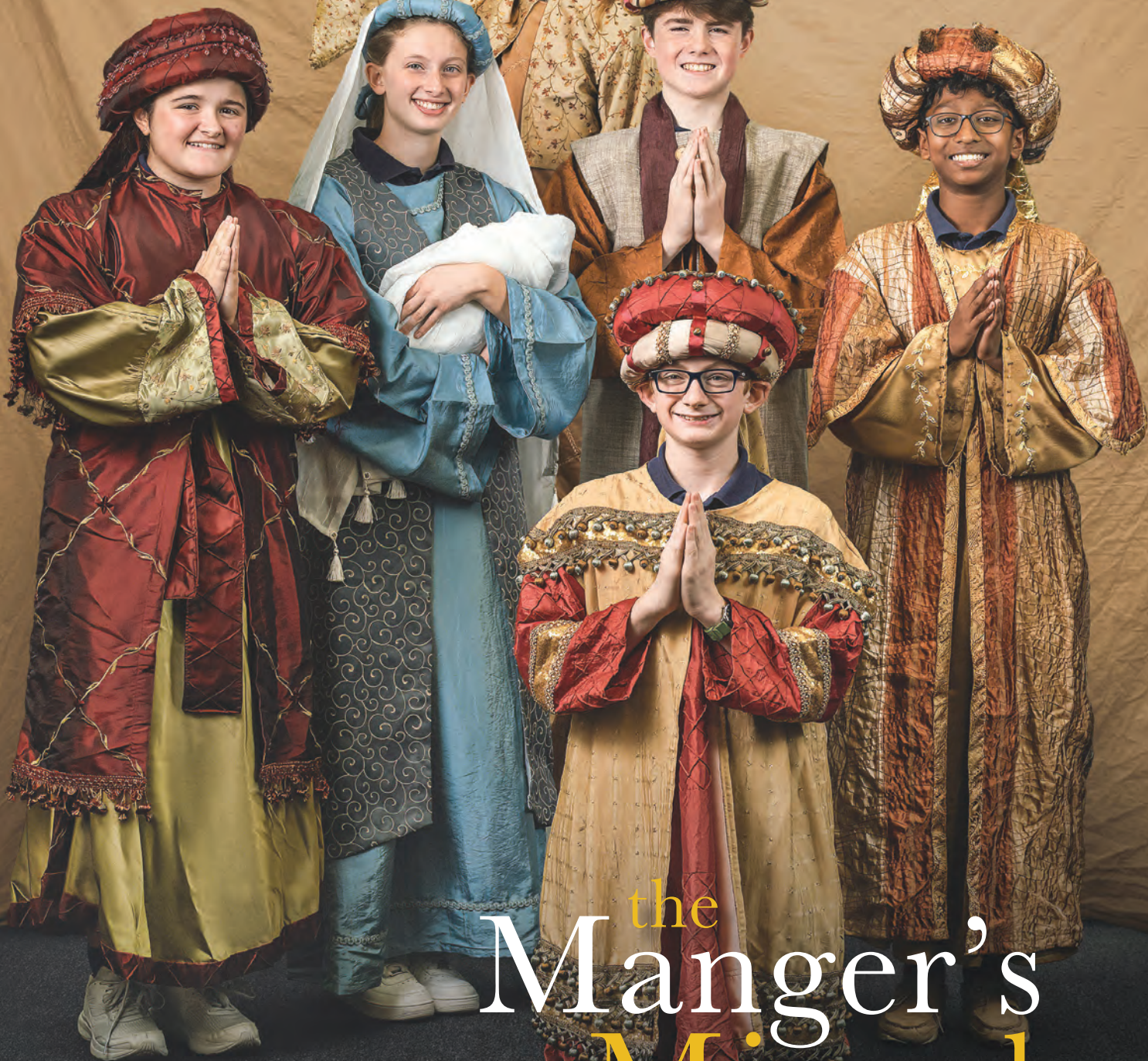




NORTH TEXAS CATHOLIC



the Manger's Miracle

JAN. - FEB. 2025
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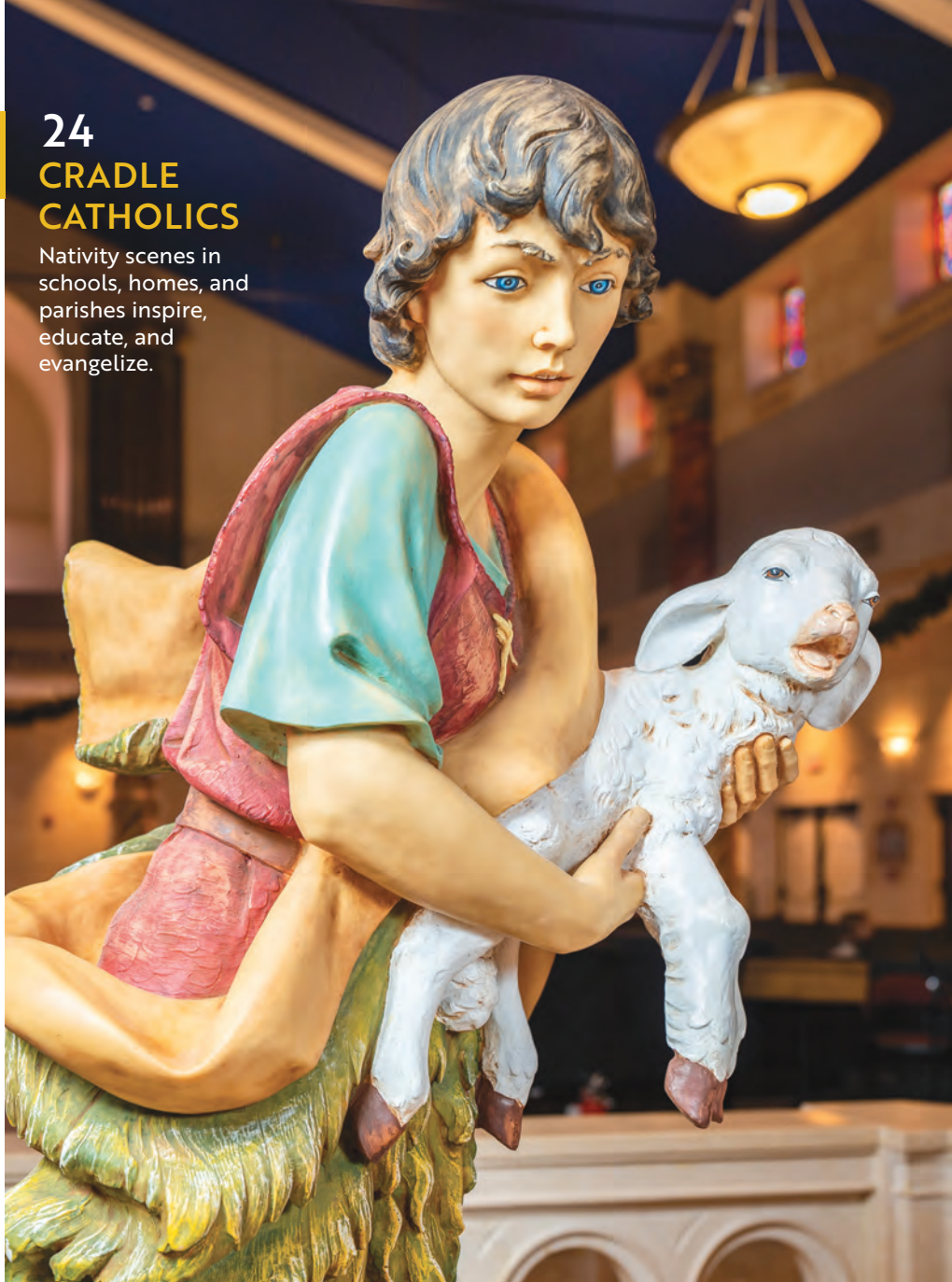
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A humble dwelling

I hope by the time you read this, your holiday to-do list has become a to-dwell list.

A to-dwell list?

To dwell in the knowledge that God is with us: Emmanuel.

To dwell in contemplation that our Bread of Life is born in Bethlehem, which translates to the house of bread.

To dwell on the fact the Son of the Most High is a babe resting in a manger.

Other than Scripture, there's no better place to ponder the meaning of Christmas than gazing at a Nativity scene, which you'll find at every Catholic parish and most Catholic homes during this season.

As we look upon the manger, our faith becomes so simple that even a toddler can understand. God became one of us because of His great love.

For the main feature article this issue, *NTC* correspondent Joan Kurkowski-Gillen spoke with parishioners from Iowa Park to Strawn to learn what makes their parish's Nativity scenes unique. Whether the figures are simple or ornate, the crèche is the beloved focal point of each parish's celebration of the Christmas season. Her article begins on page 24.

Other beloved figures in the Nativity set include the Wise Men. My children (now grown) enjoyed moving the Magi and their quite tippable camel closer and closer to our home's Nativity scene, until they finally arrived on Epiphany.

Have you ever wondered what moved the Magi to associate a star with the newborn King of the Jews?

Don't miss this issue's excellent column on Epiphany by Jason Whitehead, which addresses how Gentiles knew of the messianic prophecies given to the Jewish people.

You can find it under the "Columns" tab at NorthTexasCatholic.org. And check out Katie Leonard's column for ideas on living liturgically in January with your family.

May Our Lord Jesus Christ dwell in your hearts and homes this Christmas.

Susan Moses

EDITOR

Views from the Pews

Although the days are short and the temperatures are cool, the joy of the Holy Spirit can't be tempered. From an enthusiastic Mass celebration to quiet contemplation in Adoration, the Holy Spirit abides in and guides His followers.

Unity and celebration. On Oct. 27, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Rwandan, and Tanzanian Catholics from local parishes celebrated Mass at St. Joseph Parish in Arlington with Most Rev. John Kobina Louis, auxiliary bishop of the Accra Archdiocese in Ghana.

Time for school. Bishop Michael Olson visited many Catholic schools, including St. George Catholic School in Fort Worth (pictured here), during Advent. He celebrated Mass with the students then visited them in their classrooms, fielding a wide range of questions.

Advent anticipation. What's the best way to prepare for the coming of Jesus at Christmas? Worship Him now! Many young adults worshipped the Lord in Eucharistic Adoration at the Young Adult Advent retreat, held Dec. 1 at St. Ann Parish in Burleson.



NTC/Ben Torres



NTC/Richard Rodriguez



NTC/Ben Torres

THERE'S MORE



Read all our local stories by scanning the QR code or visiting NorthTexasCatholic.org/local-news.

Extend the invitation

ARLINGTON — Sunday, Oct. 20 was designated by Pope Francis as World Mission Sunday. The pontiff’s message for this year’s celebration, “Go and invite everyone to the banquet” (*Matthew 22:9*), emphasizes the Church’s primary task to become disciples of Jesus Christ and extend this invitation to the whole world.

During Bishop Michael Olson’s homily at St. Joseph Parish in Arlington on World Mission Sunday, he explained the call to mission is twofold.

“Part of the missionary spirit given to the Church is that we go forth with zeal both to meet Christ already present in our neighbor and also to introduce Him to others who have not encountered Him,” he said. “We go into the world to find Christ where He has called us as we meet new people and encounter new cultures.”

As part of the Mass celebration for World Mission Sunday, Bishop Olson recognized Ciara Edmond as a national winner of Missionary Childhood Association’s National Christmas Artwork Contest.

Edmond, a second grade student at Louise Cabanis Academy of Young Scholars in Grand Prairie, attends Our Mother of Mercy Parish in Fort Worth.

Edmond’s artwork is displayed at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., during the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Catholics in grades K-8 are encouraged to enter this year’s contest by Jan. 31, 2025. Go to FWdioc.org/mca-national-christmas-artwork-contest for instructions on submission.

— Jennifer Johnson



Bishop Michael Olson with MCA national art winner Ciara Edmond.

NTC/Juan Guajardo

New lessons, familiar Scriptures



High school students resume the Walk to Emmaus



High school students sing and worship during the Nov. 16 retreat.

FORT WORTH — Many Biblical stories are so rich, we can return time and again for new insights.

The Walk to Emmaus is one of those weighty passages, and those well-known verses from Luke served as the theme of the annual high school retreat again this year, for the second of three years.

About 200 students from nine parishes and Cristo Rey Fort Worth College Prep met at Holy Family Religious and Retreat Center in Fort Worth for a full day of activities — from small group exercises to lively music, from engaging talks to quiet opportunities for reconciliation and

prayer — centered around when the disciples walking with Jesus to Emmaus recognized Him in the breaking of the bread.

The students concluded the retreat with the breaking of the bread in the holy Eucharist, with the celebration of Mass by Father Robert Strittmatter.

Victoria Ramon, diocesan director of youth, young adult, and campus ministries, said last year’s retreat focused on Jesus opening disciples’ minds to Scripture on the Road to Emmaus, and next year’s retreat will highlight disciples’ actions after recognizing Jesus: They departed to tell others.

From 5 to 55 years in class



Teachers honored for milestone anniversaries

NTC/Juan Guajardo



Father Brett Metzler congratulates Nolan's Jack King on 55 years of service.

FORT WORTH — Teachers and staff of the 17 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Fort Worth were honored for milestone anniversaries at an in-service on Oct. 11 at Nolan Catholic High School in Fort Worth.

A total of 62 school employees were honored, with service ranging from five years to 55 years.

The educator with the longest tenure, Jack King, has worked 55 years in the diocese. He began his career in Catholic education in 1968 at his alma mater — St. Andrew Catholic School in Fort Worth.

A few months later, he joined the faculty at Nolan to fill a vacancy in the math department. During five decades at the high school, the husband and father of three daughters coached baseball, girls basketball, and cross country at various times in addition to teaching math or computer science.

Today he's an assistant director of technology at the school.

The in-service also included Mass, celebrated by Nolan Chaplain Father Brett Metzler, a briefing on human trafficking, and an address from Immaculée Ilibagiza, author of "Left to Tell," her personal account of surviving the Rwandan genocide.

Grief acknowledged



About 200 attend Mass for Babies Who Died Before Baptism

FORT WORTH — Decades ago, Elsa Zamarripa suffered two miscarriages but the memory of losing those babies is still painful.

"It wasn't recognized. It was dismissed. There was silence," remembered the grieving mother who later had a daughter after a difficult pregnancy. "I'm grateful that's changing."

A member of St. Thomas Becket Parish in Fort Worth, she found comfort and a community of about 200 faithful at the Memorial Mass for Babies Who Died Before Baptism, held Oct. 26 at St. Patrick Cathedral.

Started more than 35 years ago by the founders of Mother and Unborn Baby Care — the late Chuck Pelletier and his wife, Pat — the annual liturgy offers spiritual healing to families and individuals who lost children through miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion.

Making the Mass a diocesan event has ensured it will continue for years to come and



A family lays a rose on the Marian altar in memory of children who passed before baptism.

NTC/Ben Torres

gives it wider exposure.

"It's one of the most beautiful Masses and very healing for grieving families who never had closure," explained Theresa Schauf, Respect Life coordinator. "For too long, women

were told to 'get over it' after losing a baby. We're doing a better job of acknowledging this was a life and there's a reason to grieve."

—Joan Kurkowski-Gillen

Celebration for Our Lady



Bishop Michael Olson and more than 3,500 faithful participate in a procession honoring the Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of Guadalupe on Dec. 8 at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Fort Worth and the surrounding neighborhood. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

MORE PHOTOS



See the entire photo gallery by scanning the QR code or visiting North-Texas-Catholic.smugmug.com.

IN MEMORIAM

FATHER ROBERT THAMES

Father Robert Thames, who spent decades working with the poor in Mexico and Bolivia, died on Oct. 22 in Cabezas, Bolivia. He was 86.

Born in Decatur, he was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Dallas-Fort Worth on June 27, 1964, in St. Patrick Cathedral. He was incardinated as a priest for the Fort Worth Diocese in 1970.

From 1971 to 1979, he



Father Robert Thames

served as pastor of Sacred Heart in Breckenridge and St. Francis of Assisi in Graford, as well as providing pastoral care for San Patricio Mission in Throckmorton.

After serving in Bolivia and Mexico, the missionary returned to Bolivia in 1996 and, with the help of Educate the Children donors, opened Nuestra Señora del Carmen School in 2004, the first of four campuses.

SISTER ROBERTA HESSE, SSMN

Sister Roberta Hesse, SSMN, spent almost half her life working with impoverished families in the Congo, Cameroon, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Much of that time was dedicated to treating children who suffered from malnutrition or tuberculosis.

In a 2020 interview, Sr. Roberta remembered, “Working in Africa, I received so much more than I could



Sister Roberta Hesse

ever give. It wasn't as much about nursing as it was learning the value of just being present.”

The former nurse and missionary, who touched the lives of many with her caring presence, died Oct. 31 in the Our Lady of Victory Center after a long illness. She was 90.

Born Irma Margaret Hesse on June 14, 1934, the Muenster native was the eldest of nine children.

Advancing toward diaconate



Five admitted as candidates; five installed as acolytes

FORT WORTH — During a Mass for Admission of Candidacy and Installation of Acolytes held at St. Patrick Cathedral on Oct. 25, Bishop Michael Olson admitted Hoang Do, Jerry Flota, Steve Mleziva, Ricardo Romero, and Raymond Schultz as candidates for Holy Orders. Deacon candidates Alan Franklin, Thang Nguyen, Hoang Trinh, Michael Waldon, and Kendall Coffey also were installed as acolytes during the Mass.

The liturgy marks two



Bishop Michael Olson with men in formation to the permanent diaconate on Oct. 25. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

of the final rites as the men continue their five-year formation to the permanent diaconate.

“With this group of candidates, especially the seven entering their final year [as

two candidates had received installation as an acolyte at an earlier date], you see their willingness to see Christ in the person they’re serving,” said Deacon Rodney Asebedo, diocesan director of

diaconal formation. “They’ve worked in shelters and in hospitals, and they are able to see Christ in the infirm or in the homeless.”

— *Christina Benavides*



Get ready for school

Catholic Schools Week, beginning Jan. 26, celebrates the best in Catholic education

Mark your calendars for Catholic Schools Week, Jan. 26 - Feb. 1.

The weeklong event celebrates the faith-driven focus, high academic standards, and priority on service that defines Catholic education.

The 17 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Fort Worth will host open houses and special activities for parents, grandparents, students, and prospective families.

Go to CatholicSchoolsFWdioc.org/school-open-houses for a schedule of tours and other special events, or call any school for a private tour.

CLERGY ASSIGNMENTS

BY MOST REV.
MICHAEL OLSON

REV. DAVID AMAL RAJ MARIA, SAC

New to the diocese, has been appointed **Parochial Vicar** of St. Stephen Parish in Weatherford, effective Dec. 2.

REV. FRANCIS KWASI POKU

New to the diocese, has been appointed **Parochial Vicar** of St. Maria Goretti Parish in Arlington, effective Oct. 22.



Krischelle Cook, a Catholic Charities Fort Worth client, shares her experience with the Padua Project before an audience of 750 donors at CCFW's Creating Hope Luncheon at Will Rogers Memorial Center Dec. 10. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

Hope outlasts poverty

By Susan Moses

Each December, Catholic Charities Fort Worth hosts Creating Hope, an event to share a glimpse of a few clients the nonprofit has helped become the “successful, accountable, contributing, and thriving persons they were meant to be,” explained Michael Iglio, CEO and president of CCFW.

This year the decision of which clients to highlight was more challenging than ever. In 2024, the nonprofit set a record, assisting more than 1,000 households out of poverty by long-term case management and financial resiliency programs.

At Creating Hope on Dec. 10, nearly 750 community members heard from a few of these families.

Krischelle Cook, 31, credited CCFW with helping her find a “bigger, brighter future” when she was struggling with debt and domestic abuse.

She described her previous life dramatically, saying, “It looked like my house was

on fire, like all my rooms were burning at different places, and it was out of control. My foundation was exposed.”

Cook reached out to CCFW and enrolled in Padua 2.0, which offers holistic, relationship-based, and research-backed services, helping her with budgeting and accountability as well as emotional wellness.

She compared CCFW to a guiding lighthouse as she left her previous life to “grow and blossom to where I am right now. They see the good in you and see what’s good for you.”

Having completed a certification as a yoga instructor and found employment teaching dance and fitness, she has made a career with her passion.

Another client, Miranda Sweeney, 37, shared her “roller coaster of a journey” from a childhood on the Mississippi coast with drug-addicted parents to raising a family and managing the sonography department at a Texas hospital.

Like her parents, Sweeney began using drugs, and by ninth grade she was selling

pills to classmates.

When Hurricane Katrina left her homeless and derailed college plans, she moved to Texas to start anew.

She did. By 2017, she was married with three children and had been drug-free for years. She wanted to enroll in college to become a sonographer, “but balancing school and family and finances was pretty overwhelming.”

Educational navigation from CCFW “wasn’t just about financial and practical help. It was about having someone in my corner. Becky, my navigator, was that person for me. ... For the first time in my life, someone other than my husband was there for me and believed in me when I really needed it the most,” Sweeney said.

Her experience exemplifies that CCFW’s programs have generational impact. 🇺🇸

Volunteer, contribute to, or learn more about Catholic Charities Fort Worth by visiting [CatholicCharitiesFortWorth.org](https://www.CatholicCharitiesFortWorth.org)



GROWING STARTS FROM THE ground up

St. Teresa of Calcutta Parish takes groundbreaking step

By Brenda Raney

The air was crisp, the sun was shining, and wispy clouds dotted the blue sky on Saturday, Nov. 30 when more than 100 parishioners and friends gathered at St. Teresa of Calcutta Parish in Roanoke for the groundbreaking ceremony of its first permanent structure.

Bishop Michael Olson, on hand for the groundbreaking, acknowledged the occasion by saying, “You’ve been preparing the ground by coming together to worship God as He desires to be worshipped in the celebration of the Eucharist by works of charity, by fellowship together, and by prayer. ... May God bring to fruition this good work He begins today, and may He bless you and sustain you in the shared project that we all undertake as God’s people in His Church.”

The groundbreaking is an important step for a parish that celebrated its first Mass just over two years ago. The construction, overseen by Deacon Daniel Zavala, coordinator of parish life of St. Teresa, and Diocesan Director of Construction and Facilities Tom Ross, is moving forward with the goal of building a fellowship hall in which Mass will be celebrated. Eventually, a church will be constructed.

Currently, weekend Masses are held in the auditorium of nearby Hughes Elementary School; parish councils meet in portable buildings that accommodate a

chapel and administrative offices. Masses and other activities will move to the parish hall once it is complete in 2025.

According to Dcn. Zavala, the lack of a church building or fellowship hall hasn’t stopped the parish from offering all the sacraments and traditional activities one would expect in a long-established parish.

On this Saturday, the parish Knights of Columbus Council 18179 had grills sizzling with hamburger sliders and hot dogs; the Women’s Ministry Pastoral Council served sweet treats; and bounce houses entertained the youngest guests attending the ceremony with their parents.

Parish families weren’t the only ones on site to witness the groundbreaking.

For Teresa Velasco, the groundbreaking was such a momentous occasion she flew from California to join sons, John Paul and Daniel, and their families for the event. Her grandchildren, baby Velasco cousins, were among the first to be baptized in the parish.

“It is amazing to start a church,” she said with evident excitement. “It is hope for the future.”

Church growth is tough to predict but Dcn. Zavala sees evidence that St. Teresa Parish, located at 13517 Alta Vista Road, is growing rapidly. While the first Mass on Sept. 4, 2022, attracted about 100 area Catholics, Dcn. Zavala said, “We are up to about 300 families now.”

He is optimistic about the future.

“We are attracting those who are excited about not having to drive 20 to 30 minutes to church. They join St. Teresa because the parish is closer to them. Others come and check us out and then you won’t see them again, but parishioners say, ‘Oh, they’ll be back’ [when the church is built],” said the deacon.

Church and hall construction requires an enormous amount of capital, skill, and project management to make sure the parish has the best contractor support. That job falls to Ross. His expertise from 29 years in the construction industry is what led to his employment by the diocese to oversee the construction and maintenance required by 92 parishes and 17 schools.

At St. Teresa, Ross works closely with Dcn. Zavala to ensure plans are developed and follow the needs and specifications of the parish and the diocese.

In the six years that Ross has worked in this position, he has built other diocesan churches and church halls and is personally invested in the outcome.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been in a position where I wasn’t proud of the product that I provided,” he said. “The people that are going to use the [facilities] — the parishioners, when you see the bishop dedicating the church. ... It has an impact on me personally and everybody I work with.”

While the community as a whole looks forward to seeing the completed



Bishop Michael Olson blesses the construction site with holy water during the groundbreaking ceremony at St. Teresa of Calcutta Parish in Roanoke on Nov. 30. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

parish hall, some like Joan Allen view the portable buildings — or “double-wides” [trailers] as the 88-year-old calls them — just part of the process. She was part of a church opening in Aurora, Colorado, before moving to North Texas to be close to her adult children and their families.

Allen joined St. Teresa because she loved the welcoming environment and the energy of the parishioners who are committed to this fledgling community. The buildings are ancillary to her faith.

As Allen described, “God just opened the window up in heaven and sent a bunch of grace fluttering down to our little double-wide, and He created the best parish. So many graces have come down upon us to meet all these wonderful people, all of whom are committed to making this a real eucharistic community. And it just warms my heart because everyone is so grateful.” 🇺🇸



Parishioners join in breaking ground at St. Teresa of Calcutta Parish in Roanoke for the construction of a parish hall that will house the fast-growing parish community. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

The Best Decision

From teacher and music director to priest, Father John Mark Klaus, TOR, celebrates the 25th anniversary of his ordination

By Mary Rampellini

During his time as a lay person, Father John Mark Klaus' enthusiasm for his Catholic faith led him to serve in as many ministries as possible in the parishes he attended through the years.

But he had always felt called to do more and at the age of 38 made the bold and uncommon decision to leave his career as a teacher and music director to join the Franciscan Friars, Third Order Regular, in his native Pennsylvania.

"I wanted to do sacramental ministry," Fr. Klaus said. "This seemed like the next step."

Fr. Klaus was ordained a priest at the age of 48 — which for him fulfilled a childhood dream. He celebrated the 25th anniversary of his ordination on

Nov. 24 during the 11 a.m.

Mass at Good Shepherd Parish in Colleyville.

"It's a very joyful day for me," Fr. Klaus, 73, said at the end of his homily. "I celebrated my first Mass on this special feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. This feast has a lot of memories for me over the years, but especially on my ordination day."

It was Nov. 20, 1999,

in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

"The vestment that you see me wearing today," Fr. Klaus added, "was made for me for my first Mass 25 years ago, at a parish I had worked at for 10 years as the music director. It was called St. Therese of the Little Flower. One of the parishioners made a vestment for me, at the choir's request."

Fr. Klaus went on to commend the local community for their "vibrant faith" and after his remarks, the approximately 1,000 parishioners in attendance gave him a long standing ovation.

Fr. Klaus is the son of a Pittsburgh steelworker and high school teacher whose faith journey has seen him grow from altar boy to a beloved people's priest.

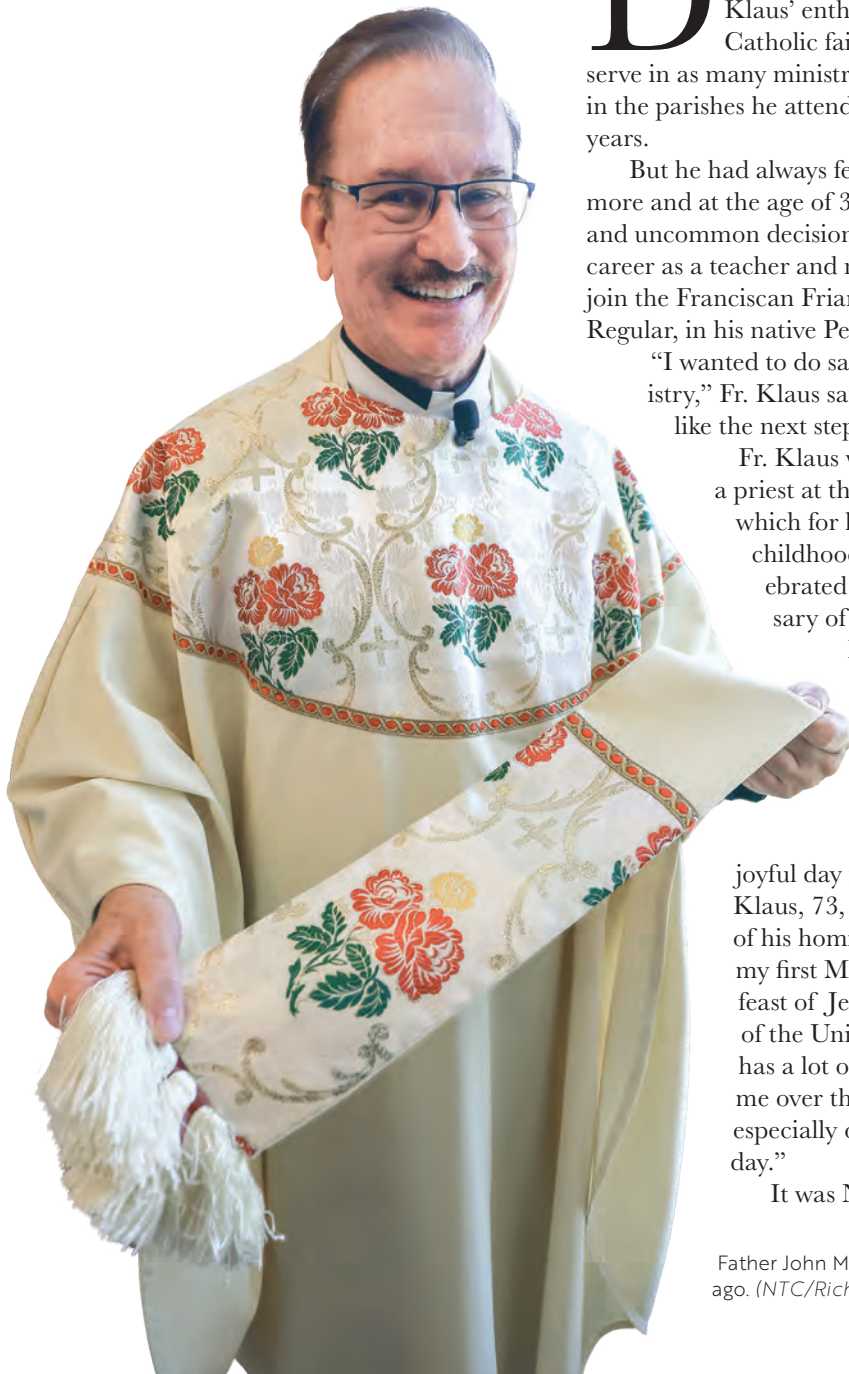
Father Zachary Burns, TOR, who like Fr. Klaus is a parochial vicar at Good Shepherd, sees in his brother priest as a man dedicated to serving God's people.

"He knows the schedule of what's going on at the parish better than anyone," Fr. Burns said. "And he'll just get in his car after dinner, or whatever, and he'll go over to the church and pop in on this meeting; he'll show his face at this [event]; he'll stop by our softball game."

"He's always reaching out. He's always around the people. He always just wants to be where the parishioners are and that's kind of like his model for ministry. It's a ministry of presence," said Fr. Burns.

Deacon Rick Wright, who assisted at the anniversary Mass, said Fr. Klaus has great compassion for those he serves.

"While most people see Fr. John Mark in Mass, performing his priestly



Father John Mark Klaus, TOR, shows the vestment he wore for his first Mass 25 years ago. (NTC/Richard Rodriguez)

duties at the altar or ambo, it is in small group settings where you can truly witness the pastoral style of Fr. John Mark,” Dcn. Wright said. “He has a deep, caring interest in people and likes to visit with them, such as after he celebrates Mass at one of our adult living facility [and] senior care centers.

“People have told me the empathy he possesses while meeting a grieving family over the loss of their family member, or during the anointing of the sick. People come away from those encounters with Fr. John Mark with a little more hope, a little more joy,” the deacon continued.

Fr. Klaus — who is a fan of both traditional and contemporary hymns — earned degrees in music education and music history for his first career.

“I’ve had a love for music ever since I was a little boy,” he said.

Fr. Klaus became a teacher in 1974, moved into a full-time music director position in 1979, and joined the Franciscans in 1989.

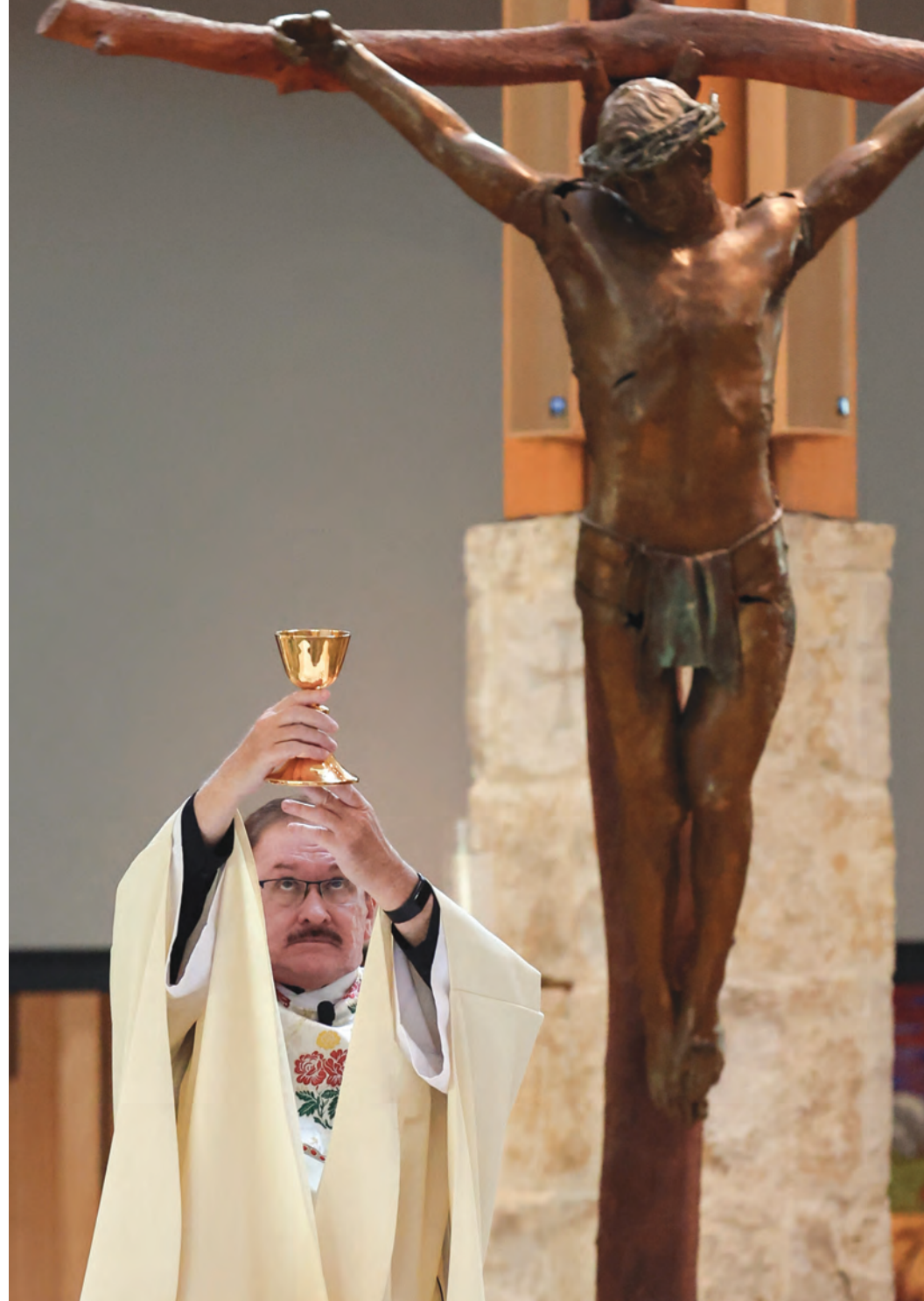
“After 10 years of being a music director I thought, ‘You know, I still feel called to religious life,’” Fr. Klaus said. “So then I thought I’d better look at some different communities to find out where God was calling me, and the Franciscan TORs were the seventh community I visited. They were teachers.”

The order serves St. Francis University, where Fr. Klaus was a campus ministry director and taught music, and Franciscan University of Steubenville. He would go on to earn master’s degrees in liturgy and divinity.

His order first assigned him to a Diocese of Fort Worth parish, St. Andrew, in 1999 before being assigned to a parish in Sarasota, Florida.

He returned to Texas in 2015 and served four more years at St. Andrew before being assigned to Good Shepherd in 2019 — another parish in the diocese that is served by Franciscans.

“We have a large congregation,” Fr. Klaus said of the parish’s more than



Father John Mark Klaus celebrates his 25th year as a priest during Mass at Good Shepherd Parish, Sunday, Nov. 24 in Colleyville. (NTC/Richard Rodriguez)

3,000 families. “It’s wonderful to be able to preach to that many people because as Catholics we are to be evangelists and preach — preach our faith to other people and help them that way.”

The parish also has a strong focus on the sacrament of reconciliation.

“We have confession three times a week and just to be able to forgive sins or give people spiritual advice on how to grow closer to God is a great joy,” Fr.

Klaus said. “Conversion and penance is our [order’s] charism.”

Fr. Klaus has a special gift for working with those discerning priesthood, said Fr. Burns.

Through 25 years of priesthood, he’s never lost the enthusiasm of his first years as a priest.

“He never complains — and he just lives a very humble Franciscan spirituality,” said Fr. Burns. 🇺🇸



Jim Breen, Debbie Morrison, Michael Halloran, and Jasmin Wells are honored at a National Philanthropy Day luncheon at the Ridgela Country Club. (NTC/Rodger Mallison)

YOU GET MORE THAN YOU GIVE

Fort Worth Diocese community members honored in the National Philanthropy Day Awards

By Sandra Engelland

The Diocese of Fort Worth was well represented with four honorees who received 2024 National Philanthropy Day Awards from the Association of Fundraising Professionals Fort Worth Metro Chapter on Nov. 12.

Renée Underwood, Chief Development Officer of the Advancement Foundation for the diocese, said giving to others is a key part of the Catholic faith and a result of gratitude.

Underwood, who nominated two winners (Stephen Breen Memorial Foundation and Michael Halloran), noted philanthropy

inspires others “to lives of gratitude.”

She added, “Many Catholic faithful live lives of stewardship, not just attending Sunday Mass but breathing through their pores and spilling out all around them in acts of service.”

Here are the honorees who are part of the diocesan community:

Outstanding Philanthropic Entity: Stephen Breen Memorial Foundation

A tragedy gave birth to the Stephen Breen Memorial Foundation.

Jim Breen’s son Stephen died of cancer at 15 on Oct. 4, 2004. At the time, he was a sophomore at Nolan Catholic High School and a graduate of St. Andrew

Catholic School in Fort Worth.

Before he died, Stephen told his family if they wanted to start a foundation in his memory, he wanted it to go to two causes he cared about: helping families afford Catholic education and helping

kids with cancer and their families.

Thus, the Breen family established the Stephen Breen Memorial Foundation.

In the last 20 years, the foundation has provided \$2.6 million in tuition assistance to students attending the 17

diocesan Catholic schools.

More than \$350,000 has benefited children fighting cancer through Cook Children's Hospital in Fort Worth, the nearby Ronald McDonald House, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

For Jim Breen, the foundation is Stephen's lasting legacy and has a

tremendous impact on the community and the Breen family.

He encouraged others to look around their neighborhoods and parishes and find ways to help.

"I'm sure a lot of young people think, 'I can't help anybody. I don't have financial resources.' But here's a way a

15-year-old kid figured out to help people," Jim Breen said.

Initially, donors were people who knew Stephen. Now many donors never met him but believe in the mission.

"This is a labor of love," Jim Breen said. "Like in most cases, you get more than you give."

Outstanding Philanthropist: Debbie Morrison

Debbie Morrison and her husband Charlie Morrison have been part of the Cristo Rey Fort Worth board of directors since the school was founded in 2018, after the couple took part in the feasibility committee.

Cristo Rey's unique model includes a rigorous college preparatory program and a work-study component where businesses and organizations contribute to students' tuition. Students who might otherwise not be able to afford a private education can attend the school while gaining valuable work experience.

For Morrison, the most rewarding part of her involvement in Cristo Rey is seeing the transformation of students.

"We have 13-year-old eighth graders come into interviews who say, 'Mom and Dad are making me do this,'" she said. "By the end of freshman year or in the sophomore year, you see them give presentations in front of hundreds of people, speaking fluently and confidently. It's amazing!"

Students graduate having completed four internships with businesses or organizations, which strengthen their resume

and help them decide their future career.

Morrison and husband Charlie Morrison, the current CEO of Salad and Go and former CEO of Wingstop, also give a scholarship to one Cristo Rey graduate each year to attend Kansas State.

Other charities she's helped lead include the Fort Worth Botanic Garden, Metroport Meals on Wheels, and Fort Worth Legatus.

"Giving to others is one of the best ways to lift your own spirits," she said. "Find something that speaks to your passion and get involved."

Outstanding Advisor: Michael Halloran

Michael Halloran, managing partner of Clearfork Wealth Management, believes anyone, no matter their level of wealth, can have a legacy that greatly impacts others.

"It's a big myth that you have to be super wealthy to have an impact on causes you care about," he said. "No matter the amount of wealth you have, you can have an impact."

Halloran started a philanthropic effort related to his business called Clearfork Cares, which has given more than \$100,000 to charities since it

started in 2016.

Last year, Clearfork Cares gave \$27,000 to charities in four different areas: education, animal causes, human services, and other nonprofits, as determined by more than 80,000 people voting via social media.

Halloran also volunteers every summer at Camp Moss, a summer camp for children with congenital heart disease, after he had two open heart surgeries in 2012 for a congenital heart defect.

"These are young people who get

wrapped in bubble wrap," he said. "This is their opportunity to have a summer camp experience in a camp staffed by doctors and nurses."

Halloran also is on the Advancement Foundation's board of directors, after serving many years on the board of directors for St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic School in Keller.

Halloran added, "I'm not a self-made man; everything I have is from God. And God is calling us to experience more of Him by giving to others."

Emerging Leader in Philanthropy: Jasmin Wells

One of five recipients named an Emerging Leader in Philanthropy, Jasmin Wells is the annual fund manager at Cristo Rey Fort Worth. Since starting the job in August, Wells has helped boost the school's fundraising and outreach.

She was a grant writer at the YMCA of Fort Worth when she saw the job

listing at Cristo Rey.

"When I look back, I think Cristo Rey found me," Wells said.

She interviewed with Jessica Walsh, vice president of development, and caught the vision for Cristo Rey.

"The focus on education and opportunity aligned and clicked for

me," she said.

Her favorite part of the job?

"I would say being in an environment where I get to see the kids every day walking to class or coming back from corporate work-study," she said. "I hear their stories and their outlook on the future." 🇺🇸

COLLARS IN THE CLASSROOM

Priests build faith and relationships with their presence in Catholic schools

By Susan Moses

Father Matthew Tatyrek clearly remembers the first time he stepped into a Catholic school. He was 23 years old, beginning his seminary studies.

Now the pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Parish and School in Denton, hardly a day goes by when he's not in a Catholic school.

Father Samuel Maul recalls that he never spoke to a priest until late in his high school years. Despite attending Mass regularly with his family, he explained, "I never really remember seeing a priest smile. I never had any connection with any of them."

Fr. Maul makes certain the students of St. Maria Goretti Catholic School won't have a similar experience.

Four days each week, the pastor of the Arlington school can be found greeting children as they enter.

He said, "They know who I am. They know what I'm about. They know I'm there to support them, to share the love of Christ with them. And I think that helps in a lot of ways."

Priests in their clerical garb stand out amid the plaid uniforms of Catholic schools. In addition to celebrating Mass, they frequently assist with drop-off and pickup, visit classrooms, and attend athletic practices, theater productions, and choir performances — all the while sharing joy and forming faithful Catholics.

NORMAL PEOPLE

Mary Burns, interim principal of St. John the Apostle Catholic School, appreciates having two priests and two religious sisters active in the North Richland

Hills school. Each week students attend Mass and have the opportunity for confession.

The clergy and Dominican sisters at the school serve as a reminder for students and staff to "look at everything we do with that vision toward heaven," she said.

Father Jack McKone, pastor of the parish, usually starts the school day helping students with backpacks and vehicle doors during the morning drop-off.

Burns said, "It's always a joyful greeting. They [Fr. McKone and Parochial Vicar Father Eric Flores] laugh with the kids and welcome them, so they have a wonderful start to their day — seeing them as real human beings, up front and personal, spreading the joy of Christ."

Sharing joy is one objective to having a visible role at the school. Fr. McKone said he wants students to know "priesthood is a joy-filled vocation. Yeah, there are certain things we give up, but there's not a vocation that doesn't involve sacrifice." The sacrifice heightens the joy, he said, "knowing you're doing something that matters."

When students see Fr. Tatyrek at Immaculate Conception Catholic School, they greet him with a cheery "Good morning, Fr. Tatyrek. God bless you."

He hopes the students learn what they have in common with him — we are all persons called by God. He said by interacting with the students, they see, "We are real people. We have good human interests that help us to foster a good and healthy life, physically and spiritually and mentally. Just being a normal person can show a child that following Christ is not for the elite or the elect. It's for everyone.

"There's a joy in being a Christian, and there's

also work to it obviously, too. Both of those things are present at the same time. I think my example, as well as Father Khiem [Nguyen, parochial vicar], embody the joy of following our Lord and also the reality of it as well,” he continued.

Joy is a two-way street — the priests exhibit the joy of Christ to students, and they experience joy when they’re with the young learners.

Fr. Maul explained, “The school takes up 60 percent of my brain power, but it also brings me 70 percent of my joy. It’s extremely fulfilling.”

FUTURE INVESTMENT

By their presence and their words, priests in Catholic schools inspire students to consider a religious vocation.

Fr. McKone said, “We talk to the kids regularly, constantly, about vocations. God calls enough people to serve, but the problem is we don’t have enough people answering. And we don’t have enough people answering probably because we don’t have enough adults encouraging.”

Students in Catholic schools have the opportunity to discuss religious vocations with a teacher, priest, or deacon, “but also to their friends and classmates,” added Fr. Tatyrek. “As much as they would potentially talk about it with the clergy, they need, really, the support of their peers to be successful with it at this point in their lives.”

When Fr. Maul observes in some students a seriousness in faith, a sacrificial character, and an aptitude for service, he explicitly asks if they have considered priesthood or religious life.

“I keep a running list in my head. I pray for them in Mass, and I pray for them on my own time so that they might be able to fulfill the need that we have within our diocese,” Fr. Maul explained.

Regardless of their future vocation, Catholic school students benefit from access to the sacraments and frequent interactions with clergy.

The active participation of priests helps accomplish the mission of Catholic schools to further the Kingdom of God by the education of children, “aiding in their formation as Christians to then go and serve as ambassadors of Christ to the rest of the world,” said Fr. Maul. 🇺🇸



Father Jack McKone helps with the school car lane at St. John the Apostle Catholic School in North Richland Hills. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)



Father Samuel Maul chats with first graders at St. Maria Goretti Catholic School in Arlington. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)



Father Matthew Tatyrek visits with a seventh grader at Immaculate Conception Catholic School in Denton. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)



NTC/Juan Guajardo

Experts discuss the alarming prevalence of human trafficking in the Metroplex at the Nov. 18 town hall meeting at Nolan Catholic High School.

TRAFFIC STOP

Knowledge helps combat human trafficking, say experts at town hall hosted by diocese

By Joan Kurkowski-Gillen

Sofia was a senior in high school when a boy she met online made her feel special. Through carefully crafted messages and false promises, he gained her trust and convinced the young woman to engage in risky behavior. What seemed like a relationship between teenagers turned dark when the much older predator, part of a human trafficking ring, coerced his victim into prostitution using violence, drugs, and threats to maintain control.

“It’s one of the tactics we see — a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship that’s built on lies for the purpose

of exploiting that individual,” Paola Chavez Reyes told the *North Texas Catholic*. “A youth may feel they know this person, but in the end it’s all about manipulation. It’s not what we think of when we hear the term human trafficking.”

Reyes was one of the professionals invited to speak during a town hall sponsored by the Diocese of Fort Worth Nov. 18 at Nolan Catholic High School to address the growing incidence of child sex trafficking in North Texas. As the outreach and training program director for Unbound Now — an international agency that serves survivors and combats exploitation through education — she oversees

efforts to identify and respond to human trafficking across Unbound Now’s service regions.

“A sense of belonging and wanting to be loved and cared for are not bad things, but it creates an opportunity for traffickers,” the advocate stressed. “Building community to support youth can prevent trafficking.”

The evening event was part of a multifaceted diocesan initiative designed to inform parents, caregivers, and educators about the alarming prevalence of human trafficking and give them the tools to recognize behaviors that put young people at risk.

Steve Kouba takes notes at the Nov. 18 town hall meeting held at Nolan Catholic High School. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

“Our next step is to focus on training our students to recognize the dangers of human trafficking — most importantly how to protect themselves and their peers,” said Sandra Schrader-Farry, diocesan Safe Environment director.

In January, Unbound Now will present awareness sessions at both Nolan Catholic and Cassata Catholic high schools with plans to offer a similar program in Catholic middle schools sometime in the future.

According to data collected by Governor Greg Abbott’s Child Sex Trafficking Team, currently 80,000 children are involved in human trafficking in Texas. The Lone Star State is the second-largest hub for sex trafficking in the United States, and the average age of teenage girls lured into the industry is 14. Research suggests social networks and online grooming play a significant role in how traffickers market, recruit, sell, and exploit children for criminal purposes.

THREATS AND MANIPULATION

A human trafficking prosecutor for Tarrant County, Lindy Borchardt is part of a tenacious team of medical professionals, law enforcement officers, and advocates who work to protect children in Tarrant County. Thanks to their efforts, predators who exploited women and children were sentenced to more than 900 years in prison in the last two years.

“That team also involves all of you,” she insisted, addressing the audience. “An engaged, informed society — a community that cares about protecting our children — is the best defense we have against human traffickers.”

It’s a common misconception that human trafficking is a border concern or that predators troll the streets in a white van looking to abduct victims.

“Cell phones are the white vans for our children today,” Borchardt continued. “In all the cases I’ve prosecuted, it’s all about social media.”

One victim was contacted by an old school friend online who eventually convinced her to meet in Dallas. Once inside the apartment, she was greeted by her former classmate’s trafficker.



When the teenager balked at going to work for him in the sex trade, the pimp threatened her family.

“He knew she lived with her elderly grandmother and her mother’s work hours. The choice was to come willingly or jeopardize her grandmother’s safety,” she explained.

Traffickers often use other females to recruit new victims rather than older males because it’s easier to gain trust.

NO TYPICAL CASE

What does human trafficking look like? How many cases are there?

“We don’t know. Cases can hide in the criminal justice system,” admitted Brody Burks, Texas’ assistant attorney general.

What looks like a boyfriend and girlfriend having a fight in a parking lot may really be the “forced” part of a street pimp relationship, he explained. More training is helping law enforcement become better at recognizing human trafficking situations when answering calls.

“People who live in affluent neighborhoods or small communities may think it doesn’t happen here, but it does,” the state law enforcement officer said, explaining large metropolitan areas are not the only hubs for crime. Human trafficking is also present in more remote areas like the Permian Basin. “Where we have men with lots of money in their pockets, little supervision, and working long hours, we have

prostitution. And where we have prostitution, we have human trafficking.”

Burks explained cartels use social media to normalize what they do and use gaming apps and funny videos to recruit victims. Transporting cars is a common tactic.

“Our investigators report there’s trafficking on all apps all the time, so you have to stay ahead of it,” he warned. “Monitor what your kids do and have them request permission to install a new app.”

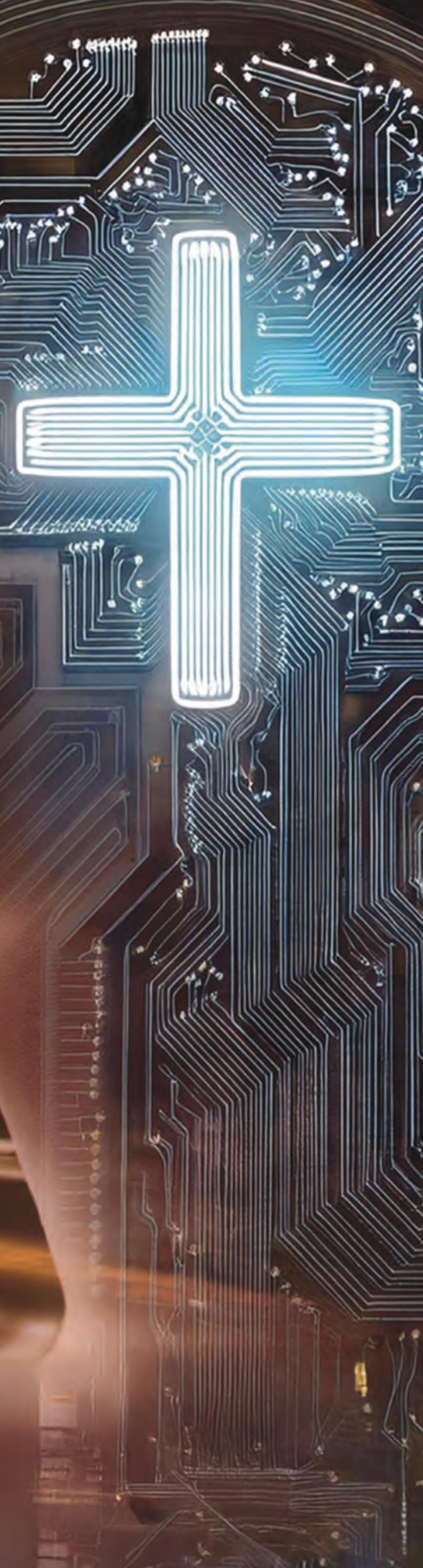
MAKING STRIDES

Welcoming participants to the town hall, Bishop Michael Olson recalled for the audience a conversation he had with Pope Francis in 2020 along with other bishops of Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.

“One of the things he brought up was the major problem of human trafficking in the world and said if the devil is present anywhere, it’s in the exploitation of women, children, and the poor,” the bishop explained.

The Pontiff asked the American bishops to combat the problem by making people more aware of the issue.

“I took that to heart,” Bishop Olson said. “This is something we can do to learn about the problem. In the last four years, we’ve made great strides. Our Safe Environment training has helped us recognize the signs so we can do good, love our neighbor, and welcome the stranger.” 🇺🇸



VIRTUAL YET VIRTUOUS

Leaders weigh in on artificial intelligence concerns, ethics, and benefits

By Matthew Smith

Charles Dickens, in his 1854 novel “Hard Times,” wrote of loss of individuality and dignity in the midst of the Industrial Revolution and the vitality of mankind striving to maintain both virtues.

“It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do,” Dickens wrote. “But not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent.”

Were Dickens alive today, he might well voice similar sentiments toward artificial intelligence.

As did State Senator Tan Parker, R-Flower Mound, and others during a Nov. 6 talk on AI at Nolan Catholic High School.

AI in broad terms involves harnessing technology to create machines and computers capable of mimicking human intelligence. The far-reaching applications of which range from Siri and Alexa to self-driving cars, facial recognition capabilities, and beyond. Implications rich in

benefits but also of fear, ethical concerns, and harmful possibilities.

Parker, himself a Nolan graduate, co-chairs the Texas Artificial Intelligence Advisory Council which, among other endeavors, is tasked with crafting ethical guidelines concerning all things AI.

Such concerns are valid from the standpoint of security, misinformation, and human dignity among other possible AI misuses.

AI researcher Oren Etzioni recently expressed fear of a “tsunami of AI-generated misinformation” throughout social media, news, and election campaigns.

Parker stated that AI, while the talk of the town of late, is hardly new.

“AI has been here a long time,” Parker said. “We’ve had machine learning taking place for decades. When you fly in an aircraft and the pilot switches the autopilot function on, that’s AI.”

Parker spoke too of positive AI impacts extant already in the Texas Department of Transportation and law enforcement endeavors but also of potential pitfalls through its use in state universities and the



State Senator Tan Parker responds during a Q&A on artificial intelligence at Nolan Catholic High School on Nov. 6. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

Texas Workforce Commission. Reasons, Parker added, that his committee is hard at work drafting proposals to effectively use but also safeguard against AI's many uses.

It's a matter of perspective, Nolan Director of Branding and Strategic Programming Alex Mishork said. "AI presents huge opportunities but huge challenges too."

The important goal, Mishork added, is to strive to maintain the human ability to reason and solve problems while simultaneously honoring God and upholding the dignity of man.

"AI brings amazing capabilities and applications creative and helpful," Mishork continued. "But also big questions in how this technology is going to be developed in a way that's not going to have adverse effects on the public and our minds."

Parker agreed.

"[AI is] a tool to augment human performance," Parker said. "We need to always make certain that AI tools are just that, tools that augment, not replace, human performance. We don't want to see it used for detrimental and destructive things."

Bishop Michael Olson in a letter spoke

of AI's benefits but also addressed the bigger picture of ethics and wisdom.

"Ethical treatment of the human individual is too frequently subordinated to questions of efficiency," Bishop Olson said. "Ethical concerns soon become subordinate to technical assessments of systems," risking the danger of shifting morality and human intellect to secondary consideration.

"The direction of this call is to maintain the centrality of the human person amidst this digital innovation and technological progress," the bishop stated. "We must ask how AI will serve human nature, the human person, and the human community."

Bishop Olson echoed Aristotle's thoughts on virtue and wisdom's requirements of human example and interactions.

"Aristotle held that one cannot learn how to be virtuous by reading a book," he said. "Even more so today, one cannot acquire virtue and goodness through the technological means of AI."

Bishop Olson also referenced Rome's "Call for AI Ethics" issued in 2020 through Pope Francis' Pontifical Academy for Life.

That report stresses the shared responsibility of governments, institutions, and

technological companies to ensure the centrality of humankind despite AI and technological progress.

The same report champions AI's "enormous potential" for improving social coexistence and personal well-being, facilitating tasks, and augmenting human capabilities.

"However, these results are by no means guaranteed," the report reads.

AI, the report authors argue, must be based less on technology and more on the good of humanity and the environment.

AI advances must be inclusive of all, mindful of the value of humankind, and protective of our ecosystem, they stress.

"AI-based technology must never be used to exploit people in any way," the report reads. "Especially those who are most vulnerable."

Mishork, after the Nov. 6 meeting, spoke of the role of AI and technology at Nolan.

"We want our students to be prepared and well equipped to use all the emerging technology," Mishork said. "But we also want students to experience the challenge of thinking and generating their own opinions and thoughts foremost, developing virtues and skills first without the booster of technology." 🇺🇸



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ARLINGTON

- 1 Saint Joseph
- 2 Saint Maria Goretti

DENTON

- 3 Immaculate Conception

FORT WORTH

- 4 All Saints
- 5 Cassata High School
- 6 Cristo Rey High School
- 7 Holy Family
- 8 Nolan Catholic High School
- 9 Saint Andrew
- 10 Saint George

- 11 Saint Peter the Apostle

- 12 Saint Rita

GAINESVILLE

- 13 Saint Mary

GRAPEVINE

- 14 Holy Trinity

KELLER

- 15 Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

MUENSTER

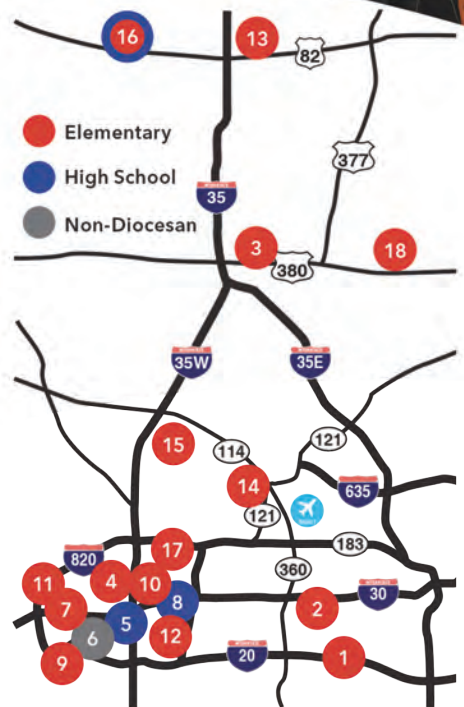
- 16 Sacred Heart

NORTH RICHLAND HILLS

- 17 Saint John the Apostle

PROSPER

- 18 Saint Martin de Porres





Three Magi are part of the Nativity display at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Keller.

CRADLE CATHOLICS

The tradition of Nativity displays in homes and parishes inspires, educates, and evangelizes

By Joan Kurkowski-Gillen

Photography by Juan Guajardo

Terry David loved Christmas. The holiday season, with its festive lights and comforting traditions, was his favorite time of year.

“He loved the Nativity set our church always put outside,” said Monica David, remembering her husband who died just before Christmas 2018. “It was always a great reminder of what Christmas is all about.”

So when high winds badly damaged the 32-inch resin statues last year, the longtime member of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Pilot Point became part of the effort to replace them. Her generosity, along with other donors, helped purchase a new 12-piece Nativity set for the church in memory of deceased loved ones.

David’s late husband grew up in the rural faith community and did all the electrical work in the church and parish hall.

“Buying a few pieces for the Nativity set is a great memorial to him,” she explained.

The church’s outdoor display is a public witness to the true reason for

the season, according to Father Jason Allan, St. Thomas Aquinas’ pastor.

“The Nativity statues are a beautiful reminder, not just to us but to everyone who drives past the parish, of our Lord, who took on humanity to reconcile us back to God,” he said in a thank-you message to parishioners. “As we enter the season of Advent, make sure to visit the Nativity and say a prayer to our Incarnate Savior.”

CONTEMPLATING THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Setting up a crèche is an essential part of celebrating Christmas for Christians around the world. Whether made of wood, wax, or marble, renderings of Mary and Joseph caring for a newborn surrounded by farm animals evokes a sense of wonder, joy, and belief in salvation history.

In his December 2019 apostolic letter, *Admirabile Signum*, Pope Francis said a Nativity scene is like “a living Gospel rising up from

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Mary at St. Patrick Cathedral



St. Joseph at St. Patrick Cathedral



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the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man.”

The Holy Father encouraged families to not only continue the beautiful tradition of placing a manger with Jesus in the home, but to share the custom with others in the workplace, schools, hospitals, prisons, and town squares.

“The Christmas

crèche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith,” he explained. “At every stage of our lives, it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God’s love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with Him.”

SHARING JOY AND REDEMPTION

When Advent approaches, parishioners at Christ the King Church in Iowa Park start preparing for an event that attracts families from across North Texas. Every December, organizers exhibit more than 200 creative, culturally diverse Nativity sets with the hope of highlighting the universal meaning of Christmas joy and

redemption.

“They’re big or small, and made from different types of materials,” enthused Marilyn Putthoff, project coordinator. “We’ve had elaborate ones made from fine porcelain to hand-painted clay sets from Mexico.”

Over the event’s 20-year history, some of the more unusual figurines were crafted from chocolate, paper, cotton balls, and matchsticks. Adding a layer of interest to the collection are cards from participants describing a family story or history connected to each display.

A Nativity set made by Karla Faye Tucker, who in 1998 was the first woman executed by Texas in 135 years, receives a lot



Students from Holy Trinity Catholic School in Grapevine have presented a live Nativity each year since 2019.

It is likely the Magi rode to Bethlehem on camels, which is why many Nativity scenes, such as this one at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, include camels.

of attention. Tucker waited on death row for 14 years, during which time she announced her conversion to Christianity.

The late prison counselor Roger Hinesh befriended the death row inmate who gave him the decoration as a Christmas gift in 1997. The manger scene, made with tiny sticks, was donated to Christ the King Parish with a request to display it every year.

“Setting up the Nativity sets marks the beginning of the holiday season for us,” Putthoff observed. “Sunday school classes from other churches come over, so it’s a wonderful way to share the true meaning of Christmas.”

EXPERIENCING BETHLEHEM

Holy Trinity Catholic School in Grapevine invites families to become

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temporary citizens of Bethlehem as they walk through the events leading up to Christ's birth during a live Nativity program.

Since 2019, students and their teachers have brought the Christmas story to life by re-creating scenes from the Gospel in their classrooms. Volunteers from the school's three sponsoring parishes — St. Michael in Bedford, St. Francis of Assisi in Grapevine, and Good Shepherd in Colleyville — participate.

"In one of the scenes, an angel visits Mary, and another is about Joseph's dream," explained Julie Schwebel, the school's business manager and event volunteer. "There's music playing as the children act out the Bible verses. It helps you picture what it was like."

Weather permitting, the final three Nativity sites are housed in the school's outdoor nature center enhanced by lights, a gazebo, and real farm animals,

including a llama. Traditional Christmas carols, sung by the school's choir, add a feeling of warmth and nostalgia to the evening.

"The children wear beautiful costumes, and the images just transport you to Bethlehem," Schwebel commented. "It gets everyone into the Christmas spirit full force."

THE CRÈCHE AND ST. FRANCIS

Only two animals — a donkey and ox — were part of the first live Nativity scene prepared by St. Francis of Assisi in 1223 to explain the birth of Jesus to followers. An icon of the Christ child, placed in a straw-filled manger, completed the re-creation in a cave near Greccio, Italy, during midnight Mass.

Frustrated by the growing materialism consuming Italy in the 13th century, the patron saint of animals used the stark, thought-provoking environment to emphasize how Christ's entry into the world was marked by poverty, exile,

and persecution. He feared that worshippers, who received little education at that time, didn't understand Christ's lowly birth reflected His humility and understanding of the human experience.

Buoyed by St. Francis' passionate preaching as well as the poignancy of the setting, some visitors claimed to see the statue of Christ move in its manger and "everyone went home with joy" from the Mass, according to Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of St. Francis.

The impact of that first Nativity scene reverberated throughout the region. Within a century, every church in Italy adopted the practice. Today, creating Nativity images remains the country's most popular Christmas tradition, an art form in itself.

When statues replaced a living



During Advent, shepherds wait near an empty manger at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish.



Angels appeared to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds in the Nativity narrative of Christ. This angel appears over the Nativity scene at St. Patrick Cathedral.

version of Christ's birth, in-home Nativity sets became a Christmas staple in churches and homes around the world.

A TREASURED TRADITION

St. Andrew Parish, shepherded by members of the Third Order Regular Franciscans, displays the story of St. Francis and his role in the "Beginning of the Christmas Crèche" next to its manger scene. The figures of Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, and a reposing lamb were made by the Italy-based Fontanini company known for its high-quality, intricately detailed workmanship. Placed on broad steps to the left of the altar, the crèche includes a white baby blanket crocheted by the late Kathleen Luffman and ornate boxes representing gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Father Damian Vincent Amantia, TOR, an assistant pastor at St. Andrew in the mid 1990s, purchased the Nativity set for the parish.

Seeing baby Jesus placed in the crèche for the first time at midnight Mass is a treasured tradition for parishioners, according to Christina Alves.

"Following the chanting of the Christmas proclamation at midnight, the presider carries the baby Jesus to the crèche. Others follow in the procession with the blanket and boxes," explained the director of music and liturgy. "Our Nativity is very simple, but parishioners love it."

CREATING WONDER

The Nativity ensemble gracing the sanctuary of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Keller is also crafted by the four-generation House of Fontanini.

"They're hand-painted by Italian artisans so we handle them with gloves," explained John Wolf, who oversees the care and placement of the 11-piece set every holiday season.

Some of the pieces are life-size and measure five feet in length. The three kings — one standing, one bending, and

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one kneeling — are accompanied by a 100-pound dromedary camel that requires four people to lift. Hoping to make the display seem as realistic as possible, baby Jesus rests on a bed of real, fire-retardant hay.

“We have a large church with an open altar, so we needed large figures for Christmas,” explained Wolf who expects as many as 14,000 worshippers at Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. “We take great pride in how the birth of Jesus is presented.”

A floating angel hovers over the manger from a wire and is a favorite with youngsters.

“Kids at the school wonder how it got up there,” the organizer said, admitting the flying figurine has had some tense moments.

“At one Mass, the altar server went the wrong way with the cross and it caught the wire,” Wolf recalled. “People held their breath as the angel shook and wobbled for a couple of minutes. That’s one of the dangers of trying to be creative.”

Placing wreaths and 550 feet of garland on the church’s 28 pillars takes two days and a committee of helpers to complete.

“It’s an amazing undertaking, but our church is extremely beautiful at Christ-

mastime,” Wolf said proudly. “I love watching the kids stare at the animals and the kings. It’s just pure joy. Children remember the Christmases of their childhood. It leaves an impression.”

A DAUGHTER’S MEMORY

Some people look back on a Christmas when they were young and remember presents, holiday dinners, or decorating the tree. One of Betty Chew’s favorite memories is helping her mother, Janie Lemley, carefully unwrap the Nativity set she purchased for St. John Church in Strawn sometime in the mid-1960s.

“The box was delivered to the post office, and my mom and a friend took it to the church,” said the Stephenville resident. “They unwrapped every figure looking for damage. Mother paid for it, and she was going to make sure everything was okay.”

A member of the altar society, the late Mrs. Lemley cleaned and took care of the linens for the rural church along with several other women. Decorating the sanctuary for Christmas and setting up the wooden stable, handmade by Charlie Kostih, was a task she looked forward to every holiday season.

“My mother grew up in that church and her family lived in Strawn since the 1920s,” she explained. “The Nativity set was always put on a large table in front of the organ.”

Visualizing her mother removing the Baby Jesus from a cardboard box and holding it up for the first time is still a cherished memory for Chew, now a member of St. Brendan Parish in Stephenville.

“It was summer when the Nativity arrived, but I remember feeling like it was Christmas,” she mused. “Seeing it always brings home the meaning of Christmas and memories of my mom for me.”

LEAVING A LEGACY

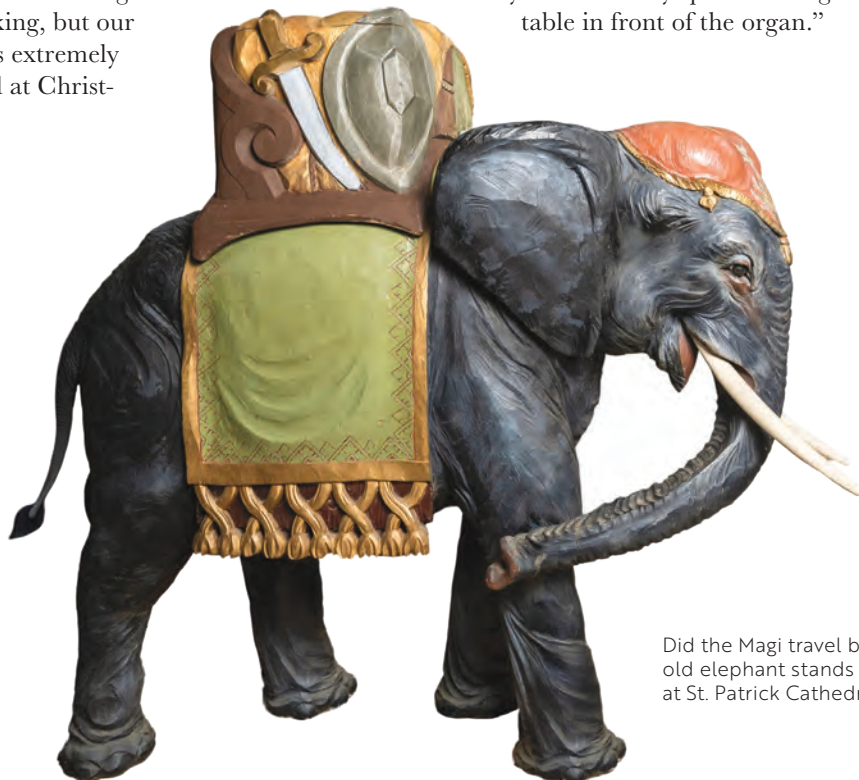
A 76-year-old bearer of the Magi, an elephant, is a sentimental piece of the Nativity collection at St. Patrick Cathedral. Purchased in 1948, it now accompanies a new set of Italian-crafted figurines procured through F.C. Ziegler, a church supply company.

Older replicas of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, made from plaster in the 1950s, had degraded with cracks and flaking over the years and are now displayed in the parish hall.

“The new set holds a special place in our hearts as it was one of the last projects our beloved historian, Kathryn [Kay] Fialho, contributed to the cathedral before her passing in March 2022,” said Edward Smith, the cathedral’s chief of staff. “Kay’s dedication and love for our community are forever etched in this Nativity set chosen for its harmony with a hand-carved elephant that has graced our space since 1948.”

A symbol of continuity and remembrance, the new Nativity set is a bridge between young and older generations of parishioners.

“It’s a testament to the enduring spirit of our community,” Smith emphasized. “It not only honors Kay’s legacy but also celebrates the rich history and traditions that bind us together.”



Did the Magi travel by elephant? This 76-year-old elephant stands ready to carry a Wise Man at St. Patrick Cathedral.

A FAMILY TRADITION

Gathering with family members to create a Nativity scene, or *nacimiento*, is a tradition Brenda Garza remembers from her childhood in Monterrey, Mexico.

“People would get together at Grandma’s house over the weekend and set up Bethlehem,” said the communication director at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Grapevine. “Some of the figures were passed down over the years or given as gifts at Christmas. The scenes were very creative with

some featuring different levels and even running water.”

A contest hosted by St. Francis of Assisi Parish in 2024 hoped to inspire parish families to adopt the Latin American custom and design their own Christmas-night scenes during Advent. Judges viewed photographs of both indoor and outside Nativity sets

designed by parishioners to select the winner.

Franciscan missionaries brought their love of the crèche to the Americas where it continues to be the primary Christmas decoration in many Hispanic homes, Garza said.

“When you put a Nativity scene outside your home, you’re telling onlookers who you are,” Garza pointed out. “You’re sharing your identity as a Catholic family. It’s a form of evangelization.” ✝



Baby Jesus (here at St. Patrick Cathedral) holds His arms outstretched to offer love and salvation to humanity.

2024

HOLY BIBLE

A Year-end Sabbath

What a year! The older I get the faster years seem to fly by. Seems like it was just Jan. 1 and now a new year is around the corner. With life's fast pace, we often do not take time to look back, reflect, and enjoy what we have experienced.

St. Thomas Aquinas says the two great moves of the will are to seek the absent good and to rest in the good possessed. Basically, he is saying we are either striving after things and experiences or resting in the things we have accomplished. I think we are really good at the first one, but the latter is often skipped in pursuit of more absent goods.

I learned this Aquinas quote while watching a Bishop Robert Barron video on the importance of the Sabbath. He explained God did not so much "rest" on the seventh day because He was tired from all that creating; rather, He spent the first Sabbath day savoring all He had made the previous six.

His exhortation to us is to reclaim the Sabbath day as a time to savor the things we have been working so hard to acquire.

The speed with which 2024 flew by and the reminder to savor the things in my life prompted me to combine the two into a year-end examination.

It seems like the perfect time to do this with all the year-end top 10

lists and all the New Year's resolutions being contemplated. Why not take these traditions and put a spiritual twist on them?

Let's allow this season to be a time to savor what we received and carry this as a resolution into the New Year, to savor, taste, and rest now, as it pertains to 2024, but also to resolve to do this every Sabbath day.



Jeff Hedglen

Here are some ways I plan to savor, taste, and rest:

1. Go month by month reviewing 2024. Remember the good things that happened, "wins" at work, and new items and experiences that brought me joy. Give thanks for all these wonderful parts of my life.
2. Reflect on the tougher moments, the times I failed to be Christ-like to others, the loss of loved ones, ending of relationships, changes that were not welcomed, and hurtful things that happened to me. Can I see the hand of God in these events? Is there anything to savor? Any lessons to be learned?
3. For the things that happened so fast I barely remember them, I will set aside some time to rest and reflect over them, or journal about them, so as to attempt to remember the "taste" of the moment that has passed.

4. Think of the important people in my life and consider the times we spent together. Try to savor the memory, and maybe send a text or card to these people thanking them for who they have been in my life and reminisce with them over these shared experiences.

5. Lastly, reflect on the times of prayer and sacrament that stand out, and times God was with me, but I was not aware in the moment. God is constantly savoring me, as He said in *Genesis 1:30*: "God looked at everything He had made and found it very good." I want to take time and savor God and His love for me.

In this fast-paced, 15-second-attention-span, doomscrolling time in which we live, being intentional about our spiritual lives is essential. Days, months, and years will fly by, never to be remembered if we let them. But we can choose to slow down, rest, taste, and savor the things God brings into each of our lives, and we can take advantage of one of the great gifts of God's creation, the Sabbath. ✝

Jeff Hedglen is the campus minister of the University Catholic Community at the University of Texas in Arlington.



Personal Epiphanies

Our family Nativity set was one of my favorite Christmas decorations growing up. Alongside the Christmas tree (which shifted between real and fake), it represented the final, inexorable step toward the holiday.

As per tradition, we would place the tiny baby Jesus figurine somewhere within the tree, resting on a bough until Christmas morning, when it would attain its rightful place. Favorites, however, were always the Wise Men.

They looked important. Even as inert resin figurines, they commanded an air of significance which was enough to prompt me to want to hold and examine them as soon as we took them out of their dusty, attic-worn boxes. It certainly helped that they were the most lavishly decorated of all the figures, shepherds and carpenters not generally being known for their finery.

They also served to underscore the significance of the Nativity to my young mind. Three established, accomplished, and ostensibly wealthy men thought the birth of Jesus significant enough to travel great distances, carrying with them items over which, throughout history, entire societies made war.

Although I may not have fully comprehended the more nuanced significance as a child, I had an implicit sense of them. What Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar did

was atypical; it appropriately portended the greatness to which Christ would rise, literally and metaphorically, in His own life.

Additionally, the story of Epiphany, as this visit has come to be called, carries much symbolic weight for our own lives as Christians; how we are supposed to contextualize our own individual relationships with God, our own journeys to Him.



Walker Price

We are all on different paths, some of us more sure than others of where they should place their foot next. However, we are all, just like the Magi, walking toward the same destination; we have seen the star, and are drawn toward its light. There can be no going back.

In a way, beginning this journey is a great deal of effort.

When someone is lost in the forest, the thing they search for most is the barest hint of a trail: somewhere to walk where at least others have been at one point in time, and who will hopefully make themselves known further on.

Like the Magi, we come from all over the world. If the world can be like one giant, dark, foreboding forest (which it certainly resembles, at times), then we are alike in our search for the blaze that will save us.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh — things that, excepting gold, appear

foreign as gifts to our modern ears. If we place ourselves in the cultural context in which Jesus was born, however, these would have all been seen as highly extravagant.

Frankincense was frequently prized more than gold, and myrrh carried deeply sacred associations, being a key ingredient in the oil used to anoint kings, as well as in funerary practices.

Apart from the poignancy of these items in relation to the life of Christ, they should get our attention as well. Not only did these travelers come great distances to see “the newborn king of the Jews...” (*Matthew 2:2*), they brought with them some of the most valuable gifts they could possibly have. Does this not, once again, mirror our own act of self-giving when we dedicate our lives to following Christ?

We should, each of us, seek a personal epiphany. Not merely a realization, but a dedication, an act of spiritual pilgrimage. This may be something we work toward for some time, as the Magi journeyed toward Bethlehem, over two millennia ago; but also like the Magi, let us come bringing Him our best. 🇺🇸

Walker Price earned his degree in English from UT Arlington. He attended St. Andrew Catholic School and Nolan Catholic High School in Fort Worth.



Birthdays, Babies, and Building Community

Teresa Ovesen shares her devotion for service with the community and her parish family

By Christina Benavides

On Christmas Day about 14 years ago, Teresa Ovesen discovered her charism for serving the homeless while visiting her son in Washington, D.C., with her husband, David.

The family of three had resolved to spend Christmas Day serving others and set off for Central Union Mission, where they prepared more than 1,000 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches “to be handed out to the unsheltered homeless men and women as they left the mission after

Christmas lunch,” Ovesen recalled.

That evening, Ovesen, her husband, and her son, Chad, agreed “this had been their favorite Christmas to date.”

Since that fateful Christmas, “stewardship has become a way of life” for the Good Shepherd parishioner, and her time with the D.C. Union Mission paved the way for her long-standing service at Fort Worth’s Union Gospel Mission (UGM), a Christian-based charity and shelter for the homeless.

“I have this huge desire to be a part of and to share this community with others,” she reflected as she considered her call to stewardship. “How can I share with others this opportunity to look at these people, His people, in the eyes and see them for who they were created to be and are loved by Him just like we are?”

A former member of the Colleyville parish’s Mission Outreach Council, Ovesen helped the parish create ties with the nonprofit homeless shelter.

“During that time period, we really ramped up our support of that group,” said Good Shepherd’s coordinator of Outreach Ministries, Ray Matteson. “She’s a passionate advocate for the homeless and a leader in the parish.”

In July of 2021, Ovesen started the Birthdays and Blessings outreach ministry at UGM to help others in her Colleyville church gain a firsthand awareness and understanding of homelessness, which is “a complicated problem that involves real people who need to know that people care about them and that there is hope for a brighter future.”

On the third Monday of every month, Ovesen leads members from different ministries at the parish on a trip to the nonprofit shelter, so they may all together celebrate the birthdays of female residents whose birthdays have

often gone unnoticed.

“The homeless need to know is that they are not alone and that they are loved,” she stressed.

Ovesen has resolved to alleviate that sense of alienation one birthday kit at a time.

“One of the most important parts of serving and living our faith is by connecting people and connecting with people. It is the heart-to-heart connections that help us to share and live a life exhibiting His love,” she said.

Through the Birthdays and Blessings ministry, more than 150 parishioners and community members have visited UGM and enjoyed a moment of shared joy with its residents.

“It’s been a big hit that’s really had a nice impact on the parish here, and the parishioners do get engaged as do the ladies who are served,” Matteson said.

With the list of ministries scheduled to join her in 2025 nearly full, Ovesen reflected on the ministry’s three years of service: “I have met many phenomenal people at our parish and learn much from each. God’s light most definitely shines brightly here at Good Shepherd.”

SMALL TOUCHES, BIG IMPACTS

Along with her work with the homeless, Ovesen has dedicated herself to bringing God’s love in many other forms of service, including volunteering at Cook Children’s Medical Center as a baby buddy for infants in the neonatal intensive care unit.

“These babies are never without prayer,” she said.

“In my heart, I think it’s really important that we, as Catholics, connect beyond our parish boundaries and lifestyles,” the philanthropist said, stressing how her involvement in service has played a crucial role in the growth

of her faith and sense of belonging in the Church.

The coordinator of liturgy at Good Shepherd, Sister Michelle Nguyen, CMR, brimmed with gratitude as she spoke of the small touches of light she has seen Ovesen share with her faith community through her devotion to service.

“In 2022, Teresa started a sewing industry, and she named it Sewing with Love,” Sr. Michelle said, adding that Ovesen took the initiative to bring volunteers together to teach them sewing skills before taking on large projects like working on the costumes for the Christmas play and redesigning baptismal garments, as well as creating a banner for the church and many liturgical items for the celebration of Mass.

“If you just come to our church, you’ll be able to see all the things that Teresa did for our celebration of Mass,” Sr. Michelle added. “It’s just amazing. She is very dedicated and very generous.”

While Ovesen has since stepped down as the sewing ministry leader, she is still quick to employ her talents for her community members, including personally embroidering the parish logo on the aprons of volunteers serving at UGM on Thanksgiving 2024.

“The thing about Teresa is that it’s all about fellowship and building community,” Sr. Michelle shared. “That is why she is always wanting to bring everyone together.”

Ovesen said there is a “two-way street of love that facilitates happiness through the love of God” that she wishes to share with her community.

“We are all His children, and He teaches us that selflessness and doing for others is key to building strong communities and families,” she said. 🇺🇸



A World of Faith

By Christina Benavides

In the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia (On Love in the Family)*, Pope Francis writes that “every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens ... Our families are invited to contemplate the Child and His mother, to bow down and worship Him” (30).

With their relationship rooted in prayer from its very start, Stella and John Amagbor of the University of North Texas faith community at St. John Paul II University Parish in Denton have been blessed with resilience and fortitude in their persistence to keep their nuclear family of five together.

BUILT ON FAITH

Natives to Nigeria, Stella first met John while completing her compulsory year of service for the National Youth Service Corps, having just earned a Bachelor of Science in chemistry. As soon as she arrived at her South Nigerian post, she immediately scouted around for the nearest Catholic parish. There, she met John, who was the president of the youth group and active in the parish choir.

Upon the conclusion of her term of service, Stella set her sights on continuing her education — in India, where she would graduate at the top of her class with a master’s in chemistry.

“I was always calling our Blessed Mother Mary to intercede for me

because I was all by myself in a country that I’d never been to,” Stella said. “But God helped me, and I came out really successful — not just as a best student, I also broke a record. I was the first international student to be the best student at the university.”

A TRADITION OF PRAYER

John reached out to Stella via Facebook during her time abroad, and with time, their relationship progressed.

“We started dating with a novena,” Stella said, laughing at the memory along with her husband.

“Our first novena was dedicated to Our Mother of Perpetual Help, I still remember,” John said with a smile.

◀ Stella and John Amagbor with their children, Gerard, John, and Eucharistia, at St. John Paul II University Parish in Denton. (NTC/ Kevin Bartram)

So began a new tradition they have since maintained.

“We say a novena every month,” John said. The tradition has provided them with a source of constant comfort and hope even when apart.

A CHALLENGING TIME

Stella began her Ph.D. studies at the University of North Texas in the fall semester of 2022 and is currently in her third year of working in surface science, “training towards becoming a process engineer in a semiconductor or energy industry.”

While the family successfully procured a visa to stay together in the U.S., John is forced to return to Nigeria for work for most of the year due to visa limitations.

“It’s super challenging,” the mother of three admitted. “But in all of it, God has been helping us, bringing into our lives people who are like a community, especially here at JPPII.”

A SMALL GESTURE

As the Amagbors settled into daily life in North Texas, they found a family in the parish community of St. John Paul II University Parish in Denton.

During the second year of her doctorate at UNT, Stella became pregnant with their third child. While at a parish potluck, she found a box of crackers that suited her pregnancy cravings. When she inquired about them, the owner generously offered her the whole box.

The small gesture had a huge impact on Stella.

“It melted my heart,” she said. “I called my husband and said somebody in church did this, and I felt like this was so sweet. ... I made a decision in

my heart on that day that when I had my baby, this man was going to be his godfather.”

Shortly after, the young mother came up to Robert Black, the cracker bringer and an usher at the parish, and asked him to be the godfather of her unborn son. After Robert spoke with his wife Linda about the request, the two agreed to be godparents.

“Ever since then, it’s more like we now have a family — we look at them like not just brothers, sisters, or friends, but like they’re our own family,” Stella said.

The many friends they’ve made along the way, Robert’s guidance, and Linda’s “kindest words and softest hugs” have all made Stella and John feel incredibly blessed.

FAMILY VALUES

“I believe that God has shown His face to us through the Catholic faith,” John said, reflecting on how his faith has helped him weather many challenges he’s faced.

Both he and Stella were brought up in families firm in the faith, and they work hard to instill those values in their children.

“We’re very big on our family values,” Stella said, “and what forms our family values is our Catholic faith.”

For now, while their children are young, the couple incorporate morning and night prayers into their kids’ routine. They hope to pass on these values and love for God to their children.

“We’ve met Nigerian families here whose kids are now grown, and they still hold onto the faith and values of their family, so we have that strong hope, and we believe that our kids also will follow that path,” Stella said. ✨

SAFE ENVIRONMENT

To Report Misconduct:

If you or someone you know is a victim of sexual misconduct by anyone who serves the Church, including clergy:

- ▶ Call the Victim Assistance Hotline at 817-602-5119.
- ▶ Call the Director of Safe Environment at 817-945-9334 and leave a message.
- ▶ Call the Chancellor of the diocese at 817-945-9315.

To Report Abuse or Suspected Abuse:

If you suspect abuse of a child, elder, or vulnerable adult, or abuse has been disclosed to you:

- ▶ If someone is in immediate danger call 911.
- ▶ Call the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (CPS) at 800-252-5400.
- ▶ Immediately report the alleged abuse to your supervisor, priest, or principal and submit the Confidential Notice of Concern with CPS report information, contact information on all concerned, description of abuse, dates if known, and how you learned of the abuse.

For more information about our abuse prevention policies and programs, visit fwdioc.org/safe-environment



A Second Family

NTC/Juan Guajardo

HE IS: Father Ronaldo Mercado, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Arlington. He was previously the pastor of St. George Parish in Fort Worth and parochial vicar at St. Michael Parish in Bedford.

ORDAINED: May 23, 2015, at St. Patrick Cathedral.

FAMILY FIRST: Fr. Mercado's late father always said one of his children would become a priest. As the only boy of four children, Fr. Mercado waved off the comment, believing a grandson would be the priest.

While he had a firm faith, his devotion to his family and his commitment to support his younger sisters' education kept his sight on building a successful career as a medical technologist for many years.

SCIENCE AND FAITH: Upon early graduation at 19, Fr. Mercado began work as a medical technologist, eventually leading to work with tissue typing and cross-matching for organ transplantation at the National Kidney and Transplant Institute in Manila. At 27, Fr. Mercado was offered the opportunity to work at a hospital in Vernon, Texas.

In Vernon, he attended Mass at Holy Family Parish during the week, and on his time off, he attended Sacred Heart

Parish in Wichita Falls.

CALLED: While working in Vernon, compassionate patient encounters helped him understand how "fulfilling the life of a priest is — that you bring somebody to Christ."

Attending the Vocation Awareness Program in 2006 prompted him to begin his discernment, but he didn't enter seminary until August of 2008 at the age of 35.

KEEPING THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER: One of the few Filipino Catholic priests in North Texas, Fr. Mercado invites the Filipino faith community to celebrate Mass in its native Tagalog four times a year.

Whether it be participating in a novena or meeting with the elderly who need a house blessing, Fr. Mercado works to be present for his second family, "which is the Church."

EMULATE THEM: "Nowadays, the family is being disintegrated and that is the enemy of our soul — he wanted to destroy the sense of unity of the family. And that unity starts through prayer. Let us always emulate the Holy Family of Jesus."

HOUSE OF PRAYER: "We need to have a family faith-based ministry, not just for couples or youth, but a family base

that really, truly strengthens the family, making the home a house of prayer." In this way, he said, a family may encounter Christ both at church and in one's home.

SPIRITUAL CLEANSE: The sacrament of reconciliation allows all faithful — priests included — to receive a spiritual cleansing.

"I find that the sacrament of reconciliation gives me healing and a sense of peace when everything is chaotic in my mind. So I'll think, 'I need some spiritual medicine and a spiritual bath,' so I'll go twice a month.

"The power of the sacrament of reconciliation is beyond our merit. It's much more of restoring us to who we are as a priest, but also that sense of connection with the grace of God, so that the flow of grace that we impart, we may also share it with the people — everything comes from the Lord."

JOY IN PRIESTHOOD: Fr. Mercado believes that the life of a priest is mysterious and filled with grace, "but it is always coming from God, not from us. ... We first taste the reward here — the joy of heaven — by the people's encounter through us when they see in us that reflection of Christ. We are just participating in the ministry of our Lord Jesus." 🇺🇸

His Will is My Will

(NTC/Matthew Redden)

It's helpful for those discerning a vocation to hear stories of how Jesus Christ called someone to follow Him as a priest or religious.

I'll share a little about my story.

I always knew God was real when I was growing up, that He loved me, that He had a purpose for me. I would go with my mom to St. Vincent de Paul in Arlington for Sunday Mass, kicking and screaming. At 16, I got confirmed and quit going to Mass altogether. I was really interested in sports, in my friends, and finding a girlfriend. But I was beginning to sense in myself that I was unhappy, that something was deeply missing.

St. Paul says in *Philippians*: "Their God is their stomach; their glory is in their 'shame.' Their minds are occupied with earthly things" (3:19). My God had become my stomach; that is, I was only searching after my own pleasure, my own desires. My mind was occupied with only earthly things.

This deep unhappiness in my life eventually led me to say, "Lord, I need you. I need your help."

When I was 22, I began praying every day and reading the Bible for the first time. Then my aunt gave me a book called

"Catholicism for Dummies." It changed my life! I never knew Jesus Christ was in the Eucharist — Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. I never knew I could go to confession and have all my sins forgiven. I never knew the Catholic Church was 2,000 years old. When I read this, I was inspired to go to reconciliation after 15 years. It was powerful! Christ forgave all my sins. I encountered His love and mercy in a profound way. I had a joy and peace I had never had before.



Fr. Maurice Moon

From that moment on, I began trying to go to Mass and Adoration every day, to pray the Rosary often, and be active in my local parish, St. Philip the Apostle in Flower Mound.

From there, I told God my happiness would come only from following His will, not mine. I wanted to get married, have kids, but I was willing to sacrifice that for what God wanted for me. I enjoyed sharing the love of Christ with others, so I thought maybe God was calling me to some ministry in the Church. I got in touch with the vocation director, Father Kyle Walterscheid, and he prudently said to wait at least a year before joining seminary. I continued working at Chili's as a waiter, helping out at St. Philip, and growing in my relationship with Jesus Christ.

I finally entered seminary, and the

glove fit: I enjoyed it, I was able to flourish, and I had a desire to offer the sacraments to the people of God. It became clear to me this was where God wanted me to be, even though I had strong desires to be a husband and father.

Just the other day, I saw a video of a kid catching his first big fish with his dad, and they are going crazy with excitement. That experience looked awesome, but that is not what God wants for me. What He wants for me is to preach and teach the Word of God, to absolve sinners in reconciliation, to baptize babies and adults, to bring sacraments to the dying and prepare them for eternal life, to be another Christ for people in all their ups and downs of life.

I love being a Catholic priest. It's tough, but so is any other vocation. God's grace is sufficient. He wants us to trust in Him daily.

I hope my vocation story can help someone discerning his or her vocation. This is how the Lord led me, and I pray you trust Him enough to lead you to the amazing vocation He wants for you. All you have to do is say yes to Him each day. 🇺🇸

Father Maurice Moon serves as Director of Collegian Seminarian Formation and is on the formation faculty at St. Joseph Seminary College.



Las hermanas Silvia Gómez, María Laura Martínez, Juana Velásquez, Edid Torres y Susana Islas, MCHS, en el convento de su orden en Fort Worth.

HERMANAS y maestras de la fe

Religiosas trabajan con esmero con la comunidad hispana

Por Violeta Rocha

Ante el creciente número de hispanos católicos en la Diócesis, dos comunidades pequeñas de religiosas, movidas por el llamado expresado en *Mateo 9,35-38*, “La mies es mucha, pero los trabajadores son pocos”, realizan con gran tesón su hermoso apostolado con los hispanos, demostrando así el serio compromiso de su consagración a una vida de servicio. Se trata de las comunidades de las Hermanas Misioneras Catequistas de los Corazones de Jesús y María, que tienen su Casa Madre en Tlalpan, Ciudad de México; y las

Hermanas Catequistas Guadalupanas, que fueron fundadas en Coahuila, México.

CATEQUIZAN CON SENCILLEZ PARA ‘FLORECER’ EN LA FE

“Configurarnos con los sentimientos del Corazón de Jesús, al estilo del Corazón de María y colaborar para la santificación de las familias”, ése es el carisma de las Hermanas Misioneras Catequistas de los Corazones de Jesús y María, MCHS, por sus siglas en inglés, que han estado presentes en la Diócesis de Fort Worth desde hace 75 años.

“Caminando con el pueblo entre el apostolado y la vida comunitaria,”

fomentan el amor a María y al Corazón de Jesús a través de la confesión, la Comunión y la visita al Santísimo, especialmente el primer viernes del mes”, señala la Hermana Susana Islas, Coordinadora de la casa local, que alberga el convento de la Parroquia de St. Rita de Fort Worth.

Su comunidad cuenta sólo con cinco hermanas y está a cargo de la Formación de Fe y/o el Ministerio Hispano de las parroquias de St. Rita, Immaculate Heart of Mary de Fort Worth, Holy Name of Jesus de Fort Worth y St. Francis of Assisi de Grapevine.

En sus inicios, los sacerdotes las llamaban “las violetas”, añade la

Hermana Susana, y narra una “olvidada” pero hermosa historia de siete violetas silvestres que “en el exacto momento de la consagración del vino” cayeron dentro del cáliz Eucarístico. Las flores habían sido colocadas cerca de la custodia, como gesto simbólico del deseo de ocho catequistas de no faltar a su devota visita al Santísimo, ya que sólo una podía asistir. Pese a que esto provocó que el sacerdote se molestara mucho, hubo personas que le dijeran “dichosas ustedes que han sido bañadas con la sangre de Cristo, Dios tiene una misión para ustedes”.

Una de esas catequistas se convertiría años después en la Madre Sofía Garduño al fundar en el 1918 las Hermanas Misioneras Catequistas de los Corazones de Jesús y María.

“La gente nos identifica por la alegría y la sencillez,” indica la Hermana Edid Torres, MCSH, que es Directora del Ministerio Hispano de la Parroquia de St. Francis of Assisi de Grapevine desde el 2019, donde se destaca el programa de catequesis de la comunidad hispana. “Yo me maravillo de la manera de cómo ellos aman a Dios”, ella añade. Las Hermanas se regocijan de la constante integración a la comunidad de habla inglesa “que nos han abierto sus brazos”.

Es menester seguir catequizando “para que conozcan a Dios y lleguen a ser santos”. La Congregación aspira también a que, en el futuro, “si es la voluntad de Dios”, crezcan como comunidad y vean ‘florecer’ las vocaciones.

‘DOS ROSAS’ EN EL NOMBRE DE GUADALUPE

Así como es extraño que San Juan Diego encontrara rosas de Castilla en el cerro del Tepeyac para presentarlas al Obispo Juan Zumárraga envueltas en su tilma, es también inusitado ver que dos hermanas de sangre sean llamadas en diferentes décadas a la misma vocación, la misma congregación y que se hallen trabajando en la misma diócesis.

Se trata de la Hermana Diana Rodríguez y la Hermana Teresa



Hermana Diana Rodríguez, HCG, da una charla el 6 de mayo de 2023. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

Rodríguez, quienes desde hace cinco años se esfuerzan y trabajan juntas en la Diócesis de Fort Worth para realizar su misión como Hermanas Catequistas Guadalupanas: “Amar a Jesús y a María y hacerlos amar,” destaca la Hermana Teresa Rodríguez, Directora de Formación de Fe de la Parroquia de St. Bartholomew de Fort Worth. “Estamos bajo la protección de la Virgen de Guadalupe”, agrega.

La Hermana Diana, Directora de Formación de Fe de la Parroquia de All Saints y Superiora de la delegación de Fort Worth, explica que la Congregación llegó en el 1952 al Norte de Texas “para atender a la comunidad hispana”, cuando era aún la Diócesis de Dallas. La Congregación entonces permaneció sólo en la Diócesis de Fort Worth, una vez que fuera establecida en el 1969.

Las dos hermanas nacieron en Fort Worth y fue precisamente en la Parroquia de All Saints donde, al ver a las Catequistas Guadalupanas servir “con alegría y fe”, que la Hermana Teresa decidió irse al convento a los 16 años de edad. Poco después de una década, la Hermana Diana se unió también a la

orden fundada en el 1923 por Monseñor Jesús María Echavarría y Aguirre, tercer Obispo de Saltillo Coahuila, México.

“Aunque sólo somos dos actualmente”, asevera la Hermana Diana, su esperanza es seguir esforzándose para que la feligresía “pueda ver en nosotros la alegría que nosotros vimos en las hermanas cuando éramos pequeñas” y “si Dios provee” que nazcan vocaciones, para continuar su trabajo “con la educación religiosa, tanto para niños como para adultos.

“La doctrina no es aprenderse las oraciones de memoria, sino que encuentren el amor de Dios en sus vidas, con su familia, con sus amigos y en todo momento,” afirma.

Ambas abrazan la belleza de sentirse más hermanas en espíritu que de sangre. Su unión “más fuerte es ser hermanas en la Congregación. Yo sé que lo somos de sangre, pero aquí las dos decidimos algo todavía más superior”, la Hermana Teresa declara. Apunta además que, como la Hermana Diana es su Superiora, “la obediencia es lo importante porque es la voz de Dios quien la guía”, sin importar que su hermana sea diez años menor que ella. 🇺🇸

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white dress with a large pink rose and a Guadalupe print, a bright pink shawl, and large floral earrings, stands with her hands clasped in prayer. She is positioned in front of a black metal railing and a stone statue of the Virgin Mary under a gothic archway. The background shows a building with a cross and the number 201.

Jamás dejaste Mi Lado

Carolina Imperial al frente de una estatua de la Santísima Madre en la Parroquia de Immaculate Heart of Mary en Fort Worth. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

Carolina Imperial regresa a México para cantar la Serenata Guadalupana en la Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

Por Christina Benavides

Hace casi cuatrocientos años, San Juan Diego vio una imagen de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, que le pidió que construyera un santuario en el cerro del Tepeyac de México. Con un ramo de exóticas rosas castellanas envueltas en una tilma impresa con la colorida imagen de la Santísima Madre, el santo convenció al Arzobispo Juan de Zumárraga de la Ciudad de México de la validez de la aparición.

Pasemos al presente, ya en las vísperas del 12 de diciembre, un cantor de la Parroquia de St. Michael en Bedford le cantará una serenata a la Santísima Madre en la Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, que se encuentra en la misma colina donde una vez se apareció. En su carta de presentación a la Basílica, Carolina Imperial describió la oportunidad de cantar la balada que compusiera, “Jamás Dejaste Mi Lado”, como el “mayor regalo de mi vida” y “un tributo a la Virgen, que nunca me abandonó y siempre estuvo a mi lado, incluso en los momentos más difíciles”.

Al recibir la noticia de que había sido elegida para ser parte de la prestigiosa lista de artistas para cantar ante la tilma sagrada en la Basílica para la Serenata Guadalupana del 2024, Imperial se sorprendió y se llenó de alegría y emoción.

La participación como cantante será un hito para la artista de 35 años y marcará su primer regreso a su México natal desde que sus padres la trajeran a los seis años a los Estados Unidos en busca de mejores oportunidades.

Imperial, quien recientemente recibió una tarjeta de residencia a través de una visa para víctimas de violencia doméstica, destacó su asombro por el hecho de que su primera visita de regreso será para cantarle a La Virgencita.

“Hay mucho simbolismo ahí en mi corazón”, dice la ex beneficiaria de

DACA. “Se siente como que México me está abriendo los brazos y estoy entrando por la puerta grande. No hay una puerta para mí en mi corazón más grande que ir a cantarle a la Virgen”.

‘YA HABÍAS HECHO EL MILAGRO’

Al reflexionar sobre su largo viaje a la Basílica, la cantautora local recuerda los muchos “pequeños toques de Dios” que ha experimentado en su vida. “Siento que Dios ha moldeado las cosas y me ha guiado por este camino todo el tiempo”.

La conversión de Imperial a la Iglesia comenzó con una invitación para cantar el Ave María en una boda en una parroquia de María Inmaculada. Su talento fue reconocido y recibió más solicitudes para cantar en varias parroquias del Metroplex, incluidas Immaculate Heart of Mary de Fort Worth y St. Michael de Bedford, entre otras.

“Siempre ha habido pequeñas señales y recordatorios de que Ella está ahí”, señala.

‘ME SENTÍ TAN SOLA’

En el 2018, Imperial se casó y soñó con formar una familia. Ese sueño lamentablemente se detuvo en el tumulto de su matrimonio, que terminó en el 2020 después de que Imperial fuera llevada a un refugio para mujeres debido a la violencia doméstica.

“La vida pasa muy rápido”, afirma. “Recuerdo la Carolina que era cuando comencé la relación, pasando por las clases sobre el matrimonio, la preparación para ello, casándome ese día, y luego cómo todo se desmoronó y sintiéndome tan sola”.

“Y ahí es cuando finalmente nos apoyamos de nuevo en Dios”, continúa diciendo. “Nos apoyamos en nuestro Rosario como cuando María estuvo al pie de la cruz”.

Desde entonces, la cantante ha seguido trabajando como voluntaria y actuando para quienes buscan refugio en SafeHaven del Condado de Tarrant,

buscando ser un “faro de esperanza” para otros sobrevivientes.

“Si rezamos, nunca es en vano”, asevera Imperial. “Sólo tenemos que confiar y tener la fe que se requiere para llevar las cosas adelante y hacer lo mejor que podamos día a día”.

‘JAMÁS DEJASTE MI LADO’

Cuando un conductor ebrio chocó su automóvil en marzo del 2022, el automóvil quedó destruido y el accidente le afectó un tanto los nervios a Imperial, pero no tuvo fracturas ni raspones.

El incidente finalmente le recordó que debía apoyarse en su fe. “Dios sabe lo que hace y tiene un tiempo perfecto y un plan para todo”.

Poco después, Imperial recibió la noticia de la anulación de su matrimonio.

De inmediato, sintió una esperanza renovada para su futuro; vergüenza por dudar de su fe; y un poderoso alivio de que Dios y Nuestra Señora nunca la abandonarán.

“Esto realmente está sucediendo”, Imperial se recuerda pensando. “Tengo una segunda oportunidad en la vida. Puedo hacerlo mejor.” Y luego me llamaron para participar en una serenata guadalupana en Dallas y fue entonces cuando escribí la canción. Cada palabra de la canción es lo que tenía que decirle a La Virgencita”.

Un año más tarde, Imperial ahora se prepara en estos momentos para cantar en su tierra natal esta canción fruto de su amor y gratitud a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe y espera que todos los que escuchen su música recuerden que “Dios está vivo y muy bien; y que no importa cuán terrible sea nuestra situación, no importa en qué situación nos encontremos, Él siempre está allí”.

“Dios sabe que somos humanos y la Virgencita también”, continuó diciendo Imperial. “Por eso Ella nos ama, como lo haría una madre”.✝

el camino de los SANTOS REYES

Las tradiciones del Día de Reyes concluyen la temporada navideña con un significado cultural y espiritual

Por Joan Kurkowski-Gillen

El Día de Reyes fue siempre una festividad importante para Wanda Ortiz y su familia.

“Fue algo muy importante porque mi mamá, María Dolores, nació el 6 de enero, día de la Fiesta de los Reyes Magos”, explica Ortiz, oriunda de San Juan, Puerto Rico. “Lo celebramos por tres días”.

Tras mudarse a Kentucky, Ortiz se reunió con sus familiares en Puerto Rico después del Día de Navidad y permaneció allí hasta que terminaron las festividades del Día de Reyes.

La Misa del Día de Reyes, en que tres hombres vestidos como los Reyes Magos llevaron sus regalos al altar, fue la liturgia más hermosa de la temporada navideña que la feligrés de la Parroquia de All Saints de Fort Worth jamás haya presenciado.

“Cuando éramos niños regresábamos a casa de la iglesia y abríamos nuestros regalos”, recuerda Ortiz. “Mi abuelo decía siempre que el nacimiento de mi madre era su regalo de los Reyes Magos”.

SEGUIR LA ESTRELLA

Las Sagradas Escrituras nos dicen muy poco acerca de los Reyes Magos

que llegaron a Belén desde Oriente para rendir homenaje a Jesús recién nacido. Se desconoce además cuántos visitantes fueron a ver la Sagrada Familia y cuál era su estatus social.

Mateo en su Evangelio no llama reyes a los viajeros, pero los obsequios que le traen al niño Jesús — oro, incienso y mirra — simbolizan riqueza, poder y majestuosidad. La capacidad de los tres reyes para reconocer que había ocurrido un acontecimiento significativo en la historia, debido a la aparición de una brillante estrella en el firmamento, cumple una profecía que se encuentra en el Antiguo Testamento.

“Te inundará una multitud de camellos: llegarán los de Madián y Efa. Los de Sabá vendrán todos trayendo oro e incienso, y proclamando las alabanzas de Yavé”. (*Isaias 60, 6*)

El oro indica la majestad de Jesús; Él es El Rey; el incienso simboliza Su divinidad, pues se ofrece a los dioses; y la mirra simboliza Su sufrimiento y muerte, que es parte de Su futuro para salvar a la humanidad.

Dos mil años han transcurrido, pero el 6 de enero de cada año se sigue recordando a los Reyes Magos en la



Las imágenes de los Reyes Magos en la Parroquia de St. Michael en Bedford. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)

Solemnidad de la Epifanía del Señor, por su papel en la historia de la Natividad y la salvación de la humanidad. Es una de las celebraciones cristianas más antiguas que se remonta al siglo II.

Según la tradición cristiana occidental, los doce días de la Navidad comienzan con el nacimiento de Jesús el 25 de diciembre y culminan el 6 de enero, Día de la Epifanía, con la visita de los Magos de oriente, que fueron los primeros gentiles que presenciaron la revelación y manifestación de Dios a todo el mundo.

“Los Reyes Magos nos muestran que Dios tiene la intención de traer la salvación a todo el mundo y no sólo a un grupo selecto”, señala el Padre Tim Thompson, párroco de la Parroquia de All Saints.

Los estudiosos creen que estos visitantes y testigos de la Natividad eran astrólogos multiculturales que pudieron haber venido de diferentes partes de Oriente.

“Los Reyes Magos estudiaban las

estrellas y eso fue lo que los llevó a Cristo”, añade el párroco. “Esto nos dice que Dios actúa de muchas maneras, y a través de muchos medios, para llegar a la gente, incluso a los que no son cristianos”.

La palabra Epifanía significa “manifestación”; y varios momentos de los primeros años de vida y del ministerio de Jesús se consideran “epifanías” de su divinidad. Incluido su nacimiento en Belén, la visita de los Reyes Magos, su bautismo realizado por Juan y su primer milagro en las bodas de Caná.

RECIBIR REGALOS

Desde el 1970, los católicos romanos de los Estados Unidos celebran la Fiesta de la Epifanía el primer domingo después del 1 de enero, que en el 2025 se celebrará el 5 de enero.

En muchos países hispanos con profundas raíces católicas, la llegada de los Reyes Magos se celebra con desfiles, comidas tradicionales y regalos.

“Los Reyes Magos le dieron a Jesús sus primeros regalos, por lo que ésa es

una gran diferencia entre cómo recibimos regalos en los países latinoamericanos y aquí en los Estados Unidos”, señala Arturo Marrero, empleado diocesano y ex residente de Puerto Rico. “El Día de los Reyes Magos es la celebración más grande de Navidad y comprende muchas fiestas y cantos”.

En la víspera del Día de Reyes, se anima a los niños a llenar una caja de zapatos con hierba, que tradicionalmente se ponía debajo de la cama, para que los camellos coman, una costumbre similar a dejar zanahorias para los renos de Santa Claus.

“Santa tiene más bien un propósito comercial, pero el Día de Reyes es bíblico; así, que se trata de una historia diferente”, enfatiza Marrero.

Las decoraciones que representan a los Reyes Magos se exhiben en los hogares durante todo el año y son parte importante de la cultura puertorriqueña, lo que brinda a los padres la oportunidad

CONTINÚA EN LA PÁGINA 46

DE LA PÁGINA 45

de enseñarles a los niños quiénes eran los Reyes Magos, qué llevaron al Niño Jesús y qué significa todo eso.

“Tengo un cuadro de los Tres Reyes Magos con la bandera puertorriqueña en mi oficina”, dice Marrero con orgullo. “Extraño el Día de Reyes, no sólo las celebraciones litúrgicas de la Iglesia, sino también las fiestas que se celebran con familiares y amigos”.

Pedro Moreno, que nació en la ciudad de Nueva York, pero se mudó a Puerto Rico con su familia cuando era adolescente, aprendió rápidamente las ventajas de celebrar las tradiciones navideñas de ambos países.

“Recibimos regalos el Día de Navidad y el Día de Reyes”, Moreno apunta con regocijo. “En nuestra casa funcionaba así: recibías ropa nueva en la Navidad, pero juguetes el Día de Reyes”.

Los obispos de Puerto Rico intentan guiar a sus rebaños hacia una temporada de Adviento adecuada, pero es difícil competir con el entusiasmo que la cultura hispana tiene por la Navidad y el Día de Reyes, añade.

“En Nueva York se veían árboles de Navidad en la acera ya el 26 de diciembre, pero en Puerto Rico la Navidad es una temporada que nunca termina”, continúa diciendo Moreno. “Incluso mientras nos preparamos para el Día de los Reyes Magos, seguimos celebrando con música, cantos y comida”. 🇵🇷



NTC/Juan Guajardo

AMBIENTE SEGURO

Para Reportar Mala Conducta Sexual:

Si usted o alguien que usted conoce es víctima de abuso sexual por parte de cualquiera que sirve a la Iglesia, puede:

- ▶ Llamar a la Línea Directa de Asistencia a Víctimas: (817) 602-5119.
- ▶ Llamar al Director Diocesano de Ambiente Seguro: (817) 945-9334 y dejar un mensaje.
- ▶ Llamar al Canciller de la Diócesis: (817) 945-9315.

Para Reportar Abuso o si Sospecha de Abuso:

Si usted sospecha de abuso de un niño, anciano, o adulto vulnerable, o si abuso ha sido revelado a usted,

- ▶ Si alguien está en peligro inmediato, llame al 911
- ▶ Llame al Departamento de Servicios para la Familia y de Protección (DFPS) de Texas al (800) 252-5400.
- ▶ Reporte inmediatamente el presunto abuso a su supervisor, sacerdote o director, y presente el Aviso Confidencial de Preocupación con la información requerida por DFPS.

Para más información sobre nuestros programas de prevención de abuso, visite fwdioc.org/safe-environment



REUNIDOS PARA HONRAR A Nuestra Madre

Por Christina Benavides

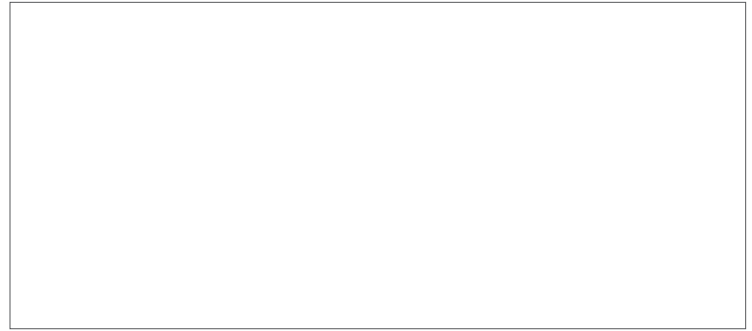
El 18 de diciembre, Día de la Solemnidad de la Inmaculada Concepción, alrededor de 3, 500 fieles se reunieron en la Parroquia de Immaculate Heart of Mary de Fort Worth para honrar a nuestra Santísima Madre y celebrar también la Fiesta de la Virgen de Guadalupe, que se aproxima. La misa fue celebrada por el Rev. Obispo Michael Olson, el párroco Padre Óscar Sánchez, CORC, y varios sacerdotes. La comunidad parroquial, en colaboración con el Ministerio Hispano diocesano, realizó una procesión de una milla por el vecindario. Un grupo de matachines realizó sus bailes tradicionales; las Guadalupanas dirigieron el rezo del rosario; y varios de los ministerios parroquiales se unieron en oración. 🇺🇸



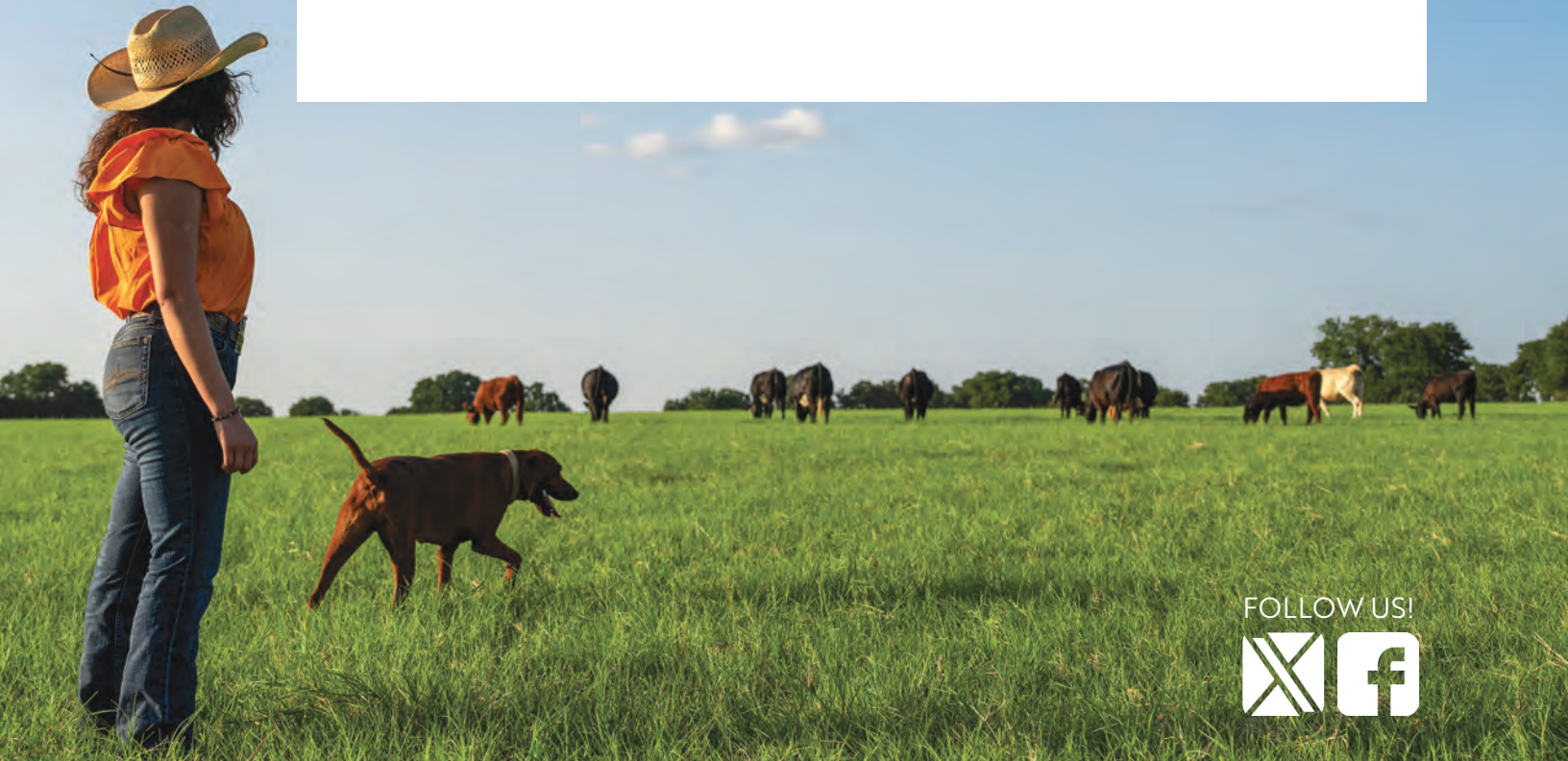
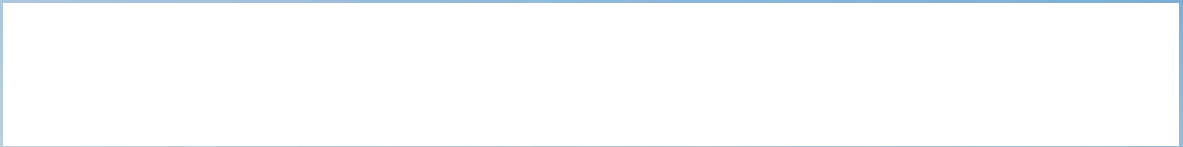
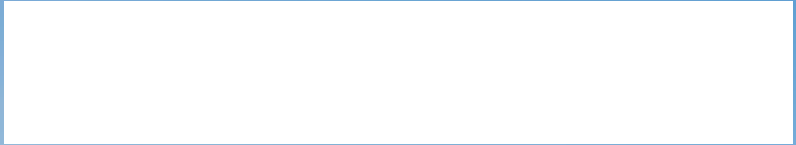
PARA VER MÁS FOTOS
ESCANEE EL CÓDIGO QR



Fieles en una procesión en honor a la Inmaculada Concepción y Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe el segundo domingo de Adviento, el 8 de diciembre, en la Parroquia de Immaculate Heart of Mary y sus alrededores. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)



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