

ISSUE No. XVIII

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

24 DECEMBER 2017

# *Cathedral*

WEEKLY



CHRISTMAS:  
THE IMPOSSIBLE BECOMES REALITY



# *Cathedral* WEEKLY

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NINTH BISHOP  
OF SPRINGFIELD IN ILLINOIS

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# RENEWAL OF OUR PARISH



## Christmas: The Impossible Becomes Reality

Here is proven the old saying that actions speak louder than words, in this case God's actions. It is this great mystery of Christmas, God becoming one with us in all things but sin, that is a stumbling block to many people of faith outside of Christianity. Many can

accept the notion of resurrection but that God would condescend to enter into our human condition....unthinkable. Yet, here we are again at the manger to celebrate this wonderful reality, this wonderful mystery of the Word made flesh, the love of God incarnate.

The hustle and bustle of the secular world around us for this time of year is at an end, mostly because they sadly miss the whole point of Christmas, building up to one day and then for many people its all over. How wonderful for us in the Church that this is not the case. Christmas opens up for us a beautiful season in the life of the Church where we are invited to ponder, to stand in awe, to celebrate these wonderful actions by our loving God in the coming days and feasts. I hope and pray that you will take time in the days ahead to ponder these mysteries, to allow the Lord to enfold you in his love, to come to a deeper understanding of your own God-given worth that is testified to by the Lord Jesus coming to us.

On behalf of Bishop Paprocki, Fathers Maher and Stock, Deacons Smith and Keen, and all the parish and school staff, I want to wish you and yours a blessed and merry Christmas. May the light of the Christ Child, born for us in Bethlehem, lead us and all the world to greater peace and joy.

*Father Christopher House is the Rector-Pastor of the Cathedral and serves in various leadership roles within the diocesan curia, specifically Chancellor and Vicar Judicial.*



## WEEKLY COLLECTION INFORMATION DEC 16/17

Envelopes - \$ 5,000.00	Loose - \$ 3,379.16
Maintenance - \$ 225.00	TOTAL: \$8,629.16

**\$ 7,728.73 short from the amount  
needed to operate**

## MASS INTENTIONS FOR THE UPCOMING WEEK

### Monday 25 December

Midnight Mass - For the People

9AM - Barbara McGee (Family)

### Tuesday 26 December

7AM - Charles Rossiter (Jane Fornoff)

5:15PM - No Mass

### Wednesday 27 December

7AM - Mary Zanoni (The Severino Family)

5:15PM - Dr. David Mack (Friend from Marian Center)

### Thursday 28 December

7AM - Larry Bussard (Shirley Davison)

5:15PM - Norma F. Buckner (Tim and Judy Nicoud)

### Friday 29 December

7AM - Eleanor Nancy Ryan (Lou Ann Mack)

5:15PM - Stacy Brown (Friend)

### Saturday 30 December

8AM - Marcella Dahlkast (Mary Sestak)

4PM - Dr. David Mack (Friend from Marian Center)

### Sunday 31 December

7AM - John and Edith Bakalar (John Busciacco)

10AM - Rosemary Crum (Debbie and Family)

5PM - For the People



# DISCIPLESHIP



## Bringing Christmas to Life Again

In 1223, St. Francis of Assisi inaugurated a pious practice that in places today has become so common that many think that it always existed

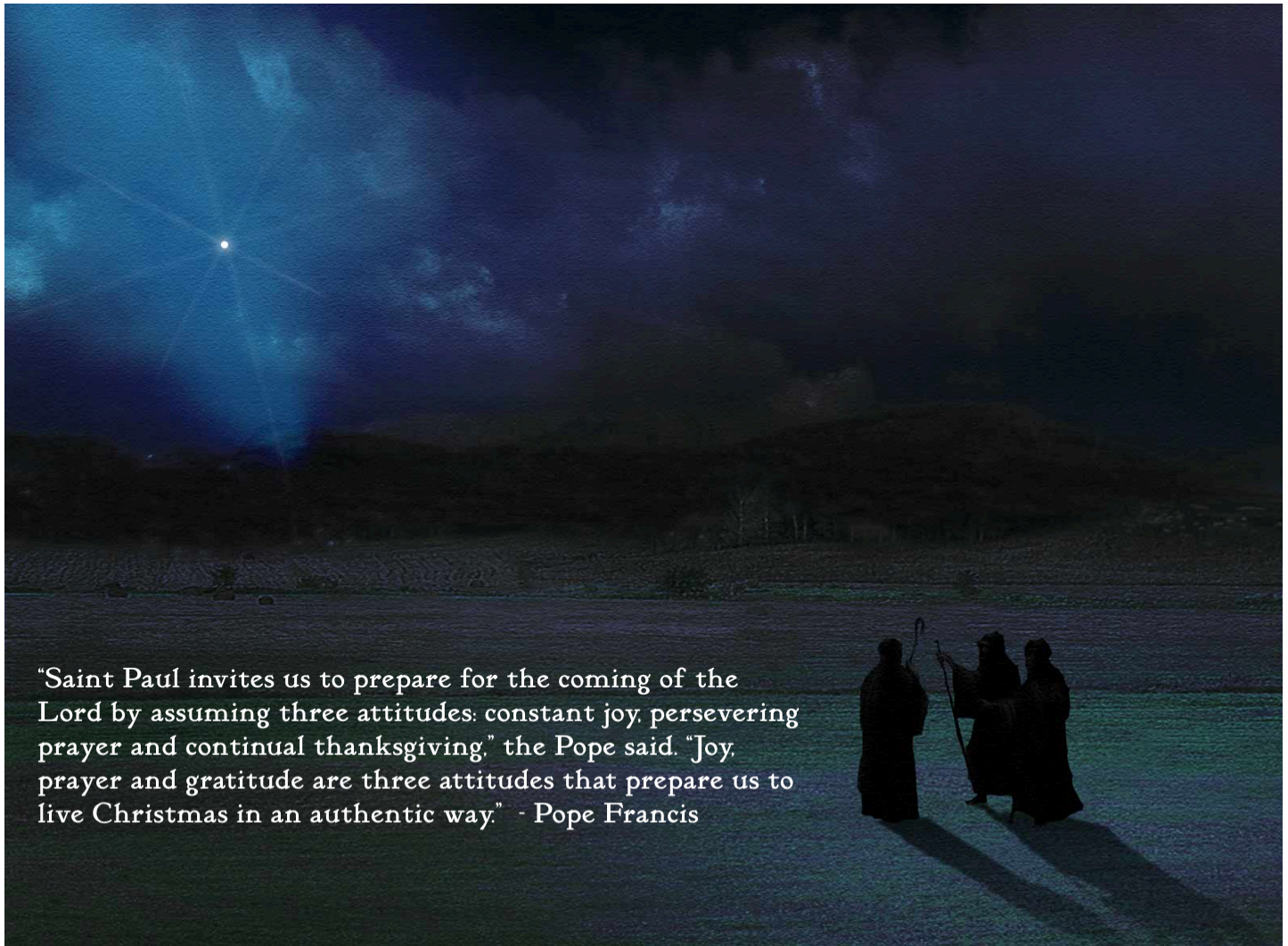
This great saint, as he was traversing the rolling hills of central Italy one December to proclaim the Gospel, noticed that few of his countrymen were taking the mysteries of the faith seriously. Many were not preparing for Christmas at all. Of those who were getting ready to celebrate the Lord's birth, they looked at it as an event tied exclusively to the past. The mysteries of the faith had become sterile. The central persons in the drama had become stale and lifeless, incapable even of stimulating his contemporaries' imaginations — and therefore no longer capable of inspiring them to a greater relationship of mutual love with God in the present.

To counteract these tendencies, on Christmas Eve 1223 in the town of Greccio, Francis set up the first crèche in recorded history. He brought in live animals — an ox and an ass. There was a

baby and a young set of parents. There was plenty of hay and a manger. There was even the attempt — with hundreds of burning torches — to create the luminescence of a bright star. And Francis could not have been happier with the results. People came from all over to see the living nativity. Through all the sounds, sights and even smells, the people became convinced that Christmas was not just a cute story, but a real event, one that was not just past, but one they were called to enter into the present.

Living crèches like this spread quickly throughout Italy. The phenomenon soon extended into art, as artists started to paint nativity scenes with the main characters dressed anachronistically in 13th century garb — to emphasize that Christmas is not just a past event, but, even more importantly, a present one, in which every believer is called to "go now to Bethlehem" and "pay [Christ] homage." As St. Francis' first biographer wrote, "The Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory."

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"Saint Paul invites us to prepare for the coming of the Lord by assuming three attitudes: constant joy, persevering prayer and continual thanksgiving," the Pope said. "Joy, prayer and gratitude are three attitudes that prepare us to live Christmas in an authentic way." - Pope Francis



## Holy Smoke!

Why do we use incense in worship?

Our altar boys practically fight for the honor of being the thurifer. That's the name for the server who carries the thurible — the censer — in the procession at Mass. They like being thurifer because they get to wear the more ornate lace surplice, and they know thurifer is the most complicated job and is reserved for the older, more experienced boys.

The use of incense is optional for most Masses. It's used to purify the coffin at funerals and to bless statues and images. However, many Catholic priests choose not to use incense at Mass, and the people of many parishes have forgotten the uses and meaning of incense in worship.

Over the last 50 years many Catholic traditions have been abandoned and forgotten. Too many Catholics simply went through the motions and did not understand what the different devotions and actions of worship meant. When the chance came to abandon the old ways many priests set them aside in an attempt to simplify Catholic worship and make it more accessible for the people.

The first recorded use of incense for worship is from Egypt around

2400 B.C. That's 400 years before the time of Abraham. Incense was also used in ancient China and plays a part in Buddhist, Shinto and Taoist ceremonies. Hindus have also used incense in worship from ancient times.

In the Old Testament, God gave Moses instructions on how to build the tabernacle — the traveling temple of God. The Book of Exodus recounts the instructions to build an altar of incense to stand to the side of the altar of sacrifice (see 30:1-10). When the priest enters the tabernacle each morning and evening to tend the perpetually burning lamps he is also commanded to offer incense.

Just as the oil lamps were to burn constantly in the Temple as a sign of God's presence, so there was a constant pillar of smoke ascending to heaven from the tabernacle. The pillar of smoke was a sign of God's constant guiding presence to the people. It hearkened back to the column of smoke that led the people through the wilderness by day and the column of fire that led them during the night.

God even gives Moses a recipe for making the incense: "Take these aromatic substances: storax, onycha and galbanum, these and pure frankincense in equal parts; and blend them into incense. This fragrant power, expertly prepared, is to be salted

and so kept pure and sacred. Grind some of it into fine dust and put this before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you. This incense shall be treated as most sacred by you" (Ex 30:34-36).

The Jewish offering of incense continued throughout the Old Testament period — first in the tabernacle, and then in the Temple in Jerusalem. Incense was also offered as part of the religious ceremonies in the surrounding pagan religions. In fact, most of the references in the Bible to incense are the Old Testament prophets lamenting the fact that too often the Jewish people had forsaken the Lord and chosen to make sacrifices, including the offering of incense to the false gods.

Why did people offer incense in the first place? The priests of pagan religions believed that the incense was a "spiritual offering." The smoke was an intermediary substance between earth and air. The demons were marked by a sulfurous stench,

and the fragrant incense would drive them away; meanwhile, the beneficial gods would be appeased and grant the worshiper protection and prosperity.

The New Age practice of "smudging" connects people with the supposedly Native American tradition of using fragrant smoke to purify the atmosphere of an area — driving away negativities and creating a positive mood. Implied in the calm discussion of smudging is the superstitious idea that evil spirits are being driven away by the fragrant smoke and the "good spirits" will be pleased and invited.

The pagans offered sacrifices to gain benefits from the gods.

Offering incense was forbidden by God in the Old Testament because it was not only a way to offer pagan gods worship, but was a way to invite them into one's life.

John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, was a priest of the Jewish religion. He was taking his turn serving in the Temple when the angel Gabriel appeared, informing him of the pregnancy of his wife, Elizabeth. The Temple duty he was performing at the time was the evening offering of incense. As he did so his actions echoed Psalm 141:2: "Let my prayer be incense before you; / my uplifted hands an evening offering."

The psalmist expresses the true meaning of the offering of sacrifice. It is not to appease angry false gods or to drive away the fearsome demons. Instead, the rising smoke is a symbol of prayer. The wafting smoke and the lifting up of one's hands in the traditional gesture of prayer provides a most powerful and poignant symbol of pure and heartfelt prayer to the true God.

This beautiful prayer action is seen at the announcement of John the Baptist's birth. That a priest of the Old Covenant was offering incense when the birth of the forerunner of the New Covenant is announced links the use of incense as a prayer offering to the worship of Christ the Lord.

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The fulfillment of this worship is pictured in the Book of Revelation when St. John has a vision of the worship in heaven (see Chapter 4). He understands the worship in heaven to be a completion of the Jewish worship in the Temple. Because of his vision and because the first Christians were Jews, it would make sense to assume that the early Christians used incense in their Eucharistic ceremonies.

The offering of incense as viewed in the first few centuries of Church writings is usually negative. One of the most common ways to ask Christians to compromise their faith was to force them

to offer incense to pagan gods. It is probable, therefore, that the practice of using incense in Christian worship was abandoned to avoid confusion among the faithful and to present a clear witness: incense offerings were associated with paganism and, therefore, abandoned by Christians.

Incense in worship made a comeback in the fifth century once Christianity was firmly established. Its use increased in the East and the West so that its use as a symbol of prayer and as a means of sanctifying and purifying became universal. As the use of incense increased, its connection with the Book of Revelation

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**The offering of incense at Mass is therefore an important part of Catholic worship. It is at that moment that our worship on earth becomes connected with the worship of heaven.**

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was seen more clearly. The apostle John saw clearly that the offering of incense was a beautiful symbol of prayer. So, he writes, "the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones" (5:8). The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.

The servers at Catholic Mass kneel before the altar during the Sanctus — when the faithful sing with the angels, "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory." As they do so they echo the angels in heaven. Then the server swings the incense as the priest offers up the Lamb of God on the altar. At that point in the Mass heaven's doors are opened, earth and heaven are met, and we get a little glimpse of glory.

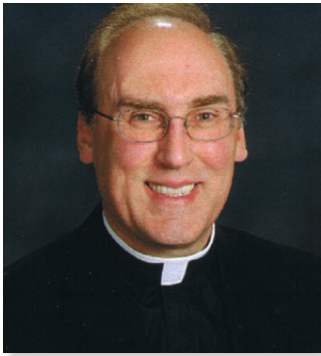
The offering of incense at Mass is therefore an important part of Catholic worship. It is at that moment that our worship on earth becomes connected with the worship of heaven.

Also, the prophecy of Malachi is fulfilled. He spoke the Lord's words, saying, "From the rising of the sun to its setting, / my name is great among the nations; / Incense offerings are made to my name everywhere, / and a pure offering" (Mal 1:11).

*Father Dwight Longenecker is the chaplain of St. Joseph's Catholic School, Greenville, South Carolina.  
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## The First Christmas

What is the actual date of the birth of Christ?

One would think that if anyone's date of birth were remembered exactly, it would be that of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the gospels do not pinpoint the date of Christ's birth.

The reason is probably that the

focus of the gospels is on the kerygma or mystery of redemption — the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. This focus is also probably why St. Mark's Gospel does not even include the Christmas story, but begins with the Baptism of the Lord at the River Jordan. Easter, on the other hand, can be better dated because of its concurrence with Passover.

Prior to the legalization of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in the year 313, no universal date or even formal celebration of Christmas is found. For instance, Origen (d.255), St. Irenaeus (d. 202), and Tertullian (d. 220) do not include Christmas or its date on their lists of feasts and celebrations.

After legalization, the Church was better able to establish; universal dates of feasts and to organize the public celebration. Moreover, we now see the Church addressing controversies concerning Jesus as true God and true man and how He entered this world. Such concern would focus more attention on the importance of celebrating Christmas, the birth of our Lord.

On the more practical side of this issue, Roman pagans used to gather at the hill where the Vatican is presently located to com-

memorate the "Birth of the Unconquered Sun" This pagan feast was celebrated throughout the Empire either on Dec. 25 (according to the Julian Calendar) or on Jan. 6 (according to the Egyptian calendar). Although not proven with certainty, some historians credit Constantine, who declared Sunday as a day of rest in the Empire, with replacing the pagan festival with that of Christmas. Interestingly, since the 2000s, Jesus was honored with the title, "Sun of Justice."

Somehow all of these elements converged to the formal celebration of Christmas on Dec. 25. For instance, Christmas was celebrated in Rome by Pope Liberius (352-66) on Dec. 25. On Dec. 25, 379, St. Gregory Nazianzus preached a Christmas sermon in Constantinople. In the Cathedral of Milan, St. Ambrose (d. 397) celebrated Christmas. Therefore, by the year 400, generally, the birth of Christ was set on Dec. 25 with the exception of Palestine, where it was celebrated on Jan. 6 until the mid-600s, when it was then transferred to Dec. 25.

As an aside, the Feast of the Epiphany also emerged in Gaul (the Roman province of present-day France) about the year 361. This feast was moved to Jan. 6, which remains the official date.

While the concern for exact dating may preoccupy us at times, I believe the most important point is celebrating the birth of our Lord. Remember that the title "Christmas" is derived from the Old English title "Cristes Maesse" which means "The Mass of Christ." This Christmas, may we lift up our hearts at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and receive our Lord, born into our souls through the grace of the Holy Eucharist.

*Father William Saunders is pastor of Our Lady of Hope parish in Potomac Falls, Virginia. He is the dean of the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College.*

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The crèches in our homes, the beautiful praesepios in our churches, the Christmas pageants and living nativities in our schools and CCD programs all have the same purpose: to "bring the child Jesus to life again" so that he may be "stamped upon our fervent memory."

Just as in St. Francis' time, the "Child Jesus has been forgotten in the hearts of many." While the minds of multitudes still recall details of Christ's birth and their memories are full of the words of Christmas hymns learned long ago, their hearts can have amnesia. Their reflection on Christ Jesus in Bethlehem no longer sets their hearts on fire with greater love for him. Christmas still may inspire them to actions of love for others, like altruistically helping young kids buy "Christmas shoes" for ill mothers or serving as Secret Santas for so many in need. But it fails to elicit the most important reaction of all: adoring love for the newborn king of kings.

Prior to his death in April, one of our contemporaries — whom future generations will likely regard as a great saint like St. Fran-

**To help the Child Jesus come to life in us, Saint John Paul II called us all to live an intensely Eucharistic Christmas**

cis — tried to do for us what the *poverello* from Assisi did for his generation. The means he proposed did not involve animals, or hay, or the best attempts to emulate a shining star. They involved something far more basic, which we can often take for granted and treat as lifeless as a plaster statue of the baby Jesus. To help the Child Jesus come to life in us, Pope John Paul II called us all

to live an intensely Eucharistic Christmas, for the same Jesus who was placed in a manger and adored by the shepherds and wise men is placed in our hands and in our mouths in holy Communion.

The best way for the Child Jesus to come to life again and be stamped upon our fervent memory at Christmas, he taught, is to remember that God-with-us is still with us. Bethlehem is as close as the altar and tabernacle of the nearest Catholic Church.

This is indeed "good news of great joy for all people!" Merry Christmas!

*Father Roger J. Landry is a priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts. He is pastor of St. Bernadette Parish in Fall River, MA.*  
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