

TIDINGS

OF HOLY NAME OF JESUS NATIONAL CATHOLIC PARISH

A Monthly Newsletter of Information and Events

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A BRAND NEW SACRAMENT, BUT A VERY OLD DEBATE (Part II)

One of the tricks used to understand a biblical passage is to try and imagine the question that would motivate the answer. It's like Jeopardy. We're approaching Christmas so let that be our example. Why does Luke have the angels appear to the shepherds on Christmas to tell them of the manger? What question do "the shepherds" and "the manger" answer? Caesar Augustus was hailed as "saviour," "god," and "the beginning of the good news (gospel)." The Christian Saviour and God, the first act of the gospel story, is alternatively recounted in terms of lowly circumstances rather than the majesty and circumstance of the Roman saviour. Jesus comes to bring God to the lowly of society (i.e., the shepherds) by being born Himself in lowly estate (the manger). The Christian inversion of status begins at the beginning.

If we translate this method to our topic of the Sacrament of the Word of God Heard and Preached, we need to ask what question this sacramental innovation answers. The first Synod in 1904 is organizational, and we begin to assert ourselves as a denomination. The Synod of 1906 is unexpected and is convened to deal with divisive and destructive matters that could not wait. Then comes the Synod of 1909. Hodur had been consecrated a bishop two years earlier in Utrecht, Holland. The church has matured and established herself. Her catholicity is guaranteed by a valid apostolic succession, but how does she stay on course as a reforming, democratic church? How does she guarantee the authority of the congregation now that the authority of the clerics has been instituted?

For one, she gives sacramental validation to the informed opinion of her lay members. The congregations are instructed by the Sacrament of the Word of God Heard and Preached. This reflects the sentiment of the earliest extant piece of Christian literature, the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, where it is written: "You yourselves have been taught by God." (4:9) As mentioned last month, our church's original intent was to empower the parishioners through Synod representa-

tion to participate in all areas of church decision-making. This requires that parishioners be knowledgeable and informed, and this requires the Sacrament of the Word of God Heard and Preached.

I too often hear that matters pertaining to "faith, morals and discipline" belong to the clergy, especially to their leaders. My question is what of substance in a church is beyond these categories? I cannot think of any. Or maybe we are reading this prerogative too narrowly. Maybe we are reading it in isolation of, or in exclusion of, the Sacrament of the Word of God Heard and Preached. This sacrament gives priority and prominence to the clergy as teachers of congregations. The status and prerogative of teachers is not to be underestimated ... nor overestimated.

A persuasive teacher and a compelling argument are hard to counter. Maybe we need to understand authority as that of a teacher rather than a Caesar. Maybe the message that motivates the Christmas story of the manger and the shepherds should be applied to churches and her shepherds. If we go back to the first authority-model of the New Testament, Paul advises the members of the Thessalonian church: "Test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thess. 5:22) This is plausible and feasible when all the faithful have been "taught by God," have been taught by the Word of God Heard and Preached. This model then erases the ambiguity of the shared authority our church constitution grants to both the clerical hierarchy and all the faithful.

The Bible and its role in the authority structure of the church have always been contentious. We entered into the fray with the promulgation of our unique sacrament. That sacrament, however, has the potential to mend the wound of division and contest in the church. It can protect democracy from its enemy of ignorance, and leadership from the temptation of autocracy. An inspired leader can teach persuasively and an inspired congregation can "test everything." This is why there is a Sacrament of the Word of God Heard and Preached.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS
MONTH OF DECEMBER

- December 1, 2007 – Confession for the youth of the church up to the age of 16 at 10:30am.
- December 2nd – **First Sunday of Advent.**
Polish Mass recited at 7:45am.
Blessing and lighting of the Advent Wreath at 9:00am, and blessing of the Christmas Wafers.
Christmas flower collection begins today.
Monthly meeting of the Parish United Youth Association at 10:00am.
- December 5th – Monthly Mass for Health at 6:30pm.
- December 7th – Monthly visitations to the sick and the shut-in of the parish.
- December 8th – **FEAST OF DIVINE LOVE.** Mass of the day at 9:00am.
- December 11th – Monthly meeting of the Parish Committee at 7:00pm.
- December 12th – Advent Penitential Service at 6:30pm.
- December 19th – Advent Marian Mass at 6:30pm.
- December 23rd – Christmas decorating of the church at 10:00am.
- December 24th – **SHEPHERDS' MASS OF CHRISTMAS EVE** at 11:00pm.
- December 25th – Mass on Christmas Day at 10:00am.
- December 26th – Mass on the Feast of St. Stephen at 9:00am.
- December 27th – Mass on the Feast of St. John with the blessing and distribution of wine at 9:00am.
- December 28th – Feast of the Holy Innocents. Mass at 7:30am.
- December 30th – **FEAST OF THE HUMBLE SHEPHERDS.** Mass at 9:00am with a special prayers for Sacred Vocations, and a collection after Mass for our church seminary.
Monthly meeting of the Adoration Society at 10:00am.
- December 31st – Mass of Thanksgiving at year's end, with the reading of the pastor's report at 6:00pm.

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SEASON OF ADVENT

Advent always begins on the fourth Sunday prior to Christmas. The symbolism of these Sundays is that they represent the putative 4,000 years from the time of Adam that the world waited for the advent, the "coming," of the Son of God. During

this time of anticipation, the church prepares herself for the Nativity. On the First Sunday of Advent, we will bless the **Christmas Wafers** (Oplatki). These wafers are traditionally shared with friends and relatives who gather together on Christmas Eve. For those who are farther away, many people place a fragment of the wafer in a Christmas card. Please remember that the Christmas Wafers have been blessed and should be treated accordingly.

Also on that First Sunday of Advent we will bless the **Advent Wreath**. A single candle is added each Sunday, representing the increasing light in the world as the birth of Jesus approaches.

To prepare ourselves to become the spiritual manglers for the Christ Child we will hold our **Advent Penitential Service** on Wednesday, December 12th. The choir leads us through this Service during which time we are encouraged to think about our relationship with Jesus and to admit any of the ways in which we may have failed in that relationship. At the conclusion of the Service, General Confession will be administered to all of the adults present. The Constitution of our church requires that members receive a full, sacramental Confession at least once a year. This is a perfect opportunity to fulfill this obligation.

Mary takes on a prominent role during Advent. She is the mother of Jesus. As we prepare to celebrate His birth, Mary obviously becomes a main character. On Wednesday, December 19th, we will celebrate a special **Advent Marian Mass**. I hope that you will choose to come and join us as we honour the one who shares her human nature with our Saviour.

FEAST OF DIVINE LOVE

Somewhere early on in the story of our church, we transformed the Feast of the Immaculate Conception into the Feast of Divine Love. We moved from the story of Mary's unique preservation from the stain of original sin, the sin that is universal and based on our shared humanity, to the story of our unique feast day's celebration of the divine love inherent in God's act of creation. Scientists and poets (read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*) appreciate with wonder the miracle of our physical universe and its delicately tuned receptivity to conscious life. Rather than create a manufactured excuse for Mary's birth to be different than all others, and to thus compromise the humanity she

shares with Jesus, our church emphasizes the miracle of life. Too often in religion we see anything not perfect as sinful. We deprecate this world based on our hopes for the next. Bp. Hodur appreciated the gift of creation and saw sin as our responsibility not our inheritance.

CHRISTMAS FLOWER COLLECTION

During the season of Advent, we accept donations to the Christmas Flower Fund. These contributions defray the church's cost of decorating the Sanctuary with all of the poinsettias that brighten up the church so beautifully. Collections will be accepted after Mass on Advent Sundays, and memorial contributions may be made through the rectory. Thank you for your generosity.

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

All of our Advent waiting and preparations, all of the flowers and decorations, culminate in the celebration of the **Shepherds' Mass** at 11:00pm on Christmas Eve. In the darkness of one of the year's longest nights, the light of the Child Saviour enters our world, and everything changes. God becomes human. The incarnation means that God directly through Jesus Christ knows of our joys, limitations, sorrows and triumphs. God loves us sufficiently to become one of us. This is a message of hope that can brighten the darkest night. Come and join us for this joyous celebration as we light the Christmas tree, place the baby Jesus in the manger, and share the light of the Christ Candle with all in the congregation as we sing the first carols of the season. Let us come together to receive Holy Communion with one another as we invite the Holy Infant into our spiritual mangers. Anyone who believes in Christ, anyone who celebrates Christmas, should feel drawn by their faith to come to the House of God on the birthday of the Son of God.

If you are unable to be with us at the Shepherds' Mass, a **Mass of Christmas Day** still allows you to be in church on Jesus' birthday. Mass begins at 10:00am. Its ceremony is not as elaborate, but its sanctity is the same as all Masses.

The day after Christmas is dedicated to **St. Stephen**, the first martyr of the Christian faith. Stephen faced the choice of protecting his own life or protecting his faith in Christ. He chose the latter. Christian martyrs are willing to allow other people to harm them, even to the point of death. This is the profound distinction between Christian

martyrdom and that which we hear of so frequently in the news at present. On the first day after the birth of Jesus, we are reminded that our faith in such a God requires our full commitment. Jesus comes into the world on Christmas to show us the example to imitate. The martyrs, the first of whom is Stephen, are called upon to imitate that example completely and extraordinarily. Mass this day is at 9:00am.

The following day is the **Feast of St. John**. Stephen was called to a martyr's death by stoning; John was called to witness to his faith by a long life. Tradition holds that John is the only apostle who did not abandon Jesus at the cross, and in turn he was the only apostle who did not die a violent death. In John's Gospel, the first miracle is the changing of water to wine at Cana. To represent this first miracle, the church blesses wine and shares this gift with her members. It is hoped that as John was saved from a poisoned chalice of wine, and as John was able to enjoy a long life, that those who share in the blessed wine may also be blessed with good health and a long life. Mass this day is at 9:00am.

On the third day after Christmas we remember the **Holy Innocents** of Bethlehem. King Herod ordered the execution of all the baby boys of that village in his hope that one of those children would be the newborn King of Israel. Joseph had been warned in a dream to flee Bethlehem and so Jesus was protected, but on this feast day we remember all of those who were slaughtered in one of the first attempts to thwart the plan of salvation that God enacted through the birth of His Son. Mass will be offered this day at 7:30am.

FEAST OF THE HUMBLE SHEPHERDS

This is one of the unique feast day celebrations of our denomination, and one of the first. It dates back to 1906 and the Special Synod of that year. We honour the message bound up in God's choice of the shepherds to be the first to hear of Jesus' birth. God chose the humble of the earth over the proud and powerful. We are always to keep this divine choice in mind. On this day we also pray for Sacred Vocations, that those whom Jesus has called to serve as priests may appreciate the shepherds' symbolism of humble, dedicated service. A special collection will also be accepted on this day to help support our church's seminary in Scranton, PA.