

Spirit of Life

Parish Newsletter — November/December 2010

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A Letter From Our Pastor

What Can I Give Him?

Dear Parishioners,

As we all know, December is about Christmas – and Christmas is about giving.

Maybe that is all we should have to say, but life is usually a little more complicated. Most of us need some guidance on what and how much to give in order to balance our own needs, our wants, and our need to give.

The final stanza of Christina Rossetti's poem, "In the Bleak Midwinter" is familiar to all of us. It's even sometimes printed as a separate poem:

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.*

But what does it mean to give the Christ Child our heart? Our love, of course, is our main gift, but without being more specific that is vague and general. We still seek more direction.

Some would say that being told to give Him our love is all the guidance we need. Maybe, if we were pure spirit, that would be enough. But we aren't pure spirit. That's not the way God created us. Humans are a soul and a physical body joined to form one being. To give a total response, we have to give a material gift to convey our gift of love and feelings.

That's true of merely human relationships as well as our relationship to God. How do you think all your family members would feel if



they came down on Christmas morning to find nothing under the tree, and you told them, "Of course, I have a present for you. I give you my heart"? How would you feel if you were told that by all your friends and family members? You'd wonder if they really love you, or if they are merely cheap.

It is true that a family or other group may decide to forgo giving and receiving presents for a year in order to practice detachment from the excessive

commercialism associated with Christmas. But the very fact that not giving presents for a fixed period is the result of a conscious decision to prove a point demonstrates we consider it unnatural. Normal human behavior is to show our love by presenting a gift.

If that is how we want to treat the other people we love, it should be equally true of the response we make to God. Being both spirit and matter, soul and body, we express our gratitude to God and our love for Him with a gift.

Do we have anything God needs? Of course not! He already owns the whole universe. But our gift can convey our grateful response. The key is how much love our gift represents. In material terms, its size should reflect what God has entrusted to us.

Perhaps a couple of examples will help. Jesus, watching worshippers make their contributions at the Jerusalem Temple, saw a

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Sara Snider Embracing Christ among Us

*"This is the Gospel on five fingers: You did it to Me."
— Blessed Mother Teresa*

When Spirit of Life parishioner Sara Snider was 18 years old, she not only discovered she was pregnant, but she also was hit with even more shocking and devastating news: she had an aggressive form of liver and colon cancer.

The doctors gave her three months to live.

Today, by the grace of God, Sara and her son are both here

"Being a single mother and facing my daughter's illness left me blindsided," says Sara's mom, Shari. "If it weren't for our Spirit of Life parish community our family would never make it through – not just financially, but emotionally and spiritually as well. The prayers, support, donations and friendship of our parishioners are really what give us the strength we need to go on. Each day, we remember how blessed we really are."

Sara is still struggling to live, but she is truly grateful she has made it this far. Her son, Louis, 3, is God's greatest gift to her. When she first found out she was pregnant, there was pressure on her to consider an abortion. However, after she heard the baby's heart beat, and after she examined her Christian conscience, she knew she had to keep her child, buoyed by the loving support of her mother and her Catholic beliefs.

"The minute she heard the baby, we fell in love with him," Shari says. "I told her, 'Keep the baby. We will get through this together.'"

Sadly, after Sara had baby Louis, she was not even able to touch him for the first few months because she was undergoing chemotherapy. However, with the help of God, through thick



Sara Snider (center, holding son Louis) and her family, including (from top left) brother Robin, mom Shari, brother Charles, (middle left) sister Kara, (middle right) sister Brandi and Shari's two foster boys, (front row) Armond and Mannie

and through thin, they made it. The attitude the Sniders have is simply amazing.

"I am used to being able to spread love, not have to receive it," Shari says. "However, now I know we need help at times. In a heartbeat, my daughter can take a turn for the worse, and I rely on being able to contact our parish staff. Even though this whole trial is extremely difficult and often does not make sense to us, we believe there is a reason for all of it. We offer it up to God."

As it turns out, it may be the fact that she carried the baby to term that she was able to live much longer than all of her doctors expected. In fact, medical experts are immensely surprised that she was even able to get pregnant and carry Louis for nine months considering her sizeable tumor.

"In accepting the child with open arms and being blessed because of it, the Sniders bore witness to a beautiful pro-life testimony," Alison Krumm, who serves with our parish Outreach Ministry.

Sara herself has grown tremendously in her faith, and in her walk with Christ.

"Sara has become so compassionate and thoughtful," Shari says. "She is always thinking of others, and what we can do for them."

We, as a community united by love, have embraced the Snider family. In doing so, we have embraced Christ among us. Now this is stewardship. This is the Gospel of life, of God's radiant love and of hope, and we are living it out – together. Let's keep at it.

Learning Something Over Their Weekend: *The Parish Leadership Retreat*

It isn't often that you feel like you've learned something new at the end of your weekend. But after the parish leadership retreat on Oct. 1 and 2, Bonnie Volk had a deeper understanding of how dependent – and grateful – she was to God.

"I came away from the retreat with a renewed sense of what it means to be obedient to God, in all ways," she says. "I understand that everything we have is a blessing from God: our talents, our treasures, our time -- it's all from Him."

Over a day and a half, nearly 30 parishioners – largely those in leadership roles throughout the parish – met to hear presentations, pray silently, and converse in small groups. The weekend centered on a common theme: "Faithful Stewards Called to Build the Church."

Discovering the role of individuals in this "Building of the Church" was the goal of the retreat. But learning how to make that happen, Bonnie says, comes through prayer.

"Some of the changes that my husband David and I have made in an effort to be better stewards began with prayer and discernment for the guidance to where God wanted and needed us in His great plan," she says. "I understand the role of being a steward as part of God's salvation plan."

A friend of Bonnie's described the role of a steward as just one of the "tiny cogs in the wheel of God's amazing plan" – an image that remains with Bonnie still.

"When I think of it this way, I am humbled knowing that He can do it without us, but He chooses not to, despite our shortcomings -- He still chooses us," she says. "It's hard to wrap our minds around that kind of love, and it's exciting to be a part of His plan."

In fact, that excitement stems from the complete commitment of self to God's will in one's life.

"Prior to saying 'yes' to God and committing to serve Him, we simply existed, got by, and went through the motions of life," Bonnie says. "To say 'yes' to God as His stewards is to really truly be alive, and live with the peace and joy that the world can't give."

Pat Lengfelder, a member of the finance council, says that the retreat helped him to go beyond silent prayer and to put that prayer into action.

"I have been active in a men's group for several years that encourages daily contemplative prayer, but I often find that contemplation without action leads me nowhere, so the other elements of stewardship become even more important," Pat says.

Simply put, the retreat helped Pat learn how he could help.

"Putting one's talents to work for the church has given me a good outlet for that need to act and test my faith in a very real way -- and the small group breakouts [at the retreat] were a good opportunity to feel out how I fit," he says.

The retreat, Fr. Chad says, was one part of our parish-wide effort to help a sense of stewardship take root in each person.

"The idea is to foster stewardship in the parish by helping individuals see their role as disciples of Jesus Christ," he says. "These are people who are personally gifted and responsible for sharing those gifts, whether it's primarily in parish life or in other ways. They each have a responsibility beyond themselves."

The recognition of that responsibility was what brought so many parishioners out for the weekend. Like us all, these are busy people, who have little time for extra commitments.

"I didn't have time for this retreat, like many people," Bonnie says. "But I went anyway, knowing that not going wasn't an option; I said yes to going, because it meant submitting my will to God's will -- and the blessings that came from attending the Stewardship retreat were numerous."

This retreat focused on ways to "build the Church." But more important than the particular theme was the increased vigor that all the participants took to their own lives from the weekend.

"The good thing about any retreat is that it re-grounds us in fundamental principles," Fr. Chad says. "I need that reminder in my own life regularly -- what it means to be a steward, as a human in relationship with God, as one who is greatly blessed and is responsible for those gifts."

That's a reminder that we all could use – not just one weekend, but every weekend.

"I came away from the retreat with a renewed sense of what it means to be obedient to God, in all ways. I understand that everything we have is a blessing from God: our talents, our treasures, our time -- it's all from Him."

-Bonnie Volk



Advent: A Journey of Anticipation

Advent is a time of preparation for the arrival of our Savior. (The word “advent” itself means “coming.”) Associated with personal reflections on the birth of Christ, Advent often is considered merely a symbolic period of waiting. Yet, in the Book of Matthew, Christ directly reminds us of His second coming: “So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.”

Advent, therefore, carries a twofold purpose, as explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “For by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior’s first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for this second coming.”

Today, in a society that moves at such a fast pace, there is a tendency to lump Advent and Christmas together when, in fact, they are two distinct liturgical seasons in our Catholic Faith.

While Christmas includes the Birth of Our Lord, the Feast of the Holy Family, the Epiphany, and the Baptism of Our Lord, the Advent season shouldn’t be overlooked, as it contains many rich traditions and feast days of its own, including the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother (a holy day of obligation) on Dec. 8 and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Dec. 12.

Advent is the season of anticipation of the mystery of the incarnation, and is a time for spiritual renewal and preparation. Yet, for many of us, Advent is filled by one long pre-Christmas “to-do” list. Choosing, buying, and wrapping gifts. Getting Christmas cards to the post office in time. Planning your family Christmas dinner.

Once Christmas Day arrives, many of us are glad, not because Advent is over and we are finally able to joyously celebrate Christ’s arrival, but because we’re so relieved that all the stress and work of the Christmas holidays is finally over!

So how can we change the way we experience Advent? There are many ways in which we can fully participate in this beautiful season:

- Start Advent traditions in your home, like lighting an Advent Wreath and discussing weekly readings.
- Take food to those who are hungry, blankets to those who are cold, toys to children who have nothing to play with.
- Attend a communal penance service.
- Since Advent is the beginning of our liturgical year, it is also the perfect time to make your New Year’s resolutions instead of waiting for Jan. 1
- An Advent wreath as a centerpiece, and displaying an Advent calendar in your home, are both wonderful traditions to share with your children.

Throughout Advent, let us commit ourselves to spending time in prayerful expectation, so that when Christmas Day arrives, we will be able to fully welcome Christ into our homes and hold Him in our hearts.

Celebrating the Miracle of Christmas with Music

*"I will sing to the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God while I live."
Psalm 104: 33*

Some things in life call for a major celebration, and the marvelous feast of Christmas is certainly one of them.

"We have been given the miracle of the Christ Child, and the least we can do is make a beautiful celebration out of it," says Director of Music Ministries Dan Weigel. "Christmas is the only time of the year at our parish that we use a special choir during Mass, instead of worship bands."

Each December at Spirit of Life, members of the Christmas Choir take celebrating God's redeeming love seriously, dedicating their time and talent to give the Christ Child heartfelt glory and praise. The Christmas Choir, which usually includes 20 to 25 members, leads the congregation in singing both traditional and contemporary Christmas pieces during the 10 p.m. Christmas Eve and the 10 a.m. Christmas Day Masses.

The choir is directed by parishioner John Darling, who works as a professional band director at Bismarck State College. His wife, Nancy, also plays piano for the choir. As a team, they join the other choir members in making the stewardship vision come alive at Spirit of Life during the holiday season.

"As the Director of Music Ministries, I act as the music leader every Sunday for every Mass, and all of the other musical volunteers simply join in with me," Dan says. "However, with the Christmas Choir, things work differently. The choir members themselves take ownership of the music

during Mass, and present a united front. It is a good experience for them."

The choir members have also discovered that being involved brings a lot of blessings along with it.

"By being in the Christmas Choir, you get to meet great people and socialize with them, having fun while you gather together to make music," Dan says. "You start practicing at the beginning of December, and just by the end of the month, you have polished off several songs. It is something to be proud of."

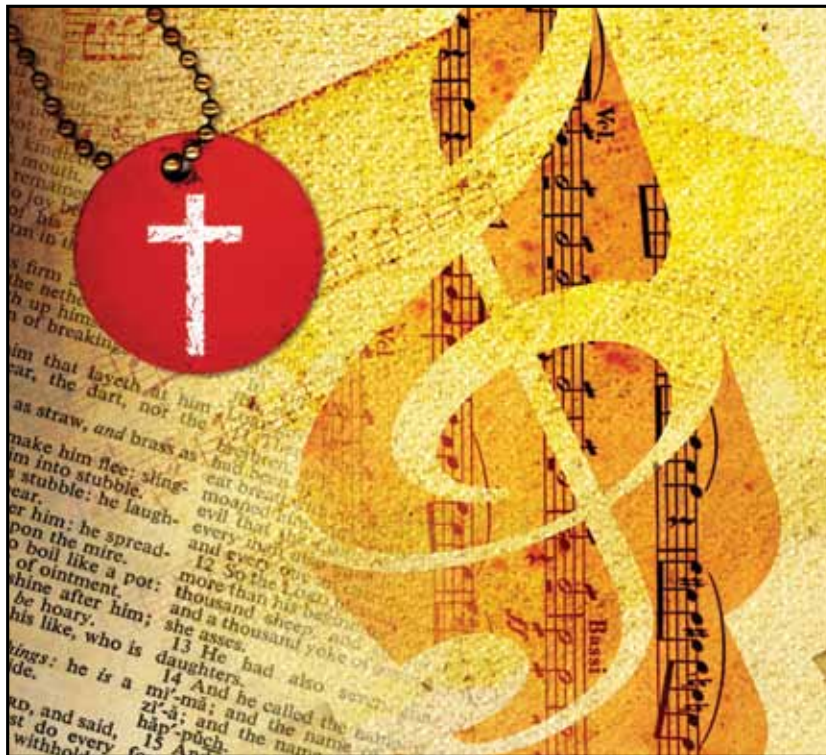
The Christmas Choir will have their first practice on Saturday, Dec. 4, at 9 a.m. at Spirit of Life. The rest of the practices will be scheduled after this one. They will take place once

per week until Christmas.

All are encouraged to share their musical gifts with our parish family by joining our Christmas Choir.

"Everyone is welcome," Dan says. "You don't have to be a professional musician, you just have to have the heart for it and be willing to work."

Furthermore, there is also a Children's Christmas Choir which generally includes children ages eight through 13. They sing for the 5 p.m. Mass on Christmas Eve. For more information on either Christmas choir, contact the Parish Office at 701-663-1660.



Feast of the Holy Family Christmas Doesn't End Dec. 25

It's Dec. 26, and we've celebrated Christmas, opened all of our gifts and practiced all of our Christmas traditions.

What do we do now?

The Christmas season is far from over. In fact, the octave of Christmas has just begun, and the Holy Solemnity of the Nativity of our Lord on Christmas Day, is directly followed by the Feast of the Holy Family of Nazareth on Dec. 28.

After giving birth in a stable, Mary and Joseph were now charged with a great responsibility. Their home would be the place where our Lord grew up! Do you ever stop and think about what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to raise the Savior of the Universe? They changed His diapers, fed Him His meals, and helped Him learn to walk. No doubt, Joseph taught Jesus how to safely work a saw, and Mary probably helped Him mend His clothes. This puts all of our parenting duties into perspective. Can you imagine caring for Our Lord as He was a vulnerable and helpless child? In fact, contemplating the Holy Family in this way gives us a new-found appreciation for family life — with all of its trials and triumphs.

Though little is known about Jesus' early years, we know He grew up just like any human child, and Mary and Joseph were chosen to parent Him. The Lord chose the family as the place for His birth and His growth, thereby sanctifying the fundamental institution of society. From then on, the Family was much more than just a group of people living together. With the Holy Family as our example, all Christian families are



called to be small domestic churches. As was the humble home of Nazareth, the family is an authentic school of the Gospel, wherein we live our faith on a daily basis. John Paul II explains that “recollection and prayer, mutual understanding and respect, personal discipline and community asceticism and a spirit of sacrifice, work and solidarity are typical features that make the family of Nazareth a model for every home.”

As Christian families, we must follow the example of the Holy Family, and be lights to shine the Truth in the midst of a sometimes dark world. Through their humble existence, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph remained united to one another and to the Father, working always to remain close to Him and to show His love to the world. So also must we do. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his 2000 Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, as Christians, we are called to show the world “convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully

in keeping with God's plan and with the true good of the human person — of the spouses and of the children who are more fragile” (NMI 47). Then, amidst all of the spilled milk and temper tantrums, all of the birthdays, graduations, and marriages, we will serve as a sign of God Himself — three persons united in love!

May Jesus, Mary, and Joseph bless and protect all families so that they will extol the peace, joy, justice, and love that the newborn Christ has given us as a gift to all of humanity!

The Solution to Hunger is in the Bag

So, are you ready for Christmas? If you have a wreath on your door, and a small pile of presents purchased, you're half the way there. However, if you haven't prayerfully prepared your heart to receive the Divine Child yet, and thought of ways to show His love to others, your Christmas celebration simply isn't going to be complete. At Spirit of Life, we have many ways to help you accomplish these goals, and live out Christmas to the full.

"Spirit of Life is a warm, loving community," says Alison Krumm, who serves with our parish Outreach Ministry. "This Christmas, we want to do all we can to make those in need feel Christ's love for them, and help them know God is always there for them in their sufferings. We care."

The Solution to Hunger is in the Bag

Please think of your church family when you shop! Our "Solution to Hunger Corner" is up and ready for your gifts of laundry soap, toiletries, non-perishable food items, grocery certificates, meat certificates, and anything else that will help our struggling families through the upcoming holidays. All items will be used to create Christmas food bags for families. All are encouraged to take a bag and fill it! And remember, the Solution to Hunger Ministry is not just active at Christmas time; it is a year-round ministry to provide food to those in need.

Advent Angel Tree Ministry

As a church community, we will once again be participating in the Angel Tree Ministry, helping provide Christmas gifts to struggling families in our parish. If you would like to help, please sign your name on the sheet by the Angel Tree in the gathering space and identify the number on the angel to be taken. We ask that you consider giving a gift of approximately \$25 per child. Keep in mind that this is the only gift most of these children will receive! Please make sure the gift is new and age appropriate. Return gifts to the church by Dec. 14. Volunteers will pack the gifts at our parish and deliver them on Dec. 16.

Community Care-n-Share

Volunteers are needed on Saturday, Dec. 18, at Lincoln Elementary to work in two-hour shifts to pack Christmas food/gifts baskets for the needy families in our community. Furthermore, the Aid Inc. Community Christmas Dinner will take place on Dec. 25. It is free to all who wish to attend. No one needs to be alone this Christmas! All are welcome to come, share Christmas with friends and neighbors. The delicious menu will include ham, mashed potatoes, corn, coleslaw, fruit salad, carrots, pickles, olives, dinner rolls and butter, coffee and milk and pie. For reservations, call 701-663-1274 by Dec. 23. The meal begins at noon and will be at First Lutheran Church, 408 9th St. NW, in Mandan. Anyone wishing to help with the dinner may contact the phone number above as well.



Those who would like to put the "Christ" back into Christmas by helping out with one of the above outreaches, or would simply like more information, may contact Alison Krumm at 701-663-1660.



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Pastor's Letter *continued from front cover*

poor widow putting in two small coins. He observed to his disciples, "This poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood." (Lk 21:3-4)

Or you may remember the children's story, *The Littlest Angel* by Charles Tazewell. The littlest angel, a small boy, gave a little box holding his favorite treasures – a butterfly, a bird's egg, two white stones, and the collar his dog had worn. God chose it among all the angelic presents.

One last example: some of you may remember the story written a century ago now by Raymond Alden, *Why the Chimes Rang*. It tells of a vast Church that supposedly had a set of glorious bells that would ring only at Christmas when a worthy gift had been presented to the Christ Child. It had been many years since they had rung. In fact, no one living had heard them, but each year many expensive gifts were offered at the Christmas service.


One year two young brothers from an outlying village decided to attend this Christmas service, but at the edge of the city came across a poor woman about to freeze to death in the snow. The older boy sent the younger to the Church with the silver coin he had to offer, while he stayed behind to help the woman. The service ended with the procession of gifts from the rich, culminating with

the king presenting the royal crown from off his head – but no chimes. But then, as the service ended, the sound of the bells was heard throughout the Church. Everyone stared to see what gift had managed to outshine the king's, but only a few near the front could see a small peasant boy slipping away after placing his brother's little coin with the other gifts.

In all three examples, one biblical, the other two fictional, the key is that small gifts were precious to God, because they represented great love. But they were real, material gifts, because we are real, material people.

What offering then should we make, we who are blessed with abundant goods far beyond any of those in the illustrations I've used? The choice is up to us to respond according to the love and gratitude we feel.

Have a blessed Christmas.

In Christ,

Fr. Chad Gion
Pastor