

From the Deacon's Desk

Whole Community Catechesis: Advent

Next weekend is the First Sunday of Advent and we will be having our Whole Community Catechesis gathering after the 9:30 am Mass on the topic of Advent. On the First Sunday of Advent the Church always begins its new Church Year.

As daylight grows shorter, the dark of night grows longer and more intense. In this cold darkness, the first signs of snow arrive, and lights begin to shine brighter and brighter at night as people adorn their homes and neighborhoods with festive lights. They are on trees and in windows, as if people are afraid of the dark and all it symbolizes.

The understanding of Advent as the beginning of the Church's Liturgical calendar year became popular in the 900's, and it looks forward to the annual celebration of Jesus' birth, both the historical event itself and the saving event of the coming of God in flesh. Advent is primarily a time of waiting and preparation, which can be a challenge for us Americans living in a hectic and fast-paced (fast-food) society. Probably a good reason for us to take Advent to heart even more as we rush from one place to another with the overwhelming feeling of "how will we get it all done before Christmas!?"

Advent has always been somewhat confusing. It blends together a penitential spirit very similar to Lent, a liturgical theme of preparation for the Second and Final Coming of the Lord, called the Parousia, and a joyful theme of getting ready for the Bethlehem event. The word Advent comes from a Latin word meaning "coming," which refers to the whole mystery of the Incarnation.

At our whole community catechesis gathering this Sunday, we will look at ourselves as the ones who have seen the light of Christ, and we are called like mirrors to reflect that light to all we meet. I once heard the Church referred to as "a community that carries the light of Christ on its face."

The symbolism of faces that reflect the image or light of God has always impressed me. In St. Peter's in Rome, over the great main altar is the large bronze "Baldacchino," built by Bernini in the 1600's. The bronze canopy sits atop four huge pillars, and most visitors fail to notice that there are two images of faces in each of the four columns comprising eight images. The eight faces have a variety of expressions, from joy and excitement, to various stages of confusion, worry, pain, and anguish. The last face in the series of eight is totally different than the previous seven, and its appearance is rounded, hairless, and infantile. Bernini's creative imagery depicts a woman's face in labor during childbirth, and the last face is that of her newborn baby. Could it be that Bernini knew something about human faces reflecting the presence and light of God, and perhaps he was encouraging us to reflect more deeply on a world which needs us to assist him in the birthing process of the incarnation over and over again? After all, the Church is a community that carries the light of Christ on its face.

All adults of all ages, and faith formation families are invited to join us for the faith formation meal and conversation, as we examine ways in which we are called to reflect the light of God to others.

Christmas Decorations Work-Bee:

On Sunday December 10th after the 9:30 am Mass, we will have a work-bee for all parishioners, especially families with children, to decorate objects to be used on our banners during the Christmas Season. Each and every time you come to church, you'll be reminded through your personal and individually decorated ornament, that God knows you each by name and appreciates the individual talents and gifts you bring to this community of faith. It will only take about ten minutes of your time, so come to the hall after Mass to make your mark.

Advent Ecumenical Service:

On Sunday December 3, at 4 pm, there will be an Advent Ecumenical Service at St. Vincent's Church between the United Methodist Church and St. Vincent de Paul Parish. The service will be presided over by Rev. Janet Lerner and Rev. Mr. Jerry Green, and it will include music by the two church choirs, prayers, readings, a homily, and fellowship afterwards in the hall. Come and celebrate with us as we joyfully prepare to remember the Incarnation between God and humanity. All are welcome!

Catholic Teaching on Organ Donation:

Last week after reading my article on what the Church teaches regarding cremation, a parishioner asked what the Church teaches about human organ donations. If one person has a question about something, you can bet other people have the same question.

A Catholic donating her body for scientific research is not only allowed, but considered a noble act when it's done for the true common good. That means it must be done in the spirit of service to other human beings and not for financial gain or product research (commercialism).

"Organ donation after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity," the Catechism of the Catholic Church states. (CCC, 2296)

Donation of one's body falls under the same teaching. St. Pope John Paul II was clear about the merits of donating one's body to science when he addressed the participants of the Ninth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life on February 24, 2003. He said, "...all, believers and non-believers, acknowledge and express sincere support for these efforts in biomedical science that are not only designed to familiarize us with the marvels of the human body, but also to encourage worthy standards of health and life for the peoples of our planet."

When a person donates his or her body to science so that medical students can study and acquaint themselves with the human body, it is completely in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church. These students learn from the donated bodies so that they then can go on to become researchers and healers of other human bodies.

In the same address, St. Pope John Paul II went on to say, "The Church respects and supports scientific research when it has a genuinely human orientation, avoiding any form of instrumentalization or destruction of the human being and keeping itself free from the slavery of political and economic interests" (Address to participants in the Ninth General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, 24 February 2003, n. 4).

Pope John Paul II once described transplants as "a great step forward in science's service of man, and not a few people today owe their lives to an organ transplant". (Address of John Paul II to the 18th International Congress of the Transplantation Society, Aug 29, 2000)

In fact, in his Encyclical Letter "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life", 1995), he had suggested that one way of nurturing a genuine culture of life "is the donation of organs, performed in an ethically acceptable manner, with a view to offering a chance of health and even of life itself to the sick who sometimes have no other hope" (No. 86).

However, it should also be noted that certain important conditions must be met for organ transplantation to take place in an ethical manner. Among these are the need for free, proper, full and informed consent on the part of the donor or those responsible for his care. In the case of organs taken from a dead person, it is important that the criteria for ascertaining that the donor is truly dead are met before such a procedure is carried out.