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Connecting, Engaging, Witnessing, Evangelizing: Our Parish Retreat on Dec. 11-13

Officially, Advent begins on Sunday, Dec. 3. For us as Catholics, Advent is a period of preparation, extending over four Sundays prior to Christmas. The word “Advent” comes from the Latin word *advenio*, “to come to,” and refers to the coming of Christ. Of course, this refers to our celebration of Christ’s birth at Christmas. Yet, importantly, it also refers to the coming of Christ in our lives through grace, and to His second coming. Our St. John Apostle & Evangelist Catholic Community offers us many occasions during the Advent season to assist us in living out our faith and, in particular, enhancing our Advent journeys.

One of the important events planned is our Advent Retreat, scheduled for the evenings of Dec. 11, 12 and 13. The leader of the retreat will be Fr. Philip Chircop, SJ. Fr. Philip is a well-known speaker and mission/retreat presenter, and he brings something special to every mission/retreat he leads.

Born on the Mediterranean island of Malta, Fr. Philip has worked in high school, university and parish settings in various capacities. But more recently, he has been heavily involved in retreat work. He is a seeker, always looking for fresh ways to proclaim the Good News, hopefully helping people to embrace real and radical changes that lead to transformation in Christ Jesus.

According to Fr. Donnell Kirchner, CSsR, in an article published in *Our Sunday Visitor*, “Every parish deserves and needs a parish mission or retreat once in awhile. The renewal, enthusiasm and shot in the arm from this type of event invigorates even the best of communities.”



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Focusing Our Hearts Heavenward: The Origin and Beauty of the Nativity Scene

With all the commercialism surrounding Christmastime, it's far too easy for us to lose sight of the true reason behind the season. Overwhelmed by our endless to-do lists and the hustle and bustle of last-minute shopping, our focus quickly shifts away from the Christ Child's birth. And yet, hidden amongst the holly wreaths and garlands, the Christmas Nativity remains a tangible reminder of the Incarnation, pulling us back into time for a moment as we reflect upon the incredible gift of Christ's birth.

Interestingly, it was circumstances much like our own today which first led St. Francis of Assisi to recreate the Nativity scene nearly 800 years ago. Frustrated with the growing materialism and greed that seemed to pervade 13th century Italy, St. Francis wanted a way to visually remind people of Christ's humble beginnings — to show them that Christmas isn't about pomp and circumstance or material goods, but rather about unselfish love. Describing the idea to his friend Giovanni, St. Francis wrote, "I want to do something that will recall the memory of that child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by."

And so St. Francis' idea took form on Christmas Eve in 1223. This original Nativity scene was a living one, even including an actual ox and ass. Villagers were deeply moved by the silent display



of humble beauty, and the Nativity tradition soon spread throughout Italy and surrounding Europe. It is a tradition that remains today in nearly every Christian church and in many homes. In fact, it's hard to imagine Christmas without a Nativity scene somewhere.

Coming in various sizes and styles, each Nativity replica continues to focus our hearts on the true meaning of Christmas — to help us remember that Christmas isn't about the amount of gifts under the tree or the festive decorations, but rather about celebrating Christ's birth.

Many families have a tradition of hiding the Infant Jesus, only placing Him in the crib on Christmas morning. This helps build anticipation during the Advent season as we anxiously await the Divine's birth. Others go a step further, actually wrapping up the Christ Child to be opened as the very first gift of Christmas.

Yet, whatever your family's particular traditions, we hope that the Christmas Nativity continues to draw your heart heavenward this Christmas season — to center us all on the greatest gift ever given, our Incarnate Lord.

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A Letter From Our Pastor

Reflections at the End of the Year

Dear Parishioners,

It seems as if we just finished Lent and Easter, and here we are at Advent and Christmas. To say this is a busy month for many is an understatement. Although December is a month of love, it can also be a difficult month for some. For those with families, it may be a month of travel as people rush to be united with loved ones, sometimes after a long period of separation.

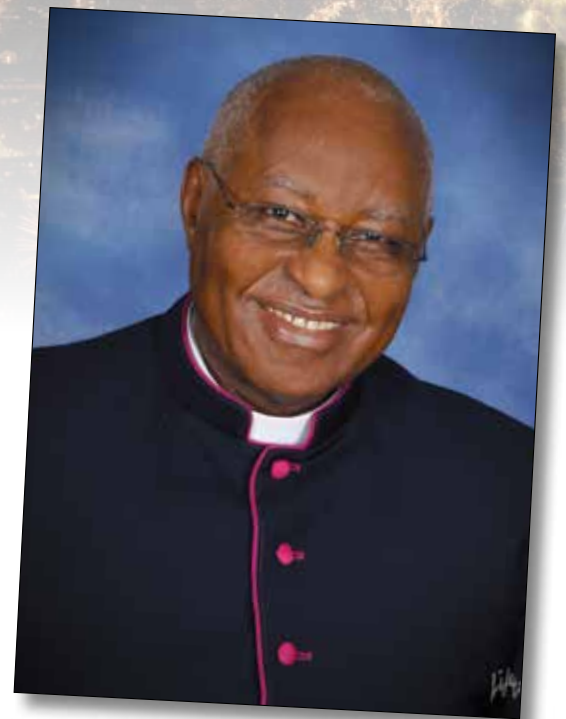
There is no shortage of reminders as to what time of year this is. However, for us as Catholics, we may need to refocus to see where we are in our faith lives. Were you aware that for us, December is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception? In that regard, we celebrate a Holy Day of Obligation on Friday, Dec. 8. Advent begins on Dec. 3, and you may notice that we begin to wear purple as a sign of Advent. That color changes to white or gold beginning at Christmas.

Of course, this is also the last month of the regular calendar year, which may add additional tasks to our own schedules

as we finalize things for the end of the year. However, there are many opportunities for us during this month to share, to pray and to celebrate in a Christian way, and I would encourage you to make an effort to be part of these. Right here in our parish, much is happening along those lines, and a careful reading of the bulletin will alert you to the “when, where and what” of these upcoming opportunities.

As I indicated earlier, this can also be a difficult time for some. In the midst of our own celebrations and joy, we need to be aware of that reality and of those living with it. This is a time to reach out, and it is a time to show love.

This December, let our minds be focused on Christ, Who will be born for us at Christmas, and for Whose coming we must always be prepared throughout the year. This is a time to thank God and to pray. It is a time to reach out to love and live peacefully with one another. We



need to remember that life continues after December, in spite of everything we feel we need to get done.

My prayers and blessings go out to each of you and your families. May God continue to watch over you. May the year 2017 end well for all of us!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Msgr. John S. Mbinda

Msgr. John S. Mbinda
Pastor

Sharing the L

During Advent, our thoughts turn to the Holy Family's grueling journey to Bethlehem and their temporary homelessness as they sought a safe place for the Blessed Virgin to give birth. With this backdrop on our minds and in our hearts, we at St. John's have an opportunity to share the love of Christ with our community homeless and low-income families at the upcoming Wahiawa Christmas Wonderland on Saturday, Dec. 16.

The Wonderland festivities will take place from 4-9 p.m. on California Avenue in front of the Ka'ala Elementary School in Wahiawa. The event, which is free and open to the public, will benefit the low-income and homeless in our local communities and will feature food, fun, entertainment, gift-giving, fellowship, and even a snow play area for the keiki. Several activities are specifically provided for the at-risk and low-income population.

Phil Acosta of ALEA Bridge, which was founded in January 2016 as the service provider to the homeless in our area, is setting his sights on making the event an annual happening.

"Last year, we had a summer food festival [Feed the Soul] and a Christmas event at the park," he says. "This is a hybrid of these two events, and if it works, we'll do it larger and make it an annual event."

Besides free music, entertainment and food for purchase from food trucks brought in by Street Grindz, local churches, community organizations, and political leaders will be providing activities and gifts for those in need. Organizations supporting the Wonderland include Honolulu Police Department/District 2, Inspire Church (Mililani and Waikale), Mililani Hongwanji, Wahiawa Christian Church, Our Lady of Sorrows (Wahiawa), and many other businesses and community organizations.

Our parish will be preparing food and gift baskets for the targeted population.

"In addition to the food and gift baskets donated by volunteers, we need volunteers for the event as well," Phil says. "We need volunteers for set-up, break-down, parking, crowd control, and moving tents and tables."

The event will bring the community together during the Christmas season and also provide an opportunity for our homeless to enjoy a little bit of the holiday.

"This provides a genuine experience for the homeless who can't provide for themselves," Phil says. "Area churches have compassion for the homeless and it is a good opportunity to help. It's a matter of providing an opportunity for people to get involved. We can all participate and fulfill the mission of helping others, and what better time than Christmas to work on a joint partnership? Early on, we at ALEA Bridge committed to engage the



Last year, ALEA Bridge offered a Christmas event to benefit the homeless. This year's event on Dec. 16 will combine the Christmas event with last summer's food festival.

Love of Christ

community. We're making a positive impact on the homeless, but there is no one solution. It's a very complex and challenging task. No single entity can fix it. We engage the community, and especially our church partners. We're building relationships so we can create opportunities to partner in different ways."

Debra Zedalis, Social Ministry Commission Chair, says our parish's partnering with ALEA Bridge improves our outreach to the homeless and allows us to have more contact with the homeless community. Our participation in the Wahiawa Christmas Wonderland provides even more opportunities to volunteer in serving the homeless and low-income.

"We'll have a booth proudly flying our St. John's banner and we'll do whatever ALEA Bridge asks us to do — whatever need they have, we will try to fulfill it," Debra says. "As of now, we will prepare 25 food and gift baskets with food, cleaning items, hygiene kits, and small gift cards for local eateries. Our Lady of Sorrows will be partnering with us and also preparing 25 baskets. We want to ensure we have enough for all those who may need some additional help, support and love at Christmas."

While our parish is very generous in financial support for the homeless, there is something that we lack.

"Sometimes we fail to put a face to the problem," Debra says. "So, when you interact with the homeless — and we do have parishioners who go to the homeless camps — you put a face to the issue and you see the person is just like you. When you serve these people, your heart is touched and you see Jesus in them — you recognize that they, too, are God's children and your brothers and sisters. They are just like us.

Circumstances have put them where they are, but that could be us. This event is an opportunity for them to be seen as a part of the Wahiawa community, but it is also an opportunity for us to make the Church visible to them and to make those we serve visible to us. Outreach to those in need moves us spiritually. If God wants us to be there, then we will be there."

During this year's Point in Time Homeless Count, we learned that in our area the homeless are mostly young males who have families here in our communities.

"It is important to know that our homeless do have ties to our community," Debra says. "From some of the work that ALEA Bridge has done, we know that many of our

homeless have mental health issues and addiction problems. Homelessness is a very complex problem. I feel sure that some of the young people out there living in the bushes are Catholic and have families in our local churches. While it is true that those who are homeless suffer, I think we need to be aware that their family members are suffering too. There may be people in our pews that have family members who are struggling or are homeless and they are suffering too. We need to reach out to the homeless, but also reach out to help their families as they struggle alongside their homeless loved one. This time of year is the perfect time to reflect on the Holy Family and our own families."



There was plenty of good food on hand during last summer's Feed the Soul food truck event near the Ka'ala School. This year's Feed the Soul event on Dec. 16 will combine the food truck event with the Christmas festival from last year.

If you would like to volunteer for the Wahiawa Christmas Wonderland, please email Debra Zedalis at dzedalis@hawaii.rr.com.

For Taylor Mitchell, Life in the

For parishioner Taylor Mitchell, each day that he shares the Good News is another adventure! Although Taylor was baptized in the Catholic Church, he wasn't raised in the faith. When he left his hometown of Pearl City to attend college, he chose New Hampshire's St. Thomas More College of Liberal Arts mainly for its small size and strong academics. Not long into his first year there, he found something even more valuable in his school of choice — an authentically Catholic community.

As Taylor completed the RCIA process at a local church and was confirmed near the end of his freshman year, the experience was both a homecoming and an exciting new beginning.

“When I was confirmed at the Easter Vigil, I expected it to be this huge moment and feeling, but it was more like coming home and getting into bed at the end of a really long day,” Taylor recalls. “My life had been boring — fine, but boring. And now, it's just so wonderful, and I really feel alive. I use the word



Taylor Mitchell on a retreat with parish middle school students

‘adventure’ a lot, because I really feel like I’m on an adventure. Life is never boring now. There is so much more to it.”

Taylor’s family moved to Mililani while he was attending college in New Hampshire, so he went to Mass at various area parishes during his visits home before settling here

and becoming a parishioner of St. John Apostle & Evangelist in 2013. He has been involved with Youth Ministry at our parish for the past five years, beginning as a catechist for Confirmation classes before going on to develop a comprehensive Youth Ministry program. Taylor loves watching the teenagers in our parish

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Church is a True Adventure!

fall in love with the Lord, and is energized to see them taking on active roles in the Church.

In addition to his work with Youth Ministry, Taylor also serves as a catechist for RCIA and as the Master of Ceremonies for the 9 a.m. Mass, and has helped with First Communion preparation, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and the Vocations Ministry. Taylor feels blessed by his participation in parish life, which gives him what he calls a “front seat to the glory of God.” As a Master of Ceremonies, he is able to view the Holy Sacrifice of Mass from up close. As a catechist, he gets to witness the ways the Lord is working in the lives of all the candidates and catechumens.

Taylor is constantly amazed that God has chosen to call him to serve these ministries.

“I rarely make a conscious decision to join a ministry — instead, the Lord decides that He wants me there and makes it happen!” Taylor says. “I don’t see myself as anything but some random guy who stumbled upon this cool church thing, and I’m just trying to soak up as much of it as I can.”

While Taylor — who works full-time as an engraver — is the first to admit that time management is not his strong suit, he has found that whenever he answers the call to serve, God provides him with the time and energy he needs.

“I joke that I live at the church,” he laughs. “If I were doing all of this by myself, with my own energy and resources, I would have burned out ages ago. But somehow, the Holy Spirit makes it work out. And when we rely on His energy, we are called to share it with others!”

Taylor may not have grown up at St. John Apostle & Evangelist, but he truly has come to consider the parish his home. As his own adventure in the Church continues, he feels blessed to be part of a community that is truly coming together and growing in the faith.

“St. John is becoming so welcoming,” he says. “People are taking a moment to get to know each other and realize that there is so much more to the faith community than just coming to Mass. I think the parish is starting to grow in that way. We’re really starting to live and share the Good News!”



Taylor Mitchell presenting at Life Night

Our Parish Retreat on Dec. 11-13

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“Our theme for the retreat is *Becoming the Body of Christ: Connect. Engage. Witness. Evangelize*,” Fr. Philip says. “‘God had a vision for the world: and the Word became flesh and pitched its tent in our midst’ (John 1:14). During this parish retreat, we will explore how we as a parish community can continue to explore and learn what it means to become the living, breathing, vibrant Body of Christ. We will do this very explicitly by unwrapping the four gifts of becoming — connecting, engaging, witnessing and evangelizing.

“My approach tends to be simple and direct,” he adds. “I start with a moment of quieting down, centering, through a chant or a song, followed by the first part of the conference. Halfway through, I invite the people gathered to stand up and stretch a little — hoping we will together become fully present again. I will then give the second part of the conference. Each session will be 90 minutes in length and all will begin promptly at 7 p.m. in the church.”

After a recent retreat at a parish in Canada, a parishioner wrote, “This was not a typical parish event. Fr. Philip is an artist at heart and madly in love with all things beautiful and soulful: music, painting, sculpture, photography, film, theatre, poetry, good company, good food, and more. He strongly believes that beauty is a uniquely wonderful entry into the mystery of the God ‘whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.’ God can indeed be sensed and experienced in all things if we have ears to hear and eyes to see, if we have the patience to have a long, loving look at the real that surrounds us. Fr. Philip brings that out.”

In a recent publication by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, titled *Communities of Salt and Light*, the Bishops stated, “The parish is where the Church lives. Parishes are communities of faith, of action, and of hope. They are where the Gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. Parishes are the home of the Christian community; they are the heart of our Church. Parishes are the place where God’s people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church’s life.”

For more information about our upcoming retreat this December, please contact the parish office at 808-623-3332.



Advent and Christmas

..... SCHEDULE

Immaculate Conception – Dec. 8

(Holy Day of Obligation)

Masses: 8 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Parish Advent Retreat – Dec. 11-13, 7 p.m.

BECOMING THE BODY OF CHRIST: CONNECT, ENGAGE, WITNESS, EVANGELIZE

Speaker: Fr. Philip Chircop, SJ

Advent Penance Service – Dec. 13, 7 p.m.

Misa de Gallo – Dec. 16-24, 5 a.m.

Church Offices will be closed Dec. 22 and 25 in observance of Christmas Eve and Christmas.

To fulfill your Sunday Obligation (Fourth Sunday of Advent), please plan on attending one of the following Masses:

Saturday, Dec. 23, 5 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 24, 5 a.m. (Misa de Gallo), 7 a.m., 9 a.m. and 11 a.m.

To fulfill your Christmas Obligation, please plan on attending one of the following Masses:

Christmas Eve Masses - Dec. 24

6 p.m. Christmas Family Mass (fulfills ONLY Christmas Obligation)

12 Midnight

December 25, Christmas Day Masses

7 a.m., 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. only. no 6 p.m. Mass