

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Once again, I want to wish all of you a Merry Christmas, and to express my gratitude for the many cards, generous gifts, and other expressions of prayerful love and support that I have received. They have truly been overwhelming!

Although much of the secular world around us has moved on from the celebration of Christmas, I want to remind you that we are still in the midst of the Christmas Season, which (for us Latin Rite Catholics) lasts until next Sunday's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, and includes this Sunday's observance of the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord commemorating the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child. The Epiphany is of tremendous theological importance, as the visit of the Magi, who are representatives of the gentile (non-Jewish) world, is emblematic of the response of the nations to the universal call to faith and salvation in Christ. They are the "first fruits" from among the gentile nations. Indeed, Christ was born among us as Savior of the World, and not just for the Jews. Thus Epiphany is a celebration of God's universal love and saving will for all of humankind. It is a celebration of the "catholicity" of our Faith.

The moral implications for us as Christians should be plain to see: We who are called to "love one another as God loves us" must also possess a love for others that knows no boundaries; it is to be a universal love that reaches out to those around us, without any regard for race, ethnicity, national origin, economic status, or any other factors that are often used to circumscribe or limit the commandment to love our neighbor.

Fittingly, the celebration of Epiphany often includes meals and other communal gatherings that celebrate the various ethnic backgrounds of those within the community: Italians with their pasta, the Irish with their mutton or corned beef and cabbage, the Poles with their pierogies and sausages, Mexicans with their tamales and atole de elote, or Filipinos with their delicious adobo and rice. And then, there is the music, all reflecting the universal call of the Lord, that with the Epiphany has gone out to every corner of the Earth!

As we begin this New Year 2020, may we grow in our understanding of the meaning of Christmas and Epiphany, and may our love for others grow in ever-expanding circles that come to embrace all those for whom God in his love became incarnate in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary—she who is the Mother of God and the Mother of Christians.

A Few Updates...

As we move into the New Year 2022, I wanted to offer a few updates on various situations and projects here at St. Francis de Sales Parish.

With respect to the **Covid-19 Pandemic** and its impact on our parish life, we will continue to observe carefully the protocols as prescribed by Bishop Brennan and will update them as changes are made to reflect the changing situation here in West Virginia, and particularly here in Raleigh County. At the present time, that means that we will continue to ask people to wear their masks at Mass and at other parish and diocesan events, especially when social distancing is

difficult, and we continue to encourage everyone to receive one of the available Covid-19 vaccines. (Bishop Brennan's statement on the moral considerations of the vaccines is available on the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's website: www.dwc.org/covid-19/)

Every Christmas, there is a special collection to help support the important work of **Catholic Charities West Virginia**. You may have noticed that the **CCWV Southern Regional Office**, located in Princeton, has resumed its weekly presence here at St. Francis de Sales Parish. They are located on the ground floor of the Parish Office and are open every Tuesday from 1-4 p.m. in order to help serve the needs of people here in the Beckley area. We have been including in the parish bulletin periodic updates from Catholic Charities on the work that they are doing here in our region.

I also wanted to formally welcome Lisa Keiling back to our parish staff as our **Director of Youth Ministry and Safe Environment Coordinator**. I look forward to working with Lisa as we begin to rebuild our youth ministry program, which like so many other aspects of our parish life has suffered from the effects of the pandemic. Our **Christian Faith Formation Program (CFF)** for children has also suffered a severe impact from the pandemic, but I am confident that, in time, we can rebuild that program as well. I am grateful to Mary Anne Adkins for taking on that effort, and to all our catechists as well. I am also asking all parents of children of catechetical age (who are not enrolled in St. Francis de Sales School) to please cooperate with our parish efforts by bringing your children to Mass and to class on Sunday mornings and encouraging them to be faithful to their prayer and studies. After all, faith formation begins when we are young, and continues for a lifetime!

Finally, I wanted to mention that communication continues with the leadership of the **Missionary Sisters Servants of the Word (Hermanas Misioneras Servidoras de la Palabra)**, a Mexican religious community that has been working in evangelization and outreach to the Hispanic community here in our diocese for approximately ten years now. Sometime this month, the community hopes to send us either two fully professed religious sisters or two women lay missionaries who will help to establish an outreach to the growing Hispanic community here in our area. The Almond Family, who have rented the house on the corner of S. Oakwood Ave. and Carter St. for the past 21 years, have purchased their own home and have vacated the property. Rather than finding new tenants, we have begun the process of renovating that house and preparing it as a new convent for the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Word. I am looking forward to the possibility of having religious sisters here in at St. Francis de Sales Parish, not only for their ministry, but also for the value of their religious witness. I will continue to keep our parishioners updated on the progress of this effort as well. One of the unmet needs that we will have once the sisters arrive is for a car that will be available to them. If you have a used car in good condition that you are willing to donate to the effort, please let me know!

Once again, I want to wish all of you a truly Blessed Christmas Season, and many blessings as we enter this New Year 2022!

In Leonard

