

### ***Lessons and Carols TONIGHT!***

It's finally here: our parish celebration of LESSONS AND CAROLS is tonight at 7:30 p.m. in the church. You've been reading and hearing about this beautiful Advent experience for several weeks now; I really hope you will set the time aside and give yourself and your family the special treat of attending LESSONS AND CAROLS. With your heart prepared in this way during Advent, your celebration of Christmas will be that much richer!

### ***Christmas Pageant***

This coming Friday night we will hold our annual Christmas Pageant. Although the Pageant involves the children of our parish, it's really an event for everyone and, in addition to the Pageant itself, there are always a few surprises to further help us prepare for the coming of the Lord at Christmas. Please consider joining us at the Christmas Pageant, whether or not you have a youngster participating in it; I promise you it will warm your heart!

### ***Christmas Spiritual Bouquet***

As described elsewhere in this bulletin, we are once again offering Christmas Spiritual Bouquet cards by which you may participate in the Mass intentions at Christmas. Many people find this to be a meaningful spiritual practice and I invite you to join in using the Christmas Spiritual Bouquet cards.

### ***First Penance***

This week we will complete our celebration of First Penance with the children of our parish. What a joy-filled experience it is as these children celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time! Sure, they're a little bit nervous at first, but it is so great to see how they leave the celebration of the Sacrament: with big grins and sometimes even a joyful skip or bounce in their walk! They feel not only a sense of accomplishment at having successfully completed the task, but, more importantly, they have experienced the joy of encountering God's love and forgiveness in a very powerful way. We really try to impress upon the children that we as Catholics go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation not because we are bad, but

because we are good. Yet, even though we are good, sometimes we sin and need to celebrate the sacramental forgiveness that comes to us through the ministry of the Church, which is brought to us through the role of the ordained priest.

I ask everyone to take a moment to offer a prayer for all the children who celebrated First Penance this year. Pray that they always stay close to the Lord through this beautiful Sacrament, and that their families will teach them and form them to celebrate this Sacrament frequently, throughout their entire life.

By the way: if you haven't been to Confession in a long time, Advent is a perfect time to come back. We would love to welcome you: there will be no lectures, no harangues, no judgments, only a joy-filled proclamation of God's welcome and forgiveness!

### ***Advent, Spiritual Growth, and a New Year: Eliminating "My" and "Mine"***

One of the great things about Advent that always inspires me is the sense of new beginning that goes along with it. There's a tremendous sense of renewal associated with this time of year as we begin a new liturgical year in the Church, as we prepare for the Lord to come into our life and into our heart in a new and deeper way, and as we wind up one calendar year and gear up to embark on a new one. For those who like to make New Year's resolutions, maybe you have even begun to think about what yours will be!

In reflecting on this sense of renewal and new beginning in my own life, I have again been brought to a tremendous sense of gratitude at being here with you as your Pastor. We have been through quite a journey together over my almost-eighteen months as your Pastor, a journey that has in many ways been a journey of renewal and new beginnings. Throughout it all, I hope the one constant is that we have encountered Christ more deeply TOGETHER.

I honestly do feel that the word "TOGETHER" is the key to it all. As Catholics, we believe that our relationship with the Risen Lord Jesus is not simply a private and individual relationship, nor is it a singular experience. Rather, the only way to fully encounter the Christ who comes among us is in the midst of

the CHURCH, TOGETHER. Therefore, not only are we connected to one another in the Body of Christ, but we are accountable to one another in our communal life together, especially as we give the witness of faith to one another.

This is why, for example, celebrating Mass is an action of the Body of Christ, the CHURCH, not of the priest alone. When we do the liturgy, we are not doing it as separate people who happen to be gathered in the same place at the same time as though we are doing parallel actions. We do not do whatever we “feel like” doing; we participate as members of the Body of Christ, handing ourselves over to the common ritual actions so that we might be formed by the ritual. The celebration of the Eucharist, remember, is not about myriad separate, individual communions with the Lord; rather, the Eucharist builds up the CHURCH and therefore molds us into our corporate identity as the Body of Christ. We cannot know Jesus or be close to Him without being completely immersed in the life of the Church community.

If this is true at liturgy, it is also true in our life together outside of liturgy, in all the ways we interact with each other in parish life. Perhaps one way we all need to challenge ourselves as to how we will let the Lord into our life more completely at Christmas is to allow ourselves to be converted more deeply into the communal life of the CHURCH. Perhaps a good Advent meditation might be to ask how frequently we interact with others and with the world from a “my” and “mine” mentality. One way of doing a spiritual self-examination is to do the self-test called “*check the pronouns.*” Are we using “I” and “mine” and “my” way to frequently in our conversations and in our interactions with others? Does this betray an inappropriate possessiveness or control or self-centeredness?

This can play out in all sorts of ways among all of us, sometimes among very good people who are working hard to accomplish a great deal, but who sometimes become too territorial or “turf” oriented. Think about how these phrases negatively impact our life together as a parish: “my rooms;” “my prayer service;” “my Mass;” “my storage space;” “my liturgy;” “my ministry.” The fact is that each and every

one of those things is not a personal possession, but something that belongs to the life of the parish because it is part of the life of the CHURCH. We are not individual parts; we are part of a whole, and we must always see and be accountable to that whole.

This Advent, perhaps we can all pray for the light of Christ to come into our life more completely by asking how we can grow beyond seeing our parish life together less and less as individual “pockets” or separate areas, and instead try to grow toward more of a shared effort and shared sense of responsibility, and a greater sense of the whole parish. It’s something I would like all of us to explore, especially the leaders of all the ministries, societies and organizations of the parish, in the upcoming calendar year ahead. We’ll have some opportunities to explore this together in some events as well.

Growing in that area is more than just a nice thing to do. It’s necessary because it’s an important part of the way we live our life IN CHRIST — which has to be TOGETHER.

#### *In conclusion...*

Together, let’s aim high in Christ. Together, let’s bring out the best in each other. Together, let’s be the best we can be in Christ.

And let’s always remember: LOVE IS A GIFT.

Sincerely,