From Bishop Folda: Why do we go to Mass?

First Communicants share hopes and experiences in receiving the Eucharist

Catholic Culture in the Home: Family experiences God’s grace through Latin prayers
Bishop’s Charity Golf Classic

Monday, August 2, 2021
Rose Creek Golf Course
Fargo, North Dakota

11:00 AM - Registration
12:30 PM - Shotgun Start
Followed by Social and Banquet

To register your team, contact:
Brenda Hagemeier
701-356-7928
brenda.hagemeier@fargodiocese.org

Steve Schons
701-356-7926
steve.schons@fargodiocese.org

Register online:
http://www.fargodiocese.org/puttpurpose

Sponsored by:
Catholic Development Foundation
5201 Bishops Blvd. S, Suite A, Fargo, ND

Proceeds will benefit seminarian education and youth programs within the Diocese of Fargo.
ON THE COVER:
Bishop Folda celebrates Mass at St. John's Church in Wahpeton on April 18.
(Kristina Lahr | New Earth)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FROM BISHOP FOLDA
4 Why do we go to Mass?

SANCTIFYING GRACE
10 Experience God’s merciful love in the sacrament of penance

COVER STORY
12 Sunday Mass obligation also a privilege

FAITH AND CULTURE
17 Family experiences God’s grace through Latin prayers

NEXT GEN
18 First Communicants share hopes and experiences in receiving the Eucharist

US/WORLD NEWS
31 Pope Francis accepts resignation of Bishop of Crookston, Minn.

SIDEWALK STORIES
35 Hearing adoption story evoked flood of gratitude
Why do we go to Mass?

By now all of the faithful in the Diocese of Fargo have heard that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation was reinstated on May 1. For over a year, that obligation was dispensed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks entailed in gathering with large groups. Fortunately, we were able to resume our celebrations of Mass much sooner than most places, and now in the present circumstances, most are confident that we can gather safely and return to our normal practice of participating in the Mass each weekend. For those in exceptional circumstances, the dispensation still applies.

We often refer to the obligation to attend Mass, but it might be more appropriate to speak of our privilege to attend Mass. The Mass is a gift from Jesus himself. It is an opportunity for us to draw near to our Lord and to listen to his holy Word, just as his disciples did. It is an opportunity to receive him in the Eucharist. Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them always, and he fulfills that promise through the celebration of the Mass, offered in churches at every hour of every day all around the world.

We were created to worship God, to glorify and adore him as our loving creator. In this we find our own greatest glory, because through worship we become one with him. There is no higher form of worship than the celebration of the Mass, whether at a great cathedral or in a humble chapel. Every celebration of the Mass is the sacrifice of Jesus himself, and we participate in this sacrifice personally. When our Lord said to the apostles at the Last Supper, “Do this in memory of me,” he was making it possible for people of all times and places to partake in the sacrifice of his Body and Blood, which he offered for our salvation. The Eucharist is our opportunity to enter into communion with Jesus in the mystery of his death and resurrection, the supreme act of God’s life-giving love.

It follows then, that through our worship of God in the Mass, we are sanctified and shaped through God's grace in holiness. Through the Mass we are being formed as the saints who will be a leaven of holiness in the world and who will abide with God forever in heaven. We can’t help but be affected by the grace of the Mass if our hearts are open and ready to receive God’s love. Just as the apostles were completely transformed through their encounter with Jesus, so are we in the celebration of the Mass.

You might hear someone say, “I don’t go to church. I can worship God privately at home, or out in the beauty of nature.” And it’s true, we can worship God privately, at home, in the mountains, and on the seashore. But the fact remains that we are created and called together as a family of faith, as members of the Body of Christ, the Church. Christ formed us to be in communion with him and with one another, and that communion reaches its high point in the celebration of the Mass. Even the person you don’t know who sits on the other side of the church is profoundly and mystically united to you in a relationship of grace. We need each other for mutual support and prayer, and sometimes simply by our presence.

One might also hear something like this: “I’m a good person. I do good things for my neighbor, so I don’t need to go to church.” But remember, the second great commandment is to love your neighbor. The first is to love God with all you your heart, mind, soul, and strength. St. John Vianney said, “All good works put together are not equivalent to the sacrifice of the Mass, because they are the works of men and the Holy Mass is the work of God.” If we truly love God, then why would we distance ourselves from him and the gift that he gives us? Could we really claim to love our spouse or our children if we skipped every opportunity to be with them? The Mass is Jesus coming to us with arms wide open, inviting us into his company, into his life. It’s wonderful and necessary to do good works for others, but those acts of charity are given even greater vigor if they are founded upon the saving love of Jesus.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the liturgy of the Church—the Eucharistic sacrifice—is the source and summit of our Christian lives. It is the source from which all grace and all Christian activity flows, and it is the summit, the high point of worship, that we strive to reach. Why? Because it is Christ himself, made present in our midst. When Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, he said to the apostles, “Do this in memory of me.” Do this. Jesus tells his apostles, and all of us,
to do what he has done, to celebrate the Eucharist so that he might be with us always, and so that we might draw life from his life. The power of the Mass doesn’t depend on our feelings in the moment but on the promise of Jesus: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.”

The Mass is a foreshadowing and a pledge of the eternal life that Jesus has prepared for us, a gift that no one should lightly pass up. And the promise of Jesus isn’t just for the future, but for the present as well: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” Jesus is committing himself to be with us, to abide with us during our earthly journey, in our joys and in our sorrows. If we believe that Jesus means what he says, then nothing should stand in our way of participating in the celebration of the Mass. I look forward to seeing you in church!

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**BISHOP FOLDA’S CALENDAR**

**May 18**
Groundbreaking at St. Joseph Church, Devils Lake

**May 19–20**
Ordination and Installation of Most Rev. Daniel Felton, Bishop of Duluth

**May 22 • 4 p.m.**
Confirmation and First Eucharist, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Reynolds

**May 26 • 10 a.m.**
Baccalaureate Mass, Holy Spirit, Fargo

**May 26 • 6 p.m.**
Shanley Commencement, Shanley, Fargo

**May 31 • 9 a.m.**
Memorial Day Mass, Holy Cross Cemetery, Fargo

**June 3 • 7 p.m.**
Holy Hour and Vespers, Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo

**June 4 • 7 p.m.**
Ordination of Deacons, Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo

**June 5 • 10 a.m.**
Ordination of Priest, Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo

**June 6 • 10:30 a.m.**
Mass and Blessing of New Crucifix, Blessed Sacrament, West Fargo

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**Prayer Intention of Pope Francis**

**May and June**

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**The World of Finance**

Let us pray that those in charge of finance will work with governments to regulate the financial sphere and protect citizens from its dangers.

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**The Beauty of Marriage**

Let us pray for young people who are preparing for marriage with the support of a Christian community: may they grow in love, with generosity, faithfulness and patience.
Rev. John F. Aerts is appointed Parochial vicar of St. Therese Church, Rugby; Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Balta; and St. Mary, Knox, effective June 23, 2021 and continuing ad nutum episcopi.


Rev. Karmalraj Balasamy is appointed Parochial vicar of Holy Cross Church, West Fargo, effective June 23, 2021, and continuing ad nutum episcopi.

Rev. H. Gerard Braun is appointed Pastor of St. Anthony’s Church, Fargo for a term of six-years, beginning June 23, 2021.

Rev. Raymond P. Courtright is appointed Pastor of St. Michael’s Church, Grand Forks, for a term of six-years, beginning June 23, 2021.

Rev. Anthony S. Cruz is appointed Parochial vicar of Nativity Church, Fargo, effective June 23, 2021, and continuing ad nutum episcopi.

Rev. James R. Ermer is appointed Pastor of St. Leo’s Church, Casselton and St. Thomas, Buffalo, for a third term of six-years, beginning June 23, 2021.


Rev. John F. Kizito is appointed Pastor of St. Philip’s Church, Napoleon, for a term of six-years, beginning June 23, 2021.

Rev. Paul B. Kuhn is appointed Parochial vicar of Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo, effective June 23, 2021, and continuing ad nutum episcopi.

Rev. Kevin Lorsung is appointed Parochial vicar of St. James Basilica, Jamestown; St. Margaret Mary, Buchanan; and St. Mathias, Windsor effective June 23, 2021, and continuing ad nutum episcopi.

Rev. Prabhakar Marneni is appointed Parochial vicar of St. Anthony’s Church, Fargo, effective June 23, 2021, and continuing ad nutum episcopi.


Rev. Patrick R. Parks is appointed Pastor of St. Helena’s Church, Ellendale and St. Patrick Church, Fullerton, for a term of six-years, beginning June 23, 2021.


Rev. Antony Samy is appointed Pastor of Seven Dolors Mission, Fort Totten; St. Jerome, Crow Hill; and Christ the King, Tokio for a term of six-years, beginning June 23, 2021.

Rev. Kyle P. Metzger is appointed as principal of Shanley High School, Fargo, effective July 1, 2021, and continuing ad nutum episcopi. This appointment is in addition to his current appointment as Vocation Director for the Diocese of Fargo.

Rev. Jayson T. Miller is appointed as assistant Vocation Director for the Diocese of Fargo effective July 1, 2021, and continuing ad nutum episcopi. This appointment is in addition to his current appointments.
Known as the “Martyr of the confessional,” St. John Nepomucene was born in the present-day Czech Republic in 1345. In his early childhood, St. John was cured of a disease through the prayers of his parents, and they consecrated him to the service of God. He was later ordained a priest and was sent to a parish in the city of Prague.

Father John was invited to the court of King Wenceslaus IV. In that role he became the queen’s confessor. When the king was cruel to the queen, Father John taught her to bear her cross patiently. One day the king asked him to tell what the queen had said in confession. When Father John refused, he was thrown into prison. A second time he was asked to reveal the queen’s confession, and again Father John refused. He was tortured and then thrown into the Vltava river on the king’s orders. Where he drowned, a strange brightness appeared upon the water. On the basis of this account, St. John Nepomucene is considered the first martyr of the Seal of the Confessional, a patron against slander and, because of the manner of his death, a protector from floods and drowning.

Historical information from Catholic Online.

Feast day: May 16
Patron: Country of Bohemia (Czech Republic)
Death: 1393

O Jesus, our great High Priest, hear my humble prayers on behalf of your priests. Give them a deep faith, a bright and firm hope and a burning love, which will ever increase throughout their priestly life.

In their loneliness, comfort them. In their sorrows, strengthen them. In their frustrations, remind them that through suffering the soul is purified. Show them that they are needed by the Church; they are needed by souls; they are needed for the work of redemption. Amen.
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- Harvey - St. Aloisius Medical Center
- Jamestown - Ave Maria Village
- Rolla - Presentation Medical Center
- Valley City - Sheyenne Care Center
Join Bishop John Folda as we invoke God’s blessing upon our rural communities

4th annual RURAL LIFE celebration

Sunday, June 27, 2021

Russ and Mary Mauch Farm
16305 Hwy 13, Barney, ND
(1/4 mile east of Barney on Hwy 13)

4:00  Welcome
4:15  Blessing of land and machinery
4:30  Mass
6:00  Meal and entertainment

• Event is free and open to all
• Bring a container of soil or seed from your field or garden to be blessed
• If it rains, we’ll move indoors
• For more information, visit fargodiocese.org/rural-life
Experience God’s merciful love in the sacrament of penance

When looking at Baptism last month, we saw how Baptism saves us from the state of spiritual death into which we were born due to Original Sin. We were washed and forgiven; we became children of God and heirs to the Kingdom. However, we know that Baptism does not take away our human weakness and tendency to fall into sin, even deadly sin.

God in his goodness does not abandon us to our frailty. Even though we only receive Baptism once, and with it the forgiveness of every sin and their punishments, God gives us another means to have our post-baptismal sins forgiven. Baptism truly saved us from death, like a life-raft in raging waters. Penance as a Sacrament was called by St. Jerome, “a second plank,” because it also saves us from the death of sin, sin committed after Baptism.

Jesus left us the Sacrament of Penance as a means to forgive mortal sins committed after Baptism. Imagine what life would be like if Baptism was the only known means to forgive mortal sin! Thank God that we have another Sacrament, especially so we may receive the Eucharist worthily. To know how to gain the most from the Sacrament of Confession, we will look at what are called the three Acts of the Penitent (the one making confession): Contrition, Confession, and Satisfaction. These are all necessary for a valid and salutary Confession.

Contrition refers to the sorrow we must have for sin to be forgiven. While deep feelings or even tears may be helpful, they are not necessary for contrition. Contrition is not a feeling, but a choice. It is an honest assessment of the truth of one’s crime against God and others, and a firm resolution to amend one’s life. Contrition lowers us in humility before God at the sight of our sins. God is pleased by a humble and contrite spirit, and his grace flows like a river to the lowest place, to the humblest heart. Without contrition, we cannot receive forgiveness, because God cannot forgive a sin we lack sorrow for committing. For this reason, contrition must extend to all our sins.

We gain much by seeking contrition for sin. Perhaps the best way to practice contrition is through frequent examination of conscience. Certainly, we should do this before going to Confession. However, we would receive great benefit from examination at the end of every day, followed by an Act of Contrition.

The second Act of the Penitent is Confession. By confession we accuse ourselves of our sins with the aim to obtain pardon by virtue of the power of the keys given to the Apostles. Jesus gave the 12 and all their successors the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven: the power to bind and loose, the power to absolve or retain. However, how are they to know what to bind or loose, what to forgive or retain, unless people tell them their sins? How would they know if people had sufficient sorrow for forgiveness, except for Confession?

Confession has great advantage for the individual soul and for society. How great a gift that we can tell our sins to a priest, knowing that he can never share those sins with anyone! In the priest, we hopefully find a trusted friend and advisor. We all know the damage when we hold the shameful knowledge of our faults inside. It eats away at us. We seek relief by blaming others for our faults and problems. In reality, we just need to get it out and know that we receive forgiveness. The chaos and disorder we see around us comes from the chaos and disorder in individual souls. Confession restores order to the individual soul, and so, Confession would restore peace and goodwill to society faster than any other means.

The final Act of the Penitent is Satisfaction. Satisfaction means to pay back a debt, to satisfy. Sin leaves us in debt to God. Confession of sin will repay some of what we owe him. However, some of the effects of sin remain. When we tell a neighbor “I’m sorry” after breaking their window, the fact of the broken window remains. Unless we include in the “I’m sorry” a resolution to repair the window, our words will not mean much. Satisfaction repays what we owe to God for sin.

In every Confession, the priest will give a penance. This aims, in some way, to achieve satisfaction. However, the true Christian seeks to live their whole lives in atonement for their sins and the whole world. We aim to repay to God by our loving acts of prayer and sacrifice what has been unjustly withheld from him by the sins and ingratitude of ourselves and others.

By having in mind the three Acts of the Penitent, we can grow to make better and better Confessions, and experience God’s merciful love as never before.
The challenge of evangelization at this time in our Church was an ongoing discussion between the President of the University of Mary, Monsignor James Shea and some of his friends. “We became convinced that Pope Francis’ observation that ‘we do not live in an age of change, but in a change of age’ really was true in a striking, transformative way,” he explained to Dakota Catholic Action. “That realization brought into much clearer focus the emphasis that Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put on the New Evangelization.”

The reaction he received from audiences in several states after giving talks on the topic, revealed that the issue touched a chord with Catholics truly worried about the rapid secularization of our culture. It inspired him to publish his thoughts in From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age released by University of Mary Press in May of 2020.

The basic vision of the book is that societies have a moral and spiritual “imaginative vision” that impacts everything about that society. In the U.S., we have experienced a dramatic shift in recent decades from a “Christendom imaginative vision” to a secular one. As a result, the Church needs to re-think her strategies for spreading the Gospel. “It’s urgent,” according to Monsignor Shea.

Monsignor Shea’s goal of writing the book, was simply to have something to pass onto the faculty. “Our main motive in publishing the book was as an encouragement and explanatory piece for those working here at the University of Mary,” he said. “We want to have a common vision and sense of purpose in our important work of Catholic higher education.”

The book opens by explaining, “At every point, the One who came as light into darkness to establish a kingdom of truth and love has been opposed by the darkness. The light continues to shine; its origin is in God himself, and the darkness cannot overcome it (c.f. John 1). But the extent of that light, the way it sheds its rays, the kind of opposition it encounters and therefore the means it uses to keep its light shining and shed its influence abroad, changes from place to place and age to age.

It is therefore important for those who are members of Christ’s body, who share in his divine life and so are called by him to be the light of the world (c.f. Matt. 5), to take thought for the times in which they live and to devise pastoral and evangelistic strategies suited to those times.”

The book walks us through history beginning with a time where zeal, the truth, and the Holy Spirit was all the Church had... that and eleven apostles. We see the waves of evangelization spreading to create cultures of Christendom where Christianity becomes the prevailing wind only to eventually slip into the culture through complacency. Once the culture smothers much of the spirit that should set the Church apart from the secular world, the mission must again become apostolic to overcome it.

Pastoral strategies include rethinking education and also rejecting social analysis that expects defeat. “They leave out faith and miracles and the Holy Spirit by a necessary of their method and so they will necessarily be inaccurate concerning the activity of a spiritual organism with its roots in heaven,” Monsignor Shea wrote. “What sociological survey could have predicted the conversion of an ancient and sophisticated civilization at the hands of a small group of uneducated laborers? What numerical analysis could have surmised the explosion of the monastic movement? Or the conversion of all the pagan peoples of Europe? Or the appearance of a St. Francis and his thousands of followers in a few short years? Or the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the conversion of Mexico? Or, for that matter, the conversion of a single soul?”

Thus, Monsignor Shea states that our task is simply to understand that we are living in a new apostolic age, to trust that the Holy Spirit is at work and as St. Paul says, the more evil that is present, the more grace abounds. And ultimately, he explains, we are to seize the adventure of working with the Holy Spirit to live and share the saving message given to us by Jesus Christ.
Do we have to go to Mass today?” This phrase has been uttered countless times by children (and some adults) in homes throughout the years. The answer in the past was almost always an emphatic “yes!” However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, that answer probably changed to “No, we’ll watch Mass on TV at home.”

When Bishop Folda suspended the celebration of the Mass March 17, 2020 as the pandemic was starting to spread across the country, many diocesan parishes invested in some sort of live-streaming equipment in order to bring the Mass to the homes of the faithful.

However, as of May 1, Bishop Folda has decreed that the general dispensation for attending Mass is lifted, and the obligation to attend Mass, except in some specific circumstances, is required of the faithful. Those circumstances are noted in the decree: “This obligation does not apply to those who are ill; those who have reason to believe they were recently exposed to COVID-19 or another serious or contagious illness; those who are confined to their home, a hospital, or a nursing facility; those who care for the sick, the infirm, and the homebound; those who are unable to attend Mass through no fault of their own; those with underlying health conditions or in a high-risk category; and those who have significant fear or anxiety of becoming ill by attending Mass.”

With the exception of the specific mention of COVID-19, and the statement concerning fear or anxiety, the exemptions are the same as they always have been. If you feel you fall into one of these categories but aren’t sure, you may discuss it with your local pastor. For the rest of us, it’s time to leave our living rooms and partake in the Eucharistic celebration in person.

Many pastors across the diocese told New Earth in an email survey that Mass attendance has already been on the increase since February, and Easter weekend attendance was high as well. Some of their comments also mentioned how we could bring the rest of the faithful back to the fold:

“I have noticed the Mass attendance increase over the past three months to what I’d estimate normal pre-pandemic levels.”

“Yes, there has been a steady increase in Mass attendance. I was surprised at the number of people that were at Holy Thursday and Good Friday liturgies. On Easter Sunday, we had to set up extra seating for the 9 and 11 a.m. Masses. The number of people vaccinated and the COVID-19 numbers have improved.”
“On a spiritual level I believe those who have returned have had a spiritual hunger that was reawakened in them. Only the Eucharist can fill this hunger. If they are staying away because of fear, we should encourage them to try a daily Mass for a while, until they are comfortable being back in church.”

“The lay faithful who are returning need to invite those who are staying home back to Mass.”

“There has been an increase gradually, but not yet at previous levels. Many have commented that they were tired of the televised Mass and missed actively participating in the liturgy.”

“There is a lot of difference of opinion about the pandemic among parishioners and even within families. Being attentive to the needs of others and treating each other as persons to love instead of problems to solve would go a long way.”

“More people are done with restrictions, or have had the virus, or are vaccinated, and they are ready to get back to normal. For those who are still concerned about danger, I think it will simply take time. For those who have ‘gotten out of the habit’ we might need to do more specific outreach/emails/mailings to encourage them to return.”

Yes, we as Catholics are well aware of the Sunday obligation to attend Mass. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church freely uses the word “obligation:”

“The precept of the Church specifies the law of the Lord more precisely: “On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass. The precept of participating in the Mass is satisfied by assistance at a Mass which is celebrated anywhere in a Catholic rite either on the holy day or on the evening of the preceding day” (CCC 2180).

“The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin” (CCC 2181).

So yes, the Church states we are obligated to attend Sunday Mass, but should attendance really be looked at as an obligation? What if we looked at our Sunday participation in a different way?

While growing up, my parents, strict church attendees, required all of us in the family to go to Mass. As a kid I felt pressured to be there more times than I care to admit, and many times I just sat in a pew with my thoughts ranging elsewhere and not on what was happening at the altar. I know my parents’ intentions were good, and they were correct to make sure we attended Mass, but their approach sure turned me off, especially as a teenager. Based on that experience, my wife and I use the term “privilege” in our household when explaining to our 12-year-old son why we are heading out the door to Mass.

The Catholic Church addresses the importance of why attending Mass is so important for the faithful, which takes a bit of the sting out of the word “obligation:”

“Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God’s holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 2182).

“We often talk about the obligation to attend Mass, but we should think of it as a privilege instead,” said Bishop Folda. “We are all created to worship and give glory to God, and what a gift it is to be able to worship him through the Mass, the holy sacrifice of his only Son. When we gather each Sunday for the Mass, we are entering into the holy presence of God. We are entering into the mystery of Christ’s life poured out for us. I can’t think of anything more necessary or more beautiful.”

As more and more COVID-19 vaccines are being administered, and with the faithful starting to feel more comfortable attending Mass, restrictions at Mass are slowly being lifted as well. Mask-use is no longer required in cities who have lifted their mask mandates but is still encouraged in parishes across the diocese. Holy water fonts may be filled again. Congregational singing has returned, and offertory collections may now be taken by passing a plate or basket among those gathered at Mass. Some restrictions remain in place but in time will also be lifted.

Father James Goodwin, pastor of St. Maurice’s Church in Kindred, delivers his homily at Mass on April 25.
(Paul Braun | New Earth)
This lifting of Sunday dispensation has been a welcome sign of returning to normal for some of the faithful. Others, however, fear it is still too soon. Many sent emails to New Earth explaining their feelings:

“This last year has been difficult for me as a relatively new convert. I needed Mass to reaffirm my faith on a weekly basis. I found I was slipping backward by not going to Church. Mass is back. Hurrah!”

“I am very happy Bishop Folda is lifting the dispensation and returning the requirement of attending Sunday Mass and receiving the Holy Eucharist. I personally believe it is of utmost importance as a Catholic to be at Mass on Sunday and during the week if possible and receive the Holy Eucharist.”

“I still do not feel comfortable attending church in person... and my son has very strong emotional feelings about it not being time. He is concerned about his grandparents and having to stay away from them even more. With the second wave and not that many getting vaccinated, little mask usage in places, it seems too early for me.”

“I think the decision to reinstate the Sunday Mass obligation makes a lot of sense. People who can’t attend due to health reasons are already exempted from the obligation, so reinstating the obligation makes a lot of sense for the rest of us. Hopefully it will encourage people to begin attending Mass in person again, which is so important!”

“I think the lifting of the mass dispensation is a much needed step to returning to normal.”

“I wish the Bishop had waited a little longer to reinstate the obligation to go to Mass. I feel we need to wear a mask to get groceries and I don’t think they are wearing them in church, or being that careful. We do not feel comfortable going back yet.”

“Enough is enough, and it’s time to go back to normal. Those who are at risk can take the proper measure. The rest of us need to continue the mission.”

“I have talked with Catholics that I know are strong in their faith, however, I think the fear is still there, and they will not attend Mass. Many of them have health issues and just don’t feel safe.”

“Over the course of the pandemic, streaming Mass became a convenience and could easily be treated as a program on TV with a person mindlessly doing other tasks while having Mass streamed. Attending Mass in person allows us to receive the sacraments we have taken for granted before the pandemic, and with Bishop’s decree taking effect, we as disciples will be able to receive the sacraments with great reverence.”

While some parishes that have been live-streaming or recording their Masses will cease that practice now that dispensation has been lifted, others will continue to do so. The Cathedral of St. Mary will continue to livestream the 10 a.m. Sunday Mass on the diocesan website for now, and the diocese will still air The Sunday Mass on local television.

The lifting of dispensation will bring some back to Mass but not all. A personal invitation to someone you know who has been staying away from Mass could be just the nudge they need to return. However, there are those who are still not ready to return or who legitimately need to stay away for now. For those members of our parishes we need to have patience and understanding, and we need to pray for them while they make their decision to return. For those who have slipped further away, let us pray that they too may return to the fold.

For the rest of us, let’s make Sunday Mass and participation in the Eucharist a joyful occasion, where we can be grateful and privileged to take part once again.
Trinity Youth Camp is a Catholic camping experience for youth entering 4th-8th grades fall 2021.

- June 23 - 27  Red Willow | Binford, ND
- July 14 - 18  Pelican Lake | Bottineau, ND
- July 21 - 25  Camp of the Cross | Garrison, ND
- July 28 - Aug 1  Pelican Lake | Bottineau, ND

Activities include Good News, crafts, recreation, water sports, daily Mass, skits, campfires, new friends, and much more!

All camp sessions will resume as normal this year. Mask regulations will be determined by each campsite’s leadership this summer, and we will still be following state and local recommendations.

For more information, and to register go to our website:  www.trinityyouthcampnd.com

*Registration is due one week prior to the start of each session.
Two neighboring parishes had been praying for an unknown individual since the members returned from the COVID-19 dispensation to attend Mass on Mother’s Day in 2020.

Members of the parishes had been discussing the name—a name that could have been a woman’s or man’s name—and wondering who the person was. They could conjure up no link to the name or anyone with a picture of the person.

They were stumped, but they prayed for this person.

Occasionally, a parishioner or a member of the finance council at one of the parishes inquired about the name with the pastor. He would say she is related to someone in the parishes. She lived in a neighboring state where COVID-19 was out of control and while she was not suffering from COVID-19, she was isolated due to her treatment.

The parishioners were stumped, but they prayed on because of what little they did know. They knew now that Arden Blair was a woman and that the situation was serious.

They heard her name week after week at their three weekend liturgies for 50 weeks.

Then one Sunday, the pastor told those assembled that this would be the last time they would hear Arden Blair in the petitions. She had died the previous Friday morning. The pastor said she would not have a funeral anywhere near their churches or be listed on any website for a local funeral home.

Arden Blair was a stepchild of a former deacon of the parish. She was born to a family unable to care for her. The former deacon and his wife became her stepparents.

Arden was ever thankful to her stepparents. She cleaned and cooked in her family home. She went to school with her stepbrothers and sisters. Arden graduated, married the boy next door, divorced, and had three careers in her 56 years of life.

At age 40, she experienced breast cancer, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, hospitalizations, and an interruption in her work. She was soon declared free of cancer.

As the pandemic started, Arden, a speed-walker, experienced shortness of breath on a late-night walk. She got to a park bench and tried to regain her breath. It happened again the next week. She did not have COVID-19, but what was this?

She could not get in to see a doctor. All general practitioners were being switched over to ER doctors or COVID-19 floor doctors. Finally, she called her oncologist. The oncologist said she could enter through door #6 for a work-up by the oncology team.

Every time they ran the tests, the answer was the same, but the oncologists did not know if this result had a name. That is, until they found a similar set of circumstances.

Arden was called in for a gowned-and-masked visit with the gowned-and-masked oncologist. The deacon’s wife and Arden’s Power of Attorney for Health Care were zoomed in to the conversation.

The oncologist said Arden was terminal with about eight weeks to live. The disease is called Adomesarcoma. It is the swelling of sacs around a major organ. In Arden’s case, the lungs. The swollen sacs would suffocate Arden from within her body. Arden assented to chemotherapy one day every three weeks—for what amounted to nine months.

Despite her isolation, Arden got COVID-19. The oncologists said that was the end of the chemotherapy.

Arden lived for another nine weeks. The parishioners of the two parishes kept hearing Arden Blair and praying for the unknown woman.

The pastor said it was a miracle that the woman lived so long after diagnosis. Miracles had been known to happen to known parishioners in these two parishes. Maybe another miracle happened for an unknown person as the parishioners prayed.
The Holy Spirit is hard at work weaving a tapestry out of our family. As with any project or craft, particularly in the early phases, it appears chaotic—frayed ends abound, messy false starts that will likely have to be reworked are glaring—but the raw materials of a glorious liturgical cloth are present. With God’s grace we hope that this tapestry will find its completion with my wife and I in heaven and our children in their vocations; weaving their own tapestries that will one day adorn heaven as well.

To start from the beginning would prove an arduous journey, so we will pick up at the birth of our third child and first daughter. While I have been convicted of the names we gave our boys, my wife was the one who was struck by the name of Ancilla for our little girl. To the uninitiated, such as myself at the time, Ancilla is the Latin word for “handmaid,” as in the Angelus: ecce ancilla Domine, “the handmaid of the Lord.” We were in the habit of saying the Angelus as a family at the time, but I was inspired to learn the Angelus in Latin. I’m not entirely sure why, other than I wanted a better understanding of our selection of a name and to more effectively articulate its meaning. I found the Angelus in Latin set to Gregorian chant and, of course, the accompanying YouTube video so that we could learn it.

The discovery of the beauty of the Angelus chanted in Latin, and the proclivity of our two and three-year-old to join in, led us to further exploration of the canon of prayers. The next logical step seemed to be learning the prayers of the rosary in Latin—a task made easier by the repetition involved. Additionally, given the increasing chaos of life with three and now four children, we were struggling to develop a rule of prayer that worked with variable routines and expanding ages. We found ourselves gravitating towards praying a rosary with the children as they fell asleep and chanting the Angelus at noon, before lunch. This worked better than our fitful attempts to pray some of the Liturgy of the Hours with the children, so we embraced the structure provided by meals and began saying an appropriate prayer before each one: the Benedictus (Canticle of Zachariah) before breakfast and the Magnificat (Canticle of Mary) before supper. We began praying these in English, but have similarly found ourselves gravitating towards chanting in Latin. Unfortunately, our children did not receive any musical talent that my wife and I lack, so it can be somewhat cacophonous at times. Like I said, frayed ends.

We thus found ourselves uniquely prepared for an unexpected opportunity provided by the COVID-19 lockdowns. We felt that Mass “attended” virtually would pose the risk of confusing our children regarding the nature of worship, so we eschewed it in favor of following the 1962 Latin missal we had procured, with some help from the audio of the countless YouTube videos of the Mass propers. Upon discovering the Mass in this form, I felt as though I had found something I had been searching for my entire life. I had experienced it at times, but didn’t have the necessary initiation to understand what I was a part of. Given some effort learning Latin and the place of the propers in Mass, I am in awe of the unspeakable beauty of the liturgical tradition of the Church, and have come to realize that this beauty is inseparable from the form that it developed in—namely Gregorian chant and Latin.

Despite having developed a proclivity for the limited use of Latin in the liturgical setting, my wife proved resistant to my eager efforts to implement the language in all aspects of our family prayer. She shared with me recently that in listening to the Bible in a Year podcast by Father Mike Schmitz she has come to understand that God set the Israelites apart by teaching them to worship in a manner different from the neighboring people, and different from anything else in their lives. This realization has helped her to understand Latin as the gift it is to the Church—a universal and unchanging language to communicate a universal and unchanging creed. It is a language not used in everyday life but is set aside for use in prayer.

We hope to guide our children down a path that leads them to faith and on which they are open to God’s grace. As parents, we are tasked with helping them to find their vocations, which God will use to lead them to himself. We are finding that the beauty of the traditions of the Church are the means the Holy Spirit is using to weave his tapestry.
At their recent retreat, third-grade children of Sts. Anne and Joachim parish practiced genuflecting as they entered the church, how to properly place their hands when creating a ‘throne’ for the Precious Body, and saying ‘Amen’ loud enough to be heard after Bishop Folda says, ‘the Body of Christ,’” said Connie Dulany, Religious Education Coordinator at Sts. Anne and Joachim Church in Fargo.

Likewise, many students around the diocese who have recently received their First Communion or were preparing to receive the sacrament, shared their thoughts and hopes about the experience.

“After I was confirmed, I noticed they started the consecration. I got excited! I pictured the image from St. Faustina in my heart. It wasn’t long and it was my turn to receive Holy Communion. My heart shined, I did the best I could to stick out my tongue, the way our priest taught us. I was so happy to receive Jesus.” –Liza Steele, St. John’s, New Rockford

“I enjoyed experiencing my First Communion with my aunt, Tracy, who was my sponsor for my Confirmation. She is also my godmother. Many other kids shared in the experience with me, some of my classmates, and also students from Carrington. The Bishop asked us many questions. I knew the answer to most of them. I was excited that he called on me to answer three or four of the questions!” –Cade Helseth, St. John’s, New Rockford

“I was afraid that I was gonna mess up at first so I was nervous, but I didn’t mess up. After I felt better. Then the next time at church I got to receive the Eucharist and now I get to receive the Eucharist every time.” –Eden Thorenson, St. Andrew’s, Westhope

“I was nervous at first, but when it was over I felt really good because I received the Eucharist. I was happy because now when I go to church I will receive the Eucharist.” –Kasen Beaudrie, St Andrew’s, Westhope

“When I first received Jesus in Holy Communion, I felt happy and holy.” –Peter Newman, St. James, Jamestown

“It was a very very very good day. It made me feel so very special. Thank you Jesus. I hope we have a great relationship for life!” –Benen Belzer, St. James, Jamestown

“My First Communion was joyful. Most of all I was excited to receive Jesus! I have loved taking communion every time we go to church. I try to concentrate on more things at church, be good, read the bible more, and say more prayers. I was filled with joy when I could receive Jesus and was very happy that day.” –Laura Heinle, St. Mathias, Windsor

“I was really excited. I was happy that I got to receive my sacraments and I was excited to grow closer to God. I’ll share my love for Jesus each time I receive communion and that I will be filled with joy and happiness.” –Aubrie Schmaltz, St. Therese, Rugby

“I will pray and thank the Lord for always being with me after I receive communion.” –Allie Monroe, St. Therese, Rugby

“I know that communion will help me. I am happy that Mrs. Leier was with me at my First Communion. I would like to have Communion every day.” –Karlee Selensky, St. Therese, Rugby

First Communicants share hopes and experiences in receiving the Eucharist

Compiled by Kristina Lahr

A girl receives her First Communion on April 18 at St. John’s Church in Wahpeton. (Kristina Lahr | New Earth)
“It was very exciting to receive my First Communion. It felt very good to receive my Sacraments... I hope God fills me with grace every time I receive communion because I feel closer to Jesus.” –Isaiah Schann, St. Therese, Rugby

“I was excited to put on my dress and receive the Body of Jesus at my First Communion. Now each time I receive communion I want to be more like Jesus and be closer to him. It is exciting and makes me want to learn more about Jesus and God.” –Reagan Wald, St. Therese, Rugby

“When I received my First Communion, I was excited. It was exciting! I felt united with the whole Catholic family and my parents. It made me feel older! It brought me closer to Jesus. Now when I receive communion, I hope it will make me more and more like Jesus.” –Pendleton Wangler, St. Therese, Rugby

“I hope that when I receive my First Communion, it will strengthen my relationship with God and I get to start having more time in the church.” –Harper Lavelle Johnson, Holy Cross, West Fargo

“My hopes for when I receive my First Communion are for Jesus to give me the strength to help others when they need it and for the Holy Spirit to come into and guide me and for the Holy Trinity to come and help me do little things with great love.” –Kole Malarkey, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“My hopes for my First Communion are that I can be closer to Jesus, like going to Mass more, inspired to pray more, love God and Jesus more, make me more kind, and help me to become the best version of myself.” –Josie Brekhus, St Joseph, Devils Lake

“My hopes for when I receive my First Communion are to get closer to God and to pray more, and to go to church more, and to know God is with me.” –Vaya Everson, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“My hope for when I receive First Communion is that Jesus gets inside me and makes me more thankful for the things he made.” –Connor Dumont, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“I hope that I go to heaven and fulfill my mission. I hope that I stay close to God, go to church, and be the best version of myself.” –Jackson Schmaltz, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“My hope for when I receive First Communion is that I become closer to God and love God more.” –Samantha Broyles, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“I hope when I receive communion that I can get closer to God and so I may go to heaven. I also hope to pray more.” –Josephine Vetsch, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“My hopes are to be my best version of myself and feel holy, be closer to God, be grateful, and do kind things.” –Luke Black, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“My hopes for when I receive First Communion are to have the faith of Jesus and so I get used to communion.” –Jace Lyon, St. Joseph, Devils Lake
“My hopes are that God will fill me with grace and understanding so that I can become the best version of myself and grow in virtue. Also, so God will give me strength to follow him.” –Miriam Kaffar, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“I hope that my First Communion will bring me closer to God and I will have a good life.” –Ryder Litzinger, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“I hope I will be able to make it to church every Sunday. I hope I will pray more and be successful.” –Aubryn Wiberg, St. Joseph, Devils Lake

“I’m excited to have the bread and wine because I’ve been waiting for it.” –Christina Hershey, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Reynolds

“I hope I am able to eat the body and the blood of the Lord and it will help me get to heaven.” –Isabella Andree, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Reynolds

“I hope Jesus will help me be good by receiving his body and blood.” –Ethan Justin, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Reynolds

“I hope to eat the bread and body of Jesus to be a better person.” –Ben Leggige, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Reynolds

“I hope the Blood of the Lord transforms me.” –Hank Lessard, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Reynolds

“I hope that I get Jesus.” –Jakob Untersher, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Reynolds

Cade Helseth and Father Reese Weber, pastor of St John’s in New Rockford and Sts. Peter and Paul’s in McHenry, after the Mass celebrating Confirmation and First Communion at Sacred Heart, Carrington on April 11. (submitted photo)

Matrimony: A calling to forgive

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* As of 01/2020, rated A+ Superior by A.M. Best
The Little Flower Parish Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) in Rugby held a rummage sale March 5–6 to raise money for their yearly activities and helped another community in the process.

“The purpose of the sale is to raise money for the CYO, but it’s also kind of going back to Lent,” explained Katelyn Duchscher, a CYO member who attends religious education classes at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Balta. “During Lent, we’re supposed to give up things we don’t need and help others. So, this is a good way for people to get rid of the things they don’t need and to help other people get the things they do need.”

According to Duchscher, the money goes to the CYO to help fund activities like the Amazing Race, an October event where members race around town collecting items such as food or shoes to donate to charities.

“Pretty much the money we earn here funds the Amazing Race and programs like that,” Duchscher added.

“In the summer, we get to go on a trip,” said Sister Mary Ruth Huhn, a CYO advisor and teacher’s aide at Little Flower School. “This year, we’re going to Valley Fair. We’re going to work at the homeless shelter and tour either the cathedral or the basilica in the Twin Cities, so then, we’ll have to pay for the bus and the facilities, so we raise the money here.”

Items left over after the sale go to St. Anne’s in Belcourt, where the items are sold at discounted prices.

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A year is a long time to be separated from the communities you belong to. While many of us have already returned to Mass some time ago, it hasn’t been the same. Without coffee and rolls—or a time to socialize after—we missed visiting with our friends at church. Waving as you pass by on the way out to your car isn’t enough time to keep up these relationships. Many of us also missed going out to eat, to watch a movie, to shop with family or friends, or just gathering at the local café or coffee shop to talk about the news and weather.

Why is being together so important to us? Our faith teaches that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Each of us have an innate human dignity. Even if our human dignity is violated by ourselves or others, it can never be lost completely. We are also relational beings, reflecting the mystery of the Holy Trinity with one God in the three persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who exist in relationship to each other (Catechism of the Catholic Church 253-256). We do this by living together in society.

This need to live in society is at the heart of our human nature. Quite simply, it’s the way we are made. We are both designed and commanded by Christ to love God and to love our neighbor. Our happiness depends on this. Research is now showing—as we’ve also seen in our counseling program at Catholic Charities—that the isolation and loneliness so many people have experienced during COVID-19 is linked to an increase in anxiety and depression. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature” (1879).

That being said, I am also thankful for many of the blessings of technology. Through phone and video calls we have been able to connect with family and friends in ways we couldn’t only a decade ago. Of course technology has its drawbacks and serious concerns too, as many of us are aware. Yet at work, virtual meetings have helped us maintain relationships first with our clients but also with our colleagues and other service providers and, of course, our supporters. While I have missed seeing everyone at conferences and events, phone and video are much better than nothing!

Yet even as we invested in new technology this year for telehealth services, we also had to make the difficult decision to postpone or cancel different events at Catholic Charities. It may seem like forever ago but it was just March 2020 when we were blessed to host our Fargo Caritas Award Luncheon honoring Dr. Lucho Espejo for his service to the poor in the medical field just a few days before everything shut down. However, our Bismarck Caritas Award Luncheon scheduled for May 2020 was postponed first until November and then until this year. That’s why we were so excited to finally honor Marci Loomis for her service to the poor through the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Bismarck on May 11. We were also thankful to gather together again for our semi-annual Catholic Charities All Staff Training in April.

A year is a long time to be apart from those you love and care for. In my conversations with supporters, the greatest suffering for many has been being unable to see their grandchildren or their grandparents for so long. As much as we can do online, this past year has shown that no amount of technology can ever fully replace human connection. How do you give someone a big hug on a video call? How do you give a hearty handshake or a first bump on the phone? You can’t. That’s why we are so blessed that things are opening up again here in North Dakota.

We look forward to seeing our family, friends, and all of you in person soon. It has been a long year, but it is so good to be together again!
Should suffering shake our faith?

Premier Christian Radio in the UK just sponsored a survey that investigated how the COVID-19 crisis has affected religious beliefs and attitudes. There were three major findings—namely, that 67% of those who characterize themselves as “religious” found their belief in God challenged, that almost a quarter of all those questioned said that the pandemic made them more fearful of death, and that around a third of those surveyed said that their prayer life had been affected by the crisis. Justin Brierley, who hosts the popular program Unbelievable?, commented that he was especially impressed by the substantial number of those who, due to COVID-19, have experienced difficulty believing in a loving God.

Of course, in one sense, I understand the problem. An altogether standard objection to belief in God is human suffering, especially when it is visited upon the innocent. The apologist for atheism or naturalism quite readily asks the believer, “How could you possibly assert the existence of a loving God given the Holocaust, school shootings, tsunamis that kill hundreds of thousands of people, pandemics, etc.?” But I must confess that, in another sense, I find this argument from evil utterly unconvincing, and I say this precisely as a Catholic bishop—that is, as someone who holds and teaches the doctrine of God that comes from the Bible. For I don’t think that anyone who reads the Scriptures speculatively, suffering is visited upon us as punishment for sin. Rather, they appreciated it as, mysteriously and nonbelievers today, is that the biblical authors saw no contradiction whatsoever between affirming the existence of a loving God and the fact of human suffering, even unmerited human suffering. Rather, they appreciated it as, mysteriously enough, ingredient in the plan of God, and they proposed various schemata for understanding this. For instance, sometimes, they speculated, suffering is visited upon us as punishment for sin. Other times, it might be a means by which God effects a spiritual purification in his people. Still other times, it might be the only way that, given the conditions of a finite universe, God could bring about certain goods. But they also acknowledged that, more often than not, we just don’t know how suffering fits into God’s designs, and this is precisely because our finite and historically conditioned minds could not, even in principle, comprehend the intentions and purposes of an infinite mind, which is concerned with the whole of space and time. Practically the entire burden of the book of Job is to show this. When Job protests against what he takes to be the massive injustice of his sufferings, God responds with a lengthy speech, in fact his longest oration in the Bible, reminding Job of how much of God’s purposes his humble human servant does not know: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth . . .”

Once again, whether they half-understood the purpose of human suffering or understood it not at all, no biblical author was tempted to say that said evil is incompatible with the existence of a loving God. To be sure, they lamented and complained, but the recipient of the lamentation and complaint was none other than the God who, they firmly believed, loved them. I don’t for a moment doubt that many feel today that suffering poses an insurmountable obstacle to belief in God, but I remain convinced that this feeling is a function of the fact that religious leaders have been rather inept at teaching the biblical doctrine of God. For if human suffering undermines your belief in God, then, quite simply, you were not believing in the God presented by the Bible.

I want to be clear that none of the above is meant to make light of the awful experience of suffering or cavalierly to dismiss the intellectual tensions that it produces. But it is indeed my intention to invite people into a deeper encounter with the mystery of God. Like Jacob who wrestled all night with the angel, we must not give up on God but rather struggle with him. Our suffering shouldn’t lead us to dismiss the divine love, but rather to appreciate it as stranger than we ever imagined. It is perfectly understandable that, like Job, we might shout our protest against God, but then, like that great spiritual hero, we must be willing to hear the Voice that answers us from the whirlwind.
Equal Rights Amendment not the way to equal treatment

CHRISTOPHER DODSON
Executive director of the North Dakota Catholic Conference, which acts on behalf of the Catholic bishops of N.D. to respond to public policy issues of concern to the Catholic Church

God created men and women as equals. Both are created in his image and both are bestowed with equal dignity that must be respected in law, business, the economy, and society. Discriminatory and undue disparate treatment of women should be eliminated, if necessary, by law.

What might sound good, however, does not always make good law. Such is the case with the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

The ERA, until recently thought of as a failed relic of the 1970s, came up in the recent North Dakota legislative session. Congress approved the ERA for ratification in 1972. It gave the states seven years to ratify the amendment. North Dakota voted to ratify it in 1975. Not enough states voted for ratification before the seven-year time period expired. Nevertheless, some members of Congress, abortion advocates, and states have decided to keep ratifying the ERA and keep counting states.

Senate Concurrent Resolution (SCR) 4010 was simple. It clarified that North Dakota’s approval of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1975 is no longer valid since the time for national ratification of the amendment expired in 1979. The resolution was not about whether women and men should be treated with equal dignity. The resolution was solely about whether the time for ratification of the ERA has passed and about whether Congress and others should attempt to resurrect a dead amendment.

When introduced, the nation’s Catholic bishops opposed the ERA because of concerns that the word “sex” could be interpreted to mean a “right” to abortion and more. Their concerns proved accurate. “Sex” has since been interpreted by courts and government agencies to require payment for, and performance of, elective abortions and transgender surgery.

To demonstrate that this is not a far-fetched claim, we can look to a case close to home.

Passed in 2010, the Affordable Care Act prohibits any federally funded or administered health program or activity—broadly defined—from engaging in discrimination. Rather than listing the types of discrimination prohibited, the act incorporated several nondiscrimination provisions already in federal law, including Title IX, which prohibits discrimination “on the basis of sex.”

Using that provision, Health and Human Services defined “sex” to include “discrimination on the basis of... termination of pregnancy... sex stereotyping, and gender identity.” It then defined discrimination based on “gender identity” to prohibit a healthcare provider from refusing to offer medical services for gender transitions if that provider offered comparable services, such as gynecological services, to others. In short, prohibition on the basis of sex became a mandate to cover and perform elective abortions and transgender surgeries.

In 2016, several Catholic entities, including the Diocese of Fargo, Catholic Charities of North Dakota, the University of Mary, and SMP Healthcare from Fargo, challenged the rules in federal court in North Dakota. The State of North Dakota joined them.

The state of North Dakota joined the suit for four reasons. First, the state operates a State Hospital that could have been required to provide elective abortions and transgender surgery. Second, it has a Medicaid program that excludes coverage for elective abortions and gender reassignment surgeries. Third, the state public employees plan excludes coverage for those procedures. Fourth, the state employs healthcare providers who, as state employees, would have had to perform elected abortions and gender reassignment surgery.

In January of this year, the U.S. District Court in Fargo granted victory to the state and the Catholic plaintiffs, at least for now. The Biden Administration has announced it will appeal. The judgment is based on procedural matters and that, as applied to the religious plaintiffs, the rules violate the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. It was never disputed, even during the Trump Administration, that the rules required coverage and performance of elective abortions and gender reassignment surgery and that this requirement stemmed solely from the word “sex.”

The case illustrates the problem with the Equal Rights Amendment. It is not limited to “sex discrimination” as commonly understood. Abortion rights advocates have long admitted that they view the ERA as a path to an undisputed constitutional right to abortion on demand. The North Dakota case proves that the word “sex” would mean that and more.

If you were to believe some of the claims on social media, letters to newspapers, and even editorials, North Dakota legislators hate women because they passed Senate Concurrent Resolution 4010. Also according to them, the Equal Rights Amendment has nothing to do with abortion. They are wrong on both counts.

The history of how courts and government agencies have interpreted “sex” demonstrates that the ERA poses a threat to human life, state law, and religious freedom. Women deserve equal treatment in the law. The ERA, however, is not the way to achieve it.
The month of April is the anniversary of our foundress’s death and what she started in 1776 has gone round the world. There are sisters throughout the world commemorating her existence and we have all worked diligently to follow Nano Nagle’s motto, “Do what needs to be done.” The Union of the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary has been in the Fargo Diocese since 1882. Her words and actions have led to being in the fields of education, medicine, ministry, and a lifetime of care giving.

The journey of life leads people down different avenues. The sisters started in northern Fargo. After the tornado in 1957, the sisters realized it was time to move and built a new home on the south edge of town. As the number of sisters increased, so did the ministries. But sisters age, as we all do, and that building got too big. Due to the decreasing numbers of Sisters, it was time to rethink our place of residence. The old residence became a retirement center for seniors.

A new ministry center was built at 32nd Avenue South where many spiritual and justice activities for lay and religious were held. The lay people were well aware of Nano Nagle and the ministries of the sisters and helped whenever and wherever they could. As a result of the lay people’s interest, in 1980 the Presentation Associates/Friends of Nano was created. There are now over 125 members throughout the United States who continue to share the ministry in other parts of our country and keep their affiliations with the sisters. They are a strong force in continuing Nano’s charism as the number of sisters are decreasing.

Most of our sisters locally have moved into retired years but our journey of faith never ends. All the people that were once students or friends are still walking with us. Our numbers are decreasing and the space we were in was too big for the number. It is now fitting to return to the retirement center we once created.

My life in transition has been different than most of the sisters, but it has been one blessed by God in very creative ways. I was blessed as a child and helped to understand the power and presence of God in creation. I knew God had his hand in the creation of the squirrels, birds, and animals as well as the trees and plants that were nearby. After 24 years as a sister in the residence on 32nd Avenue South, I moved to Riverview. One of the first visitors I had was a squirrel on my patio. It brought back many memories. Needless to say, I found some food for the birds and the squirrels and feel a blessing from God through my patio visitors.

I was very active in my home parish when I entered religious life 27 years ago. The power and presence of God continues to be revealed to me. When I moved, I had no clue how God would continue to lead me on this journey of life. I am here to tell you that God has a plan for each of us no matter where we live or how old we are. Life with God is never ending for lay or religious.

We are now sharing our lives with all the residents at Riverview whether at meals, worship or just relaxing. We are blessed by the lives of men and women who have lived in many places throughout the states. Each of us is called to listen and share our lives and experiences with our dinner partners.

My life is blessed by this move as I listen to the stories of how God has led other men and women and my similarities with theirs. Sharing a meal with a total stranger is an experience that is life giving. God and the Presentation Community are alive and well on this daily journey. We are all called to listen and pray.
This year of formation has been a year of many transitions. After two years in pre-theology at St. Gregory the Great Seminary in Seward, Neb., this past August I moved to major seminary at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md.

As this change in my life drew nearer, I found myself encountering some uncertainties and fears. In my two years there, St. Gregory’s had become a second home. I knew many things would be different at the Mount, and I began to get nervous about some of the adjustments. Would I be able to make friends in a larger community? Would I be able to adjust to the new rhythm of life? Would the Mount become as much of a second home as St. Gregory’s had been?

In the first months, many of these fears and apprehensions did prove to be challenges. I began to miss many of the guys at St. Gregory’s. The size of the house was a bit daunting, the enrollment more than five times larger, and there were activities at St. Gregory’s I loved that were missing from the Mount. However, the fact that there have been challenges is not a bad thing. These challenges have helped me to grow in ways that I would not have been able to without them.

One of these fears surrounded integrating into a new community. There are over 100 more seminarians at the Mount than there were at St. Gregory’s, and it was a bit overwhelming at first. It was taking longer to acclimate to the larger community than I would have liked. It also seemed like it was taking longer to develop relationships with the guys than it did at St. Gregory’s. In talking about these challenges with my formator, I was able to recognize that all of these things take time to resolve. I wasn’t going to hit the ground running knowing every single person and knowing them well.

As time passed, this proved to be the case. I grew more comfortable in the new community and began to make some great friends. I overcame other worries as well. I am adjusting well to the rhythm of life in a different seminary, and while St. Gregory’s will always hold a special place in my heart, the Mount is becoming a second home, similar to what St. Gregory’s was.

Facing these challenges has helped me grow deeper in my trust of Jesus. While there have been challenging moments in this year, it has always been clear that this is where Jesus wants me to be. Once those challenges were put behind me, it became clear that those challenges were part of why he wanted me here. This has helped to highlight that even though it might not be the most comfortable thing for me in the moment, what Jesus wants me to do is always the best thing for me. There is always a purpose to what he asks, even if I don’t always see it. This has helped to show me why I constantly need to trust him, and has helped me to trust him more.

This deeper trust in the Lord will aid me long after I complete seminary formation. Be it God’s will, I will someday be a priest serving the people of the Diocese of Fargo. Part of the life of diocesan priesthood is getting assigned to different parishes, which means transitions like this are likely to be frequent in my life. Having transitions such as this now has given me a taste of this inevitable part of diocesan priestly ministry. More importantly, it has shown me what will help me through those transitions: a deep and abiding trust in Jesus.

Transitions help us to trust in Jesus’ plans

Seth Skjervheim
Theology I at Mount St. Mary’s, Emmitsburg, Md.

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Five ways a charitable gift annuity can benefit you

H ave you considered the benefits of obtaining a charitable gift annuity for the benefit of a Catholic Church entity of your choice? Here are five points to ponder:

1. ATTRACTIVE RATES. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, in their mid-80s, are receiving a modest income from their Certificate of Deposit. When the CD matures in two months, they plan to obtain a Catholic Development Foundation Gift Annuity and start receiving a significantly higher return, guaranteed as long as either one is living.

Gift annuity rates are very attractive for older friends of the Diocese of Fargo. You can receive guaranteed rates for either a two-life annuity or a single-life annuity.

Many folks in their retirement years will be pleased when they compare their low investment rates with the current annuity rates offered by the Catholic Development Foundation.

2. TAX-FREE PAYMENTS. Part of each annuity payment is tax-free. For example, Mrs. Jackson, age 82, contributed a check for $25,000 toward a gift annuity. Every year, she will receive a fixed payment. Of this amount, a certain percentage will be excluded from income taxes. The tax-free portion of the annuity payment is considered “return of principal” and continues through the annuitant’s estimated life expectancy.

3. INCOME TAX DEDUCTION. Because a charitable gift annuity is partly a gift and partly an investment in an annuity contract, the donor who itemizes is entitled to an income tax deduction for the gift portion of his or her annuity amount.

In the case of Mrs. Jackson mentioned earlier, her $25,000 gift annuity produced a substantial charitable tax deduction.

The deduction is available for the tax year when the gift annuity is established. If it cannot be used entirely, the donor has up to five years to carry forward the unused amount. The tax advantages with the charitable deduction make the effective rate of the gift annuity even higher than the rate used to establish the annuity.

4. FIXED, REGULAR PAYMENTS. It’s nice to be able to count on a specific amount of payment no matter what happens to the financial markets. Your annuity payments will remain the same every payment date (monthly, quarterly, semi-annually or annually). And since gift annuity payments are backed by the full assets of the Catholic Development Foundation, you have assurance that your check will be direct deposited or in the mail every payment date for the rest of your life.

5. PERSONAL SATISFACTION. Perhaps the greatest benefit of a Catholic Development Foundation gift annuity is the personal fulfillment you receive by helping your church as well as yourself. Your gift annuity assists a worthy cause that makes a difference in the lives of others. Your gift enables us to maintain and expand the faith-based beliefs and programs you supported during your life.

6. OTHER BENEFITS. There are additional reasons for obtaining a gift annuity with the Catholic Development Foundation. Some like the idea of reducing the size of their estate, thus lowering potential estate taxes. Others like the ease and simplicity of establishing a gift annuity.

People with highly appreciated stock can also benefit from a gift annuity. They particularly like the partial bypass of capital gains they receive.

If you would like a personalized illustration, please contact me at steve.schons@fargodiocese.org or (701) 361-9757. I’d be happy to assist.
Joe and Kathy Loney, parishioners of St. Benedict Church in Horace, will celebrate their 50th anniversary on May 15. They were married at St. Matthew’s Church in St. Paul, Minn. They moved to West Fargo in 1984. They have 5 children and 10 grandchildren.

Ken and Memory Mauch, parishioners of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Mantador, will celebrate their 60th anniversary on June 10. They were married at Sts. Peter and Paul and have 4 children, 13 grandchildren, and 1 great-grandchild.

Clarabell Demers celebrated her 110th birthday on Nov. 3, 2020 COVID-19 style, with a drive-by parade in her honor. She has been a life-long parishioner of Sacred Heart Church in Oakwood. She has been blessed with 3 children, 19 grandchildren, 35 great-grandchildren, and 12 great-great-grandchildren.

Wayne Freund, a life-long resident of Cando, celebrated his 90th birthday on April 2. He and his wife, Marguerite, are parishioners of Sacred Heart Church in Cando and still work the family ranch. They have been married for 65 years and have 9 children, 18 grandchildren (1 deceased), and 2 great grandchildren.

Ann Hager, parishioner of St. Therese the Little Flower Church in Rugby will celebrate her 90th birthday on May 21. Ann and her late husband Raymond, who passed away in 1980, were blessed with 8 children, 22 grandchildren, 46 great-grandchildren, and 1 great-great-grandchild.

Barbara Kuntz, parishioner at Little Flower Church in Rugby, will celebrate her 92nd birthday on May 1. She married Frank Kuntz on Oct. 22, 1945, and they lived on a farm near Orrin until retiring to Rugby in 1981. Frank passed away in 2012. They have 13 children, and numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great grandchildren.

Frances Leingang, parishioner of St. Anthony of Padua Church in Fargo, will celebrate her 90th birthday on May 14. She has been blessed with 6 daughters, 15 grandchildren, and 18 great-grandchildren.

SHARE LIFE’S MILESTONES
As a way to celebrate life and love, we encourage parishioners in the Diocese of Fargo to send a photo and news brief for anniversaries of 50 years or 60+ years or birthdays of 80+ years to: New Earth, Diocese of Fargo, 5201 Bishops Blvd. S., Suite A, Fargo, ND 58104 or news@fargodiocese.org.

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75 years ago — 1946
St. Benedict’s in Wild Rice observed its diamond jubilee on May 16 when the Most Rev. Aloisius J. Muench visited the parish and administered the sacrament of Confirmation to fifty-three children. In his sermon, His Excellency sketched the history of the parish from its humble beginning when a small group of locals set a cross on the bank of the Red River near Wild Rice back in 1862. Holy Cross Mission was established in 1871 and included a few new families from Canada. The Rev. Athanase Fidele Bernier was the first resident pastor appointed in 1881.

50 years ago — 1971
Changes are in the works. After much discussion and prayer, Catholic Action News will begin accepting letters to the editor for print in the May issue. Guest Editorials will also be welcomed and included as space permits. A feasibility study is underway regarding a format change, from glossy paper to newsprint, for when the current stock is exhausted. Editorial staff is also entertaining the possibility of a name change for the paper in conjunction with the new format in the fall. The Name Contest is open and the submitter of the chosen name will receive a year’s subscription free!

20 years ago — 2001
“New church with the integrity of its traditional look, that is our dream,” said Father Dale Lagodinski of St. John in Wahpeton. Driving down Dakota Avenue in Wahpeton, you will notice one of the pillars of the community is getting a face-lift. St. John is undertaking a major renovation and remodeling project. “The church sanctuary was badly in need of repair,” said Father Lagodinski. “And this project has been in the planning stages for approximately four years.” Another building phase St. John’s is considering to expand is the entry of the day care and add office space and rooms for religious instruction.

A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST
These news items, compiled by Danielle Ottman and Kristina Lahr, were found in New Earth and its predecessor, Catholic Action News.

EVENTS

Maryvale to lead mother-daughter retreat
Head to Maryvale in Valley City for a Mother-Daughter Retreat on May 26 from 6 to 8:30 p.m. This retreat will provide mothers and daughters with mutual experiences of prayer and sharing along with personal prayer time. Brief conferences will enable retreatants to engage in helpful conversation. Suggested donation per person is $20. Register by May 19 at dorothy.bunce@fargodiocese.org or (701) 845-2864.

Project LifeVoice founder to speak at two Minot events
Mike Spencer, founder and president of Project LifeVoice, will lead two events in Minot on June 9, hosted by Dakota Hope Clinic. At noon, he will present the Clergy Luncheon, “Role of the Pastor in Today’s Abortion Culture” at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in Minot. Spencer will address the question of whether it is possible for a pastor to be a bold voice for the unborn while at the same time nurturing a redemptive community for those who have had abortions. Clergy from all Christian denominations are welcome to attend. That evening, Spencer will lead a Life Defender’s Apologetics Workshop at the Moose Club in Minot. The event begins with a light meal at 6 p.m. Attendees will learn how to communicate the pro-life message intelligently and graciously. For either event, RSVP at (701) 852-4675 or dakotahope.org/events

Celebrate Mother-Daughter Days in Hankinson this June and July
The Franciscan Sisters of Dillingen in Hankinson invite you to join them for their annual Mother-Daughter Days. There will be two sessions this summer: June 17–19 and July 26–28 both with the theme The Joy of the Lord is My Strength. Spend some quality time together, have a little fun, nourish your spiritual life, and learn a bit about the life of Sisters. To register, contact Sister Jean Louise, OSF by text (701) 208-1245 or email ndfranciscan@yahoo.com.

Diocese of Fargo to sponsor women’s retreat Aug. 13-15
Join the Diocese of Fargo for Jesus Approaches: A Women’s Retreat, led by award-winning author and writer Liz Kelly. The retreat will include conferences, time for prayer and rest, social time, Mass, Eucharistic Adoration, and the opportunity to go to confession. It will be a chance to step out of the routine and stress of daily life in order to encounter the Lord Jesus through prayer and inspiring talks. This retreat is Aug. 13–15 at the Franciscan Retreat Center in Hankinson. Register at fargodiocese.org/evangelization-retreats-workshops.
Pope Francis accepts resignation of Bishop of Crookston, Minn.

By Catholic News Agency

Pope Francis on April 13, accepted the resignation of Bishop Michael Hoeppner of Crookston, Minn., who was the subject of two Church investigations after he was accused of mishandling cases of priests accused of sexual misconduct.

Hoeppner, 71, was the first U.S. bishop to be investigated under *Vos estis lux mundi*, Pope Francis’ 2019 norms on investigating bishops accused of mishandling or obstructing allegations of clerical sexual abuse.

Pope Francis appointed Bishop Richard Edmund Pates, bishop emeritus of Des Moines, Iowa, to lead the Crookston diocese as apostolic administrator “sede vacante” until a new bishop is named.

Hoeppner is reported to have pressured an alleged victim to drop his allegation of abuse against a priest, failed to follow mandatory reporting laws, and neglected to follow protocols designed to monitor priests accused of misconduct.

A report on the *Vos estis* investigation of Hoeppner was sent to Rome in late October 2019, and in February 2020, the Diocese of Crookston announced that the Vatican had ordered an additional investigation into the bishop.

Both investigations were conducted by Archbishop Bernard A. Hebda of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Hoeppner was not permitted to oversee sexual abuse cases in his diocese during the second investigation.

In depositions released Nov. 5, 2019, as part of a legal settlement, Hoeppner is seen to admit to several of the charges against him. In those depositions, Hoeppner also defended a diocesan decision to allow a priest to remain in ministry, without notifying parents or parishioners, after the priest admitted that while he was a teenager he had sexually abused a younger child.

The announcement in early 2020 about a second investigation into Hoeppner followed several months in which local Catholics called for Hoeppner’s resignation, and accused him of mistreating a popular priest removed from ministry under vague terms.

Priests in the diocese told CNA at the time that they expected Hoeppner to be removed from office, and that given the bishop’s record, the credibility of the *Vos estis* procedures could be called into question if he is eventually permitted to remain in office.

*Vos estis lux mundi* allows the Vatican “to provide for a supplementary investigation” after initial steps are taken, if Vatican officials deem it necessary.

Texas bill proposes longer waiting limit for divorce: a small step to strengthen marriage?

By Kevin J. Jones | Catholic News Agency

A Texas legislator has again proposed extending the waiting limit on no-fault divorce, a proposal that has drawn support from the Texas Catholic Conference.

The state Catholic conference told CNA April 27 that it supports the bill because it is “an incremental improvement in protecting the permanency of marriage in families with children.”

If H.B. 3190 becomes law, married couples seeking a no-fault divorce would have to wait six months if they have minor or school-age children or disabled adult children. “No-fault” divorces do not include cases in which domestic violence is involved.

In an April 26 Twitter post about the legislation, Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso said it is “absurd” that “the greatest commitment that two human beings can make with one another is treated with less seriousness than the contract we sign for a car.”

“If only people would learn to fight for their marriage instead of fighting each other,” he said.

The bill was proposed by State Rep. Matt Krause, a Fort Worth Republican. He has proposed similar bills in previous sessions of the legislature. Texas currently has a 60-day waiting period for divorce.

In 2017, Krause proposed a six-month waiting period on no-fault divorce. In a separate bill, he proposed to end no-fault divorce, citing the need to provide support for a spouse unwilling to divorce.

“There needs to be some type of due process. There needs to be some kind of mechanism to where that other spouse has a defense,” Krause told the Austin-based NBC affiliate KXAN News in 2017.

“I think people have seen the negative effects of divorce and the breakdown of the family for a long time,” he added, saying he thought his bill would help reverse the trend.

In January 2017, a spokesperson for the Texas Catholic conference spoke to CNA about the effects of divorce law.

“No-fault divorce laws typically ease the divorce process, rather than encouraging spouses to seek spiritual guidance or professional counseling to enrich their marriage,” the spokesperson said.

All 50 states allow some form of no-fault divorce. In 2010, New York became the last state to legalize no-fault divorce.
Father Aloysius Ezenyeka didn’t know how long he had been unconscious. A gentle slapping on his face stirred him, and his eyelids flicked open to an African hospital room filled with people clapping and cheering.

“Father, Happy New Year. Welcome to 2021.” Joy flooded the faces of the weary doctors, nurses, friends, and family who surrounded his bed.

The news of the new year wasn’t the only surprise awaiting his waking moments. The medical staff recounted everything that had happened to him over the past 24 hours, relaying the harrowing tale of the father-and-son rescue team that brought him to the hospital, the struggle to find a clinic that could perform life-saving surgeries, and more—a flurry of events that followed Father Al’s being shot by armed assailants while alone on Southwest Nigerian roads, just one night before.

The events of the previous night began with Father Al praying the rosary while he drove, contemplating what post-prayer music to put on for the rest of his long drive. Suddenly, he heard a sharp noise. Perhaps it was just a pebble propelled loudly from under his tire.

In the next split second, the origin of that sound was unmistakable. His windshield shattered as bullets passed by his side, fired by two men hiding in roadside bushes directly in front of him.

“I didn't know what to do, but I didn't have any time to be afraid,” he told CNA. He had traveled this road many times as a Benedictine of Ewu Monastery, and he had heard it was a dangerous stretch of land because of bandits. But he never expected that he would be on the receiving end of violent gunfire.

“I didn't think there would be any problem at all for me. I knew that there could be robbers, but I never really thought seriously it would happen to me.”

Although unscathed after the first volley of bullets, he knew that the assailants’ intention was to kill him. “You might as well at least try a little bit to give them a run for their money,” thought Father Al.

In that desperate moment, he found himself faced with three options: he could take the lane further from the shooters, but that would allow more time for them to shoot at him. Or he could take the lane closer to the bush in which they hid, but that would just make his car a closer shot.

The third option was to drive towards his attackers. “That would scare them. Or, they would get me right away, and that would be the end of it.” Making a life-or-death decision, he pressed himself under the steering column, taking meager cover under the dashboard as he slammed on the gas pedal.

The assailants ran into the bush behind them to avoid his car and unleashed another barrage. Rounds lodged in the front tire and around the engine—and painfully into Father Al’s stomach.

“There’s no way you can have that amount of bullets without being hit. I’m just surprised I was only hit once. I didn’t stop... I held the wound as much as I could to keep the blood from flowing, but it was practically impossible to do that. I did that the best I could.”

As he later recounted the story, Father AlNonchalantly noted the irony of his situation, laughing: “Drive-bys are usually people inside the vehicle shooting at people or houses, but this drive-by was me driving by.”

He decided to stop for help once he was out of range and out of danger. As soon as he was clear, almost like clockwork, the engine died and he coasted off the road near a lonely truck stop with broken vehicles. He stepped out of his own mangled car, and then collapsed.

An 11-year-old boy named God-is-Great watched Father Al’s wounded body fall to the ground, unmoving. The boy ran to get his father, SonyMopo. Others came to help, too, but no one had medical training, there were no supplies, and not even a 9-1-1 number to call. While SonyMopo went to get his own vehicle, nothing could be done for Father Al.

“There’s no emergency line. They were confused. What’s truly sad is that you couldn’t do anything for another human being that is in need. Just thinking about it is really strange. I could feel that they wanted to help, but didn’t know what to do,” the priest said.

He lay bleeding on the ground for over an hour. Eventually, SonyMopo came speeding along, coming to a rolling stop next to the crowd surrounding Father Al’s wounded form. They loaded him into the back of the vehicle to take him to the local clinic.
The only path they could take was blocked by the same shooters. Unknown to Father Al, SonyMopo had grabbed a gun. He told his son to drive the car while he shot out of the lowered passenger-side window to scare off the assailants so they could pass safely.

“At that point, I was in pain, just trying to pray,” Father Al said.

A young man named Chidiebere sat in the back with Father Al and prayed Hail Marys in their familiar, shared language. They were both from the same tribe, just one village over from each other. Interspersed in these prayers were appeals for Father Al to pray out loud and to not close his eyes.

“Any time I would try to give up, he would say, ‘No, no, no, Father, you’ll make it.’”

Together, they arrived at the first clinic, Okada Teaching Hospital, at 6 p.m. and stayed there for about two hours. But they had no supplies at the clinic.

The hospital staff murmured at Father Al’s volatile condition. “Don’t worry about that man—he’s not going to make it. He’s going to die anyways, so just look at other ones,” he remembered hearing.

Chidiebere, SonyMopo, and God-is-Great continued to encourage him to stay awake as they sped for more than 90 minutes to their next option for care: the emergency room at Benin, to which they arrived at around 10 p.m. Multiple times, they were delayed by policemen who pulled them over for speeding.

“A lot of things go through your mind. You say a lot of prayers,” Father Al said. “Apart from saying those prayers, you have to make peace with the fact that this is the end. And I did. The beginning hours were praying for God to help me and all that, but by the time we got to the hospital in Benin, I had already made my peace. I could not believe that I was going to make it, and I was okay with that. I prayed to God.”

When the medical team found that he was a priest, they called everyone they could think of and worked to get a team of doctors to leave their families to prepare for surgery on New Year’s Eve.

At this point, Father Al assumed he was going to die. He had lost a lot of blood, and the doctors had said it was too late for him.

The priest’s brother Titus drove the three hours from their village to the hospital and collected Father Al’s things from SonyMopo.

“Listen. I love you, take care of everyone else. I will see you again,” Father Al told Titus before being ushered into surgery right around midnight, New Year’s Day.

A violent attack from gunmen and a five-hour surgery were certainly not part of Father Al’s plans. As a priest serving in California, he was in Nigeria just on a visit to family.

Father Augustine Ebido called Father Al’s American physician, Kevin White. Dr. White attempted to get through to Father Al’s regional bishop, Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles, to inform him of the priest’s condition.

But through all the chaos and a literal game of telephone, incorrect information was shared throughout the staff and diocese. “Some people were thinking I was going to die, that I didn’t make it, that people died in the car with me... it was just a lot of mixed up messages,” Father Al said.

Bishop Barron traveled to Father Al’s parish, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, to give the unfortunate news of his shooting.

“We heard that he had been shot many times and was left on the side of the road,” Bishop Barron told the Angelus. “When I first got the news, it was that he was dying. We had very little hope.”

Unsafe of his condition, Father Al’s parishioners started a 3-day Novena, and the parking lot filled with cars to pray. They sent donations and more than 400 pounds of gifts for him and the people in Nigeria.

A few days later, Father Al was able to call Bishop Barron directly and give him the news of the successful surgery.

“He was very weak. I could barely understand him. But he was conscious, and he knew who I was,” Bishop Barron told the Angelus.

Bishop Barron called often to check on his recovery and to offer help, encouraging Father Al to return to America to receive medical attention.

Father Al insisted he did not want to go anywhere until he had healed, so the bishop told him, “Whatever you need, let us know and we’ll provide it for you.”

Although appreciative of the many offers he received to be transported to America, Father Al said he chose to remain in Nigeria with his family to help show people in the United States that despite the troubles Nigeria faces, it is filled with good people.

The priest said he is saddened by the media portrayal of Nigeria, which tends to focus on negative events but not positive aspects of the country. Father Al said he is proud of his country and grateful for the care he received, feeling God worked through the doctors and nurses there.

“There’s no way you can survive six, seven hours without medication with losing so much blood,” he said. “That was almost an impossibility. They said at that clinic there was no way else I was going to survive. The doctors at the hospital said it was not going to work. I think it was purely providential.”

Father Al eventually healed and did return to the United States, where 600 people attended a “Miracle In Nigeria Thanksgiving Mass & Celebration” that Bishop Barron concelebrated with Father Al on Palm Sunday this year at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Today, Father Al has almost entirely recovered.

“I don’t have much pain anymore. I ran four miles this morning. I guess if I can run four miles, I’ve recovered,” he laughed.

Father Al remains grateful for the experience, saying it has brought him closer to God and changed his views on life.

“This is the way I read my own life: God prevented my death because he believed I was not ready,” he said. “I was not ready for eternity. I was not ready for Heaven. I needed more work for sanctification. I needed to be alive for him to sanctify me and purify me and help me to be ready.”
Care for nature, pope tells world leaders at climate summit

By Catholic News Agency

In a video message sent to a climate summit on April 22, Pope Francis urged care for nature and the preservation of the environment.

“I greet you who are gathered in this initiative, which seems to me a happy one,” the pope said to participants in a climate summit of 40 international leaders that was organized by US president Joe Biden.

Francis said the summit encourages humanity “to take charge of the care of nature, of this gift that we have received and that we have to heal, guard, and carry forward. This is increasingly significant because it is a challenge we face in the post-pandemic era. We need to keep moving forward and we know that one doesn’t come out of a crisis the same way one entered. We come out either better or worse.”

“Our concern is to see that the environment is cleaner, purer, and preserved. We must take care of nature so that it takes care of us.”

During the summit, held on Earth Day, Biden pledged that the US would cut its carbon emissions to about half of 2005 levels by 2030.

In an earlier message marking Earth Day, Pope Francis had urged world leaders to “act with courage, operate with justice, and always tell the truth to people” with regard to the environment.

Francis said that for some time people have been more aware of the need to protect nature, and that interactions with the biodiversity given to us by God must take place “with the utmost attention and respect.”

USCCB chairmen welcome designation of temporary protected status for Venezuela

By United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

On March 8, the Biden Administration announced that it will be designating Venezuela for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). TPS is a statutorily authorized immigration status, subject to certain conditions, that allows individuals to remain and work in the U.S. during a period in which it is deemed unsafe for them to return to their home country. This particular designation is valid for eighteen months, and it is subject to renewal if the relevant conditions are found to be ongoing at the time of expiration.

Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville, auxiliary bishop of Washington and chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Committee on Migration, and Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, chairman of the USCCB’s Committee on International Justice and Peace, issued the following statement in response to the announcement:

“We commend this just and humane decision by the Administration, which will provide much needed relief to those Venezuelans already present in the United States. The situation in Venezuela has been steadily deteriorating over the past decade, resulting in civil unrest, severe food insecurity, and loss of life. Unfortunately, many Venezuelans will continue to be impacted by the conditions that warranted this designation. Therefore, we encourage the Administration to work toward addressing these conditions through diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and international relief efforts that seek to promote and preserve human life. We continue to stand in solidarity with our Venezuelan brothers and sisters, and we pray for an end to the circumstances that perpetuate their suffering. May Our Lady of Coromoto, patroness of Venezuela, comfort them in their time of need.”

Over the last two years, the Bishops have urged humanitarian relief for Venezuelans, requesting TPS and supporting legislative efforts to that end.
Recently, a women’s faith group with which I’ve journeyed in the past several years reconvened for the first time in 12 months at one of our homes. After our long separation, we yearned for in-person contact and faith-filled camaraderie. But another compelling reason had brought us together as well, for not long before, our host and her husband had become parents through adoption.

We knew the immensity of this occasion; she’d been sharing her story with us for a while and had begged many prayers, which, in our inability to give much of anything else, we were happy to offer.

Now, after several years of aching sorrow, our friend had become a mother. Because of COVID-19 distancing, we’d lost touch with the details of their journey. So, along with taking turns holding the new baby, we circled around his mommy to parse through the details. What was it like? How had she felt learning they’d be receiving a child? What happened on the day of delivery? And what was it like to be handed this precious gift—the one I now held in my arms?

Several dear people in my life would not be here if not for adoption, including the aunt who held me as the waters of baptism were poured over my tiny head on Sept. 12, 1968. But this story affected me in a new way because it had begun unfolding in my own time.

After hearing the details of the day our friend and her husband were called to “Come soon! This is happening today!” and about the hours-long journey that would culminate in them accepting this unfathomably precious gift, I began to feel a surging sense of gratitude for the birth mom. Learning about the moment she and the birth father walked away and down the hospital hall, after placing their child in my friend’s arms, touched a very deep place in my soul.

Ever since then, I have been keeping this biological mother close to my heart and in my prayers, even while continuing to pray for my friend in her life as a new mother. I am in awe of both of them; of the new parents’ willingness to take on this incredible responsibility at a time when the world is in such flux, and of the birth parents’ willingness to walk away from the child they created together.

What struck me most was how the biological parents didn’t have the best situation. It wasn’t even clear whether they’ll stay together. Additionally, this little one wasn’t the first child the mother had birthed and placed with another.

But I hold no judgment against her. Because despite her circumstances, and the severe pressures of the world to choose abortion in such a situation, she didn’t acquiesce. The mother in this tenuous situation opted to go through nine months of feeling her baby kick, carrying the child of her flesh in her womb, and journeying with him every living moment of each day, right up to that point of bittersweet release.

She had chosen the harder thing. And because of that, my friend will have the blessing of nurturing that child, introducing him to God, helping him take his first steps and forming his first thoughts, and letting him know how deeply he is loved—by God and his parents, the ones who brought him into the world, and the ones who will see him through it.

It seemed so simple. I know it wasn’t. I know there were hard moments. And I’m sure there will be times of consternation still to come in all these lives. But something happened in this story that I can’t shake.

Life was given, despite the enticements of the world to exchange it for petty reasons. A little person created in God’s image and likeness joined our world, just as he was meant to.

Both mothers are heroines to me. But the one who walked away will remain close to my heart in a special way. I have seen so many in similar situations, at our state’s only abortion facility, fall to the world’s conniving to discard the life within. In contrasting that scenario with this one beautiful life that exists today, all mantras and slogans of “choice” fade quickly away, with only the choice of love remaining.

I feel certain that someday, God will bestow on this birth mom the most exquisite reward for her most exquisite sacrifice. Until then, may God be with them all.

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Do you know where we are?
The answer will be revealed in the June *New Earth*.

Last month’s photo is of St. Thomas Church in Buffalo.

*Where in the diocese are we?*