

**October 29, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

“Even death is illumined and can be experienced as the ultimate call to faith, the ultimate ‘Go forth from your land’ (Gen 12:1), the ultimate ‘Come!’

Spoken by the Father, to whom we abandon ourselves in the confidence that he will keep us steadfast even in our final passage.” Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Lumen fidei*, paragraph 56

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Our review of the Catholic teachings in regards to funerals continues.

The last main reason that we celebrate a funeral is to comfort those who mourn. This comfort is more than mere sentimentality. Gathering as a Christian community, we are buoyed by our shared hope in the Resurrection, and express the very real human need always to turn to God in times of crisis.

Understanding these three reasons for celebrating a Christian funeral, helps us to understand why the celebration of the Christian funeral is divided out over three liturgical celebrations: the Vigil, the funeral Mass, and the Committal.

The funeral vigil and period of visitation is the primary place to offer consolation to those who mourn, and celebrate the blessings that the deceased received during his or her life. The Vigil and period of visitation is traditionally celebrated in the home of the deceased. This has not been a custom in the local area for over a century, but highlights the essentially domestic character of the Vigil and period of visitation. This is the primary place for family members and friends to share memories and stories. This is also the most appropriate moment for a eulogy or other words of remembrance.

Although the majority of funeral visitation in both parishes take place in our churches immediately preceding the funeral Mass, there can be a tension between the respect and reverence that is required in a sacred space, and the informality of a visitation. In addition, many people find it difficult to take time off from work to pay their respects and offer consolation to the mourners when the only period of visitation immediately precedes the funeral Mass.

For both these reasons, it would be praiseworthy to give serious consideration to having a funeral Vigil and visitation the evening before the funeral Mass at a funeral home. In the more informal setting of a funeral home, people can more freely share stories and memories, greater physical comfort can be offered to those who mourn, and there is a greater opportunity for friends and acquaintances to offer their consolations and respects. Since a Vigil is not a sacramental celebration, it can be led not only by a priest, but also a deacon, and even a properly trained member of the lay faithful.

We will take a break from our reflection on Catholic funerals next week, but will continue the following week with a review of the Catholic funeral Mass and Committal.

Memento mori,

Father Bill

For your additional reflection, I invite you to read the homily that Fr. Paul Scalia preached for the funeral of his father, Supreme Court Justice, the Honorable Antonin Scalia:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/02/20/transcript-rev-paul-scalias-eulogy-his-father-justice-antonin-scalia/80667122/>

**October 22, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

“It is not Death that will come to fetch me,  
it is the good God.” St. Therese of Lisieux

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Shortly after I was ordained a priest, I was given a form to complete. It was for my funeral plan. The diocese wants priests to be prepared. Over the years, I have been asked by parishioners, relatives, and even friends about helping them to plan their funerals.

The next few columns will provide a review about what we, as Catholics, believe about funerals, and some guidance about how to plan a Catholic funeral. The introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals, the liturgical book used by priests and deacons to celebrate Catholic funerals, contains some beautiful teachings about the Catholic understanding of death and how this finds liturgical expression in the Catholic funeral rites:

“At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of Her confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist. Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to Him, the author of life and the hope of the just” (Order of Christian Funerals, par. 4-5).

This introduction highlights three reasons that we celebrate funerals. First, like all liturgical celebrations, is to offer worship and praise to God, and express gratitude for blessings received. We celebrate funerals, because we have the Faith to believe that death is not the end of the story. This is a bold proclamation of the Gospel message. When people gather for funerals they naturally share memories and stories about their deceased loved one, recognizing the many ways that God has blessed them in life. In our celebration of funerals, it is important to respond to these blessings with prayers of thanksgiving.

Next, we intercede on behalf of the deceased. Paragraph 1030 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.” The name for this final purification is purgatory. Christ teaches, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Perfection is the standard to get into heaven. However, perfection is a pretty high standard. Purgatory is the process by which God perfects us. Since “we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death,” our prayers and sacrifices benefit the faithful departed in the process of final purification. By our prayers and sacrifices, our loved ones spend less time in purgatory.

Memento mori, Father Bill

**October 15, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER and of THE SON and of THE HOLY SPIRIT...**

How many times have we said these words as we made the Sign of the Cross over ourselves? But have we ever thought about what we were doing and saying? Have we ever wondered when this ancient prayer came into practice and what it really means?

This ancient prayer that we practice (Yes, I said prayer) is thought to have been given to us back in apostolic times. While no direct evidence supports this, St. Basil, who lived in the 300's, tells us that it was the Apostles that taught us to mark ourselves with the Sign of the Cross for those who put their hope in the Lord.

Through the ages, some people treated the Sign of the Cross as a magic amulet, something with magical powers to protect them. It was noted by a bishop that some people would even make the Sign of the Cross on their way to commit a crime. During the Reformation, Martin Luther did not abandon the Sign of the Cross but the Protestant church did away with it because they felt people were treating it exactly as a superstition to bring good luck and protection. It makes you think about those basketball players on the free throw line, doesn't it?

For Catholics today, the Sign of the Cross is considered a prayer, but it is also a sacrament. A sacrament does what it says. For example, in Baptism we are cleansed of Original Sin and given Divine Grace. A sacramental, however, prepares us to receive Divine Graces. This is why at the beginning of Baptism the parents and godparents are asked to trace the Sign of the Cross on the baby's forehead. You are preparing your child to receive God's Graces.

Parents, by the graces given to you through the Sacrament of Marriage, it is your responsibility to evangelize your children in the faith. You have the authority to not just ask for, but to give God's blessing upon your children. You should bless them every night and before they leave for school. All you have to do is trace the Sign of the Cross on their foreheads. Use holy water if you have it and use some simple words, "May God Bless You in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." We too should bless ourselves with the sign of the cross before we leave our homes to face the world.

The sign of the cross has power over the devil. Yes, making the sign of the cross helps us in our battle with the devil and all the evil spirits who prowl the world for the ruin of souls. It was by Christ's death and resurrection that He conquered sin and death for us. We now can have eternal life if we choose. The devil hates this. By making the Sign of the Cross, we are uniting ourselves with Christ on His Cross; we are opening ourselves up to God's graces to help us in every spiritual battle. By making the Sign of the Cross, we are reminding ourselves and telling the whole world that we are united with Christ in His Baptism, in His death, and in His Resurrection.

The next time you make the Sign of the Cross, don't rush it. Do it willfully, prayerfully, and do it big. Open yourselves up to all of the wonderful graces God wants to give you.

Deo Gratias,

Dcn. Gary

**October 8, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

“Go and fear nothing, I will help you.”

the Queen of Heaven speaking to Adele Brise, October 9, 1859

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I hope that all of you are aware that the only Church approved apparition of Mary in the United States is located in our diocese. In October 1859, Mary, under the title of the Queen of Heaven, appeared to Adele Brise, a young Belgian immigrant.

Roughly a year ago, I recounted the details of how Mary appeared to Adele, and the message that she gave to her. I also recalled that in the 164 years since the apparition, there have been numerous miracles associated with the shrine of Our Lady of Champion.

This year, I would like to relate the most famous miracle associated with the Shrine. Two historic fires occurred on October 8, 1871. The more famous of the two was the Chicago fire. However, the Peshtigo Fire was responsible for more deaths and was more destructive. Due to the high winds and dry grounds, the fire quickly became a storm of fire and roared like a tornado right toward the Shrine’s grounds.

Desperate for help, people from the surrounding countryside fled to the Chapel where Adele and her companions were praying for Mary’s protection. Lifting the statue of Mary, those there that night processed around the sanctuary, praying the Rosary and singing hymns to Jesus and the Blessed Mother. When the wind and fire threatened suffocation, they would turn in another direction to pray. Early the next morning, a steady rain came and extinguished the flames of the fire.

Although the fire charred the outside of the Shrine’s fence, it had not harmed the grounds. However, the area surrounding the grounds was destroyed, and the only livestock to survive were the cattle the farmers led to the chapel. While many deeper wells in the area went dry, the chapel’s shallow well gave the cattle enough water to survive the heat.

In short, Mary protected all those who sought refuge in Her protection.

This miracle should not only help to edify us, but encourage us that in times of danger and temptation, we can and should seek Mary’s intercession. Just as she protected all who sought refuge on the grounds of the Shrine, she will also protect those who go to her for protection.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

\*The account of the miracle of the fire is adapted from <https://championshrine.org/our-story/>

**October 1, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

“The Rosary is the ‘weapon’ for these times.” St. Padre Pio

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On October 7 each year, Holy Mother Church celebrates one of the great military victories of Christian history, which is the victory of the Christian League over the Ottoman navy in 1571. Despite being vastly outnumbered, the Catholic forces, under the leadership of Don Juan of Austria, both annihilated the Ottoman navy and liberated the tens-of-thousands of kidnapped Christians who were enslaved to row their ships. The victory was so stunning and unexpected, that even Don Juan considered it to be a miracle. As the ships deployed to engage the Ottomans in battle, Pope St. Pius the Fifth implored Catholics throughout Europe to pray the Rosary. In Thanksgiving for this victory, the same Pope instituted the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary on October 7. In addition, the entire month of October is dedicated to the Rosary.

The Rosary is a powerful weapon.

The Rosary is a scripture-based prayer. The heart of the Rosary is meditating upon the mysteries of Christ’s life. Each mystery begins with the Our Father, and continues with ten Hail Marys. The repetition of the prayers helps to calm the heart and mind, and also to draw the person praying into reflecting on the mystery itself.

Saints throughout history have found the Rosary to be a powerful prayer. It is a powerful way of restoring order to your spiritual life. In fact, St. Francis de Sales teaches that “the Rosary is the greatest method of prayer.” It is also a powerful tool for growing in holiness and rooting out sin. One who faithfully and devotedly prays the Rosary will find that habits of sin are soon overcome.

The Rosary precedes every Mass celebrated at Holy Trinity and St. Gregory. If it’s been a while since you’ve prayed the Rosary or if you have never learned how to pray it, come to Mass early and learn. I usually pray the Rosary by taking a walk about parish grounds. I offer it as a thanksgiving for the people who come to Mass, the volunteers that keep the parish going, and as a supplication that more people come to Mass.

“Say the Holy Rosary!

Blessed be that monotony of Hail Marys

which purifies the monotony of your sins!”

St. Josemaria Escriva

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**September 24, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

“Behold, I send an angel before you  
to guard you on the way and to bring you  
to the place that I have prepared” Exodus 23:20 (ESV).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This Friday, September 29, Holy Mother Church celebrates the Feasts of the Archangels. Shortly after, on Monday, October 2, is the liturgical celebration of the Holy Guardian Angels.

We do not talk about angels often enough. And there are many misunderstandings about what angels are and what their role is. The word “angel” literally means “messenger.” And we see this often in Sacred Scripture. Throughout the Old Testament, God sends angels to bring important messages to His people. The angels also have a role in bringing messages back to God.

Something to notice is that almost every time an angel appears in the Bible, the first words are “do not be afraid.” This tells us that angels aren’t cute, cuddling and harmless as they are often depicted on greeting cards and works of art. Rather, angels are mighty and fearsome.

This helps us to understand the second role of angels, and that is as heavenly protectors. The angel of the Lord was sent to protect and watch over the Hebrew people during the Exodus, and the archangel Raphael was sent to protect Tobias on his journey in the book of Tobit.

Lastly, angels offer ceaseless worship before the throne of God in heaven.

As messengers, angels should be called upon as powerful partners in prayer. We should be asking our own Guardian Angel to pray for us and to help us.

As mighty and fearsome protectors, we should be calling upon our Guardian Angels in times of danger and temptation. But it is important to realize that our Guardian Angels will respect our free will and permit us to experience the consequences of our actions. So it is not a failure of our Guardian Angel if we deliberately place ourselves in the occasion of sin, and act surprised when our Guardian Angel does not prevent us from sinning.

Our angels are also primarily concerned about spiritual dangers, rather than physical dangers. Although they are powerful protectors from both kinds of dangers.

Lastly, angels help us to offer God fitting worship. Although we do not usually see them at Mass, nonetheless they gather with us. We use their songs in our worship of God such as when we sing “Glory to God in the highest,” which the angels sang at the birth of Jesus. Scripture also shows us that the angels ceaselessly sing “Alleluia, alleluia,” and “Holy, Holy, Holy...” around God’s throne in heaven. Both Eucharistic Prayers One and Four highlight the role that angels have in our own acts of worship.

May the Lord send His Holy Angels to watch over you,

Fr. Bill



**September 17, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve ...

### **Whether We Live or Die**

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul tells us, "Brothers and sisters: None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."

Truer words were never spoken. I believe all of us as Catholics, as all Christians, would like nothing better to be said about us or inscribed on our tombstones than that we truly lived and died for the Lord.

Even though at our baptism we became part of God's family, brothers and sisters to Christ, we all know how very, very hard it can be to live and die for the Lord. Well, one thing we have to do is to have a rock-solid, steady relationship with Jesus. If we don't have that solid personal relationship with Jesus, we will never live for Him or much less, die for Him.

The way to develop that solid relationship with Jesus is through prayer. We have to pray. If we don't have a prayer life, nothing else is going to happen. Now just as living up to St. Paul's letter to the Romans this week is hard, praying and having a prayer life can be just as challenging to say the least.

This is why I want to recommend a book to you. It's called "Prayer For Beginners" by Peter Kreeft. It doesn't matter if your prayer life is at the beginning stages of life, or you are a seasoned prayer warrior doing rosaries and novenas that would make the Bishop envious, there is something in this book that will help you. One thing I know for sure is that learning to pray better is never ending.

Peter Kreeft tells us he wrote this book for the Marthas of the world, for people with little time to pray and for those who keep finding excuses not to pray. The author realizes that we are very busy, distracted people, and sometimes, let's face it, we are not very holy. (If you're like your Deacon, you're raising your hand right now.) You do not have to have an advanced degree in theology to read this book; it's written for us, the people in the everyday world. The chapters are short and to the point with everyday examples of what we face in the world before us. It is the kind of book that you can take your time reading.

The chapter I especially liked was titled, Patience, Forgiving Ourselves for Failure. The author talked about how we want to become holy all at once and go faster than the Grace of God which then leads to our demise. The chapter also brings up an interesting point about sin. Kreeft states that we like to think about our sins the way the devil wants us to think about them, rather than the way God wants us to think about our sins. God wants us to worry about our sins before we sin but the devil wants us to worry about them after we sin. God wants us to feel free to repent, while the devil wants us to feel free to sin.

I cannot say enough good things about this book. I urge you all to get it. I would also like to hear your comments and thoughts about the book. And as always, I give you the Deacon's guarantee: If you get this book and find absolutely nothing of value in it, I will pray for you twice as hard.

Let us improve and steady our relationship with Jesus so we can remember that in life and death, we are the Lord's.

Deo Gratias,

Deacon Gary

**September 10, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

"If you warn the wicked to turn from his way... you will deliver your soul." Ezekiel 33:9

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Muscles that are never challenged, never grow stronger. Analogously, we cannot grow spiritually if we are not challenged. Christ wants to make us better disciples, so we should expect the words of his Gospel not only to comfort, but also to challenge.

This Sunday's Gospel begins with these challenging words, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault..." (Matthew 18:15). The plain meaning of Jesus' words is that he expects his followers to confront wrongdoing. While this Gospel requirement has never been easy to put into practice, at present times it seems to be particularly unpopular. But nevertheless, these are Jesus' words.

Based upon this passage of the Gospel, the Christian tradition has taught that "admonishing the sinner" is one of the seven Spiritual Works of Mercy."

How exactly is admonishing the sinner merciful?

The first thing that we have to keep in mind is that sinful behaviors cause great harm. They cause harm to others. They cause offense to God. And, upon reflection, they harm the sinner himself. So admonition is first of all a mercy, since it seeks to reduce harm to others, seeks to prevent offending God, and seeks to draw someone else to a better life.

When I read this passage, I think of myself not as the one who is sent to "go and tell the faults," but rather I think of myself as the "one who commits the sins against others." Everyone has been in the position at some point when they have inadvertently caused harm or offense to someone else. At times, I feel I have a particular skill at unintentionally "stepping in it." I trust your goodwill that you would not cause this hurt to another person, if you had known better. People often do not know the harm that their words, actions, and behaviors cause to other people.

So it is merciful to admonish them, since it brings them to a greater self-knowledge and provides them with the opportunity to repair the harm that they have caused. When admonishment or fraternal correction is done well, it becomes an occasion of grace for both people involved. It is true that many people do not receive admonishment well, even admonishment that is offered in the most charitable way possible. However, Christ makes it clear that we are not responsible for the result. We are not responsible for how the other person responds to our admonishment. We are simply responsible for offering those words with humility and loving charity.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**September 3, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

"Be still and know that I am God" Psalm 46:10

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the conclusion of the "Prayers of the Faithful," the gifts of bread and wine are brought forward and the priest prepares the altar for the celebration of the Eucharist. The preparation of the altar concludes with this exchange of prayers: The priest says, "Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father."

And the people respond, "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and good of all his holy Church."

Notice that there are two parts of the sacrifice: the priest's part of the sacrifice and the people's part of the sacrifice. Both sacrifices are offered. Both sacrifices matter. What you bring to Mass to offer to God matters.

What's your sacrifice? The traditional "Morning Offering Prayer" teaches us what we can offer to God, "O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart Mary, I offer you this day, with all its prayers, works, joys and sufferings..."

As the priest is preparing the bread and wine, the people should be using their imagination to put their own sacrifices on the altar. What have you prayed for this week? Who have you prayed for this week? Place that on the altar. This is the place in Mass to offer to God our personal intentions. How have you worked this week? How have you served others this week? How have you lived out your vocation this week? Place all of that on the altar. What have you experienced in the past week as a blessing and a gift from God? Place that on the altar. What have you suffered this week? What we suffer is an invitation to share in Christ's Cross, and what we suffer should be placed on the altar.

With just a few moments of reflection, we can see that day-to-day life provides a rich offering to God. And this is what Saint Paul means in today's second reading, "I urge you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

Everything offered to God "in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass" is received by the Father, transfigured, and returned to us as a rich blessing. The bread and wine are offered to God and returned to us as the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Eucharist. This is no less true with our "prayers, works, joys and suffering..." The more we bring to Mass, the more we get out of Mass.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**August 27, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

**“Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46:10**

**Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

1. This weekend is the 169th anniversary of the founding of the village of St. Nazianz. The story is unique in the history of Catholicism in America. The original settlers were not seeking fortune or fame. Rather they had read the words of the Acts of the Apostles and were making a serious effort to put those words into practice.

“Now the full number of those who believed  
were of one heart and soul,  
and no one said that any of the things  
that belonged to him was his own,  
but they had everything in common.”

Acts 4:32

Father Ambrose Oschwald, who led this group, was also the founder of Holy Trinity Parish in School Hill.

2. As we begin the month of September, I am already looking forward to the Feast of the Archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, which is celebrated on September 29. For decades, the Catholic Church prayed the prayer of St. Michael after Mass. Pope Leo XIII asked for this prayer to be offered after Mass to prepare the members of the Church for spiritual battle. While not talked about as often now as it used to be, the Christian life is a life of spiritual combat. This theme is common in scripture, as this example from the letter to the Ephesians demonstrates:

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood,  
but against the rulers, against the authorities,  
against the cosmic powers over this present darkness,  
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore, take up the whole armor of God,  
that you may be able to withstand in the evil day,  
and having done all, to stand firm.”

Ephesians 6:12-13

During the month of September, we will be praying the St. Michael Prayer at the end of Mass. It is found on the back cover of the Breaking Bread hymnal, and prayer cards will be distributed after Mass this weekend. I highly encourage you to pray this prayer daily.

There is a classic Catholic book called Spiritual Combat by Father Lorenzo Scupoli.

3. A few weeks ago, I wrote about the book, Living Joy: Nine Rules to Help Rediscover and Live Joy Every Day by Chris Stefanick. Enough people have asked about getting a copy of the book that a case of books was ordered. Catholic Market has a program that parishes can order certain books at a much-reduced cost. If you would like a copy, they will be available at Masses the first weekend in September. A donation of \$2 to \$3 to cover the cost is appreciated but is not necessary.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**August 20, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

**“Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46:10**

**Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

In this Sunday’s Gospel, we meet the Canaanite woman, who is desperately petitioning the Lord for the health and life of her daughter. Surprisingly, the Lord seems to respond to her desperate prayers not with compassion or concern, but rather with indifference and silence.

Does God always answer your prayers? There are a number of petitions that I have offered to God in prayer, and God responded with indifference. God is not a celestial Santa Claus, who is obligated to give us everything that we ask for or want. God’s only promise is to give us what we need to get to heaven.

Not everything that we ask for will help us get to heaven. God sometimes says “no,” because he has better things in mind for us. As the experiences of life begin to mature into wisdom, we begin to understand the words of the Garth Brooks song, “Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers...”

How do we respond to God’s silence? How does this woman respond? We could understand at first if she had responded with frustration and even indignation.

But she doesn’t.

She responds with persistence and perseverance. The Lord is on the move, and she persistently follows him. The apostles try to turn her away, but she perseveres through their obstacles. And this actually deepens the woman’s prayer and draws her closer into the heart of the Lord. Because of her persistence and perseverance, she receives even more from the Lord than she asked. Not only was her daughter healed, but she was praised by the Lord, “O woman, great is your faith!” Not only did this woman receive the healing of her daughter, but she also received the gift of Faith, a deeper relationship with the Lord, and even an invitation to come to his table (hence to be considered a member of his family).

While the Gospels do not give us this woman’s name, I often ask for her intercession when I experience frustration and silence in prayer so that I may persevere in my prayers and that my heart may be open to the even greater gifts that our good Lord is preparing for those who wait on his word.

“I wait on the Lord, my soul waits,

and in His word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning.”

Psalm 130:5-6

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**August 13, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

**“Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46:10**

**Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

Peace be with you. Today’s first reading is one of my favorite readings from the Old Testament. The Prophet Elijah is at Mount Horeb. It took him forty days to walk there. He was desiring to talk with God. Now he was waiting for God to speak. He received word that God would be passing by the mountain, so Elijah prepared himself.

The mountain was shaken with a storm so strong that it crushed rocks. This was followed by an earthquake, and later a fire. Elijah recognized that God was not speaking through any of these fearsome manifestations. Rather, it was only when he heard “a tiny whispering sound” (1 Kings 19:12) that Elijah went to the mouth of the cave to speak with God.

This story illustrates the power of silence. How easy would it be to smother the tiny whispering sound in which we can hear the voice of God?

Many Christians have found the experience of silent retreats to be life-altering experiences. These retreats can vary in length from three days up to a thirty-day silent retreat. Can you imagine being silent for thirty days? These retreats follow a general pattern: at first it is difficult to cultivate the silence necessary to pray. One can turn off the music, and silence their phone, but the mind can be frenetic with thoughts and worries.

As the mind quiets down, there is a silence that settles over one’s heart. In my experience of silent retreats, this silence is almost tactile. It is restful, but can feel empty and to be honest, even boring. At this point there is a great temptation to move, to do something to fill the silence. But at this point it is important to wait.

Like Elijah, who waited for God in the cave, we need to let the storms of our life settle before we can hear how God speaks to us. If we have the persistence to wait in silence, we soon experience that God does in fact speak to us. The silence is not empty, but rather it is filled with God.

We do not need to go on a retreat to experience the benefits of silence. One can take time for silence each day, perhaps twenty minutes. When the heart is in the habit of being silent for a period of time each day, it gets in the habit of stilling the mind and opening the heart to be attentive to the presence of God and to hear his voice.

St. Mother Teresa leaves us with these words, “The fruit of silence is prayer, the fruit of prayer is faith, the fruit of faith is love, the fruit of love is service, and the fruit of service is peace.”

Blessings,

Fr. Bill



**August 6, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

**“Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46:10**

**Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

Peace be with you. You will have noticed that over the past few weeks I have returned to emphasizing the importance of prayer in my bulletin columns. There is one simple reason for this: Prayer works.

This is not just simply a theoretical proposition. Parishes that thrive are parishes that pray.

In last Sunday’s first reading, we heard the Lord God address these words to King Solomon: “Because you have asked for this [wisdom], and not for a long life for yourself, nor for riches, nor for the life of your enemies, but for understanding so that you may know what is right - I do as you requested. I give you a heart that is wise and understanding” (1 Kings 3:11-12), but the Lord continues, “I will also give you for what you have not asked, both riches and honor” (1 Kings 3:13).

Jesus echoes this idea towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, “Seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things will be added onto you” (Matthew 6:33).

Prayer can seem like a luxury or even a waste of time when there is a lot of work that needs to be done. But the principle from scripture is that placing God first in prayer does not distract us from our work, but makes our work more effective. When we place work first, we are depending on our own strength, our own endurance, and our own effort. The thing is even the strongest person has limited strength, even the most persistent person will reach a point of fatigue, and even the greatest human effort falls short.

Where we fall short, we can remember the words of St. Paul, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25). And Paul’s encouraging words, “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

When we place God first, we are no longer depending on our limited strength, but rather we are depending on the strength that comes from the Lord. And his strength will not fail.

This is the reason why St. Francis de Sales famously gives the following advice on how to pray, “Every Christian needs a half hour of prayer a day, except when we are busy - then we need an hour.”

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**July 30, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

**Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

I am currently finishing up the book *Living Joy: 9 Rules to Help You Rediscover and Live Joy Every Day* by Chris Stefanick.\* Stefanick is a popular Catholic author. He is a father, a Catholic speaker, and in many ways a very ordinary man. This makes his insights applicable to our daily life, but his deep faith shines through his words. This book is both approachable and deep.

His second rule for everyday joy is "Practice silence." He uses a data driven approach to highlight the effects of our noisy world on our spiritual life and our emotional health. He uses the same data to demonstrate the positive fruits of intentionally cultivating silence as part of our life. These include how an environment of silence helps to cultivate deep thought and substance, how silence leads to wonder and gratitude, and what I found most interesting is how silence helps us to cultivate deep friendships, with both God and with each other.

He offers a simple method of cultivating silence: STOP. BREATHE. THINK.

Stopping takes us out of the rat race of worry. Deep breathing slows down not only the heart rate, but also the rate of our thoughts. Thinking helps us focus on the one thing that matters.

Take a deep and intentional breath. Often we do not think about our breathing. But stopping to take a deep intentional breath, slows us down. One of the classical ways of teaching someone to move from vocal prayer towards meditation is breathing. Pick a short prayer that you have memorized. This could be the "Our Father" or the "Hail Mary." Prayerfully say the first word of the prayer. Stop. Take an intentional breath. Rest a moment to ponder that word. Move to the next word, and repeat.

A few things will probably happen. Your heart rate will slow down, and you will notice yourself relaxing. Most likely, if you are open to it, we will have a sense of God's presence with you in your prayer. And for many people, the meaning of the words seem to open themselves up to you.

Does it take longer? Yes. Of course it does. But it is also enriching.

Silence is not empty,

but rather it is the emptiness

that makes a space for God.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

\*As a parish we can order these books for \$2.00 per copy, if we order a whole case. If you want a copy let me know.

**July 23, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

**“Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Growth happens in two ways: growth can be quantitative, and it can be qualitative. Quantitative growth is an increase in number, such as fertilizing a tomato plant to increase its yield. Qualitative growth improves the quality, such as pruning a tomato plant, including some of the small green tomatoes, so that the few that are left are better quality.

Prayer is subject to these two types of growth. Often as a Christian’s spiritual life awakens and they wish to deepen their life of prayer, they will add more and more prayers. But increasing the minutes of prayer often becomes frustrating because the increased time in prayer does not feel effective or fruitful.

So, for a time, we can set aside the question of how long we should pray. Rather, at the beginning of the spiritual life it is often more beneficial to make a small commitment to daily prayer, such as ten minutes in morning, but focus one’s spiritual efforts towards deepening that time of prayer.

In short, at the beginning of the spiritual life, the disciple usually finds greater satisfaction in prayer by focusing on the quality of the prayer rather than the quantity of prayer.

A necessary ingredient of quality prayer is to cultivate an interior stillness or a posture of silence. The tranquility of the soul is necessary for prayer since noise and distractions make it all but impossible to hear the voice of God.

When I was learning to scuba dive, I was amazed at how much was visible in the water all around me. However, one of my scuba classmates had the unfortunate habit of slamming into the beach floor and kicking up a bunch of sentiment. In just a moment, what was once clear water, in which I could see for a great distance, enclosed around me as a cloud of darkness. In his agitation, my classmate would continue to kick his fins. This would keep the sentiment suspended in the water. All that was needed was not more activity, but more stillness.

It is the same way with our souls and listening to the voice of God in our hearts. The noise in the world around us, and the distractions that arise from within our hearts, are like the sentiments kicked up by my friend. They keep us from hearing how God is speaking to us, and seeing where he is trying to lead us. To hear his voice, and to see where he is leading us, we need to cultivate a habit of stillness and silence.

Over the next few weeks, I will share some simple methods for cultivating this silence.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**July 16, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Corinthians 11:13).

Prayer is difficult, but it is necessary. One of the difficulties with prayer is that many of us have not been taught how to pray as adults should pray.

Growth and development are part of life. Over the course of time, the body grows taller and wider (hopefully not too much wider). A student moves from counting to arithmetic to algebra and geometry and even up to calculus. A tradesman starts out as a novice, then an apprentice, next a journeyman, and finally a master craftsman.

Yet, most people have not grown in their life of prayer. As children, we learned to pray by memorizing prayers and reciting them. This first stage of prayer is called vocal prayer. This method is appropriate for children, and a necessary first step in the growth and development of the life of prayer. While it is appropriate for children, this method of prayer falls short for the spiritual life of adults.

As a church, we have not done well at teaching people how to pray beyond vocal prayers. Many people are not even aware that the Catholic Church teaches that all Catholics should be pursuing a life of prayer that is both meditative and relational.

Meditation is simply using the mind and the heart to ponder over the words of prayer, and to discuss them with our Lord God. When you recall that you are in God’s presence, and simply rest in his presence, you are participating in a simple form of meditation.

The relational aspect of prayer recognizes that when we pray, we are not simply talking into the great abyss or a big emptiness, but rather we are lifting our hearts and our minds up to the Lord God.

The first step of introducing aspects of meditation to our prayers is to be attentive to our vocal prayers. This could be while praying the Rosary, or reading scripture, or the words that we recite as part of the celebration of the Eucharist. Avoid saying the words in a mechanical or rote manner. Pay attention. Reflect on how these words are speaking to you. When a particular word or phrase catches your heart, pause and rest there for a moment. The Spirit of God is with you and will open up that word or phrase for you. The Lord God will speak to you, if you pay attention.

Yes, this takes time. Prayer cannot be rushed. But recall that the finest wines grow in quality as they are aged with care. The flavor of cheddar improves with time. The good things in life are not found in the express aisle, and that includes prayer.

“Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10, ESV).

“Heart speaks to heart” St. John Henry Newman.

Blessings, Fr. Bill

**July 9, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers us these comforting words: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Every Catholic priest is required to take a retreat annually. A retreat is a period of time in which the cares and worries of the world are set aside, so that the person making the retreat can focus on renewing and reviving their life of prayer and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

My annual spiritual retreat follows a typical pattern. Upon arrival, I unpack, and the first evening I usually sleep really well. The next day, I end up taking a really long nap. After that I am refreshed and attentive for the rest of the retreat. I don't even realize how tired I have become, until I stop.

Life keeps us busy. So busy in fact that we don't even realize how tired and burdened we have become. When we finally pause, and take some time to rest, all the weariness hits us at once. In the setting of a spiritual retreat, the Lord sees the weariness, and he gives us his rest. He revives us.

While priests are required to take an annual retreat, all Catholics are highly encouraged to take an annual retreat. I know most people would find it hard to find the time to go on a retreat. It is worth the sacrifice and effort to make the arrangements. Unfortunately, it is not possible for everyone.

Even if you cannot go on a retreat, the Lord still wants to give you rest. He does not want you to be weary with labors and carrying burdens.

This is the importance of prayer, especially time for silence and meditative prayer. Time spent before the Eucharistic Lord, whether it is Eucharistic Adoration or simply time spent before the tabernacle, is always refreshing.

I find praying in the morning to be especially refreshing. During the summer, I will sit on the back porch each morning. I will pray the Liturgy of the Hours, but before I pick up my prayer book, I simply sit in the silence of the still morning, recall that I am in the presence of God, and receive the rest that he wishes to offer me.

I highly encourage you to set aside time to be silent and still. The silence helps us to notice the Lord's simple yet powerful presence. The stillness helps us to receive the refreshment he wishes to give to our weary souls.

"Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10, ESV).

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

Currently I am reading: *Lectio Divina and the practice of Teresian Prayer* by Fr. Sam Anthony Morello. This short booklet of only 28 pages is a beautiful introduction to meditative prayer. If you are looking to deepen your prayer, I would highly recommend this booklet.

**July 2, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Prayer is essential for our lives as Christians. Just as the body will soon wither and die without food, water and air, prayer is necessary for the life of the soul. Without prayer, the soul will undergo a spiritual death.

I enjoy talking about different projects and dreams that I have for both parishes. But there is only one project that really matters. One day when I am standing before the judgment seat of God, He will not be asking me about boilers or budgets, or painting projects. He will be asking me if I brought people to life in Christ. We need to take care of the other projects, but the only “project” that has eternal significance is our relationship with Jesus Christ.

My main job as pastor is to be an example of prayer, to pray with others, and to teach others to pray.

Prayer is difficult. Our culture values activity. Taking time for prayer feels like a waste of time. But prayer is necessary before any of our activities are fruitful. Historically, it would be hard to find two saints that had a larger impact on the church and in fact on world history as St. Dominic and St. Francis of Assisi. They labored tirelessly in their preaching and service to the poor. Yet, before either one of them sent anyone out on mission, they first founded convents devoted to ceaseless prayer.

In more recent times, we can look at the amazing example of St. Teresa of Calcutta, known affectionately as Mother Theresa and her Missionaries of Charity. They work tirelessly for the poorest of the poor. Each day throughout the world tens of thousands of people are fed at their soup kitchens, sheltered in their homes, and find medical care in their free clinics. Mother Theresa knew that this truly impressive effort of compassionate care was only possible if it was supported by prayer. When her Missionaries of Charity were invited to begin a new ministry in a new area, she insisted that they first establish a convent completely devoted to prayer.

She was firmly convicted that without prayer all her efforts would come to naught.

Prayer is never a waste of time. It is simply entrusting that time to God the Father. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He loves us more deeply than we could possibly imagine. He knows what we need, even before we ask for it. All the time that we spend with God in prayer is fruitful, not because of our own effort, but because God makes it fruitful.

Take time to pray. It is never wasted.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**June 25, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Recently, our parishes joined together for a Eucharistic Procession. That experience will be a highlight of my ministry here. The participation in the procession exceeded my expectations and was very encouraging for me as a priest. Thank you! I am already looking forward to the procession next year.

During the procession we sang "Godhead Here in Hiding" a hymn by St. Thomas Aquinas, translated by the great English poet and priest, Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is a Catholic classic, and such a beautiful summary of what we believe about the Eucharist, that I hope it becomes a regular part of our worship here. Here are the lyrics of the first verse:

"Godhead here in hiding whom I do adore

masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more

See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart

Lost, all lost in, wander at the God thou art."

The word hiding in the first line recalls this Sunday's Gospel. Jesus speaks to the apostles, "Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed..." What was being concealed? In a certain sense, Jesus' divinity, that is his status as "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." During the 33 years that Jesus lived here on earth, anyone who saw him would have seen his humanity: the infant son of Mary, the foster child of Joseph, a carpenter, an itinerant preacher, even a wonder-worker. They would not have seen his glory as the Son of God directly. His godliness was "hiding" in a sense within his manliness.

So, it took faith for the apostles to confess that Jesus was Lord.

Yet, at the time appointed by God, the glory of the Lord was revealed. Was it not a centurion at the crucifixion that was the first to confess, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39)? Or Thomas that confessed on the eighth day after the Resurrection, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28)? It was through his death and resurrection that the apostles were able to see that Jesus was not only a carpenter or a preacher, but that he was truly the Messiah for which their hearts longed.

We live and believe in similar circumstances as the apostles. Jesus dwells with us. In fact, the word tabernacle means the dwelling place. He dwells with us, not incarnationally, that is in the flesh, like he did with the apostles, but rather sacramentally. He's truly and really present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Like the apostles, we cannot see his glory directly. He is "Godhead here in hiding." But like the apostles, we can make an act of faith. They saw a carpenter or a preacher, but by faith, they recognized their Lord and God. We see bread and wine, but by faith, we can recognize our Lord and God, Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

While for the apostles, Jesus was present in the flesh, and for us he is present in the sacrament, it is the same Jesus. As Jesus taught the apostle, time spent before the Eucharist often brings us enlightenment. As Jesus healed the sick, the Eucharist heals us spiritually. As Jesus fed the five thousand, the Eucharist feeds us at the level of our deepest hungers. As Jesus raised the dead to life, the Eucharist is truly our “Bread of Life,” and “all who feed on this bread will live forever” (John 6:58).

Blessings,

Fr. Bill



**June 18, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

There are three movements in today's Gospel. Jesus sees. Jesus summons. And Jesus sends.

Jesus saw the crowds, and his heart was "moved with pity." What does Jesus see when he looks out on our parishes?

This is not a question that can be answered in a few short lines in a bulletin column. But I would say he is first of all grateful for each and every person that shows up for Sunday Eucharist. But looking at the people that do come, I think he sees that they need something more. What is that something more? Does your faith feel routine as if you are going through the motions? Do you want more? For Jesus, the sacraments are not only rituals to be performed, but through these rituals, we should experience a powerful encounter with Jesus himself. For Jesus, the prayers that we say are not just formulae to be recited, but a deep conversation where our heart speaks to his heart, and his heart speaks to ours.

What does Jesus see? He sees people that are faithful to coming to Mass and supporting their parish. Jesus is thankful for this response. But he also sees people that need to go deeper.

Jesus summoned his twelve disciples, and gave them authority. Notice he calls them each by name. The call is personal. Who is Jesus calling? He is calling you. I know what the response can be, "I am already busy. How can I do more?" Remember that before Jesus sent his disciples on mission, he first formed them. He spent time with them, teaching them, speaking with them, drawing them into a deeper relationship with his heavenly Father. Each of us is called to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Many Catholics, even Catholics that faithfully come to Mass, do not feel like they have this relationship with Jesus.

Jesus is calling you. But before he is calling you to do something, he's calling you first of all to spend time with him and to learn from him.

Jesus sends. None of the disciples are called simply for the sake of being called. Each is called to fulfill a mission. So what's our mission? Almost every meeting with the parish council, we are discussing ways to grow the parish. We have to remember that growth happens in two ways. Each year we see trees that grow taller, and bear much fruit. This is visible growth. We do not see the roots are growing deeper. This is invisible growth. A bountiful harvest is a cause for great joy, but this harvest is only possible when the roots are well established.

I believe that before Jesus is calling us to grow our parishes outwardly, we need to first grow inwardly. The call to Christian conversion needs to go to the root of who we are. The roots of the faith need to reach into the depth of our hearts before we can grow outward. So our mission is first of all a challenge to ourselves to deepen our faith.

Eventually, Jesus will send the disciples to all the world, but he begins by sending them not to pagan territories nor Samaritan towns, but first of all to the lost sheep of Israel, that is, to their own people.

Jesus sees you. What does he see? Jesus calls you. What is he calling you to do? Jesus sends you. Where does he want you to grow?

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**June 11, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace be with you. This weekend is the annual celebration of the Sunday of the Body and Blood of Christ, also commonly called Corpus Christi. Each Sunday, we celebrate the Eucharist, but this one Sunday of the year is set aside to specifically focus on the belief that the Lord is truly present, body and blood, soul and divinity, in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is not a symbol. It is a reality.

On the night before he died, Jesus said, "This is my body... this is my blood." And we take his words seriously.

The Catholic Church throughout the United States is in the midst of a Eucharistic Revival called for by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Bishop Ricken has published a pastoral letter called Encountering Jesus in the Eucharist for both the Eucharistic Revival and as the next step in his "Disciples on the Way" initiative.

My life was transformed by learning about the Eucharist, and much more importantly, spending time with our Lord, present in the Eucharist, before the tabernacle and during periods of Eucharistic Adoration.

Jesus gives us faith. Jesus is present in the Eucharist. So it follows that spending time in prayer before the Eucharist strengthens one's faith. It doesn't just strengthen it, it sets it on fire.

I want both of these parishes to be vibrant faith-filled communities. When I look at other vibrant parishes, there are always four strong pillars of parish life: 1) a strong devotion to Mary, 2) dedication to reading and studying the Word of God, 3) faithfulness to celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation (a.k.a. Confession), and 4) most importantly, a strong Eucharistic life.

Do you want these parishes to flourish?

It begins with renewing your relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist. Here are three ways to renew your relationship with the Eucharist: 1) read the bishop's pastoral letter Encountering Jesus in the Eucharist. Both parish websites will have a link where you can access it directly. 2) Be attentive during the celebration of the Mass. The readings for Mass are available in the Word Among Us, in numerous places online, and on various apps on your phone. Read, pray and ponder over these readings in the days leading up to Mass. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your ears and heart to be attentive to the way that the Lord is speaking to you through these words. Arrive at Mass early to give yourself time to pray and to recollect yourself. And lastly, 3) visit the Eucharist often. It used to be normal Catholic practice for people to drop into the church to pray before the tabernacle. This should be a normal practice for today also. The pastoral councils at both parishes are discussing times to make Eucharistic Adoration available so that people can come before the Lord in prayer.

St. Paul wrote, "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has any heart imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). Jesus is waiting in the tabernacle to give you these blessings. Go and meet him there.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**June 4, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This weekend we observe Trinity Sunday, which celebrates the central mystery of the Christian faith.

All religions are not the same. Belief in the Trinity distinguishes Christians from other world religions. Hindus believe in many gods. Buddhists are unsure about god's existence. Jews and Muslims share with us a belief in one god, but find our belief in a Trinity as erroneous and offensive.

Our belief in the Trinity sets us apart from all other religions and is a belief that we share with all other Christian denominations.

Our belief in the Trinity is that the ONE God is a communion of three persons. Not that there are three Gods. Nor is each person one-third of God. Each person of the Trinity is fully God.

The Trinity reveals that God is, in himself, a circle of self-giving love. He is a communion of persons bound by the gift of love. The Father is the one who loves, and the Son is the one who is loved, and the Holy Spirit is the love that is shared among them. God is a communion of love based upon relationships between persons.

This probably seems like a remote theological point that does not have an impact on our day-to-day faith. However, by revealing himself as a communion of person, God reveals that faithful love is at the heart of who he is. If love is at the heart of who God is, he can share himself with us in a way that is more profound and intimate than we can ever imagine.

If God is not a Trinity, then Jesus is just a creature. If Jesus is just a creature, then God sent a creature to work our redemption rather than doing it himself. If God is not a Trinity, then the Holy Spirit is not God, but rather some vague force. If the Holy Spirit is just a creature, then we would not be receiving God himself into our hearts through faith and the sacrament.

But since God is a Trinity, we can truly and beautifully say that God himself chose to enter our world to save. Since God is a Trinity, we can truly and beautifully say that God himself dwells in our hearts as the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**May 28, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Come Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful!

This Sunday is the celebration of Pentecost. The name simply means fifty, since it is celebrated on the fiftieth day after Easter. It is the celebration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples who were gathered with Mary in the upper room.

Have you experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? If you have been baptized and confirmed, you have received the Holy Spirit, whether you realize it or not. But even though Catholics have received the Holy Spirit sacramentally, most Catholics are uncertain about how the Holy Spirit acts in their life. The Pentecostal Denomination places a great emphasis on the more dramatic gifts of the Holy Spirit. Within the Catholic Church, the Charismatic Renewal has a similar focus. Most Catholics have not had these dramatic experiences, and as a result, doubt about the power of the Spirit in their lives. But the Bible is clear that the greatest gifts of the Spirit are supernatural Faith, confident Hope, and agape Love. These gifts are often present, even when they are not expressed in a dramatic way.

Many Catholics were never taught that they should be asking for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. If they do not know to ask for the Spirit, how will they receive it?

At different points in my life, I have participated in Catholic charismatic prayer groups. I have witnessed these dramatic gifts in person. They are real. They are powerful. And they can change lives. But usually, I experience the gift of the Spirit during times of silent and meditative prayer. The gifts of the Spirit are just as real, just as powerful, and just as transformative, even when they come silently.

How can we tell if we have received the Spirit? Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "You will know them by their fruit." And this is the test about whether the Spirit is present: Does this experience lead me to a closer relationship with God and a holier life? If it does, it is of the Spirit. If it does not, it is not of the Spirit.

I have been praying for a renewed outpouring of the Spirit on these parishes. At Mass during the Eucharistic Prayer, there are two times that the priest calls down the Holy Spirit. The calling down of the Holy Spirit is called the EPICLESIS. The first time is over the gifts, the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine, the server rings the bells, and the words are pronounced: "Therefore, O Lord, we humbly implore you: by the same Spirit graciously make holy these gifts..."

The second time is not as clear, but it is equally present. It is the EPICLESIS over the people. After the consecration, the priest continues the Eucharistic Prayer, and calls down the Spirit on the people with these words, "...filled with the Holy Spirit, [we] may become one body, one spirit in Christ. May he make us an eternal offering to you..."

Just as the Spirit is called down upon the gifts of bread and wine, that they may be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, so the Spirit is called down upon you, that you may become a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, that is the Church.

Today, we hear how the Spirit came down as tongues of fire. May the Spirit set your life and faith on fire starting today.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**May 21, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Lord has risen! He has truly risen!

It is hard to believe that it's almost the end of the Easter Season, and soon we will not be using that greeting anymore. But the end of the Easter Season draws our attention to a number of important Catholic feasts, and for me personally, it's also close to my birthday.

This Sunday is the celebration of the Ascension of the Lord. Next Sunday is the celebration of Pentecost, followed by Trinity Sunday a week later. Since this is the patronal feast of the church in School Hill, there will be a special breakfast after the 8:00 am Mass to make the occasion especially festive. Lastly, my favorite Sunday of the whole year, the Feast of Corpus Christi.

It was in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament that my Catholic Faith was set on fire, and drawing close to our Lord present in the Eucharist in the tabernacles of our churches never fails to renew my energy. In 2011, I was ordained the day before Corpus Christi, so my first Mass as a priest was on the Sunday of Corpus Christi. The Eucharist is a dear love of mine, and I wish to share that love with you.

At Bishop Ricken's request our parishes will be reviving the practice of the Corpus Christi procession this year. Starting this weekend, and each weekend until Corpus Christi, the bulletin will have information about the Corpus Christi procession.

Now it's not really my style to talk about my birthday in the bulletin column, but a number of people have already asked me about it, so I will provide you with two of my birthday wishes.

My first wish is that the Corpus Christi procession has large and enthusiastic participation.

My second wish is that we really take seriously the obligation to pray daily. I hope that when I am called to my next parish (and I have no clue when that will be) that the next priest is overwhelmed by the number of people in these parishes who have deep prayer lives. I encourage you to consider going on an Entrust Retreat. They are free. Don't buy me any books for my birthday, but buy yourself a book about prayer. I have two to recommend: Prayer for Beginners by Dr. Peter Kreeft, and Prayer Primer by Fr. Thomas Dubay. If you do not already pray the Rosary, pray a Rosary for me on my birthday. If you do not already read scripture, begin with the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew on my birthday, and continue with a chapter a day until you have read all four Gospels.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill



**May 14, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

He is risen! He has truly Risen! Alleluia! Peace be with you! In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a promise, "I will not leave you orphans." Jesus keeps this promise by making us a part of his family through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus gives us a father.

Saint Paul shared this reality with the early Christians: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15-16). Or: "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father!'" (Galatians 4:6).

This means that like any father, God has given us life. In response to the gift of life, we owe Him acts of thanksgiving and praise. And God is not an absentee father, but continues to nurture and guide us. He provides for us. So in moments of need, we should look towards Him to provide for our spiritual and material needs. In times of confusion, we should look towards Him to guide us.

Reflecting on our relationship with God as our Father, we need to also examine ourselves: Do we live in a way that gives honor and glory to God? By our words and actions, can others see "a family resemblance" between God and us, who are his children? A father delights in looking upon his children and seeing that they have the same eye color or similar shaped ears. But a father brims with honor when he sees that his children do not share a mere physical resemblance to him, but share the same virtues, values, and honor with which he lived his life, and hoped to pass to his children.

Jesus gives us a mother.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus looked down from upon his cross. He saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved, and said "behold, your mother" (see John 19:26-27). From the earliest days of the Church, this passage has been understood to mean that Jesus was giving us his own mother to be our mother in the order of grace. Mothers nurture and nourish. During the nine months of pregnancy a child draws its life from the blood of the mother. As the mother holds her child as she nurses him, can she not say, "Behold, this is of my body, and I give it to you?" While fathers can certainly be tender, tenderness is usually the privilege domain of a mother. The long experience of the church shows us that Mary continues to nurture and nourish her children. She encourages and strengthens us to grow stronger in faith. She brings us closer to Jesus.

If you want your faith to grow stronger, and if you want a personal relationship with Jesus, begin a devotion to Mary.

Blessings,

Fr. Bill

**May 7, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve

**WORD AND SERVICE**

In today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we can peek back in time to the early Church and see how the roles of Bishops and Deacons were defined.

It didn't take long for complaints in the Church to start coming in. The Hellenists (Greeks) complained that their widows are being ignored in the distribution of food. So, the Twelve (these are the Apostles, the first Bishops) gathered with the whole community of disciples and declared, "It's not right for us to neglect the Word of God to serve at table."

The Apostles, the first Bishops, were making clear from the start that their primary role is not to be direct service to the people. Their primary role is to pray for their people, to study, proclaim, and preach the Word of God to the people. Through Apostolic succession, the bishops' role has remained much the same through the ages. It's through the bishops' prayer and study that they are able to direct the proper charisms for the Church.

The Apostles said, "Friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task. While we for our part will devote ourselves to prayer."

What we have just seen here by the selection of seven reputable men is the birth of the Diaconate in the Catholic Church. They had men stand before the Apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. Just as it was done on that very first Diaconate Ordination, it is still done the same way today.

The deacons did the very important task of seeing to the physical needs of the people and the distribution of goods. They had a very hands-on service role. They were the bishops' eyes and ears. However, the early deacons also preached the gospel and evangelized because Stephen, one of the seven, was eventually stoned to death for his preaching and evangelizing in the name of Jesus. The first martyr in the Church was a deacon.

Beginning in the 5th century, the Diaconate started to decline as more men were ordained priests. Eventually it was put on hiatus. A revival of the Permanent Diaconate occurred with Pope Paul VI and Vatican II.

Permanent Deacons (those who are not going to be ordained priests) are still in direct service to their bishop. They are ordained to assist at liturgy, preach the gospel, baptize, witness marriages, visit the sick, and be of service to the poor. Most deacons are assigned to a parish to assist the priest and parishioners as needed. The deacon's role in the Church varies according to his time and talents. Deacons are not paid which means we have secular jobs. (It is true that some deacons are hired by a parish to fill a staff position.) Our first duty, if we are married, is to our wife and family. As you can see, a deacon has one foot in the Church and one in the secular world (try that without doing the splits).

Becoming a deacon is an answer to a very personal call from God to share the Good News of Christ. Deacons are sent out as a servant of Christ to bring charity to the world, each in his own unique way. They are ordained as a sacramental sign to the Church and to the world of Christ, who came 'to serve and not to be served'. Please say an extra prayer today for all deacons and for those men who are discerning the Diaconate.

Viva Cristo Rey,

Deacon Gary

**April 30, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we always read from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, which is commonly referred to as the "Good Shepherd Discourse." Because priests should model their lives on the example of Christ the Good Shepherd, priestly ordinations are often celebrated on this Sunday. Additionally, this Sunday is associated with preaching about priestly vocations.

This week, Bishop Ricken invited all the priests serving in the Diocese of Green Bay to join him in a meeting to discuss this week's readings and encouraged us to preach on vocations this weekend. Instead of presenting us with a new vocations program, he invited us to pray over the scriptures in a group meditation. Each priest was offered the opportunity to share how God was speaking to his heart through these biblical readings. Unfortunately, it's not common for priests to gather with the bishop with the only purpose of the meeting being to pray together. It really was a touching shared experience.

One priest shared that these words spoke to him: "They recognize his voice" (John 10:4b). These are the same words that spoke to me. This priest pondered, whether or not people still recognize the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd? He observed that our world is filled with distractions, noise, and often hours filled with activities, sometimes almost frenetic activity. And amidst all this noise, the sweet and loving voice of the Good Shepherd gets lost. As a result, the Lord is calling, but we cannot hear.

I agree.

There is an antidote to this noise and distraction. We need to slow down and intentionally seek out silence and solitude. We can turn off our music, radios, televisions and other devices, but often it is the noise that arises from within our hearts and minds that distracts us more. These days it takes time to learn to be silent. But it is worth the effort. Silence brings its own reward: "Through silence, we return to our heavenly origin, where there is nothing but calm, peace, repose, silent contemplation, and adoration of the radiant face of God" (from Cardinal Robert Sarah's book *The Power of Silence*).

When we cultivate silence not only in our home environment, but more importantly silence in our hearts and minds, we find that the silence is not empty nor is it quiet. Silence is filled with the presence of God. And in silence, we recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Blessings,

Father Bill

\*I would highly recommend Cardinal Robert Sarah's book: *The Power of Silence*.

**April 23, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace be with you and Happy Easter! Today's Gospel is the famous account of the disciples' walk to Emmaus. Like every passage of the Gospels, there are a number of layers of meaning here. I return regularly to this passage in my prayer, and the Lord always draws me into another layer of meaning.

To open up this passage, notice how it can be divided into two parts. First, we are walking with the two disciples and the unknown stranger. This stranger, who is Jesus, although the disciples do not recognize him, is opening up the scriptures "beginning with Moses and all the prophets," so that they might better understand. Second, the disciples invite the stranger to stay with them for dinner. As was the custom at that time, the guest is asked to offer the blessing and break the bread. At the moment, the disciples recognize Jesus, who is living and not dead, but Jesus mysteriously vanishes from their sight.

From the time of the early Christians up until today, this passage was seen as a pattern for celebrating the Eucharist. Like the disciples on the way, we first encounter Jesus through the Word of God. We call this the "Liturgy of the Word." Since, as St. Paul writes to Timothy, "All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching ... that the man of God may be complete, and equipped for every good work" (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Catholic Church has thoughtfully arranged selections of readings from both the Old and New Testaments over a three year cycle to ensure that the faithful have a wide exposure to the Word of God.

At the celebration of the Eucharist, we first encounter Jesus as the Word of God.

For the second part of the celebration of the Eucharist, notice what Jesus does in today's Gospel, "while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessings, broke it, and gave it to them..." What do these words sound like? It is more than a simple table blessing. These words recall Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper. There while he was at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "take this all of you and eat of it, for THIS IS MY BODY." Luke is making a connection between what Jesus is doing here in Emmaus and what he did with the disciples in the Upper Room at the Last Supper.

We believe that Jesus is truly and substantially present in the Eucharist. For the early Christians, the celebration of the Eucharist was referred to as "the breaking of the bread." So while Jesus vanishes from their sight, he does not leave them. He is still with them, since the bread that was broken is no ordinary bread. The bread that was broken is the Eucharist. Even the disciples make reference to this by saying that "he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

Each Sunday, Jesus meets us on our road, on our journey. He approaches us through the proclamation of his Holy Word and through "the breaking of the bread" – through his real and substantial presence in the Eucharist. My prayer for you is that like the disciples, your eyes may be opened, that you might recognize his presence in your life, and that your hearts may burn within you.

Easter blessings to you,

Father Bill

**April 16, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Christ is risen! He is truly risen!

Normally the Sunday readings are organized on a three-year cycle. The Second Sunday of Easter, that is this Sunday, always has the same reading from the Gospel of John. It is the famous account of “doubting Thomas.”

Why did Thomas doubt?

Being one of the original apostles, Thomas spent the previous three years following Jesus in community with the other apostles. He should have been able to trust them. He heard their testimony, “We have seen the Lord.” He also saw their actions, “when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews...” Their words said one thing, but their actions said another thing. Actions often speak louder than words. Thomas could see from their actions that the Resurrection did not change the actions of the other apostles. So, he doubted.

This becomes a challenging question for our own faith: Has your faith made a difference in your life? Can others see that? Before we have a chance to preach the Gospel with our words, we are already preaching the Gospel with actions, behaviors, and the way we live our life.

“Thomas... was not with them.” Thomas was not with the rest of the apostles. He was by himself. He was isolated. It is difficult to believe alone. The Christian faith has a strong communal aspect. Jesus said, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20). Jesus continues to be present in his church gathered in prayer. This is one of the reasons why Christians must gather on the Lord’s Day. It is simply not enough to pray privately at home. Participating in a Christian community builds up our faith. Participating in Christian community is often a place where individuals powerfully encounter Christ.

Intentionally participating in small Christian communities is a powerful way to grow in the Catholic faith. As Catholics, we are very comfortable gathering in a large group each Sunday for the Eucharist, but we are less comfortable gathering in smaller groups for shared prayer, Bible studies, and mutually to encourage each other in living the Faith. In my experience as a Catholic believer, my faith started to grow, when I found a group of friends in college that desired to grow in their Catholic Faith. We prayed together. We studied the Bible and the Catechism together. We held each other accountable. It was in this community that my faith moved from being an abstract idea to a personal encounter with Jesus. It was in this community that Jesus became real to me. As a priest, I want people to have the same experience that I have had. As a pastor, I don’t know how to begin these small communities, but I am convinced that the more we gather in small communities, the stronger and more vibrant our parishes will become.

Peace and blessings,

Father Bill

**April 9, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Have you ever attended the Easter Vigil? Due to its length and late hour many Catholics will go their entire life without attending. And they are missing out. When this liturgy is celebrated well, the duration hardly matters, but the heart is greatly moved.

The Easter Vigil liturgy always begins in the dark. No lights are left on in the church. No candles are lit. Ideally it begins outside the church (although the unpredictable Wisconsin spring weather often prevents this). In that darkness, a fire is lit. The fire cuts the darkness. From the fire, the Easter candle is lit, and carried into the empty, cold, and dark church greeted with the triumphal song: "The Light of Christ!"

Have you ever seen a single candle burning in the midst of a dark room? Although that flame seems small, it throws off an impressive amount of light. Good Friday represents the pinnacle of human darkness. It shows the brutality of the result of sin: the murder of the Lord on the Cross. Easter Vigil shows God's response to that darkness. The light enters into the cold barren darkness. The light conquers that darkness. Even the most extreme human darkness cannot extinguish the Light of Christ.

This should encourage us. It should bring us hope. There is not a darkness so opaque that the light will not triumph.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it" (John 1:5).

But the light does not remain only with the Easter candle. As the deacon carries the candle further into the dark church, and as the "Light of Christ" continues to be proclaimed, the flame of that candle is shared among those gathered. They receive the light from the candle. "A fire into many flames divided, yet never dimmed by sharing its light..." (from the Easter Exultet). This sharing of the light represents Christ sharing his victory with us. As he overcame the darkness of Good Friday by the Resurrection, he shares the power to overcome all darkness to those who believe in him. And the light grows even brighter by being shared with us.

"Therefore, O Lord, we pray you that this candle, hallowed to the honor of your name, may persevere undimmed, to overcome the darkness of this night... May this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son, who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns forever and ever" (also from the Easter Exultet).

May the light of Christ ever burn brightly in your heart and life, that you may always have the confident faith and hope that there is no darkness, however deep, that can extinguish the flame of faith given to you by the Risen Christ.

Happy and Blessed Easter,

Father Bill

**April 2, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve

**PUTTING OUR BEST FOOT FORWARD**

If the human Jesus was to walk into one of our parish communities, how would we greet him? Would it be with palm branches and cheering? Would we be concerned with His physical well-being and be ready with a dinner? Or would we be like this woman who poured out her love for Jesus in an extravagant way?

“A woman came up to Him with an Alabaster jar of costly perfumed oil and poured it on His head while He was reclining at table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant, and said, “Why this waste? It could have been sold for much and the money given to the poor” (Mt 26: 7-12).

While the disciples were in shock from what seemed to be a waste of costly oil, something that could have helped feed the poor, this woman showed them, and us, the proper way we should worship. We need to show our gratitude towards God. We should always, always give our best to God. We do not give God our second best. Now, if we continue to read in this Gospel, we see Jesus does acknowledge the value of giving to the poor, but He elevates the gifts given to Him on an even higher level.

This is why we always decorate our Churches with the finest things that we can afford. We use gold and silver; we give money to keep our buildings in good repair; we give money to support seminaries, convents, and the Diocese.

Speaking of that, I must give credit to the people of St. Gregory and Holy Trinity Parishes for the way you generously gave from not just your wallets but your hearts as you supported the one by One Campaign and the Bishop’s Appeal. Any time something needs to be fixed or bought, the funds seem to miraculously appear. You understand, just like the woman with the costly oil, about giving God our gratitude, by giving God our very best.

Jesus does also give value to giving to the poor. He told us in Matthew 25:40, “Amen I say to you, when you did it to one of the least of my brothers you did it to Me.” We are called to give to the poor as we give to God. If we give to the poor, we are truly giving to God. God created all people in His likeness and image. God gives the poor their dignity. Giving to God and giving to the poor is linked together.

As we come into Holy Week one of the ways we can give to the poor, to give alms, is to donate to the CRS Rice Bowl. It is not too late to add your change to the box. You can also write a check or put cash into an envelope, mark it CRS Rice Bowl, and drop it in the collection basket or bring it to one of the parish offices.

Catholic Relief Services is the worlds’ largest charitable organization. 93% of what you give goes directly to the poor. (Our tax dollars should only give us that good of a return.) There are so many people in dire need of help. If you haven’t given alms yet, it’s time to put your faith into action. Let us give gratitude to God by giving to His poor.

Viva Cristo Rey,  
Deacon Gary



**March 26, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

How do you feel when it seems like God does not answer your prayer? Today's Gospel begins with an earnest prayer: "The sisters of Lazarus sent word to Jesus, saying 'Master, the one you love is ill.'" Jesus does not promptly respond. Rather he waits two days, and in the meantime Lazarus dies.

Imagine the feelings and thoughts going through the hearts and minds of the sisters. They wait in expectation for their friend, yet he delays. They are disappointed when their brother dies. They have no way of understanding why Jesus didn't come. We sympathize with them, since each of us has had the experience of earnestly imploring the Lord and not receiving the response for which we hoped.

The Lord could cure Lazarus. He is not apathetic to the prayers of his friends. He cares for Lazarus. It would be good to heal Lazarus, but Jesus has something even greater in mind. This is a principle of our relationship with God. God is not satisfied to give us something that is "merely good," nor will he settle for giving us something better. He will only be satisfied to give us the BEST.

There are two responses to the unanswered prayer of Martha and Mary. First we see that Martha and Mary express Faith and Trust in the Lord, even though their prayer seems unanswered. They are confident that Jesus has the power to heal. They trust that even though their brother has died, he will rise on the last day. The other response is that of the crowds, who sneer and deride, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?"

It is a much greater miracle to raise someone from the dead than it is to cure an illness. So Jesus, who by his tears, shows that he is not indifferent to our grief, goes to the tomb, and calls Lazarus from the domain of death back to the land of the living. "Lazarus, come out!" Martha and Mary asked the Lord for something good, the healing of their brother. The Lord provided something even greater, that he was raised from the dead. But this is not yet the best.

If Jesus had merely cured Lazarus, the miracle would have been merely private, known only to those who already believed that he was the Messiah and the Resurrection. By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus not only affirms the faith of Martha and Mary, and his disciples, but everyone who witnessed this miracle began to believe in Christ. The community of Faith was expanded.

Although Lazarus was raised to life here on earth, he will die another earthly death. There is a great life that Jesus wishes to give us. "I am the Resurrection and the Life, whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die," says the Lord.

God will never settle for giving us what is "merely good." But often what we ask for in prayer falls far short of the best that God wants to give us. So we offer prayers, but God seems to respond with silence and delay. Yet, in reality he is deepening our hope and drawing us deeper in faith that the holy desires of our heart may begin to yearn for the great graces that he wishes to give to us. This type of prayer requires us to imitate the FAITH and TRUST of Martha and Mary, rather than the sneering of the crowds.

How do you respond?

Blessings,

Father Bill

**March 19, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve

**I DO BELIEVE, LORD**

In this week's Gospel we hear of a blind man, a man who was blind since birth, a man who was accustomed to living in darkness. He had no idea what it meant to see light until Jesus came and cured him of his blindness. It was only when Jesus gave him the gift of sight that he could understand. When he saw the light, he saw the truth. The man understood better than the Pharisees who Jesus was, he understood that Jesus is the Light of the World. The man could proclaim, "I do believe, Lord."

This Lent we should ask ourselves if we are blind to the "Light of the World." Now, I realize we are not talking about being physically blind from birth. I'm talking about being spiritually blind from sin. This can be so much worse because our life here on earth is short but eternity, well, that's forever.

We become blind to the harm that sin does to us. We think, "My sins are my own. My sins really don't hurt anyone." We let them build and fester inside of us over the weeks, the months, and the years. Pretty soon the eyes of our souls become clouded-over. We lose our ability to see the light. We become cynical, not just towards the world, but towards God also. We stumble around in the dark.

But just as Jesus restored the blind man's hope and confidence through a personal encounter, Jesus will do the same for us through His Sacraments. In this case, the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I realize I may have just made a whole lot of you flinch. It's a well-known fact that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the forgotten Sacrament. For some reason, it seems the world has come under the attitude that forgiveness from the Lord is something I can do on my own. But if you read through the Bible, you will see that the sacrifices of the people, the forgiveness of sins always involved a mediator (a priest) between them and God.

Back to the point, if we do not have our Spiritual Blindness cured by Jesus in His sacrament of Reconciliation, we will never see the light. We will never understand. We will never receive the graces of His greatest Sacrament the Eucharist. We remain in the dark. I do not wish to sound harsh, but this is the reality. I say these things out of love for Christ and you.

Lent is a perfect time to come face to face with the reality of our spiritual blindness. It is time for all of us to experience a personal encounter with Jesus in Confession. It is there that we find healing and are cured of our blindness. In the light of Christ, our sight is restored, and we can see the truth. We too can proclaim, "I do believe, Lord."

Viva Cristo Rey,

Deacon Gary

**March 12, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) offers this beautiful reflection about today's Gospel:

"If you knew the gift of God!"<sup>1</sup> The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him (CCC #2560).

Every religion in the world searches for God. Only Christianity dares to say that God is searching for us. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were hiding from God because they were ashamed of their sin. However, God came searching for them and called out, "Where are you?"<sup>2</sup>

The woman in today's Gospel reading has every reason to believe that God does not love her. She is a Samaritan, and the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. She was divorced many times and was not married to the man with whom she was living. This is why she was fetching water at noon, that is the hottest part of the day. She was ashamed. So she was coming to the well when she thought no one else would be there. Yet, someone was there waiting for her. There she met Christ, who desired not only a drink of water to slake his thirst, but much more desired that this woman would drink the waters of eternal life.

Christ has the same desire for you that he had for this woman. He searches for us. And wants us to drink the waters of eternal life. Like Adam and Eve, we can hide from God. We can avoid him by losing ourselves in distracts and being busy bodies. But what is Christ asking from us?

During this Lent, set aside whatever distracts you from spending quiet time with Christ. Be still. Be silent. And let Christ approach you in prayer. In the silent stillness, we will hear the voice of Christ speak to us, and if we are willing to listen, like this woman, we too will be filled with an excited joy that comes from knowing and loving Jesus.

May you meet Christ, and may He set your hearts on fire!

Blessings,

Father Bill

<sup>1</sup>Gospel of John 4:10

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:9

**March 5, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the Roman liturgical tradition, the transfiguration of Jesus is always read on the Second Sunday of Lent. This year, we will hear the version from the Gospel of Matthew.

No detail is wasted in the words of Holy Scripture, especially in the Gospels. Pay attention to two details that could otherwise easily be missed: “Jesus took Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain (1) by themselves (2)” (Matthew 17:1).

Why was the Transfiguration on a mountain? After all, it could have been on a plain or along the seashore. These were all common places for Jesus to meet his disciples. There are two reasons. Mountains are privileged places of encounter between God and his people. Abraham took Isaac up a mountain. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses encountered God in the burning bush and later received the Ten Commandments. So Jesus is taking his chosen disciples up a mountain to encounter God. Following the disciples up the mountain, we prepare our hearts for an encounter with God.

Mountain climbing involves effort. Peter, James, and John had to work to see the transfiguration of Jesus. Anyone who has ever hiked a mountain knows that the view from the top is worth the effort. During Lent, we voluntarily submit ourselves to penances and sacrifices that require effort and perseverance. We seek a greater reward than a stunning view. We are motivated to overcome our temptations and to draw closer to God. The reward is greater internal freedom and a nearer closeness to God. The more seriously that we apply ourselves to Lent, the greater the joy of the Resurrection celebration. As Catherine of Siena said, “nothing great is ever achieved without much endurance.”

Secondly, Jesus took them up the mountain by themselves. He took them away from the crowds. He took them away from the burdens of the daily routine. They had to be alone with him and lifted out of their ordinary existence to see him shining brightly.

This is an important aspect of Lenten spirituality. We leave the crowds behind to be alone with Jesus. This means devoting extra time to be alone with God. Instead of spending time watching videos and TV shows, or listening to podcasts, we take that time to be alone with God. We deliberately seek silence and quiet. When we are alone with the Lord, we get a true sense of his nearness and powerful presence.

Lent should disrupt our daily routine. Routines are good since they help us to navigate our environment efficiently, but they also dull our awareness. We stop noticing. Our Lent resolutions shake things up a bit, and with that shake up, we grow aware of God’s presence. We don’t need to worry that our daily commitments will be left unfulfilled. After all, Jesus takes them back down the mountain (referring Matthew 17:9). They return to the crowds and to their daily commitments. Yet now they are now strengthened by the mountaintop vision. So, it is with Lent. We must return to crowds and our daily routine, but we return fortified by the graces we have received and encouraged by a stronger sense of the Lord’s mysterious presence.

Blessings and Prayers,

Father Bill

**February 26, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We prepare for the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection with the forty day fast of Lent. Nearly all the ancient Churches, along with many Protestant communities, keep a Lenten fast of forty days. This practice that is shared by nearly all ancient Christians most likely originates with the Apostles themselves. So even though Lent is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, we can be confident that a forty day fast in preparation for Easter goes back to the very beginning of Christianity. But why forty days?

In the Old Testament, forty is a number associated with periods of purification and redemption. In the book of Genesis, when God sees the wickedness of humankind, he sends a flood to purify the world (see the story of Noah's flood in Genesis 6:5-8:19). It rains for FORTY days; the world floods and is washed clean.

After the Lord God rescued His people from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert for FORTY years. During that time, the book of Numbers recalls how the people were tempted to return to Egypt because they desired to eat the cucumbers, melons, and onions that grew there (see Numbers 11:4-6). They also grumbled against the Lord and He sent serpents to chastise them (see Numbers 21:4-9). Most grievously, they turned away from the worship of the true God to worship a golden calf (see Exodus 32:1-24). The Israelites were called out of slavery, but they needed FORTY years of trials to be purified before they could enter the Promised Land.

In the book of Jonah, God turns away from wrath that He was going to visit upon the city of Nineveh because they fasted for FORTY days (see Jonah 3).

Before beginning His public ministry, Jesus fulfills the Old Testament model by enduring FORTY days of temptation in the desert. Noah, the Israelites, and the Ninevites all fell short, Jesus succeeded. Noah fell into sin soon after the flood subsided. The Israelites continually doubted and grumbled against the Lord God, even as God blessed them with manna from heaven and water from the rock! The Ninevites would later go on to conquer and oppress God's people. Yet, when Jesus was tempted in the desert, He was not conquered. Jesus was victorious!

We begin our annual FORTY day period of penance and purification in preparation for Easter. Like the world in the time of Noah, we needed to be washed clean. Not by waters that will flood the earth, but by the blood and water that flows from the side of Christ Crucified. Like the Israelites, we have been called to be part of God's Holy People, but also like them we often refuse to go where the Lord leads us. We need the FORTY days of Lent. Yet, unlike the world in the time of Noah, and unlike the Israelites in the desert, we are not left to our own devices as we enter the desert of Lent. Like Christ, we are led by the Spirit.

Our need for God's mercy is great, so our Lenten sacrifices and penances should be significant. Yet, our confidence should be great, since the Spirit of God has been poured out upon us through the waters of baptism and the anointing of confirmation. The Spirit leads us.

Blessed and Joyful Lent,

Father Bill

**February 19, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. Lent's purpose is explained by the readings for Ash Wednesday. St. Paul is clear, "be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20, 2nd reading). The Prophet Joel appeals to us, "return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts ..."

(Joel 2:12-13, 1st reading). It requires humility to admit that we have sinned and to recognize our need to be reconciled to God. During Lent, we take responsibility for the wrong that we have done.

Lent is a penitential season. Penances are sacrifices that we voluntarily adopt as signs of our repentance. Penances should not be easy! They should require effort and to a certain extent they should be uncomfortable and inconvenient. If your Lent is easy, chances are you are doing it wrong.

The three practices of Lent are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. All three of these come from the Ash Wednesday Gospel. Jesus gives the instruction. "When you give alms... When you pray... When you fast..." (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18). Jesus is not saying, "If you give alms... if you pray... if you fast..." Jesus is not offering these practices as an option or a suggestion. For Jesus, these are requirements.

Almsgiving is the generosity that we show the less fortunate. Almsgiving detaches us from an inordinate attachment to material possessions. Almsgiving is an effective remedy to selfishness and greed. Almsgiving helps us to resist the temptations of the world.

Prayer is absolutely necessary for the Christian life. Every spiritual master says that Christians must pray for a minimum of at least twenty minutes a day. It is not popular today to talk about the devil. But he is real. "Be vigilant, your adversary, the devil, prowls like a roaring lion, seeks to devour you" (1 Peter 5:8). We are engaged in spiritual battle, whether we realize it or not. That is why we hear these words in the opening prayer of Ash Wednesday Mass, "Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service..." This prayer sounds like a call to battle, because Lent is a call to battle and prayer is our weapon. And as almsgiving is the remedy to the temptations of the world, prayer is our remedy against the temptations of the devil.

Lastly, Jesus talks about fasting. Fasting is hardly mentioned anymore, even though for centuries it was a normal part of Christian spirituality. Fasting is the voluntary restriction on calories to awaken hunger. The benefit of fasting includes a strengthening of self-mastery, the physical hunger of the fast awakens a spiritual hunger for God. Fasting helps us to grow in gratitude, and through fasting we gain the strength to do hard things. Since it is an act of self-discipline, it is a powerful remedy to any temptations of the flesh. Fasting should never endanger one's health, but most people in moderate health can engage in some moderate fasting.

In the next few days, take some time to reflect over what the Lord is calling you to do for Lent. Make your resolutions concrete. Write them down. The more seriously that we embrace the sacrifices of Lent,

the greater our joy at Easter. So my prayer for you is that your Lent may be hard so that your joy at Easter may be even greater.

Blessings,

Father Bill



**February 12, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

The Deacon's Book Report

Mass and realize that there is more to the story than what is being read? Have you ever wondered how all of the readings fit together?

I have to admit that when I first dove into reading the Bible I went in feet first without any plan. I hoped that when I hit the water, whatever God wanted me to know would wash over me. That turned out to be an okay plan. However, when I truly felt moved to not just read Scripture, but to study it, I needed a guide or an outline. A book that is really helpful is New Testament Basics for Catholics by John Bergsma.

It gave me an overview and an outline for each of the Gospels. It helped me to see that each Gospel was written for a specific audience. They are not just a collection of the stories Jesus told or a history of what He did. The Gospels are written in a purposeful and inspired way. Sometimes though, we can miss a lot because we do not know the "backstory". We miss the obvious clues in scripture. This is where this book is really helpful. The author gives so many nuggets of information and a lot of the Old Testament "backstory". This book was easy to follow and was extremely interesting.

One example I found interesting was the very first line in The Gospel of Matthew that we hear just about every Christmas Eve. Matthew begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." In this very first line Bergsma explains that Matthew has connected Jesus to three of the most important men in the Bible - Adam, David, and Abraham. This line fulfills the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah.

When Matthew says, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ," there is only one other place in the Bible where we hear this phrase. In Genesis we hear, "This is the book of the generations of Adam." Matthew is telling us Jesus is the "The New Adam".

When Matthew calls Jesus "The Son of David," we should pay attention to the word "the". Matthew didn't say "A Son of David". David had many, many sons and descendants. Jesus isn't just a son, Jesus is "The Son".

Matthew also called Jesus, "The Son of Abraham". Again using the word "the" instead of "a" Matthew is telling us Jesus is the one whom God spoke to Abraham about when He said, "I will establish My covenant with you and with your seed after you, and by your seed shall the nations of the earth be blessed." (Did you ever think by using "The" instead of "A" would make a world of difference?)

(John Bergsma also wrote Old Testament Basics for Catholics and Psalm Basics for Catholics which are also very helpful.)

There are many more examples, and I cannot say enough good things about this book. So if you want to dig deeper into scripture, if you want help uncovering nuggets of information that will help you

understand the early Church and people of a different time, or if you want to better understand how the Words of Christ can change your life, this is a book I highly recommend.

Viva Christo Rey,

Deacon Gary

**February 5, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In northern Israel, there is a lighthouse in the middle of the desert. Since deserts are unusual places for lighthouses, it begs the question: why would you expect to find a lighthouse there? Truth be told, I am exaggerating a bit. The northern area of modern Israel, which we call Galilee, is much drier than Wisconsin, it is hardly a desert. And the lighthouse that I am speaking of is not an aid to navigation, but rather the great church of the Basilica of the Annunciation that is built over the site of Mary's house in Nazareth. The architect of this great church intentionally designed the dome to be a great lighthouse, a light that can be easily seen from anywhere in Nazareth and even beyond.

Lighthouses have two functions. They direct ships into safe harbors and warn them of hazards on the sea. Christ called himself the Light of the World (see John 8:12). By this he meant that we should look to him to be the light by which we navigate our lives. His word is a sure guide that warns of the dangers of the world, the flesh and the devil. Just as the light of a beacon cuts through the gloom of a deep fog, his words are a light of hope that cuts through the dark gloom of sin, death and despair. And it is by his light, and his light alone, that guides us safely into the harbor of heaven.

What is even more amazing is that he calls us to be light too. In this Sunday's Gospel, he calls us with these words, "You are the light of the world." He tells us that we cannot hide the light of the Gospel under a bushel basket, but rather we must be a lamp set on a lampstand to give light to the whole world. Christ's language is strong here. He is not making a recommendation or a suggestion about sharing the Light of the Gospel. Rather he is making it clear in no uncertain terms that every Christian is required to share the Light of the Gospel with others.

These words naturally make most of us uncomfortable. The wider culture discourages us from sharing our faith with others. Although the faith is deeply personal, it is not a private matter. Not only does Christ require us to be a light unto others, but the world is also desperately in need of us to share the Light of Christ. Our world is filled with fear of war and rumors of war, confusion, despair, and pessimism. If Christ has conquered death, can he not also conquer war and violence? If Christ has conquered death, can he not also conquer despair and pessimism? Can he not be the light of clarity in times of confusion? The answer to all these questions is a YES. And we are called to proclaim Him in whom we believe and in whom we place our trust.

Let us be confident that through the power of our baptism we share in his victory. Let our confidence be bold, that through the gift of His Spirit, our words and actions may proclaim that Christ is the light.

Blessings,

Father Bill

**January 29, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this Sunday's Gospel, we hear the familiar words of the Beatitudes. These enigmatic proverbs reveal Jesus' plan for our happiness. Aristotle states that happiness is what all people seek, but he finds it difficult to describe happiness. In seeking happiness, people often try to find it in possessions, financial security, honor and esteem, power or influence over others. The wisdom of Aristotle, the inquiry of modern psychology, and the experience of many people all agree that these pursuits do not lead to greater happiness.

Jesus offers a plan for happiness that does not seek riches, honors, or power. He says, rather, that it is the poor, the lowly and the meek that will be truly blessed and happy.

We don't expect this.

Very few people would seek poverty, lowliness and humility as a path towards happiness. Jesus is not just speculating about happiness. He is not offering an untested theory. Jesus lives the beatitudes, and by the demonstration of his life, he shows us that the path of the beatitudes is the surest way to happiness.

"Blessed are the poor..." What does it mean to be poor? The poor do not have the resources to provide for their own needs. The poor depend upon others. The saintly, now deceased, archbishop of Chicago, Francis Cardinal George, said that the poor cannot afford their own necessities, but even more so, the poor cannot afford any illusions about their lives.

A person who lives the beatitudes has no illusions about their lives. They accept that their own efforts fall short of providing for what the human heart truly seeks. They know that they have little control over the course of their lives. This realization overwhelms many in our world today. But a person who lives the beatitudes is not defeated.

Jesus looked toward His Father. He knew that His Father, who provided for the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, would also provide for Him. A man or a woman of the beatitudes does not stop at their poverty. Rather, when all the illusions of life are stripped away, then they begin to trust. Imitating Jesus, they lift their eyes toward their Father in heaven, and with a grace-filled trust they can pray "...give us this day our daily bread..." They believe that God can provide for them, since even God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and even God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom (see 1 Corinthians 1:25).

Blessings,

Father Bill

**January 22, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospel that is read at Mass this Sunday includes Jesus' first recorded sermon. It is only one line, and can easily be committed to memory.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17b).

The early baptism practice of the church dramatically illustrates repentance. When an adult was baptized in the early church, he or she would be asked to make their baptismal promises. "Do you reject Satan? And all his works? And all of his empty promises?" The catechumen would be facing in a westerly direction while responding to these questions with a hearty "I do." After responding to the last of these questions, the catechumen would spit towards the west, and then turn towards the east.\* Only after turning towards the east did the catechumen continue to make their baptismal promises. "Do you believe in God..."

Repenting is literally turning in a different direction.

This ritual illustrates a basic principle: Before we embrace the Faith, we must turn away from evil and immorality.

Although REPENT is Jesus' first recorded word, I hardly recall any homilies or religious lessons that focused on Jesus' call to repentance. Repentance has not been a common theme of preaching or teaching. As a preacher, I can say it is difficult to echo Jesus' call to repentance. Like any other discipline, very few people enjoy hearing a call to repentance. This goes a long way towards explaining my own hesitation to preach about repentance, and the glaring negligence among preachers and teachers of the faith.

Yet, Jesus' words cannot simply be set aside. It does not matter if they are challenging or unpopular, Jesus' words cannot simply be set aside.

Although Jesus' first sermon was extremely short, it is also extremely challenging. Repentance is difficult. Repentance requires humility. Humility is required to accept that we are not perfect, and often we are attached to sinful words and actions. Repentance is frustrating. Sin, evil and immorality seem to be "sticky." And even when we recognize that we are attached to words and actions, it is often only through the challenging path of penance, prayer and fasting that we are able to break the bondage of sin in our lives.

Despite the challenges and struggles that repentance entails, those who take this commitment seriously often find that repentance is the first step towards joy. Jesus never asks us to sacrifice without promising that we will receive something even greater in return. If Jesus' first word is REPENT, recall also some of his last words, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full" (John 15:11, ESV).

Blessings,

Father Bill

\* The east symbolizes the direction from which Christ will return. To face east is to face Christ. This is why the priest traditionally faces east while celebrating Mass, and why Catholics are traditionally buried facing east.

**January 15, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve...

**PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE**

Do you remember these words of St Paul; "Love is patient, love is kind, love does not seek its own interests, love is not quick tempered, love bears all things, believes in all things, hopes in all things, and endures all things?" These words taken from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is a popular choice for young couples on their wedding day because they set the tone for how they hope their love grows for each other. Related to this is today's Psalm 40. The psalmist starts out with, "I have waited, waited for the Lord." How many times have we done the opposite of what St. Paul tells us? How many times have we lost patience with the people we love? How many times have we lost our patience with the Lord?

There have been too many times in my life when my patience has been nonexistent with my loved ones and with others. I wanted to wait for no one. I wanted people to respond immediately. There also have been times I expected God to be quicker in His response to my prayers and requests.

Even though we may have to wait, remember that God is never far away from us. God's love is always there for us because we hear that God has stooped down and heard our cry. But like any good parent, God doesn't always give us what we ask for on our timetable. Like any good parent, God can see beyond the immediate problem, God can see the real problem and the real solution. We are like little children who can only see what is immediately around us.

When God does act, He gives us a lasting joy. "He put a new song in my mouth." So often we fall victim to temporary happiness, the joy that the world offers us. As I think back on my life I can remember all the times I thought I would find lasting happiness in material things and in doing things my way. I remember all the times it didn't last, and I was left not with a new song, but a bitter taste in my mouth.

We have to realize that our true happiness lies in our obedience to God and His ways. As we hear, "To do Your will, O' God is my delight." This is what St. Paul re-confirms as he tells us, "Love does not seek its own interest. True love is not a random act. True love is a willful act. This is what God has done for us. It was God's willful act when the Word was made Flesh so we could be saved from our sins.

This willful act of true love is what we must reciprocate. This means that to love God we must give up our pride and our selfishness. We must give up our attitude of my will be done, and remember it is, "Thy Will Be done." When we do this, we can then proclaim, "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will." It is then that love can endure all things, and not wither and die.

Let us take to heart the words of Psalm 40 and the words of St. Paul and allow them to set the tone for our lives. Let us remember that Love is patient and let us seek God's will and not our own so that our love can bear all things and put a new song of joy in our mouths.

Viva Christo Rey, Deacon Gary

**January 8, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This Sunday, we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear the familiar story of the Magi from the East who come to search for the newborn king, and to offer them their precious gifts.

What I find interesting is that the Magi are primarily concerned with what they give to Jesus, rather than what Jesus can give to them. How would it change our experience of Mass if we approached the celebration of the Eucharist in the same way?

At each Mass, we hear the priest say these words during the offertory, "Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father" (emphasis added). What is the sacrifice that you offer?

The Second Vatican Council taught that Mass is primarily an act of worship. We don't use that word "worship" often, but it means to give to God what he deserves. He deserves our praise, and sacrifices. People will sometimes say they do not come to Mass because they "don't get anything out of it." It's hard to understand how someone can truthfully say that they "don't get anything out of Mass," since at Mass we receive the Word of God proclaimed as a living Word, and we receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus, when we receive the Eucharist. We get a lot out of coming to Mass!

But even if we feel that we don't receive anything from coming to Mass, nonetheless, we should imitate the Magi and come to Mass not to receive anything but rather to offer the gifts of our time, talent, and treasure to God. These words are echoed beautifully by the popular prayer often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "...for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

What can we offer to the Lord? Again, we look to the example of the Magi. They offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. While each of these gifts have a symbolic value, it is also true that they are expensive and rare. These gifts were the very best gifts that they could offer. So, while we may not have gold, frankincense, and myrrh to bring forward, we too should offer our very best gifts. Perhaps, we could offer the Lord our undivided attention, rather than distracted thoughts during our times of prayer and during the celebration of the sacred liturgy. Time is more precious than gold, and hence the time we spend in prayer is a sacrifice most precious to the Lord.

Each of us has different gifts and talents to offer Him. But the principle is the same for us all. Whatever we offer to the Lord should not be marginal or from our leftovers. Rather, in imitation of the Magi, we should offer the best that we have.



We should not hesitate in our generosity with the Lord. The Magi returned to their native land with more than they gave because the Lord filled them with the richness of His Word. Whatever we give to the Lord, He receives, He transforms, He multiplies, and He returns it to us. We see this in the Eucharist. We offer Him bread and wine. He receives it. And by the promise of His words, the bread and wine become His Body and Blood. He returns this greatest of gifts to us when we come forward to receive Holy Communion, and we are enriched by His grace and the gift of eternal life.

Blessings and Merry Christmas,

Father Bill

**January 1, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Even if today was not a Sunday, January 1 would be a Holy Day of Obligation for Catholics. It is not only the secular celebration of the New Year, but it's also the Solemnity\* of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.

A week ago, we celebrated the Birth of Jesus, and today we honor his Mother, Mary. This is in fact the oldest feast day dedicated to the honor of Mary on the church's liturgical calendar. On this day we rightly honor Mary as the Mother of God. This is a title that Mary received in the earliest days of Christian history.

This is a controversial claim. The Roman Empire was brought to the brink of civil war between the factions that honored Mary as the Mother of God and those that did not. Even in our own day, many Protestants will say that it is idolatrous to call Mary the Mother of God.

To clear up this controversy, we first recognize that everything we teach and believe about Mary is taught that we might have a better understanding of who Jesus is.

By calling Mary the Mother of God, we are not saying that she is the source of the divinity of Jesus. Rather we are recognizing that the child she bore was both fully human and fully divine. If she is not truly a mother, then Jesus is not truly human. If she is not truly the Mother of God, then Jesus is not truly God. If Jesus Christ was not human, then human nature is not redeemed. If Jesus Christ is not God, that is if he is "merely a man," then he could not save us. By calling Mary the Mother of God, we recognize both the divinity of Jesus and His incarnation.

This might all seem overly theological, but that does not mean it's not important. After all, Jesus himself taught that the greatest commandment was "to love the Lord with all your soul, all your heart, and all your mind" (emphasis added, see Matthew 22:37). This means that an essential part of being a Christian is devoting our mind to understanding our beliefs better. The direct application to our lives may not always be that apparent, but it does delight God that we want to learn more about Him, and to understand Him better.

Entrusting you to the prayers of Mary, our Mother,

Father Bill

\* The Catholic Church has three ranks of feast days: Memorials are the lowest rank, and most saints are assigned as Memorials; Feasts hold the middle rank, and are reserved for more important saints, and some of the Mysteries of the life of our Lord, or our Lady. The highest ranking feasts are called Solemnities. These are considered as important as Sundays, and often if they fall on a Sunday, the Solemnity will be celebrated instead.