

## From the PA's Desk

### The Meaning of Advent:

The Advent Season has a two-fold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming to us is remembered (not a time to pretend that he is born all over again); and as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period of devout and joyful expectation. (General Norms of the Liturgical Year and Calendar #39)

### Advent Season:

As we begin our Advent journey toward Christmas, we start making ready for one of the most important and central truths of Christianity; namely, that God became one of us through the incarnation of Jesus. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clarifies that we do not see the Incarnated Christ as part God and part human. Rather, we are taught that "He became truly man while remaining truly God." (CCC 464)

I am often amazed that when I deal with the topic of the incarnation and that Jesus became one of us, deep down people don't really believe it. They profess that belief in the Creed, but somewhere deep down few really believe it completely. When the Church teaches that Jesus was truly human, the Church teaches that he was like us in all things except sin. In other words, whereas you and I sometimes get lost and act selfishly or against God's desire for us, Jesus never did that. Someone once said that Jesus was the perfect image of what humanity is capable of becoming, and in him we are able to see God and to understand his feelings toward us. The Jesus I have come to know personally, like me, sometimes struggled to follow God, and he suffered like all human being do, and he questioned.

At the Second Vatican Council, and in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, the council fathers wrote: "The son of God...worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin." (GS, no. 22)

The Gospels tell us that Jesus was tempted in the desert. If Jesus were not fully human, how could that have been real temptations, because God can't be tempted. So who was being tempted in the desert? A fully human Jesus, who was, at the same time, equally God. The sacred scriptures tell us that Jesus "emptied himself" at the incarnation. This does not mean that the Son stopped being God at the incarnation, only that while Jesus was in his human body, he was emptied of divine certitude. I once received a thank you note from an elderly women in an RCIA class who was approaching her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, and this is what the note said: "Thank you for helping me see Jesus in a new light. I have always been a believer, but Jesus seemed a little remote to me. I now see him as much more alive and real."

Jesus is for me the life of God lived out in the human arena. It is the kind of life that removes the barriers that impede others and calls them to abundant living. This divine and human life in Jesus had but one ultimate purpose, namely, to invite you and me into the fullness of our own lives. At Christmas, we celebrate the reality that God loved us so much, that God chose to become one of us in the flesh. God can understand us from the inside out, and now we too have a glimpse into the very nature of God; a God who came to us as a little helpless baby. As St. Augustine once said: "God is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves." Two of my favorite quotes on the Incarnation comes from Karl Rahner (arguably the greatest theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), and Avery Dulles (who was made a Cardinal without being ordained a bishop by Pope John Paul II). Rahner said: "Salvation happens by God's personal engagement with the world, entering fully into its joy and pain, its temptations and choices, knowing the life of the flesh, the rhythm of day and night, and the power of love and rejection. The world is not saved from above, but from within." Cardinal Dulles had a similar idea when he said: "The incarnation does not

provide us with a ladder by which to escape the ambiguities of life and scale the heights of heaven. Rather it enables us to burrow deep into the heart of planet earth and find it shimmering with divinity.”

### **Youth and Young Adult Ministry:**

Last week a small group of us met for a second time with Mark Graveline from the Diocese, to discuss how we begin to do youth ministry in our parish. Each week I am more and more conscious of the growing number of young people I see gathered with us at Sunday Eucharist, and I want us to be able to connect with them outside of our Weekend liturgies. Mark helped us realize just how busy their lives are, and with them involved in work, school, sports and their outside activities, we need to find ways to immerse ourselves within the activities they are already doing. He suggested that we try to plan two activities a month in which we can bring faith to the ordinary events of their lives, and that might mean sending encouragement cards to the football or basketball team during their season, to having a mock-hair and make-up day prior to prom to help girls prepare for that important event. Two of our young adults, including Kaylie Willoughby and Shavonne Shanteau, and some other adults, are starting to meet to plan out a yearly activities calendar. We also are exploring how we can partner up with other young groups in the area, especially the youth group at Nativity Parish in Alma. Good things are happening with young people in our community, so please pray for our success and God’s guidance.

### **Whole Community Catechesis:**

Last week I mentioned briefly the new trend in faith formation called Whole Community Catechesis. Have you heard that Faith Formation is not just for kids anymore? Within the past ten years, and sweeping across the country and even in our own diocese, there are several programs and models that use a new approach to faith formation. In a typical religious education program, parents drop children off once a week for an hour-long class with other children in the same grade. The newer programs however are intergenerational and involve the entire family, both children and parents. In some parishes adults of all ages who do not have young children attend as well. The new model of faith formation for all adults, children, and youth, is most often referred to as Whole Community Catechesis.

Whole Community Catechesis begins with the understanding of adult faith formation being the focus of the Church’s educational mission. All major recent documents on catechesis written by the bishops consistently say the same things: 1) Catechesis is a lifelong process that is situated within the process of evangelization; 2) The Sunday Eucharist is the font from which the catechesis of the entire community flows; 3) Participation in lifelong faith formation is not optional, but rather is viewed as integral to all areas of parish life; 4) The hub around which all other catechetical programs must operate is adult faith formation; 5) The goal of catechesis is not to learn more “about” Jesus, but to get to “know” him personally.

While parishes differ in their approaches to the Whole Community Catechesis sessions, one way is to begin with Mass, followed by a meal or snack, followed by a large group activity, and then time to break out into smaller groups for discussion. Often groups are divided by age, and sometimes the children’s classes are a mixture of different ages. The session then ends with the re-gathering of the group for a brief prayer and social, community-building activity. While traditional faith formation (we don’t even like to call it “religious education” because catechesis is not like teaching an academic subject) are still popular in many parishes, intergenerational Whole Community Catechesis programs are growing in popularity. More info on Whole Community Catechesis will follow.

**Advent Reconciliation:** Everyone is invited to an Advent Reconciliation Service on Sunday December 11 at 1 pm. There will be a few other priests (Fr. Loren and Fr. Henkes) will be here to help Fr. Fred celebrate the sacrament, and our families who have been preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation will have the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of penance as a family. Let us keep them in our prayers as the children especially have another opportunity to encounter the healing and loving presence of Jesus in our midst. There will be other opportunities for Advent Reconciliation throughout our Vicariate in Alma, St. Louis, Mount Pleasant and Beal City.