented: "Anyone wishing to enter the place of Jesus' birth has to bend down. It seems to me that a deeper truth is revealed here, which should touch our hearts on this holy night: If we want to find the God who appeared as a child, then we must dismount from the high horse of our 'enlightened' reason. We must set aside our false certainties, our intellectual pride, which prevents us from recognizing God's closeness. We must follow the interior path of St. Francis – the path leading to that ultimate outward and inward simplicity that enables the heart to see. We must bend down, spiritually … in order to pass through the portal of faith and encounter the God who is so different from our prejudices and opinions – the God who conceals Himself in the humility of a newborn baby. In this spirit, let us celebrate the liturgy of the holy night, let us strip away our fixation on what is material, on what can be measured and grasped. Let us allow ourselves to be made simple by the God who reveals Himself to the simple of heart."

At Christmas, we are reminded even by the simple action of genuflecting at the mystery of God made man that we are first loved. That we do not and cannot earn God's love. And that every time we bow down at these words throughout the whole year, at every Sunday Mass we attend, that we can live the joy of Christmas. The joy of being with the God who has revealed Himself to us, has come in the flesh, has freed us from our sin, and offers us abundant life. The joy of giving ourselves to the God who has done these things and does not allow our sinfulness to keep us far away from Him.

Father Mark Hellinger is parochial vicar at St. Jude Catholic Church in South Bend.

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word of God – is given. That question is answered in the very setup of the parable: The sower sows his seed; the seed is given to all. The question of the parable is instead about how the seed will be received. What is in question is not the seed but the soil. The sower has made everything depend on the soil.

The second thing we dare not miss is the little detail about to whom, exactly, Jesus offered the further explanation after the parable. Remember, the parable was given to "a large crowd," comprised of many different people "from one town after another" (Lk 8:4). The explanation, though, is not given to the crowd but to His disciples, who asked Him what this parable meant (cf. Lk 8:9).

Who are the disciples, then? They are the ones who seek to understand. They have heard His word, but they struggle to know it. By asking Him to teach them, they are seeking to allow the word to sink in deep. They are becoming good soil. They are receiving Him. The evidence of their hearing well will show forth in how they act on His word (cf. Lk 8:21; 11:28).

The parable of the sower inclines us to reckon with the dangerous side of Christmas. God has given his Son. The question is, will we receive Him?

Receiving Him is not about fleeting seasonal gladness or setting Him alongside many other things. Receiving Him is about giving Him pride of place and allowing Him to set down roots and bear fruit in our lives. Receiving Him is about being His disciples – the ones who seek to know Him and who struggle to understand Him.

This is indeed the dangerous reversal: He is the guest who calls us to become His hosts, and everything depends on our hospitality.

The Lord of all comes to us wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. This is God's great proposal – His knock upon our door. He would not force His way into our world or into our lives. He has come meekly. And to our credit, some of our number received Him with great care. This is part of our reason for joy at Christmas, and during the Christmas octave, the Church schools us in the memory of this joy.

We Christians truly have cause to rejoice: Unto us a savior is born. But this good news is not for us alone. He seeks for us to welcome Him to the point that he may take root in our lives and bear fruit through our words and deeds.

Leonard J. DeLorenzo, Ph.D. is the director of undergraduate studies at the McGrath Institute for Church Life and teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Why Mary Is 'Honored by Angels and Men'

BY CARL E. OLSON

(OSV News) – "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!" Uttered by the heavenly messenger Gabriel to a Jewish maiden (Lk 1:28), these words make up the first phrase of the Hail Mary.

The second phrase of that great prayer comes from Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, who exclaims, "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Lk 1:42).

St. Bede remarks that this is fitting since the two remarks show that Mary "should be honored by angels and by men and why she should indeed be revered above all other women."

The reverence paid to Mary by Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox is bothersome to some who see in it undue attention given to a mere human. It is attention, they say, fitting to God alone.

This is an unfortunate misunderstanding, and one that is sometimes made worse by the inability of Catholics to explain the place and meaning of Mary in Catholic doctrine and devotion. Advent provides an opportunity to more deeply contemplate Mary's life as she emerges so prominently on the stage of salvation history during this season of preparation and anticipation.

How blessed was Mary? It might seem a frivolous question considering that she carried the Incarnate Son in her womb. But in order to appreciate the reverence due to Mary, it should be noted that the phrase "blessed art thou among women" is the Jewish way of saying, "You are the most blessed of women!"

And why has Mary been chosen by the Most High to be the mother of the Redeemer? Because of God's grace and her faithful response to it, a fact that Elizabeth, herself a woman of great faith, recognized: "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45).

Reflecting on Mary's faith, the Catechism of the Catholic Church compares Mary to Abraham, who, "because of his faith, became a blessing for all the nations of the earth. Mary, because of her faith, became the mother of believers, through whom all nations of the earth receive Him who is God's own blessing: Jesus, the 'fruit of thy womb'" (No. 2676).

So, what exactly does it mean to be blessed? The very first use of the word "bless" in Scripture is found in the creation account of the opening chapter of Genesis, which describes God looking upon the creatures of earth, blessing them, and declaring, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gn 1:22).

Then, after creating man, he blessed Adam and Eve and said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gn 1:28). Blessing, then, is intimately connected to the gift of life. In the Old Testament, blessings were connected with prosperity, progeny, and promise. Blessings and curses were central to the great covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and David.

With Mary, the blessing also involves prosperity, progeny, and promise – but uniquely so, for her Son encompasses all of those things and makes them available to all people for the remainder of time.

"For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness," St. Paul writes, "to confirm the promises to the patriarchs but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy" (Rom 15:8-9). The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in Mary; the Advent of the Old Testament finds completion in the Son of the daughter of Zion.

The Second Vatican Council in Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, declared that "this union of the Mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to His death; it is shown first of all when Mary, arising in haste to go to visit Elizabeth, is greeted by her as blessed because of her belief in the promise of salvation, and the precursor leaped with joy in the womb of his mother" (No. 57).

Because of her perfect faith and cooperation with God's grace, the council continued, Mary is mother of God and "mother of men, particularly of the faithful" (No. 54). Mary is revered because she faithfully said "Yes!" to God and gave birth to the God-man. She is loved because she is our mother and the first disciple of her Son, our Savior.

During Advent, all Catholics can emulate the example of Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary. Filled with the Holy Spirit, she anticipates her Savior before ever seeing Him. She worships her Lord, even when He is hidden in the womb. She reveres and embraces Mary, who brings salvation to her and to the entire world.

She hears the Magnificat and rejoices as Mary sings, "For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed" (Lk 1:48).

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

WHAT'S HAPPENING? highlights upcoming events from around the diocese. Discover more Catholic events or share your own at todayscatholic.org/event. To feature your event and gain more exposure, contact our friendly advertising account executive at 260-399-1449 to learn about space options.

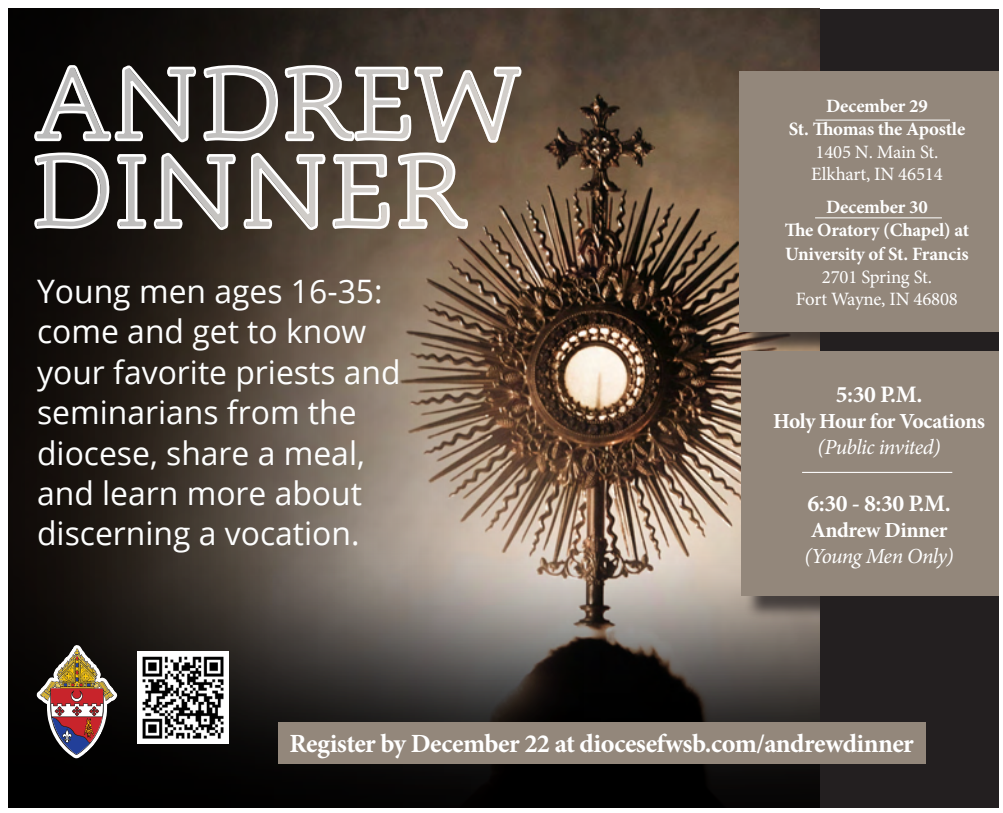
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 26
Adoration and Mass for Vocations
3 – 4 p.m.
FORT WAYNE – Please join Bishop Rhoades for Eucharistic adoration beginning at 3 p.m. followed by Mass at 4 p.m. as we pray for vocations. Both events take place at the Oratory at the University of St. Francis prior to the annual Cupertino Classic, which is being held at Bishop Luers at 6:30 p.m.

Cupertino Classic
6:30 – 8:30 p.m.
FORT WAYNE – Join us for the 11th annual Cupertino Classic: a basketball game in which the priests and seminarians compete in a friendly yet competitive game of basketball to help build up the Catholic community in our diocese and promote vocations to the diocesan priesthood. Make your poster and come cheer on your favorite priest or seminarian at Bishop Luers High School.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28
Jubilee Year of Hope Closing Mass
11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
FORT WAYNE – As this Jubilee Year of Hope draws to a close, we gather as one diocesan family to celebrate the gift that has anchored us all year: the hope we have in Jesus Christ.
Join us for the closing Mass of the Jubilee Year at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. All are invited.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 29
Holy Hour for Vocations – Elkhart
5:30 – 6:30 p.m.
ELKHART – All are invited to join in prayer for vocations to the priesthood and religious life at St. Thomas the Apostle, 1108 S. Main Street. Following the Holy Hour, young men discerning a call to the priesthood are invited to stay for the Elkhart Andrew Dinner to meet priests and seminarians and learn more about vocational discernment.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 30
Holy Hour for Vocations – Fort Wayne
5:30 – 6:30 p.m.
FORT WAYNE – All are invited to join in prayer for vocations to the priesthood and religious life at the Oratory at the University of Saint Francis, 2701 Spring Street. Following the Holy Hour, young men discerning a call to the priesthood are invited to stay for the Fort Wayne Andrew Dinner to meet priests and seminarians and learn more about vocational discernment.



REST IN PEACE

Fort Wayne
Karen Benson, 63,
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

Anna Fuentes, 66,
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

Mary Gorman, 98,
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

Thomas Kronstain, 76,
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

William L. Bogardus, 83, Queen of Angels

Sister Rosemary Rafter, 93, St. Patrick

Patricia Travis, 91, St. Therese

Catharina Dormans, 85, St. Vincent de Paul

Roger Watercutter, 83, St. Vincent de Paul

Granger
James Hahn, 65, St. Pius X

Marylou Pairitz, 87, St. Pius X

New Haven
Patrick Burnham, 51, St. John the Baptist

Linn Marie Farmer, 84, St. John the Baptist

South Bend
Janet Futa, 90, Holy Family

Angeline Nowaczewski, 100, Holy Family

Send obituaries to obituaries@diocesefwsb.org.

"The Lord awaits us, and when we finally meet Him at the end of our earthly journey, we shall rejoice with Him and with our loved ones who have gone before us."

— POPE LEO XIV

‘Hope Does Not Disappoint:’ A Jubilee to Remember

BY JUNNO AROCHO ESTEVES

(OSV News) – In his papal bull proclaiming the Jubilee Year, the late Pope Francis emphasized the theme of hope, a much-needed virtue in a time of uncertainty, war, and tribulation.

Yet in Spes Non Confundit (“Hope Does Not Disappoint”), the pope unknowingly described what many Catholics would feel in the year to come.

“Everyone knows what it is to hope. In the heart of each person, hope dwells as the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring,” he wrote.

In 2024, the pope’s health was already a cause for concern due to a persistent flu at the beginning of the year, as well as limited mobility that required the use of a cane and a wheelchair.

While the intense monthly schedule of Jubilee events was worrisome, there was still the hope that the ailing pontiff would be able to participate.

However, those hopes were dashed once his health took a turn for the worse in February, and on April 21, just one day after delivering what would be his final Easter Sunday urbi et orbi blessing, Pope Francis died.

For Archbishop Rino Fisichella, organizer of the Jubilee 2025 events and pro-prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization, the pope’s death “created a silence that was felt in the streets of Rome and the world, as well as in every Christian community.”

In an interview via email on December 3, Archbishop Fisichella told OSV News that it was in those days of mourning that “the motto of the Jubilee took on a different light.”

“The faithful understood that Christian hope is not a sentiment but a promise. I saw people crossing the Holy Door with tears in their eyes and yet with a new inner strength,” he said.

Nevertheless, Archbishop Fisichella said, “the machine did not stop.”

For both Archbishop Fisichella and Alessandro Gisotti, deputy editorial director of Vatican Media, the death of Pope Francis and the conclave and election of Pope Leo XIV did not stop the Jubilee but instead redefined it.

“The death of Francis and the election of Leo had, in a way, restarted the Jubilee in terms of attendance,” Gisotti noted.

Despite the demanding schedule, the archbishop added, “Pope Leo XIV accepted the calendar without fear and, from the beginning, chose to maintain the programmed Jubilee commitments.”

“This allowed for stability and offered a true continuity that is evident to all, given the incredible numbers of pilgrims,” he added.

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Pope Leo XIV carries the Jubilee Cross as he walks to the altar before the start of a prayer vigil with young people gathered in Tor Vergata in Rome on August 2 during the Jubilee of Youth.

This was most evident at the Jubilee of Youth in Rome, which drew an estimated 1 million young people from around the world.

Like many young Catholics, Joey Pfeiffer, a 17-year-old from Miami, was at a crucial point in his life and trying to discover his own sense of faith. For Pfeiffer, attending the Jubilee of Youth, meeting with Catholics his age, and witnessing their joy despite facing similar doubts, helped him build “a foundation in my faith.”

“I saw all these people so filled with spirit and so alive about these different experiences that they’re going through,” he told OSV News. “And I feel like it helped me create a sense of security, knowing that God was there because I saw it in these different people.”

In December of 2024, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door in St. Peter’s, marking the beginning of the Jubilee. The task of closing that door now falls to his successor, Pope Leo XIV.

Gisotti told OSV News that Pope Leo is continuing “that spirit of hope desired by Pope Francis” and that his experience as a missionary “capable of speaking to everyone” brings “an extraordinary international dimension to his papacy.”

For Archbishop Fisichella, the fact that Pope Francis would not be the one to end the Jubilee of Hope is one of “profound symbolic value.”

“Let this unfinished gesture become an invitation for every believer: The mission of the Church never closes,” Archbishop Fisichella said.

The message he believes Pope Leo will give at the closing of the Jubilee Year will entrust the faithful with bringing “hope, peace, and communion into their own homes.”

“Crossing the Holy Door means assuming the responsibility to bring hope where it is missing,” he said.

Archbishop Fisichella told OSV News that the Holy Year brought the “dimension of the pilgrimage back to the center” and that among the fruits of the Jubilee that “will accompany the Church in the coming decade” is the “rediscovery of personal responsibility in the Faith that is strengthened by hope.”

“The ‘Pilgrims of Hope’ return to their dioceses with a stronger sense of belonging and, above all, with the awareness that daily witness is the first place of evangelization,” he said.