

[Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8]

Many years ago, I saw two different bumper stickers on the back of a car that would be appropriate for Advent: “Jesus is coming... Look busy!” and “Jesus is coming, and boy is He ticked off!” But St. Peter doesn’t leave us twisting in the wind. He exhorts us to be blameless, to live faithfully, and to put the needs of others ahead of our own. That is the positive incentive to do what is good. Not just to “look” busy – but to GET busy!

First impressions tell a lot. Mark begins his gospel with the words of a wild man, a desert dweller, a rabble rouser, a voice crying out in the wilderness. Clearly something significant is about to happen for everyone -- ready or not. So the point is to get ready. Sometimes when you know something big is going to happen, it is comforting (as the First Reading suggests) to get the ball rolling.

These days, with instant delivery from Amazon or our local supermarket, we are not used to waiting. Even the smallest delay in the loading of a website is an occasion of near sin. And yet, over the last nine months, we have been forced to wait. We waited for an end to the first lockdown related to COVID-19. And now we are on the cusp of a third wave. We waited for cases to drop in our communities. Now, the numbers are growing. And we still wait for a vaccine that enables us to gather once more with one another. This experience of keeping vigil for a vaccine, for liberation from an endless COVID-tide, could be helpful for the Catholic desiring to learn how to keep Advent vigilance and to be patient.

Israel, after all, knew what it meant to wait for the Lord. The kingdom of Judah was in exile in Babylon, longing for a return to the land of the Temple. Their wait was not brief – it took nearly 70 years to get to the Promised Land.

And yet, this waiting was not fruitless. Their longing for God grew. The comfort that the Lord offered bore fruit in a heart waiting for liberation.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist is announced with the very words of comfort spoken by God through the prophet Isaiah. Just as God opened a highway through a desert of desolation, John the Baptist announces to the remnant of Israel that the time of redemption is at hand.

John is a prophet, clothed with camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey. His strangeness and simplicity are at once part of the proclamation. Turn away from sin, recommit yourself to fidelity to the Law.

And yet, John speaks to the gathered crowds in the Judean desert about a further posture of vigilance. There is someone coming greater than John. John may be the first rays of dawn of the kingdom, but he is not the sun. The crowds must wait for the coming of the Messiah, the one whose sandals the Baptist is not fit to tie.

We know who John is waiting for. We know his name: Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One. We know that He is the One Who has come to heal us from the power of sin and death, Who died upon the cross and rose again.

And yet, we share with the gathered crowd in the desert a vocation to vigilance, to patience, to waiting. Christ will come again. He will come to judge the nations, He will come to wipe tears from the eyes of all who wait for redemption, and He will come to address you and me. Christ is coming!

And the very same longing we have for the end of COVID-19, for the advent of a vaccine and for a chance to celebrate the holidays with our family is how we should approach the second coming of Jesus Christ. We must not grow tired of waiting for Our Lord, lax in our awareness that Christ will come again. Longing is good for us. Desire for the presence of Our Lord is good.

The waiting, of course, is hard. And yet, waiting increases our desire. We must learn to anxiously await the return of Our Lord.

Your reflection questions to ponder this week:

Am I feeling led by God? How patient am I? In my waiting, do I remain faithful? What am I waiting for? What will "the thief" take away? My complacency? My illusions about myself? The fantasy world I live in? What will remain? Faith? Where do I go to prepare for the coming of Christ? A place of busyness? A place of emptiness? Where do I best meet God? Spoiler alert – you will hear God in the silence, not in all the noise that surrounds us!

This weekend is the annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. Many communities of religious men and women worked for years

proclaiming the Good News through education, medicine and social justice ministries and services. They received little or no pay, just room and board in some cases. Now, in their old age and retirement, they have no income or savings to pay for their care. Religious brothers and sisters in their 80's and 90's continue to work if they can to support those who cannot.

Our own Sr. Pat Whalen is considered a "junior sister" in her community! Several are in their 80's or 90's and still working in ministry and service. There are a few Dominican senior Sisters living in our community who still volunteer in parish ministries. I was taught by Dominican Sisters in grade school, and Jesuit priests in the seminary. Our own Sr. Noreen O'Connell, who worked for years here on procuring annulments, is enjoying her third year of retirement at the motherhouse in Adrian at age 93.

I was friends with Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, from Monroe, now all gone to their eternal reward. Let us show our appreciation for these prophetic men and women who pointed the way to the Lamb of God and who taught us patient and humble service, by supporting the Retirement Fund for Religious with our prayers and with our financial support. Envelopes are at the sides of our new offertory basket boxes.

Jesus indeed is coming. Let's not just LOOK busy, let's GET busy! Conducting ourselves "in holiness and devotion, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of the Lord."

Come, Lord Jesus! Do not delay! AMEN!

[Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 98; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38]

What is a mystery? Is it something we can't ever know? Not really. Rather it's something we need FAITH to know. We have to enter into mysteries, and faith is the key that unlocks them.

Today we stand before and celebrate a mystery: The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary, the Church teaches, was preserved from Original Sin since the moment of HER conception. But how are we to wrap our minds and hearts around this truth of faith?

The mysteries, though, don't end there. Mary, too, stood before one, the Gospel tells us, and she was genuinely puzzled, not only by the appearance of the angel but also by his extra-ordinary message: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you... You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." How, Mary wondered, could such a thing happen?

We stand before another mystery as well, one the story from Genesis presents to us: If God is good and perfect and all-powerful, why would God create a world in which human beings can turn from their Creator -- that is, sin? How, we wonder, could such a thing happen?

Through faith Mary came to grasp what her own Immaculate Conception meant, and so can we. By the end of her dialogue with Gabriel, she had moved from perplexity to acceptance. She had faith in the One from whom the messenger came. She accepted the vocation to which God was calling her. In a way, she was recognizing the union with God she had always had.

It was a bond that was never broken in her, a closeness to God that allowed her to bring into the world the One Who would walk with human beings and show them the way back to the communion with God that Mary had from the beginning of her life. Her original sin-less-ness, which testifies to her union with God, helps us understand another of the mysteries we encounter: what is called Original Sin. Everyday sin we're all too familiar with. It's the failure to love and respect God and one another in the ways God has shown us.

Why it's here in the first place is the mystery. Original Sin is how we try to answer that question: We have the capacity, the freedom, to choose evil instead of good -- to forget God or to act as if God didn't exist, to harm others and ourselves. Adam and Eve had the freedom to ignore God's command, the Genesis story tells us, and when they did, the harmony with God and each other they had enjoyed unraveled quickly. They started to play the blame game. They realized they were naked -- something they hadn't noticed before their union with God was disrupted.

Freedom, though, is not a curse. It's a gift. We are free to choose to seek God, to follow God, and to be grateful. Mary used that freedom perfectly, and even Adam and Eve moved forward. Eve became "the mother of all the living," Scripture's way of saying that, in spite of the burdens the world carries, life goes on. Adam and Eve's first steps of exile from the Garden of Eden were humanity's first steps toward re-union with God. We move forward, hopeful in our redemption and with faith that Christ has shown us the path to a new friendship with God.

The Lord is with Mary -- and us. She is full of grace -- and so is our world, God's beloved creation. We can open ourselves to being filled with God's gifts. We can embrace those gifts of life, of love, of freedom. God has chosen and blessed us, the Letter to the Ephesians says, so that we may live to do God's will and give God glory. Mary teaches us that the best way to discern God's sometimes mysterious ways is to use our will to do God's will: "Let it be with me according to your word."

When Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, she sang a song of praise to God, the Magnificat. We, too, in the words of the psalm, can sing a new song to the Lord, blessing as we are blessed. A song of salvation that says it is always possible for our relationship with God to be restored, renewed, and deepened.

Our Lord said "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it." In response to the Angel Mary said "Be it done unto me according to thy word." This was Mary's disposition, not only at the Annunciation, but at each and every

moment of her life. She was conceived without Original Sin, but she continually conformed herself to God's will in obedience and in humility.

Let us give thanks to God this week for this incomparable gift He bestowed upon Our Blessed Mother in preserving her from all sin, from her very conception. Let us turn to Our Blessed Mother and ask her to obtain for us the graces we need to follow God's will for each one of us at every moment.

Our Lady, under her title of "Immaculate Conception," is also the patroness of our country. As we celebrate her Feast Day let us also ask her to pray for our nation -- that it may return to the Christian values upon which it was founded. O Mary Conceived without Original Sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee! AMEN!

[Is. 61:1-2a, 10-11; Psalm: Luke 1:46-54; 1 Thess. 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28]

This is the Sunday to joke about my “manly rose”-colored vestments, but what we celebrate today at the halfway point of our Advent journey isn’t a joke! It is joy. REJOICE! This command comes from the first word of today’s Second Reading from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians: Rejoice always. He follows that command with several others: Pray. Give thanks. Do not quench the Spirit or despise what prophetic voices are trying to tell us. Test everything.

We are told not to quench the Spirit. Isn’t it amazing how one word, one phrase, one sentence can deflate someone else’s ego and self-esteem? On the flip side, taking time to say something that builds up somebody and affirms them is keeping the Holy Spirit alive and well.

What we say to one another can either tear us down or build us up.

This leads to the humility of admitting what St. John the Baptist says in today’s Gospel: “I am not the Christ.” As I counsel people, the recurring theme I hear is: “I want to be in control. I don’t want any surprises.” Someone once said a long time ago, “If you want to make God laugh, show him your plans.” There is something very freeing when we realize that we are not God, that we are not the center of the universe, and that we let God be God. When I have to make a judgment call about something, my priest friends remind me that I am in sales, not in management! Except when I am expected to manage a parish!

We are still called, though, to be witnesses who testify to the light, and a voice crying in the desert. We’ve all experienced times when Jesus did not seem near, available or present to us. What opened your eyes to His presence? What happened that made you realize He was there the whole time?

Many souls are still caught in the wilderness of confusion, hopelessness and pain, heartache and despair, not to mention sinfulness. Can we rightfully ignore their needs? Is it loving to be quiet so that they cannot hear the truth?

This is what Isaiah means in our First Reading. By virtue of our baptism each one of us has the Spirit of the Lord poured upon us. The Lord anoints us.

He sends each one of us to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the

brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to the prisoners. To announce a year of favor from the Lord. 2020 has NOT been a year of favor!

2020 has been a most curious and unique year for many reasons. A very bad, dark and challenging year. I don't need to tell you how it was, and how it continues to be, bad, dark and challenging. But we believers are called to be a light in that darkness. To make straight the path for the Lord as joyful, missionary disciples. And to do this as Families of Parishes.

It's about sharing resources, but most of all, it's about sharing Jesus.

The Archdiocese of Detroit's 216 parishes will come together in 51 groupings called "families of parishes," with about half of those groupings beginning to operate as families by July 2021.

The long-anticipated list of family groupings was released Dec. 9, along with an expanded frequently asked questions link at familiesofparishes.org.

The release of the list comes on the heels of Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron's pastoral note, "Led by the Spirit on Mission," which outlines the vision and theology of the ambitious renewal of the archdiocese, spurred in part by a shortage of priests and Synod 16's call to reimagine the structures of the local Church to support its evangelical mission.

In the vast majority of groupings, parishes will join families consisting of neighboring, contiguous parishes -- often within vicariate boundaries -- in order to effectively collaborate and share resources.

The groupings were developed after extensive discussion and consultation among the pastors of each family, along with their regional bishops and vicars. We will be a family with St. Blasé, St. Michael and St. Ephrem, all in Sterling Heights. The remaining five Warren parishes and the parish in Center Line will form a family of parishes of their own. Each parish in the family should border at least one other parish, and families should be roughly three to six parishes. We will keep our names and be referred to in the future as "Central Macomb Vicariate Family of Parishes Number Four." St. CMVFPNF, pray for us!

There was some preliminary work which we did as a parish. I invited 18 of our parishioners to form a transitional committee to meet twice to answer some

important questions given to us by the Family of Parishes committee: “What is our history?” “What are our area’s demographics? How have things changed?” “What are our parish strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats?” “What qualities do you look for in your priests?” “What do you see as the future mission of your parish as a member of a Family of Parishes?” Many of our committee members have agreed to stay on as we await and participate in Wave Two.

Twenty-seven of the 51 parish families will begin operating together in Wave 1, which will take place by July 2021. The other 24 parish families will start in July 2022. St. Martin de Porres is in Wave 2, which will begin preparation, formation and transition in July of next year, 2021.

There will be a retreat for clergy to come together to get to know one another, and to begin work on something called the ‘family priests covenant.’ The “covenant” will be an agreement among the priests in the family -- written or verbal -- about how they’ll serve, meet, eat and pray together. The covenant also could include priest “exchange” opportunities, in which the pastor or associate pastor of one parish celebrates Mass or preaches homilies at another parish in the family as a way to introduce himself and get to know the faithful.

Along with the list of parish families, the Office of Missionary Strategic Planning also released a families of parishes “playbook” that includes a summary of the roles and responsibilities for the clergy and lay leaders of each parish. The playbook is largely a summary of the decisions made by Archbishop Vigneron’s three parish family advisory councils, which focused on governance, “mission direct” and “mission support” roles.

In addition, the creation of a number of new lay ecclesial roles and positions will benefit the entire family. For instance, a new “director of mission support,” will oversee non-ministry positions for each family, and lay directors could be appointed to oversee mission areas such as discipleship formation, engagement, evangelical charity, family ministries and worship.

Each parish family will also have a “Family Pastoral Council,” which will include two parishioners from each parish along with all of the clergy of the family, and a “Family Leadership Team” appointed by the pastor or moderator.

In the Archdiocese of Detroit, we are using the tool of Families of Parishes to make a straight path for Jesus to come alive in the hearts and minds of every person in Southeastern Michigan. As followers of Jesus, we want to share Him with each and every person we meet. We want all people to experience the love, blessings and grace that we have received from Jesus.

We know that sharing Jesus and making a way for Him in our lives is hard work. Even Jesus's disciples struggled to follow Him at times. We heard from Archbishop Vigneron's recent pastoral note on Families of Parishes, that in the Bible, disciples are obedient to His call. The word "disciple" means, "one who learns." The word "obedient" means "one who hears and listens." Even so, they doubt Jesus because there are various things that either don't make sense to them or are just too hard. What about the challenges in our spiritual lives? There are always challenges in making room for Jesus in our lives.

Even though we hear the voice of the Lord calling us to carry on and persevere, at times we, or some of us, doubt that it is possible, or that it will be fruitful. Nevertheless, our First Reading from Isaiah encourages us. Despite our modern deserts, the Holy Spirit is calling our Church to come together in a family of parishes. The way, the path leads to Jesus Christ. How much easier it is to navigate with more people to help and support, than doing it alone as one parish. How do we make a way for Jesus this Advent?

First of all, we cannot allow ourselves to be guided by fear. Jesus says countless times in the Gospel, "Fear is useless. What is needed is trust." Secondly, as Mary placed her trust in the Holy Spirit during the Annunciation, we too, place our trust in her mantle of motherly love. We call to her to help us shape our minds, our hearts and our souls as she did to be and to become joyful missionary disciples as a family of parishes in the Archdiocese of Detroit.

Come, Lord Jesus! Come and do not delay! AMEN!

[2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Psalm 89; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38]

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas! And, as Lucille Ball sang in the Broadway musical "Mame," "We need a little Christmas now," given the way 2020 turned out to be! Some of us are still preparing for it. But as we decorate our church and homes, are we doing it to prepare a garish place of splash, or are we preparing to receive Jesus Christ in our hearts? The TV show "Christmas Light Fights" is SO not in the spirit of Christmas!

In our First Reading from the Second Book of Samuel, David wants to build an appropriate house for God, a beautiful temple. It is to be a splendid place for the people to worship God, housed at the time in the Ark of the Covenant and protected by a humble tent. But God has something to say about that. After all, didn't God make the entire cosmos and all that dwells within it? Didn't God provide David with his kingdom and all the people in it? In fact, God is actually the maker of David's "house" or family, which is OUR house and family too, along with all the people of the world.

Nathan, David's court prophet, tells David to "go for it," but David's plans would be subject to God's revision. God had other plans. David's plans, however well-intentioned, were rejected. Why? Because God is free, dynamic and independent. A God who journeys, bivouacs, comes and goes and is never confined to one space. Unlike the lowercase gods, this God needs no temple, desires no temple, and approves no temple. This doesn't stop Solomon, David's son from going ahead and doing it anyway, a generation later.

Do you know what the sad irony is about this? After the destruction of the City of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD, only the Western Wall of its foundation of the temple is all that remains and the Ark of the Covenant disappeared, never to be found again... That is until Indiana Jones finds it in the movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark." But there is a sequel to the story. One that tells us that not only can God not be contained in a place or a thing, but that God can be found in an actual human being. Thus, the Gospel passage we hear today: The Annunciation.

Mary was only 14 or 15 years old, the typical age of a girl in the Middle East to be betrothed, or engaged in probably a pre-arranged marriage. Her parents were so inconsequential that the Holy Scriptures do not even give us their names. Only later tradition would call them Joachim and Ann. There was no honor, no status, and no greatness here. The very idea that God could live inside of a human being is revolutionary! A human tabernacle for the Son of God? "How can this be?" We have the answer from the angel Gabriel, "nothing will be impossible for God."

Miracles and childbirth seem to go hand in hand. It is a miracle people are courageous enough to bear children given all that can go wrong. It is a miracle anyone conceives a child given the biological precision required. It is a miracle that the baby survives its time in the womb given all the possible genetic and healthcare threats. It is a miracle that the trauma of childbirth doesn't overwhelm the baby and its parents more than it usually does. It is a miracle that more often than not, even in remote areas, the mother doesn't die from infection. It is a miracle that despite even the most incredible odds, most babies thrive and grow. Conception and childbirth are miracles. Period.

Jesus' conception and birth are no exception. They point to a truth that anyone who watches a child come into the world knows as the truth: that love exists -- as a separate, all-powerful being outside ourselves, and we are graced with its presence everyday of our lives. Hail Mary, for her role in bringing this truth to life.

When filming the movie, "Jesus of Nazareth" in 1977, Olivia Hussey, who played Juliet in the 1968 version of "Romeo and Juliet," played the role of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. When they finished filming the scene described in today's Gospel, the Annunciation, the director yelled, "Cut!" but Olivia sat, frozen and speechless. When asked if she was OK, she replied, "I need a moment to process what just happened. What a profound experience!"

Mary, the Small and Meek, encounters her God, the Great and Terrible, and just like that, becomes the mother of God's child. And what is her response?

"Let it be done to me according to your word." "Okay." That's all. And

that's everything. She said "Okay" to a scandalous pregnancy, a difficult birth in a barn, the perils of her Son's childhood, and the rejection of her home as He sets out to change the world. She says "Okay" in her embrace of His broken, lifeless body after a shameful death. Who says that Mary is irrelevant, that we cannot relate to her? We don't expect angels to deliver messages to us from God, but we can still learn from Mary's example.

Does not God also invite you and me into something awesome and majestic? Does God not also make extravagant promises to us about blessing and eternal life? It happens every time we come to Mass, and every time we receive Holy Communion.

Where in your life, is God asking YOU to say, "Okay" when you would rather say, "No way?" Who are the people the Lord is sending to you, so that you can show them that with God all things indeed are possible?

What kind of spiritual relationship do you have with Mary? Warm and friendly? Cold and distant? Abstract, or personal? Can you relate to Mary's vulnerability and admire her courage? Are her hopes and fears your own?

When I set off to college, my mom made me an afghan to wrap myself up when life and the world and my room were cold. It followed me to the seminary and to each of my parish assignments. Many years later, a woman blessed me with these words, "May Mary wrap you in her mantle of love and grace." So now I am comforted not only by my earthly mama, but my heavenly mama as well!

In these last busy days before Christmas, take some time to be still, to be silent. To let your house be quiet. Read again these three Scripture readings. Listen to the PROMISE God makes to each one of us through King David, the BLESSING that St. Paul shares with us, and the HOPE that Mary gives us. Do not be afraid, "for you have found favor with God." Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; Luke 2:1-14]

(Christmas Greetings in English, Italian, Polish, German, French and Spanish. Welcome to all who have “come home” since the pandemic began.)

There is a wonderful tradition of “giving” that our Jewish brothers and sisters share with us Christians at Christmas time. It’s called a “mitzvah.” I believe that it comes from the Jewish word meaning, “the Law.” We may know it from the term “bar mitzvah” or “bat mitzvah” is used when a teenage boy or girl is recognized as an adult with certain rights and responsibilities. For adults, a “mitzvah” obliges one who is Jewish to volunteer to work at various jobs so that their Christian brothers and sisters can attend Christmas services and spend time with their families. It is “the Law.” Or at least a commentary on the law.

There’s a decree, a law, that made Joseph pack up his travel bags and his very expectant wife and travel “up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem.”

Perhaps it is a Christian, or more specifically a Catholic “law” that brings us here today. It is the “obligation” that good Catholics come to Mass, especially at Christmas and at Easter. Although Archbishop Vigneron has dispensed us from the obligation until Ash Wednesday. Joseph followed the law of the land; you and I are here because we follow the law of our hearts. A heart guided by the knowledge that our being here today has meaning for us, individually and as a congregation of faith. This is how we choose or are compelled to celebrate Christmas. We choose to be lights, to be “luminaries” in the darkness of our world, and to the sinful world to which we will return when we leave here.

It took God Himself to come down to us into human form and experience all the human emotions, all the human joys and sorrows that you and I encounter in every life and through every day. In all this, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, “God with us,” experienced everything except sin. Although sinless, He would take upon Himself all of our sins, so that we might again merit Heaven.

So, God’s “Christmas present” to us was not toys, or land, or possessions. God’s “Christmas present” to us was His Very Son.

It wasn’t enough for God to love us “from a distance.” God kissed creation, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and gave us Jesus. A helpless little baby born in squalor and poverty. A self-less act of love.

What can we learn from today's Feast? What can a little baby teach us?

What can we give in turn to the Christ Child, to "Baby Jesus?"

I have five gift suggestions.

Gift Number One. Free your heart from hate. Hate makes us sicker and even kills us more than those whom we have hated. Bring your hate to the stable and lay it in the manger. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting. It means moving on.

Gift Number Two. Free your mind from worry. All the worry we carry in our heart accomplishes nothing, but weighs us down and keeps us from flying to greater heights. Bring your worry to the stable and lay it in the manger.

Gift Number Three. Live simply. Chances are very good that the "things" and the "stuff" that we bought and wrapped and gave will be forgotten in time. Bring your simplicity to the stable and lay it in the manger.

Gift Number Four. Give more. The more I give, the less I take. Studies show that the greatest medicine, beside laughter, is a generous heart. Give of your time, your talent, your treasure. Bring your stewardship to the stable and lay it in the manger.

Gift Number Five. Expect less. Someone once told me that they have low expectations in life because then they are not disappointed. I say, "Aim a little higher," but don't expect perfection. Only two people I know are perfect: Jesus and our Blessed Mother! If we expect our reward to be great in Heaven, we need to expect less on earth! Bring your humility to the stable and lay it in the manger.

All of these gifts speak of stewardship, discipleship and witness or evangelization. When the Christian disciple accepts Jesus Christ and His call to true holiness, stewardship, discipleship and evangelization are not optional.

Free your heart from hate. Free your mind from worry. Live simply. Give more. Expect Less. Will we be perfect? Hardly, but it's a good start.

Certainly with the year 2020 coming to an end, we won't weep to see the back end of it as we soon enter 2021. All of the sickness, the tension, the sin seems to be magnified thanks to a 24/7 news media. But what a test it has been for us to grow in patience, in acceptance, in humility and in hope.

This month, we received word about the final groupings of parishes as we begin our process called "Families of Parishes." St. Martin de Porres Parish will become a family with St. Blasé Parish, St. Ephrem Parish, and St. Michael Parish, all in Sterling Heights. We will become a "family of parishes" along with 50 other designated families. There will be two waves of formation; we are in Wave Two. This means that our

preliminary formation sessions will not start until July, 2021.

Archbishop Vigneron, our Spiritual Father of the Archdiocese of Detroit, said this in November, on the Feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe:

“In the midst of the pandemic, with all of the things that are on our minds, there could be a lot of reasons to put on hold our effort to become a missionary community, but not so. In fact, we know that the world needs now more than ever the Good News of Jesus Christ.

“Our new model of Families of Parishes is a continuation of the fruit of the Synod [that took place in the Fall of 2016]. From now on, our parishes will work together as families, in order more effectively to fulfill their mission to evangelize. It’s been the call in every age, and it’s our call today. This is what God wants of the local Church here in Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Lapeer, Monroe, and St. Clair counties.

“In the months ahead, I am firmly convinced that the Holy Spirit will give us new ways to think about how each of us can be strengthened by the other, in order for each of us to do what God is inviting us to do, so that the world hears the great Good News.

I take as my inspiration Blessed Solanus, who made it his watchword to say to everyone who came to him, “Give God thanks in all his designs.” To give God thanks for all that has been accomplished, to give God thanks for all the joyful missionary disciples he’s raised up in our midst, and to give God thanks for what he’ll do ahead of time in the next generation.” The quote ends here.

In this extraordinary year, when so much of what we have taken for granted in modern life has turned out to be more fragile than we ever feared, we have spoken often of sacrifices, but not nearly enough about the very gift of life. In the midst of pain and sorrow, of separation and sadness, of unemployment and uncertainty, we urge one another to look forward to the day when this, too, shall pass, and life will return to what we used to see as “normal.”

But some of the life that we once knew will never return, and some people will live on only in our memories. That is the reality, a consequence of sin, that we must face.

But we face it this Christmas knowing that God is with us. Not in some abstract sort of way, but in the person of the child in the manger: “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace” (Is 9:5). His birth reveals the fullness of God’s glorious plan: Not a world built on the consequences of pride, disobedience and

sin, but one created in love, crowned in Christ, drawn into the life of God as surely as God Himself has entered into the life of this world.

That is the meaning of this Christmas, and every Christmas: that God so loved His creation that He humbled Himself to become part of it. This is His greatest gift: We know our life is worth living, because He wanted to live it with us. “And the Word became flesh and lived within us.” This Christmas, may we peer more intently into that average world tucked into the familiar story of Jesus’ birth. Maybe we’ll even see a reflection of our own average world, but with new expectancy and hope.

Let’s anticipate the coming birth of our glorious Savior. And, let’s remember, though He be *far above us*, the miracle of Christmas is that He has *come near to us*, into our world, into our routine life. He is both Majesty *and* a God who presses into our days, our *everydays*. And, He whispers Life into those dusty, disgraced, and dull places—and we are never, ever the same. Let this be OUR gift to the Word Made Flesh. AMEN!

[Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3; Psalm 105; Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19; Luke 2:22-40]
OR [Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14; Psalm 128; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40]

There is a Chinese proverb that wisely says, "Nobody's family can hang out a sign that says, 'Nothing the Matter here!' " The fact is, even the best of families has at least something "the matter" – it may be arguing or holding a grudge, it may be domestic violence or divorce, it may be unemployment or sickness or a host of other problems that families are faced with. So, if you see a home with the sign that says, "Nothing the Matter here," you will know that there IS something the matter – someone is in denial! What about the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, whose feast we celebrate today?

Surely they could have proudly displayed such a sign. After all, two of the three never sinned. There would have been no sibling rivalry. This family had it all together, we think. They were problem-free and worry-free, which is why we hold them up as a model family for all time. Well, that is not exactly the case. Although we certainly do hold Jesus, Mary and Joseph up as a model for families, and they certainly are a "Holy Family," we must realize that even THEY could not have claimed, "Nothing the Matter here!"

An unwed mother was no less a struggle and social problem in the first century than it is today. The Holy Family was a family in exile. They were refugees in a strange land, as are countless families in our own time.

When Jesus was presented in the Temple as we hear in today's Gospel, Joseph and Mary must have been a little worried when Simeon says that Jesus will be a "sign that will be contradicted" and that Mary's heart will be pierced. Remember the Passover pilgrimage when a pre-teen Jesus is separated for three days before His parents returned to Jerusalem to look for Him, "filled with great anxiety." Yes, the Holy Family was indeed very human.

And then, at the end of this stunning series of events, we hear, "When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Lk 2:39-40).

That's it! There is no elaboration on what happened when they left that Temple, when they arrived home in Galilee. There is no discussion of potty training the Christ Child -- insofar as such potty trained existed in the ancient world. There is nothing but silence.

And yet, those of us who belong to families, know what took place. Nothing remarkable. There were meals. There was education. Mary and Joseph discovered in their son, who grew in wisdom, a delight that any parent knows.

There were also nights spent awake with a child who coughed until dawn.

There was work, play, perhaps even fear that there might not be enough food on the table.

This, dear friends, is the deeper meaning of the feast of the Holy Family.

The Word made flesh, the splendor of the Father, entered the mundaneness of family life.

Yes, we are called to imitate the love of the Holy Family.

But we are equally called to recognize the mystery of love that Christ revealed by becoming a child to this mom and dad. To Mary and Joseph.

Because our Lord entered this mundane mystery of family life, we cannot look at families in the same way.

Family life is a mystery, a space where divine love can enflesh itself through the mundane complexities of awaiting kids, raising kids and worrying about kids.

The task of the family is to take the time to see the mystery of love made present in the stunningly mundane task of creating a home.

So, on this feast of the Holy Family, let us worry less about how we measure up against the Holy Family. And instead, let us assume the vision of Mary and Joseph, who recognized in their son Jesus, the presence of a love beyond all telling.

Let us simply take the time to see anew the mystery of family life with all its joys and sorrows alike.

Jesus is not only the Son of Mary, but He is also the Son of God. And so that gives every human family the potential to share in the glory of God as well.

My favorite passage from St. Paul is the alternate reading given to us for today's Feast. He reminds us that we are: "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved."

How can we be a holy domestic family, and a holy parish community? A "Family of Parishes?" Work on: "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Love and peace are within our capacity to share.

Put up with each other's frailties as much as we complement each other's strengths. Be thankful. Teach each other about mutual respect for property, for persons, for life. Sing often. Whatever you do, think of doing it for God in the name of the Lord Jesus. Love and peace are within our capacity to share.

In just a few minutes we will move from the table of the Word to the table of the Eucharist. We will once again be nourished and strengthened to be Christ for everyone in our parish family, our neighborhood, our school, our workplace, our Church and our world. Perhaps as we approach New Year's with its necessary resolutions, we can add one more – to be present for more family meals at home and here in this holy place. In our sorrows and trials, in our failure to love and to forgive, we turn to the Holy Family and ask them to teach us to love as they love.

In his pastoral note [*Led by the Spirit on Mission*](#), Archbishop Vigneron reminds us, "There is no goal, plan, dream or aspiration we can have which is not under the authority of Jesus Christ. Whatever plan you have for yourself, your family or your parish -- whatever plans we may have for our archdiocese -- Jesus has the power to accomplish it." AMEN!