

Dear Friends,

In a few days, we will celebrate the Birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Depending on interpretation, this Christmas season could conclude at different points. Liturgically, the Christmas season concludes on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (January 12 this year). Culturally, many places throughout the world observe the conclusion of the season on February 2, the Presentation of the Lord. This feast celebrates the presentation of Jesus to the High Priest Simeon in the temple. Mosaic law prescribed that every firstborn male in Israel had to be consecrated to God forty days after birth and redeemed with a sum deposited in the Temple treasury. At certain times in the past, it was also known as the feast of the Purification of Mary. Even though Mary was preserved by God from original sin, as a Hebrew mother she chose to submit to the *Law of the Lord*, again Mosaic law, and offered a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. The expectation offering has roots far beyond the offertory at Mass that we explored during the Advent season.

The series on the offertory revealed a hidden treasure and was a source of renewal for our parish. I lost track of the amount of people who said “I never knew any of this.” One parishioner discovered a depth of importance to the work they do in maintaining the Church environment. They no longer feel it is a ‘cleaning chore’ but a duty with spiritual implications. Now that we have seen and heard what happens as the altar is set, what is supposed to happen during the collection and presentation of gifts, and the offering to God of bread and wine, sins and needs, we should be more prepared to embark on journey of faith that will inspire others to join us. This journey is modeled for us in the Holy Family who did not remain not tied to the manger in Bethlehem, but followed the customs of faith loyally and gave credence to what they believed in. Despite the challenges, they were determined to pay homage to God in the temple in the days after Christmas. As Christmas approaches, His love for us is made manifest as a small child in a humble place in Bethlehem. Yet, the season continues and sees its most important figures move with courage and conviction to places unknown to bring the message of salvation and peace. This, too should be a reminder that Christmas is not just one day nor a heart warming story: it is the movement of salvation from place to place, carried by its messengers. Those messengers, my friends, include all of us.

I conclude with offering a few paragraphs of an Apostolic Letter by Pope Francis. *Admirable Signum (On the Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene)* was given in Greccio, at the Shrine of the Nativity, on the First Sunday of Advent. This letter coincides with a plan that was devised several months ago. You will notice along the back pews of the Church several Nativity Scenes on display. These scenes come from the various Churches that now make All Saints parish. The set from St. Vincent was restored in time for Christmas by a family who wishes to remain anonymous....and it looks stunning. The display of several nativities reminds us, as Pope Francis writes in his letter, that the scenes look different depending on the arrangement and design of the figures. These nuances should evoke in us contemplation and prayer and that representations of scenes of faith can and should look different. I invite you to make a mini-pilgrimage to pray in front of these scenes as a way of remembering the rich past of our parish.

Let us keep each other in prayer these remaining days of Advent, that we may be ready and worthy to welcome the savior when He comes.

In Christ,

Fr. Jones

The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus' birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realize that so great is his love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.

With this Letter, I wish to encourage the beautiful family tradition of preparing the nativity scene in the days before Christmas, but also the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons and town squares. Great imagination and creativity is always shown in employing the most diverse materials to create small masterpieces of beauty. As children, we learn from our parents and grandparents to carry on this joyful tradition, which encapsulates a wealth of popular piety. It is my hope that this custom will never be lost and that, wherever it has fallen into disuse, it can be rediscovered and revived.

Standing before the Christmas crèche, we are reminded of the time when we were children, eagerly waiting to set it up. These memories make us all the more conscious of the precious gift received from those who passed on the faith to us. At the same time, they remind us of our duty to share this same experience with our children and our grandchildren. It does not matter how the nativity scene is arranged: it can always be the same or it can change from year to year. What matters is that it speaks to our lives. Wherever it is, and whatever form it takes, the Christmas crèche speaks to us of the love of God, the God who became a child in order to make us know how close he is to every man, woman and child, regardless of their condition.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Christmas crèche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith. Beginning in childhood, and at every stage of our lives, it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God's love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him, his children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that Child who is the Son of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary. And to realize that in that knowledge we find true happiness. Like Saint Francis, may we open our hearts to this simple grace, so that from our wonderment a humble prayer may arise: a prayer of thanksgiving to God, who wished to share with us his all, and thus never to leave us alone.

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