

Merry Christmas!

Long before there was any question about the political correctness of wishing others a “Merry *Christmas*,” the pastor of the parish of my youth (Monsignor John Cusack, St. Richard Parish in Danvers, MA) took the occasion every year of telling us why he preferred to wish everyone a “Happy Christmas.” He’d point out that we never wish anyone a “Merry Easter” and would question whether this adjective for Christmas, dating back to the 17th century, was the best one for us to use today. The first printed Christmas card (1843) wished recipients a “Merry Christmas” but at the end of *A Visit From St. Nicholas* (“Twas the night before...), Clement Moore wishes his readers a “Happy Christmas.” The history, then, is mixed. “Merry” seems rather light and even “Happy” might fail to bear the weight of this day’s wishes. What kind of Christmas *do* we hope and pray our family and friends will have?

My prayer is that you will have a ***Joyful Christmas***: a Christmas rooted in the inner serenity deep faith provides, strong enough to survive disappointments and sorrows life delivers to our doorstep and exuberant enough to celebrate life’s happiest times.

I wish you a ***Peaceful Christmas***: the peace the world so clearly is unable to give itself; the peace that broken hearts long for; the peace that is ours to share with one another in forgiveness, kindness and charity.

Finally, I wish you a ***Hopeful Christmas***. So much in the world around us encroaches on our capacity to hope: a spirit abroad that seems intent on draining the beauty and poetry from our lives while our ever burgeoning knowledge robs us of awe and reverence before the mystery of life, of love and of God.

I wish you a ***Joyful, Peaceful, Hopeful Christmas*** and should your Christmas be Merry and Happy, too – all the better! Please pray the same for me.

Only a week a way, let me also give my greetings for a Happy New Year! (There’s “happy” again!) If, in the new year, we dedicate ourselves anew to the joy, peace and hope of others, we will have given each other the finest Christmas gifts imaginable.

Some who read these words are with us at Holy Family regularly for worship on the Lord’s Day and to share in the dynamic life of our faith community. Others who hold this letter in hand are with us only occasionally, or perhaps not since last Christmas or Easter. All are welcome and I take this opportunity to especially *welcome home* at Christmas those of you who have been away. (I’d be grateful if any reader here would share this with those you know who have been away from the life of the Church and our parish!

Holy Family Parish is Alive and Well! These past five years have been traumatic for the people of the Catholic Church. We have suffered wounds that will take years to heal and will, even after healing, leave scars as reminders. For those of you who have been away, I want to let you know that healing is happening in Holy Family Parish. Our worship on the Lord’s Day is strong and beautiful and sees our church often filled to standing room. Our parish commissions, activities and outreach are as strong as ever and growing still. This fall we reached the point where we can say we have established a solid financial base for the parish *from which we can continue to build* so that parish programming and development can grow.

Changes... A major change this past year has been our reformatting our religious education program. As you may know, for three years we offered Generations of Faith on a monthly basis, a parish wide, intergenerational approach to faith formation. The response to GOF was mixed and a number of households withdrew from the program. We have returned to a classroom model of religious education for children on a calendar that includes three GOF-style *Faith Festivals*, one at the beginning, one at the midway point and one at the close of the year. Our January Faith Festival is titled: *Am I a Catholic: What do I need to believe?* We chose this topic because we believe it is a question on the minds of many Catholic people. I will be presenting the section for adults and high school students and look forward to seeing you there. The Faith Festivals are for

EVERYONE in the parish – you don't need to be or have a child in the program! If you are not registered in program – no problem! Just come! The Faith Festival will be presented four times: on Sunday, January 6 at 4:30 p.m., on Monday, January 7 at 6:00 p.m., on Tuesday, January 8 at 9:30 a.m. and again on Sunday, January 13 at 4:30 p.m. (The Sunday/Monday sessions include a light meal; the Tuesday morning session includes a continental breakfast.)

Arise! In the year ahead the Archdiocese is inviting parishes to participate in a renewal program titled *ARISE: Together in Christ*. If you are familiar with the nationally known *RENEW* program, *ARISE* is that same program especially adapted to the circumstances and recent history of the parishes of the Archdiocese.

ARISE offers a renewal experience for the parish, spiritually transforming people through Sunday Eucharistic celebrations, small group faith-sharing, daily personal meditations, special parish activities, resources for families with children, and Christian social action. Because of the variety of ways in which people are engaged, something is available for every parishioner, creating a unifying and enthusiastic spiritual climate in the parish.

Basic to the process is the establishment of small Christian communities: groups of eight to twelve people meeting weekly to read and reflect on Scripture, share how the Word of God relates to their daily life, and encourage each other into active discipleship. Groups will meet during six-week sessions starting in Fall 2008. Each of these sessions has a major gospel theme that is broken down into weekly themes and experienced in a variety of ways.

With the support of our Parish Pastoral Council and our Parish Staff, we will participate in this program. I believe the possibilities for growth for Holy Family in this program are many and it will be an excellent way for us to share in an archdiocesan-wide effort towards renewing the Church.

The bigger picture... Over the last several months you may have read of a new pastoral planning effort for the Archdiocese of Boston. The reconfiguration process of 2004 did not resolve all of the problems facing the Church of Boston and the continually declining number of priests available for parish ministry (here and around the United States) is reaching critical proportions:

The Archdiocese of Boston is currently served by a total of **500 active priests**. Of these, 38 are on health leave or unassigned, 97 in special ministry and **365 in parish ministry**. Of those in parish ministry, 108 are 65 years of age or older. At a **projected average net-loss rate of 25 active priests per year and a projected average of 5 newly ordained priests per year, by 2015 there will be only 292 active priests**, i.e., priests who are not retired or permanently disabled; only an estimated 212 will be available for parish ministry. **This will leave approximately 10-12 priests in each of the 20 vicariates in fulltime parish work.** (*Note: Holy Family Parish is in a Vicariate which includes 16 parishes.*) Not all active priests will be capable or willing to serve as pastors. It is likely that more religious communities -- as have the Marists, Oblates and Franciscans -- will be turning their leadership of parishes back to the archdiocese, owing to insufficient numbers of priests; a few new communities will likely take responsibility for some parishes. The current dependence on many senior priests to assist with liturgical life will surely continue but their numbers will begin to decrease.

(You can access the rest of this report through my blog at ConcordPastor.blogspot.com or through the Archdiocesan website at www.RCAB.org)

It is *not* the plan of the Archdiocese to close more parishes. As you can see in the quote from the study, it is envisioned that in a relatively short period of time, priests will be called upon to collaborate in ministering to groupings of parishes. I share this information here (as I have already in the bulletin and online) especially for those who are not always with us. There were many reasons (good and bad, for weal and for woe) behind the closing of parishes in the reconfiguration process. One major reason was the shortage of priests and the problem of having parishes open without priests to assign to them as pastors. As the number of priests declines, this problem increases proportionally.

We miss you! All of the above leads me to write directly here to those who have been away from church out of anger, disappointment and mistrust – and to those still with us on a regular basis who live with the same feelings, and that includes me. For some time now I have said that it will take at least several generations for us to recover from the wounds of the past five years. Every week in the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass we pray “ for the healing of those who have been abused and betrayed and for the restoration of trust and confidence in the Church...” I’m sure we’ll have need of that intercession for a long time. In the meanwhile, it is our work as a Catholic community with its pastoral staff to do all we can to heal, to grow and to learn to trust again. I don’t for a moment suggest that this is easy but I am very sure that this is the work before us. To help move us in the right direction, I offer to you something recently shared with me by a member of the Rotary Club. It’s the Rotarians’ “Four Way Test” or code of ethics for business and personal life and I believe it has application for us as Catholic Christians working towards reconciling with the Church:

Of the things we think, say or do:

- 1) Is it the **TRUTH**?
- 2) Is it **FAIR** to all concerned?
- 3) Will it build **GOODWILL** and **BETTER FRIENDSHIPS**?
- 4) Will it be **BENEFICIAL** to all concerned?

It’s a simple code without any particular religious vocabulary in it but it offers us good, practical guidelines for what we “think, say and do” with regard to the Church and its leadership, our conversation about it and them, and our relationship to the life of the Church, especially in the local parish. I plan to make this four-way test one of my resolutions for the new year and I invite you to consider doing the same.

Finally, I want to say how much we miss those who, for any reason whatsoever, have been away from our parish life. As you have heard me say before: *We are less a parish in your absence and ever a greater parish for your presence and participation.* Perhaps this Christmas the New Year will be a time when will consider joining us again: we will be praying for that. If there is anything that I or someone on our parish staff can do to be of assistance to you, please do not hesitate to be in touch with us. If you have been away from parish life, please speak with family members, friends or neighbors who have been active and ask their impressions of our parish life. I will say it one more time: *We are less a parish in your absence and ever a greater parish for your presence and participation.*

Until we meet again, I pray you will have a Joyful, Peaceful, Hopeful (and Merry and Happy) Christmas and that the New Year will find you and yours blessed with God’s grace, good health – and gathered for us for life and prayer at Holy Family Parish.

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Sincerely,
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