

FMA FOCUS

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Franciscan Mission Associates
Mt. Vernon, N.Y. 10551

Missions in Guatemala - Honduras - El Salvador, Central America



Virtue: Discernment

We meet the Holy Spirit's seven gifts often in the Advent/Christmas season. We hear Isaiah list them as hallmarks of the Davidic King Messiah (Isaiah 11:1-10). Discernment, decision-making with reference to God's will, is their underpinning.

One of the King David stories shows why, via the quick thinking and faith of a woman named Abigail.

She sets out on the road through the hills, to implore mercy from David. With his army, he is marching to avenge the insults Abigail's ill and confused husband hurled on David and his men (1 Samuel 25:14-24, 28-39). She awaits his approach, and startling the man, who would soon be king, makes her case.

"Blessed be your good judgment..." prays David, thanking her for preventing bloodshed, and from "... avenging myself personally," he confesses.

Discernment works. Advent is a good time to brush up our practice. ■

Help those find their way

Sometimes, they're the last things to be hung up on Christmas Eve: the Christmas stocking, or stockings, usually one for each person in the household.

Tucked away with Christmas heritage pieces, they become the last "Christmas things" to be brought out and put in place. Rather like the virtue of discernment. We just have to work at bringing it back. The feast of St. Andrew, the Apostle, on November 30 – this year on the Wednesday of the First Week in Advent – can teach us a lot about discernment.

Andrew first appears in the Gospels as a disciple of John the Baptizer. A man of deep faith, he apparently took temporary leave of his job, a fisherman on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: all because he believed in God's Promise of a Messiah.



A decision with consequences: he was called by Jesus to “come and see” what the Lord was all about. In saying yes, Andrew became the first disciple recruited by Jesus of Nazareth. Soon after, he recruited his own brother Simon (renamed by Jesus: Peter). “We have found the Messiah,” Andrew proclaimed, with conviction.

Bringing others to Jesus remains the ‘job description’ of the baptized in our day – and for generations to come.

Ask St. Andrew to help you this Advent/Christmas season... with the hardest quest of all: reaching out to people in **spiritual need**. He’d be the first to tell you: Christians begin with prayer.

- Pray for Catholics who long to come home to their Church this Christmas. Beginning with your own family. Invite them – no strings attached – to join you at home or in church: for Advent evenings of reflection, Reconciliation Service. Or invite them to join the fun of caroling with you and if they want to “bring something” for refreshments afterwards, welcome it. And pray for them, by name, every day of Advent and Christmas, leaving the rest to the Holy Spirit.

- Pray for people with no spiritual home, the spiritually poor. They may

be among your circle of friends, your neighbors with lovely homes and even top-notch holiday decorations. Some may be family members.

- Be prayerfully generous to people struggling with decisions, seeking a way to believe, or to return to their family of faith. Include young people away at school or living somewhere else where jobs are available.

And always be observant and welcoming in church.

You need only look to the graces the Lord has showered on you – and the difference that gift has made – in good times and bad. With that meditation carpeting your heart, make sure no one in your line of vision leaves church, feeling left out or unwanted.

You are the smile, the handshake, the respect and love of Christ – to those your joy, your faith, your loving heart may touch this season.

Pray. Ask for the grace to see the needs – and for the courtesy and kindness to reach out to people who see themselves as ‘outside,’ – for whatever reason. Trust that the Holy Spirit will take care of the rest.

Time consuming this being a ‘disciple’? Oh yes. A true sacrifice at times? Oh yes. But a gift-of-gifts to offer the Lord at Christmas? You bet! ■



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The Christmas Crib in your heart



Christmas 2011 marks nearly 800 years from the Christmas Eve when St. Francis of Assisi brought the Christmas Gospel to “life” with a *Living Christmas Crib* for the Christmas Eve Mass.

Today, there is another style Christmas Crib, one which even home-based Catholics or those in health care facilities can enjoy. This stable is also a choice for personal or even family preparation for Christmas: the *Christmas Crib Built in Your Heart*. Like a spiritual bouquet of prayer for a loved one, this crèche will be your gift for the Holy Infant, come Christmas Eve.

Materials needed: your Faith, a list of the Gospels for each of the Sundays of Advent, and your commitment to time for prayer during the week. A definite Advent ‘sacrifice’ in today’s hectic world.

Helpful tools: a paperback Catholic Bible, and perhaps a small notebook. Ready, set, go:

1st Sunday of Advent – See Mark 13: 33-37. The theme: *Stay Awake... Be constantly on the watch* – make ready for the Lord at Christmas, and again, at the end of times. An ideal time to look at your life: where you are now – and where the Lord invites you to be.

That forms the base, the *floor* for your crib or stable.

2nd Sunday of Advent – Mark 1: 1-8. Theme: *Salvation*. Here we meet John the Baptizer, cousin of the Lord, herald of the Messiah. He preaches repentance, baptism with water, and the any-minute arrival of the Messiah. This is a good time to check on the Parish Advent Sacrament of Reconciliation service, and to review the graces of Baptism in your own life.

You have now raised the *walls* for your spiritual crèche.

3rd Sunday of Advent – John’s Gospel, 1: 6-8, 19-28. Theme: *Joy... Christ, the Light of*

the World. Again, you meet John the Baptizer – quoting the prophet Isaiah “... Make straight the way of the Lord.” How do you – baptized into Christ’s Body – bring Christ’s light to a world still clinging to darkness rather than Light.

And now, you’ve raised the *roof* over the stable. Ready to provide shelter?

4th Sunday of Advent – Luke 1:26-38 (The Annunciation). “The Virgin’s name was Mary.” Lavish time on Mary’s faith, words, courage and commitment. Use it to mirror your own journey with God – and your destination.

Now, you are ready to put up that *shining star*, a Light welcoming those seeking the New Born King.

In the week stretching between the last Advent Sunday and Christmas, keep your scheduled appointment with the Lord. Look up the Christmas Gospels. They are distinctive for each of the four Christmas Masses. But don’t miss the 4th Gospel – from the Mass of Christmas Day: **John 1: 1-18**.

It deals with nothing less than the Savior’s mission and ministry, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. For all times and beyond time. Into Eternity. “*But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God...*” (John 1:12)

A Merry Christmas, indeed! ■

LOVE FOR MARY: A DEVOTION FOR ADULTS

So many times, we have read or heard of Marian devotion in the context of children and their delight and security in honoring the Blessed Mother.

But most often today, devotions to Our Lady speak to her as model and guide for adult men and women, serious about growing in their faith.

Blessed John Paul II openly spoke of his devotion to Mary. So much did that devotion mean to him in his vocation and personal faith, that he had the letter “M” emblazoned on his papal coat of arms, the first pope to do so.

We too can go to Mary in prayer, as adults. We can speak to her as a mother. That could be as our own mother in Heaven... or even praying, mother-to-mother. Or, with men, parent to parent. Our Lady surely understands the needs and challenges of that vocation.

Likewise, we can call on Mary as a woman with a grown child – especially when we deal with our own grown children seeking advice, or refusing to hear it! We know Mary did not hesitate to give her Son, Jesus, sound advice at the Wedding Feast in Cana! There are countless times when mothers and fathers need to do the same with their children.

Senior citizens, of course, can look to Mary as a daughter, as Our Lady’s parents, Anne and Joachim surely did.

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception, this year on Thursday, December 8, provides a great opportunity to brush up our relationship with Mary. A holy day of obligation, this solemnity will bring most of us to Mass, to hear once again one of the most free and adult decisions the world has ever

known, (Luke 1:26-38).

On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. “By a singular grace and privilege of almighty God,” he declared, “and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race,” the Blessed Virgin Mary “was, from the first moment of her conception... preserved immune from all stain of original sin.”

Thus free from sin, Mary was likewise free from the confusion and fear inherent in human decision-making. Hence, Mary was able to listen attentively to the Archangel Gabriel’s announcement of the Good News to come: The Savior, at last. Mary’s freedom likewise allowed her to analyze answers to questions that rose from her heart. Free to fully embrace God’s gift of faith, Mary quickly pronounced the “Fiat” that changed the world.

This wonderful holy day marks an appropriate time to examine our own progress as ‘grown-ups’ in faith. And to address Our Lady, adult-to-adult, seeking an honest evaluation of what we can do in this coming year to keep on growing as disciples of her Son.

Our Lady will be there to help us. We need just ask. ■



Visit us on the web
franciscanmissionassoc.org

Mother Cabrini: A Saint for Our Time

We usually celebrate the memorial feast day of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, the first American citizen to be canonized a saint, on November 13. Because the feast this year falls on Sunday, the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, it is superseded by the Sunday Liturgy.

Yet, the contributions to our Church and nation, the mission and ministry of this dynamic 19th and 20th century religious order founder and modern-era evangelist, in no way fade into the background. To the contrary, St. Frances Cabrini—called simply, Mother, by the thousands of people she touched and inspired—continues to offer the kind of dynamic inspiration and example that our 21st century Church, and nation, needs more than ever.

Some quick background: Born in Lombardy, Italy in 1850, Sr. Frances Xavier Cabrini was only 30 years old when she founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart in 1880, in Codogno, Italy. And by 1887, she had established numerous schools, hospitals and orphanages—indeed, making her sisters and herself available to serve the Lord via the Works of Mercy (Corporal and Spiritual).

None other than Pope Leo XIII called Mother Cabrini's attention to similar needs elsewhere, particularly in the United States. Needs that included assistance for the ever-growing Italian immigrant population in America.

Mother Cabrini left her homeland for the United States in 1889, eventually becoming a citizen. There for the next

28 years, Mother Cabrini and her Sisters filled in mighty gaps: homes for delinquent youth; prison visitation programs and spiritual counseling; hospitals for the sick, the infirm and the poor. And help of all kinds to the constant flow of immigrants— at a time when people not of northern European origin were less than welcome, except as workers for jobs nobody else wanted.

Her missionary zeal took Mother Cabrini and her Sisters to South and Central America—where schools were established in Argentina, Brazil and Nicaragua.

Mother Cabrini died in Chicago on December 22, 1917.

On the day of her canonization, July 7, 1946, Pope Pius XII cited the factors that helped this gentle little woman from Italy to achieve so much for God's Kingdom, here and in heaven. Along with a vibrant faith, a kind of mystical awareness "of the divine love which burned within her," Mother Cabrini prayed, constantly. St. Frances Xavier Cabrini "Humbly asked," he said, "and obtained whatever her human weakness could not obtain."

The Prayer for her Feast Day points to ways we, and the Church, can help the many new immigrants in today's turbulent world.

*By her example, teach us concern for
the stranger,
the sick, and the frustrated.*

*By her prayers, help us to see Christ in
all the men and women we meet.*

A SPIRITUAL CHRISTMAS GIFT

If you wish to give a spiritual gift for your loved ones or for special friends at Christmas, may we suggest a gift enrollment in Franciscan Mission Associates.

Those you enroll at Christmas will share spiritually in the Masses and prayers of all our Franciscan friars during 2012 and in a Solemn Novena of Masses to begin on Christmas Day.

You will receive beautifully engraved Christmas gift cards, well in advance. Each card is designed to show your name as the donor and the name of each person you decide to enroll. You may remain or give the gift announcements as you choose.

A sample announcement is enclosed. To obtain additional Christmas enrollment cards, please write today to:

Fr. Primo, O.F.M., Box 598, Dept. 2112, Mount Vernon, NY 10551

ALL THE FRANCISCANS IN HEAVEN (ST. ANTHONY, ST. FRANCIS)

As we look forward to Christmas – the celebration of the Savior’s Birth – it is a good time to recall what we can know about the home God has prepared for those who love him, Heaven.

We know that Jesus in his resurrected, glorified body, ascended to Heaven. And tradition speaks to us of Our Lady’s Assumption, being taken up “body and soul” into the glory of Heaven.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that “Christian hope” comes from Jesus and his preaching ministry – and looks to the promise of Heaven.

Specifically in Jesus’ preaching and proclamation of the beatitudes. For the “beatitudes raise our hope toward heaven as the new Promised Land.”

Indeed, the beatitudes are called “the heart of Jesus’ preaching,” marking fulfillment of the promises to Abraham and his progeny, a promise “... no longer merely to the possession of a territory, but to the Kingdom of Heaven.”

St. Francis practiced and lived the beatitudes. Even to seeing and hailing the face of Jesus, the face of God, in the most feared and rejected people of his world: the very ill and the poor.

At the same time, St. Francis lived and experienced that which all the baptized share: by God’s grace, and surely with the sacraments, especially in the Holy Eucharist, a little bit of Heaven, even while we move in hope toward eternity.

The images Holy Scripture has provided regarding the new Promised Land include: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise.

Yet, as in St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, the Prophet Isaiah’s caution about describing Heaven is noted: “... no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” (Isaiah 64:3)

Jesus has “opened” heaven to us, it says, yet the mystery “of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description.” (Catechism, 1026-1029)

For us, the celebration of a Mass for our loved ones speaks to some kind of continued contact with them, in Heaven. “Don’t know how to explain it,” people say, “ – but I felt so close to Mom and Dad at this Mass. The same thing happens anytime we schedule a Mass for their anniversaries of death, their going home to God.”

Ask the Holy Infant this Christmas to strengthen our faith. Pray for the grace to take advantage of all the glimpses of Heaven that His Nativity has made possible. Ask for the grace to keep on point, Heaven as our destination, as we strive to live as Jesus’ disciples in this world. ■

REMEMBRANCE

You can continue to carry on your own good work for the missions and the people they serve by remembering them in your will. To do so, simply make a bequest of whatever you wish to: FRANCISCAN MISSION ASSOCIATES, Mount Vernon, NY 10551. If you wish additional information about how to do this, please feel free to contact:

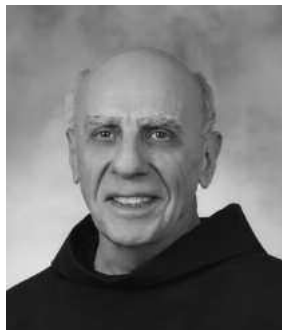
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Director's Letter

Fr. Primo, O.F.M.

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Dear Friends,

For more than fifty years the hard working people behind the Franciscan Mission Associates have gone into the far corners of the world “preaching the Gospel to every creature.” It is this message and mission I humbly undertake as I begin my journey with FMA as its new director.

What a beautiful time to be welcomed into the fold, this holy season of Advent. For many, Christmas means some combination of crowded churches, family gatherings and elegantly wrapped gifts waiting silently to be opened. This year, and every year, husbands and wives should realize another gift they have been given, the gift of marriage. In the words of Blessed John Paul II “...marriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values...”

This year at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C., 829 couples attended a special Mass commemorating 25-73 years of marriage. Those interviewed did not say maintaining a marriage was simple.

But many likely, believed God intervened at times when the road was rocky. God can become a companion in your marriage and a source of strength.

One can only imagine how hard it must have been for young Joseph and Mary traveling with little money or food, trusting in the Lord. How often they must have called out to God for his guidance and love. Marriage is not easy, whether you are rich or poor but it is a blessed union that can be a true example of God’s infinite love.

During this Christmas season keep newlyweds and those with many married years behind them, in your prayers and may you all have a blessed and holy Advent.

May God Bless you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr. Primo, O.F.M." The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Fr. Primo, O.F.M.



CHRISTMAS ALONE, BUT NEVER LONELY

Fr. Flavian, O.F.M.

As always I will spend my Christmas day alone. I receive many invitations for Christmas but I try to treat all of my friends the same and do not want them to think I chose one family over another. On Christmas day I usually visit the soup kitchen. That is where AGAPE began. I go there for an hour, hug all the homeless people we are feeding and give each of them three dollars for a Christmas gift. Most of them live in the streets. Every day AGAPE provides them with three meals, health care and any other needs they may have. Our school children have been on vacation for the last month and a half and will soon return to classes. We have a day-care, grammar school and high school. We also offer classes for people who want to finish their high school degree, a school for special children and a University. Last year we gave out more than 600 scholarships.

This year we have a new scholarship project. Children of thirty mostly unwed mothers will receive all they need to attend kindergarten, including books, uniforms, shoes, bus fare etc. They will



receive the same assistance every year until they graduate high school. This is an expensive undertaking but one of my friends offered to help and he will see his project in action later this month when the schools open again.

I am now in my 47th year here in Central America. I really love my work and especially the television work. The only problem with appearing on TV is

that you can not go anywhere without being recognized. But it is worth it. People visit AGAPE by bus almost every Sunday so we usually have a lot of people attending Sunday Mass.

Be assured of my prayers to you dear reader, especially in my Mass in the new year. Please pray for us and many thanks for all your generous gifts. Love to all.

Blessings and peace. ■



THE JOY OF WATCHING CHILDREN GROW UP

Fr. Albert, O.F.M.



In Honduras, children are usually well loved and cared for. In general it is not a country where children are abandoned or treated badly. But naturally in a country of eight million people there are always cases where the children might, due to unforeseen circumstances, end up on their own.

Our diocese of Olancho is in the biggest State of Honduras. With a population of a half a million people it did not have a single orphanage. So about seven years ago together with two Franciscan Sisters, we started the Hogar de Ninos – Santa Maria De Los Angeles.

Working with the Pastors of the 12 surrounding Parishes we have in the Diocese, little by little, our family started to form. First came Jose, then Maria, then Jarlin, and Florinda and so on and now after seven years we have a beautiful family of 26 little kids who seem to be growing up by the hour. Without

actually realizing what was happening, I started to act like the father and the two sisters fell in place as if they were the mothers of the children.

The real beauty of our family is watching the kids grow up right before our eyes. During the year we actually celebrate 26 birthdays. This year Florinda graduated from Primary School. Five of the children have finished kindergarten and Jose is studying with professional carpenters, because that is his passion.

Family disagreements, toys that disappear by the art of magic and other domestic problems are solved at night



in noisy meetings over candy and a rare piece of chocolate. We run a **very tight** family budget, since you, our benefactors at FMA are our only stable income.

But for us it is a daily miracle the way St. Francis is always so attentive to most of our basic needs; food, medicine, clothes, books, pencils. Our biggest worry is the youngest of the clan, Mary. We call her Mary of the Angels, or Angel for short. She is 11 months old and was born with a severe heart problem and needs daily medication. She will be operated on when she is two. We pray for her every day, she is a beauty with big black eyes and the hair of an angel.

In a country as poor as Honduras, only the Franciscans can face the day to day challenge and miracle of bringing up a family of 26 children. And that is only possible because St. Francis is our real father, St. Clare is our real mother and you at FMA are our beloved benefactors. ■



Words Worth Noting



It constantly happens that the Lord permits a soul to fall so that it may grow humbler.

St. Teresa of Avila

God prefers bad verses recited with a pure heart over the finest verses by the wicked.

Voltaire

Most people do not pray they only beg.

George Bernard Shaw

Children are likely to live up to what you believe of them.

Lady Bird Johnson

Assume a virtue if you have it not.

William Shakespeare

We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same.

Anne Frank

Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.

Blessed John Paul II

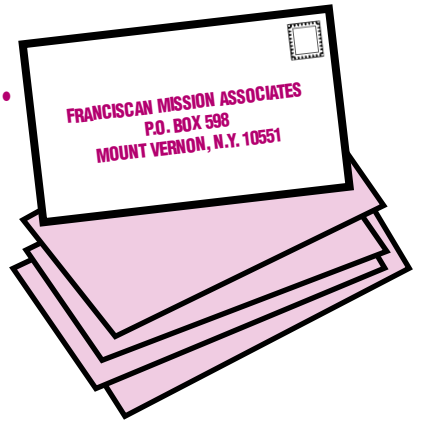
In order to change we must be sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Anonymous

If you want a place in the sun you have got to put up with a few blisters.

Abigail Van Buren

Our Readers gladly write...



Dear Father,

I wish to give thanks to St. Anthony, The Blessed Mother, St. Jude, St. Theresa and especially to the Lord Jesus for the many answers to prayer, and the favors and blessings which have been bestowed on me and my family.

Through God's mercy and the intercession of the Blessed Mother and the saints, most of all of my family has employment. I am confident that through prayer God will bless those who are still seeking employment with steady jobs, and continue to keep them working.

Thank you Father for your many prayers and good works. And I thank all of your priests and the children of the missions who continually pray for my intentions and those of my family.

I am enclosing \$10.00 for you missions. I will send more next month, and will certainly remember all of you in my prayers. God bless all of you.

Sincerely,
K.H.
Salem, OR

Dear Father,

I thank you so much for thinking of me on my 52nd birthday. Your birthday card came as a nice surprise. I had a lovely birthday. I wish you a good day too.

E.A.
Richmond BC, Canada

Dear Father,

I want to thank you for the beautiful rosary. I will say my first rosary for you and the poor. I am 86 years old. I turn to St. Anthony every time to help me. Many years ago my daughter was 17 and she was going to college. She had bad cancer. St. Anthony gave her life. I thank God and St. Anthony because they gave her life. She has seen her 62 birthday. I bless you for all you do and I thank you over and over again for the beautiful rosary.

M.V.
Cornwall, NY

Dear Father,

I wish to thank Our Lady of Lourdes for requesting and obtaining from God a successful eye operation for my granddaughter. I am now praying faithfully that she will do the miracle for the other eye. Thanks for all the blessings which have been given to me.

Thank you and God Bless You,
G.V.
Clifton, NJ

HE HAS KEPT HIS PROMISE; WE SHOULD TOO

We do plenty of promising around Christmas Time – and such promises often look to our spiritual goals and commitments. Beginning with that well-know phrase: “If only you help me, Lord, I promise to ...”

- Get to our Advent parish penance service

- Keep Christ in Christmas

- Incorporate sacrifice into our Christmas budget

- Carve out time for prayer of praise and thanks to God – at least once a week, while not asking for anything material

- Keep from negative comments – and eliminate them at Christmas parties – or anywhere; instead, praying for those who criticize me

And, on it goes, until the crash, because we fail in whole or in part. Mostly, we just promise too much. Forgetting we are human. We live with limitations.

But we need not worry. God keeps his promises. As he did with our ancestors when they failed, while living in the Garden of Eden.

For on that Christmas night more than 2,000 years ago, the Lord God fulfilled his promise of the Redeemer. And in ways far greater than the Patriarchs and Prophets ever thought possible. For the Holy Infant, born of Mary, was the Son of God, the God/Man, Jesus, the Christ. Redeemer and Savior.

Many people had been hoping for the Redeemer, perhaps coming in their own time. Yet their involvement with earthly affairs, blinded them to the possibility that God would indeed fulfill his promise. And so, in Bethlehem, busy people went about obeying Rome and

working to complete the census, making money, providing for their families, and on that Night of Nights – filling every available room as fast as they could. Visitors and officials involved with the Census, getting priority, of course.

And thus, the residents and innkeepers in Bethlehem, the City of David, the first great King, missed the most important night in human history.

Yes, God has fulfilled his promise, then and now. He has helped us indeed – and continues to do so.

For the graces of the theological virtue of Hope inspire us, as St. Paul says, to look to life in eternity, “...where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf.” (Hebrews 6: 19-20)

What can we do to build on the virtue of hope? The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us this answer:

Hope is expressed and nourished in prayer, especially in the Our Father, the summary of everything that hope leads us to desire. (#1820)

The short but powerful Act of Hope, which many of us learned by heart as children, can serve as our special meditation for Christmas, 2011.

*O my God, relying on your infinite goodness and promises,
I hope to obtain pardon of my sins,
the help of your grace, and life everlasting,
through the merits of Jesus Christ,
my Lord and Redeemer. Amen.*

God is love, St. John the Evangelist teaches. And God, is in fact, our Hope. ■





PUTTING THE CHRIST BACK IN CHRISTMAS

We can never claim that society ignores Christmas.

Indeed, the advertising, marketing, entertainment, and retail corporate structures seem to have hijacked Christmas for one purpose: achieving financial goals. The Holiday Season end of day tallies, end up being the benchmark of success or failure.

For that reason, and many more, putting Christ back into Christmas, is no easy task. Many believe that what we really need is commitment in time and effort to celebrating Christmas more fully in the home.

Today, the Advent Wreath is a well-known sign that Christmas is coming. Centered on the dinner table at home, the wreath, with one candle lighted each week, counts the days as Advent grows into Christmas. A kind of announcement that Christmas in this house will mean more than opening the presents!

The Advent Wreath calls the family to prepare for and welcome the Lord Jesus as he came into the world the first time: as a gift of God the Father to people desperately in need of the Son, the Holy Infant, the Light shining in the Darkness.

Most parishes provide a leaflet with brief Advent prayers, some, even with discussion starter questions. But families can look to more than a brief prayer and lighting a candle. With a focus on Sunday of each week in Advent.

Beginning with The First Sunday of Advent. Before or after the first candle

is lit, children can assist in the reading and, even acting out of the Annunciation (Luke 1: 26-38).

On each of the three remaining Sundays of Advent, the family can look to more of the real Christmas story. Almost like pieces of a puzzle the family can put together. With guests also at the table: the more the merrier.

The Second Sunday – a reading of Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39-45).

The Third Sunday – a reading and praying of Mary’s Canticle (Luke 1: 46-56).

The Fourth Sunday – a look back at God’s plan, with the story of Jesus’ cousin, the Birth of John (Luke 1: 57-66).

Who knows? With preparation, the family may have its own “living Crèche” -its own Nativity Scene, as family members gather around the Christmas Tree on Christmas Eve.

Dad or Mom, or a teenager can read the Christmas Story in St. Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 2: 1-20. And the children (and older family members) can take a role: Shepherds, Angels, Mary and Joseph. Ending with the youngest child placing the Holy Infant in the Christmas Crib.

While other genuine Christmas goals remain – such as sacrificing to make gifts to Food Banks, to purchase gifts for families in hard times: a family-based Christmas preparation – in the home – will create spiritual memories and personal growth, carried forward to generations yet to come. ■

SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT

Would you believe it? There are people out there who say Catholics don't sing, won't sing, can't sing!

Well, it's likely those naysayers have seldom been to Christmas Eve or Christmas Day Mass, at least not lately.

Because some of us know people who've threatened to seek another parish – if they could not take part in singing their favorite Christmas hymn with the Christmas congregation.

“We wait for the Christmas season every year to hear and sing our traditional favorites,” they complain to the pastor. “And this year: No ‘Greensleeves!’ Yes, indeed. Catholics can and do like to sing, especially Christmas hymns.

That being said believe it or not, singing is very Catholic.

St. Francis of Assisi often prayed in song. He encouraged his ever-growing band of 13th century followers to sing hymns and songs of praise to the Lord.

It is said that for Vespers on his final evening in this world, October 3, 1226, a blind, feverish, gravely ill and dying Founder asked his friars to join him in chanting Psalm 142 (Longing for God) ceasing only as he faded from this life and passed on, going home to God.

For Francis and the people of his time, song as worship was simply an ancient tradition, familiar

from the very first days of Christianity, and further back. Rooted in the worship of our ancestors, the children of Abraham. We need but look to the glorious Psalms and Canticles, still an integral part of our worship.

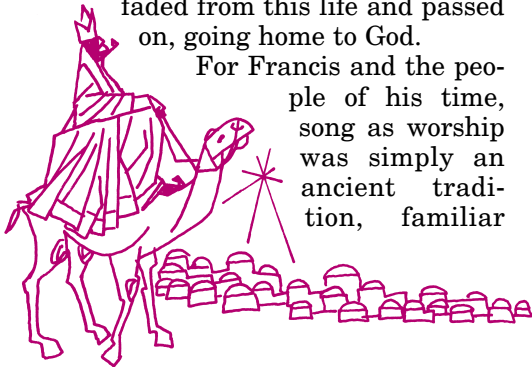
The Church in the United States is flavored by many cultures. Of course, the same must be said of the nation: A collection of many peoples and cultures from many places.

All, however, have a history of singing – especially in matters of importance, like rendering worship to a loving and gracious God, a God we dare to call “Our Father.” The Creator who sent his Son to be born, live, die and rise again – for us. To invite us home to that Loving Father and eternal life itself, when our work on earth is complete.

If you observe family members who hesitate to sing in church, encourage them – beginning this Advent. At home or family gatherings, you will want to note how well they sing, what a gift! Thus, such hymn-singing neophytes may grow quite comfortable. They may even sing out with volume loud enough to be heard in the next pew – where good Catholic people are also singing out in a very old tradition.

No doubt they are remembering those Angels who saluted the Shepherds in the skies over Bethlehem – on that First Christmas Eve.

Silent Night. Holy Night.
A Very Merry Christmas, indeed. ■



Special Novena Schedule Advent-Christmas 2011

All year round Franciscan Mission Associates conducts a regular schedule of spiritual and devotional exercises in which benefactors are invited to take part. During the Winter months the Special Novena schedule is:

- November 21-29Novena for the Faithful Departed
- December 1-31Infant Savior (31 Masses)
- December 8-16Feast of the Immaculate Conception
- December 16-24Feast of Christmas (in Padua)
- December 16-24Feast of Christmas (in Bethlehem)
- December 24-January 1Feast of Christmas (in Assisi)
- December 25-January 2Christ Child Novena (in Bethlehem)

All Franciscan Mission Associates, sponsors, and benefactors are asked to join in prayer for the intentions and petitions of those taking part in the exercises. Please pray also for our Franciscan missionaries, for the people they serve, for an increase in vocations and for all our associates. Kindly forward your petitions for the Novenas scheduled to:

**Father Primo, O.F.M., Franciscan Mission Associates
PO Box 598, Dept 2111, Mount Vernon, NY 10551-0598**



Heavenly Father
we ask you, that in our
following of Jesus Christ
we share what we have
with our less fortunate
Neighbors.
May we always share
our goods, our talent,
our time and energy
to help all those we
meet on life's pilgrimage
Sincerely & Thankful
Fray Roberto J. Figueroa

Copy of card received from a missionary
congratulating us and you on FMA's 50th Anniversary