

December 1, 2005

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Do you say “Merry Christmas!” or “Happy Holidays!”? Certainly, among those who annually celebrate the birthday of Christ, “Merry Christmas!” is an appropriate greeting. And although the “holidays” commercially flood our culture without regard to the faith of individuals, there is at the heart of this greeting an expression of a faith not shared by all. When someone who does not profess the Christian faith wishes me a “Merry Christmas” it might be that he or she is saying, “I hope your religious holiday is a happy one for you.” Whether I should wish the same to someone not of my faith is another question. At the cash register in the stores, even “Happy Holidays!” may be an inappropriate greeting from the store clerk since there are customers who are not celebrating any holiday at all. Frankly, I’d be pleased if clerks would simply say “Thank you!” (the year ‘round) as I pay for my purchase. I doubt that there are many who are truly offended by greetings of Christmas cheer and on those occasions when seasonal exuberance does offend, an equally sincere apology should restore good will to all.

For the record: when greeting me on the church steps over the next few weeks, please know that I will not in the least be offended should you wish me a “Merry Christmas”!

When I read about the brouhaha over what to call the lighted tree on Boston Common, I thought of the *Concord Journal* which reported on November 17 that the town of Concord would decorate its streets with holiday lights and would soon light a holiday tree in Concord center and in West Concord, following a holiday parade on each end of town, accompanied by holiday music, and that there would be a collection of holiday gifts to brighten the holidays of those in need, all of this designed to bring Concordians to holiday sales in stores decorated in holiday style. The *Journal* failed to note, however, what holiday(s) would occasion all this festivity!

The simple truth is that millions of people in the United States are celebrating Christmas and billions of dollars of profit will be generated on account of that. Pretending otherwise or devising speech to avoid mention of it seems generally unnecessary and sometimes silly. Jeff Jacoby, a self-described practicing Jew, makes a good point in the *Boston Globe* when he notes that we do not speak of “holiday lamps” to describe menorahs. Let the seasonal signs and symbols of different faiths be lifted up for all to see and reverence as evidence of the different ways the people of our community name their God and celebrate their beliefs.

Whether you call this time of year the “Christmas season” or “the holidays,” these weeks are a difficult time for many people, especially those who grieve, who live with depression and those who are lonely. The images of this season in the media and advertising expect and promise a joy that many have trouble finding, even after seeking it for a long time. Christmas is a time to be sensitive to those whose hearts are heavy, those who are looking forward more to this season’s end than its arrival.

WWJD? What would Jesus do or say in all this controversy? He would tell us to celebrate his birth by ending all wars, especially religious wars. He would tell us to make peace or at least to sincerely pray for family members and neighbors from whom we are estranged. He would tell us to mark his birthday not by spending money on trinkets and trimmings but on feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless. He would tell us to welcome the stranger, mindful of how Mary and Joseph were turned away as he was about to be born. He would ask us to mark his birthday by renewing our life of prayer. He would tell us get about the business of the gospel, a gift which has yet to appear in any ad or catalogue. That’s **WJWD...**

This weekend begins our December sessions of Generations of Faith. On Sunday, December 4, the session will end with our “first lighting” of the Crèche, with prayer and song, on the lawn between the rectory and Monument Hall at **6:45 p.m.** Even if you aren’t able to join us for GoF, please know that you are welcome

to come at 6:45 for the lighting which will be followed by hot chocolate and cookies in the hall. And of course we will sing **Evening Prayer** at 7:00 p.m. in the church.

We are privileged to have two large Crèche scenes from our parishes of origin: the one from St. Bernard parish which we will light outdoors on Sunday evening, and the one from Our Lady Help of Christians which will be in the gathering space in the church. On Saturday morning, December 10, we will be installing the indoor crèche and **we need help!** If you can help, please call the parish office at 978-369-7442.

On the weekend of December 10/11, you are invited to bring with you to church the infant Jesus figure from your crèche at home. At all the Masses that weekend, at the blessing at the end of the liturgy, we will bless the Jesus figures. To bless an object means to thank God for it, to set it aside as something sacred and to ask God that the object help us grow in our faith. If your figure has already been blessed, please feel free to bring it again if you like. There's no such thing as too many blessings!

A reminder: our **Christmas Mass Schedule** includes Mass on Christmas Eve at 4:00 and 6:30 p.m.; Mass at Midnight, and Mass on Christmas morning at 9:30 and 11:30. *(Please note that on both Saturday and Sunday this is NOT the usual weekend schedule.)*

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Still the question I am most frequently asked: "Father, where are you living?" Answer: I am living at the rectory of St. Elizabeth Parish in Acton with Fr. Walter Woods, the pastor there. (Fr. Sean McCarthy, formerly assigned to St. Elizabeth Parish was recently named the pastor of Our Lady Comforter of the Afflicted Parish in Waltham). Why am I living in Acton? Prior to my becoming pastor of Holy Family, Fr. Murray suggested that I delay moving into the rectory in Monument Square until some needed work was done, especially in the pastor's rooms. I took his advice and was warmly welcomed in Acton. As you might guess, other items were higher on my agenda as our new parish was opened. A committee studied the needs and made recommendations on refurbishing the pastor's rooms but more pressing issues commanded our attention and funds.

Our parish Buildings and Grounds Commission inquired last winter if I would consider relocating the pastor's quarters to the first floor. Initially I had no objection to that but then realized that no changes should be made or money invested until the we had a solid plan for how to use all the space available to us in that building. Fr. Michael Medas, who works with the deaf community in the archdiocese, lives in the rectory and for a good portion of the year has a seminarian/intern living there, too. However, now that the parish offices are located in West Concord, that leaves three full floors of space in the rectory in Monument Square. How will we use that space? The Buildings and Grounds Commission has begun a study of all parish buildings (church, rectory, hall, office) in order to present to the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Council a plan for the best use of all our space.

Part of my task here, as pastor, is to be a good steward of parish property and finances. I rely largely on Buildings and Grounds and the Finance Council for advice in these areas in which I have little or no expertise. We will move on these questions only after study and consultation. Those who have arrived at other conclusions about my not having moved into Monument Square are, in a word, incorrect. Buildings and Grounds expects to offer a report and plan in about 6 months. Please be patient with them and with me as we work on your behalf.

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming