



Our Faith in Action

American Martyrs Catholic Community

A LETTER FROM OUR PASTOR

Welcome to Our New Parish Newsletter!

Dear Parishioners,

I've often wondered why we Christians celebrate our New Year in the midst of winter. Advent comes right at that time of year when everything is about dormancy and dying. Yet, we are reminded of new beginnings, not because of buds on our trees or new blooms peeping through the cold earth, but because everything about it is countercultural.



When we read the account of the life of Jesus, our Savior, as given to us by the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we see a countercultural life. The King of Kings born in an animal shelter with no one to give Him honor other than shepherds who were on the lowest rung of society. He became a displaced person and went back into a land associated with the slavery of His people. He came back to an unknown and insignificant place to live and work — no palace and throne, but a carpenter's bench. He turned the tables of His own society and demanded that His followers be ready to follow His way up to Jerusalem and all that journey entailed. He sat with sinners and criticized the leaders of His beloved religion. He touched the untouchables and forgave those who were given no hope by society. He taught us how difficult it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom, but at the same time

give us hope that with God all things are possible. He reminded us that He did not come to condemn but to save.

With this countercultural leader, how can we be surprised that Advent is the Church's spring, that we cry out hope in the midst of darkness. He is our light. Christmas has been hijacked by the commercial world. We must do as the early Christians. We must enter this reality and in some way turn this commercial endeavor around. We cannot sit in the corner, refusing to acknowledge what is happening around us. If we insist on ignoring what is driving the world around us, we miss a golden opportunity to bring Christ into the society of our time.

Anticipation is at a high level during this season. It is nurtured by the advertising in our media. Our anticipation is about much of the good brought before us during this season — the reunion of family and friends, the sharing of signs of esteem and love, and reconnecting with many forms of greeting. Most of all is our readiness to reach out and make life a little better for others. The poor, too, have a sense of anticipation. They await the opening of our hearts to share with love the gifts that will make their lives a little easier.

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PARISHIONERS USE ARTISTIC TALENTS TO ENHANCE WORSHIP

As a stewardship-driven community, we know each one of us has certain God-given talents that we are called to use in building up God's Kingdom on earth.

One ministry through which our remarkably talented parishioners share their gifts is the decorating of our parish for the different seasons and holy days of the liturgical year. For several decades, this important work has been coordinated by long-time parishioner Margaret Bower. A member of the Liturgy and Worship Commission, Margaret is responsible for developing plans for visual enhancements to the worship space, and bringing these plans to fulfillment.

"I was a high school art teacher for many years, and that's where my talents lie," Margaret says. "We have countless people at the parish that share their different God-given talents — lecturers, musicians, organizers, and so forth. My passion is trying to get the Gospel message out with visuals. When we all

come together with our various talents, we make a stew which nourishes the physical body and the soul. Hopefully through my visual work, I'm feeding people's hearts and minds through their eyes."

Each summer, Margaret meets with parish leadership in order to devise a master plan for the various church décor elements throughout the year. Needless to say, the biggest seasons for her Environment Ministry are Advent and Christmas, and Lent and Easter. And during her volunteering tenure, the scale and grandeur of the décor has grown to a very professional scale.

"When I first started with this, a friend and I would paint 12 to 15-foot high scenes to go back behind the manger scene," Margaret says. "But today, we have them professionally done by a local studio here, and they fill the entire back wall on either side of the altar — around 50 feet high!"

The Christmas scene, which depicts the quiet town of Bethlehem where Christ was born, sets the



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tone for the entire sanctuary, and is a perfect backdrop for celebrating the Christmas liturgies.

“The Christmas scene is simply beautiful,” Margaret says. “But the thing we keep the main focus on is the altar — out of the whole sanctuary, the altar, for obvious reasons, is central.”

The Bethlehem backdrop also provides a beautiful setting for the parish’s exquisite Nativity scene.

“When Msgr. John Barry arrived at American Martyrs, he oversaw the purchase of an absolutely gorgeous new Nativity scene,” Margaret says. “The figures are almost life-size and were hand-carved in Germany. We also hand-built the stable. And, with the painted scenes behind it, it’s just perfect.”

The Nativity scene, with the baby Jesus laying in the manger, represents a sort of high point for visual enhancements during the liturgical year. Nevertheless, the banners, flowers, various painted backdrops — which are also utilized at Easter —

and other décor, enhance our experience of liturgical worship throughout the year.

“When I am invited to talk to the Religious Education classes, I always talk to them about coming to Mass prepared — reading the readings ahead of time and getting into the right mindset,” Margaret says. “The work that we do through the Environment Ministry is kind of akin to that. It helps to set that right tone. It’s not just in the sanctuary either — we have banners up in the parking structure, outside the church and around the doors.”

Thanks to the generous stewardship of talents among the artists of our parish community, we are abundantly blessed with a beautifully appointed church throughout the liturgical year. During this Advent season, and especially as we celebrate Christmas, please take a moment to note the carefully planned art and beautifully executed décor present in the church, and meditate on the spiritual reality that it is striving to convey.



FAMILIES HELPING FAMILIES: *The Ultimate Gift*



(From left) Eileen Knox and Lori Reesing on a rainy gift-delivery day



Bags of gifts are organized at St. Lawrence of Brindisi



Recipients like this little girl are excited and thankful for the ways American Martyrs families support St. Lawrence families during the holiday

American Martyrs' Family to Family Ministry began over 15 years ago, with a mission of sponsoring families from our sister parish, St. Lawrence of Brindisi, during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Each year, the ministry assists between 275 to 300 families by providing Thanksgiving meals and Christmas gifts.

Following all Masses during the first two weekends of November, many families from our parish registered for the program outside of the church, giving them the opportunity to choose a family to sponsor.

Family to Family helps to support families of all sizes, with each sponsored family being interviewed by St. Lawrence staff members to determine qualification for the program. For the Thanksgiving holiday, sponsors provide a grocery store gift card to cover the family's expenses for Thanksgiving dinner. At Christmas, sponsors provide another grocery gift card to go towards a meal, as well as Christmas gifts for the entire family. Each sponsored family creates a wish list of what they would like to receive as gifts.

"We love doing it, and without this program these kids might not have anything at Christmas. People participating in it are truly making a difference in someone's life, and that's the best part of it." — Eileen Knox

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Christmas gifts include a minimum of three gifts for each child, as well as Christmas stockings stuffed with socks, clothes and pajamas. Gifts for parents, such as linens and kitchenware, are also suggested, though not required.

“You can purchase what they are requesting — however, if this is out of your comfort zone, any gift you can provide is appreciated,” says Eileen Knox, who has co-chaired the ministry for four years, along with Lori Reseing. Both Eileen and Lori participated in the ministry for several years until taking over the chairperson positions.

On Saturday, Dec. 7 and Sunday, Dec. 8, sponsors will bring the gifts to the church for their subsequent delivery to St. Lawrence.

“We fill two semi-trucks every year,” Eileen says. “The trucks take the gifts down to St. Lawrence. We arrive at noon, but the families start lining up at 8 a.m. in anticipation — it's like Santa's coming on Christmas morning!”

The sponsored families are very appreciative of the program, often sending “thank you” notes to their sponsors. Some American Martyrs families even assist the same family each year, thus making the program a wonderful annual tradition.

Participation in the Family to Family program is spiritually rewarding for those who volunteer their resources in order to make the program possible.

“We love doing it, and without this program these kids might not have anything at Christmas,” says Eileen. “People participating in it are truly making a difference in someone's life, and that's the best part of it. As Catholics, we're supposed to be in service to others, and there's no reason we can't spend a little extra time in our lives to help someone else. Participating in it is a bigger gift than any gift you could ever give.”



A St. Lawrence of Brindisi priest peeks through the window on gift-delivery day



Christmas bikes await their new owners



Kids from American Martyrs help to load the trucks that will bring the gifts to St. Lawrence of Brindisi

WHAT DOES STEWARDSHIP MEAN?

What comes to mind when you hear the word “stewardship”?

Do you think of it as just another way to talk about money? Do you quickly dismiss it as a notion that has nothing to do with being Catholic?

Stewardship is actually a concept that is Scripturally-based, and is absolutely vital to our life as Catholics. God tells us, in the very first book of the Old Testament, “Be fertile and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and all the living things that move on the earth” (Gen 1:28).

What does that mean to us today? It simply means that God is telling us, “This is yours, so take care of it.” One of the first things God tells us to do is to be good stewards of the gifts He has entrusted to us!

The Old Testament is not the only place where we can find ref-

erences to stewardship. Indeed, of the 36 parables in the New Testament, more than half of them deal with time, talent, possessions or money. Therefore, if Jesus spoke of stewardship that much, it should be a very important part of our lives!

As Catholics, we refer to the three facets of stewardship as “time, talent and treasure.” Although these are three concrete ways to express and measure stewardship, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops tells us that stewardship is part of discipleship. Stewardship is a way of responding to God’s call in every aspect of our lives.

The Scriptures and Church traditions teach us one important point that cannot be overstated — that stewardship is primarily based on our need to give in gratitude, not on the Church’s need to receive. Of course, both the Catholic Church and our particular parish will always

need money. However, we are not asked to give simply to defray costs and fund charitable programs. We are instead asked to remember our *need* to gratefully return a portion of our time, talent and treasure to God, recognizing all that He has given to us.

It is important to remember that stewardship is a way of life, and not a program. True Catholic stewardship involves an ongoing call to live as followers of Christ. It takes time to find and define personal goals. You can begin by examining your personal commitments to the parish. How do you live your faith in your daily life with your family and friends? How much time do you spend in daily prayer, going to Mass or being involved in parish ministries and activities? What percentage of your income should you give back to God every week? What talents do you have that could be used to strengthen our parish family?

The coming months will see us increasing and intensifying our education and communication on stewardship. We will be developing a better understanding of how stewardship is a way of responding to God’s call to discipleship. And with God’s help, changes will occur in each of our hearts as we devote ourselves to a stewardship renewal within our parish. Examine how you are currently responding to God’s call to stewardship. If God called you home tomorrow, would he proclaim, “Well done, my good and faithful servant”?



BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR STEWARDSHIP RENEWAL

What is a Stewardship Renewal?

This isn't a parish fundraiser – far from it. Our annual Stewardship Renewal is the time when we ask each other to re-prioritize the way we use God's gifts in the Church. It is the time we write down how we will support American Martyrs.

Why should I fill out a commitment card?

Your Commitment Card allows you to make commitments to prayer, parish ministries, and of-fertory giving, or what we at American Martyrs call "time, talent, and treasure." There's a two-fold reason to complete your card. First, it is an excellent opportunity to move forward spiritually and personally. Second, when you fill out a card, our parish is much better able to manage our many volun-teers and make budgeting decisions.

How many parish ministries are there at American Martyrs?

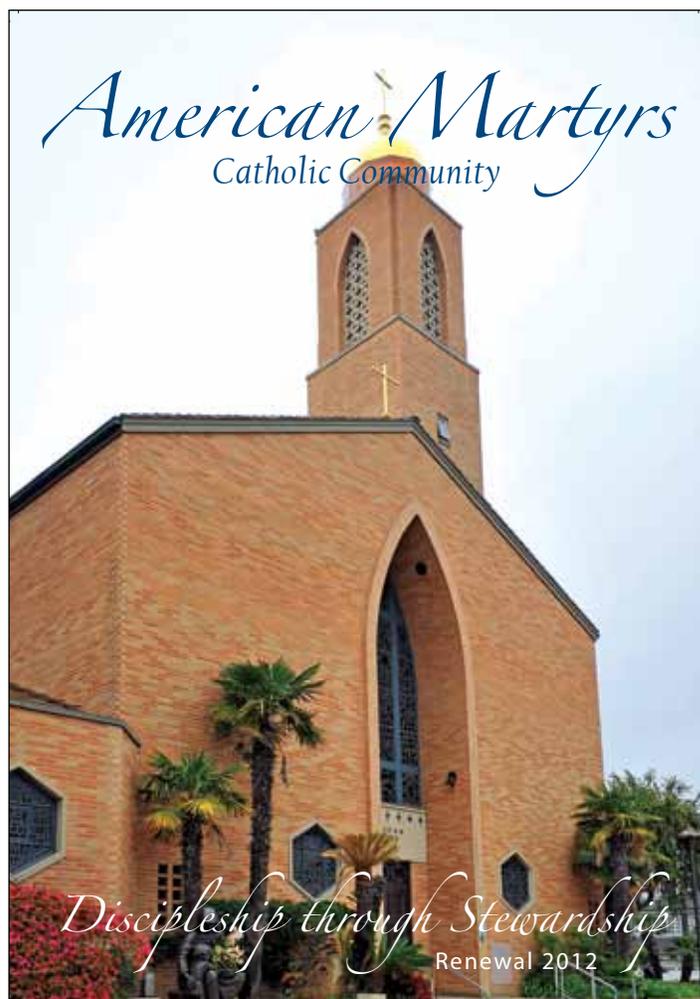
"Ministry" is a general term for any parish group, organization, or regular activity. There are dozens of ministries in our parish. You can sign up for certain ministries, or re-commit yourself if you're already involved.

What if I sign up for a ministry, but later find I'm not very interested?

You are not making a solemn promise to partici-pate in a particular ministry when you mark it on your commitment card. If you find that the parish group is different than you thought, or simply that their meeting time doesn't fit your schedule, you can change your mind. There are plenty of other ministries to consider.

I'm hesitant to make a firm financial pledge. What if I lose my job?

Your commitment card isn't a legal contract. If your circumstances change, your gift will change. In scripture, we are asked to "give according to our means." So if you lose your job, you may be unable



to give at the level you pledged. Likewise, if you get a promotion, you may be able to give more. That is why at American Martyrs, our standard of giving is based upon a percentage of income.

What happens if I don't fill out a commitment card?

Returning a card is an important part of being an active member of American Martyrs. If for some reason you lose your card, we'll send you a remind-er letter with an extra commitment card. Please make every effort to return it!

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Our New Parish Newsletter *continued from cover*

Yet it must not stop with the material side of this season. We are anticipating the great feast of the birth of Jesus. This event should be reflected in every aspect of our celebration. We do not adopt a generic approach to his feast. We are not disrespecting others when we profess our faith. It is the birthday of Jesus. From this event we reach out and with family and friends extend peace, good will and love. This should as far as possible be reflected in the cards we send. We are who we are, and Christmas is a special time to profess our faith in Christ. Hope, peace, acceptance, forgiveness, and hospitality are just a number of doorways we may use to bring Christmas back to Christ. We do not put Christ back in Christmas, He never left! When we sensitively adopt this approach, we will live the spirit of a true Advent season — a time of reflection, reevaluation and recommitment.

I am particularly happy to welcome the return of the “Our Faith in Action” newsletter. It is our hope that you will use it to be more connected to the stories and life of our community. There will be many opportunities for all of us to have a greater appreciation and knowledge of all the wonderful people and activities that make up our parish. What a perfect way for us to celebrate our Christian New Year! It is a blessing for all of us who believe that our faith must be expressed in action.

God bless you this Christmas and throughout the New Year.



Rev. Msgr. John F. Barry, P.A.
Pastor

LITURGY SCHEDULE

Saturday, 5:00 p.m. | **Sunday**, 7:00 a.m., 8:00 a.m., 9:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m., 5:00 p.m.

Monday/Wednesday/Friday, 8:00 a.m., 12:10 p.m., 5:00 p.m.

Tuesday/Thursday, 6:30 a.m., 8:00 a.m., 5:00 p.m.

Holy Day, 5:00 p.m. (Vigil), 6:30 a.m., 8:00 a.m., 12:10 p.m., 5:00 p.m., 7:30 p.m.