Joining hearts and hands to serve God, one another

OCTOBER 23, 2020

Categories: News
Tags: Featured, Parish Life
The Beaver Valley parishes of the Great Grouping are coming together in service and worship to help each other through challenging times.

On October 19, volunteers and staff at Good Samaritan Parish in Ambridge gave away about 12,000 pounds of free food and milk, as cars lined up for blocks.

“We have the entire town completely gridlocked because there’s that many people who need food,” said Cindy Deschaine, director of outreach for the Beaver Valley parishes.

Following a free milk giveaway in late August also organized by the American Dairy Association North East, the parish again handed out gallons of whole milk along with dairy, produce and meat products. Some of the food boxes were brought to Saints John & Paul Parish in Franklin Park for distribution.
Deschaine is also providing leadership in supporting the decision of their pastor, Father Jay Donahue, to bring together parishioners of Good Samaritan, Our Lady of Peace in Conway and St. John the Baptist in Baden for weekend worship.

For the next six months, Saturday and Sunday Masses will be celebrated in the gym of Quigley Catholic High School in Baden, which recently closed.

“Our Mass attendance has been so great that we were getting close to exceeding the maximum amount of people at each Mass,” Deschaine wrote in the parish bulletin.

In a video message posted on Facebook, Father Donahue said he wanted to provide a space large enough to parishioners to come together, encouraging them to visit the temporary site, which will hold 400 people socially distanced.

“I have seen the power of the Holy Spirit when we worship and work together,” he said, “in feeding over 1,000 people a week, opening up a Safe Haven for children whose classrooms are closed, and accompanying countless elderly who are home or hospital bound.”

The first weekend Masses in the Quigley gym will be held Saturday, October 24 at 4 p.m., and Sunday, October 25 at 8, 9:30 and 11:00 a.m.
Volunteers load cars with food & milk.

The gym at Quigley Catholic HS is converted into worship space.
Our Holy Father’s newest encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, is a call for all human beings to live together as sisters and brothers, sharing with and caring for each other. Its many pages offer us much to reflect on, and each reader will likely find one message or another particularly meaningful or urgent.

An aspect of *Fratelli Tutti* that struck me immediately was its genesis in a relationship between Pope Francis and an important Islamic leader, Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, with whom he had issued a joint statement last year on human fraternity. Through their shared work, the Holy Father envisioned a world where people with different beliefs and experiences live as sisters and brothers who honor each other’s human dignity as they build a better world.
“Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers, sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all,” he wrote in Fratelli Tutti.

This struck my heart because at Christmas last year I had my own eye-opening experience with brothers and sisters from our local Islamic community. That newborn friendship has been much on my mind during the COVID-19 lockdown.

It began with an email from a gentleman, Eftakhar Alam—Efty, for short—who was eager to develop a relationship between the Muslim community and the Catholic Church in Southwestern Pennsylvania. He told me he would attend Midnight Mass at Saint Paul Cathedral, which indeed he did. It was a joy to introduce him to all those gathered.

After breakfast a few weeks later, he invited me to a Friday afternoon service at a Monroeville mosque. This was a first for me. I went accompanied by Monsignor Ronald Lengwin and Father David Poecking, who represent me at ecumenical and interfaith events.

On arrival, I followed the Islamic custom of removing my shoes for worship, an act that echoes God’s command to Moses to remove his shoes as he approached the burning bush of God’s presence. I witnessed the men doing the customary washing of their hands, face, neck, arms and feet before coming into the worship space. I was awestruck at the devotion of the mosque full of men who were in attendance replicated by the mosque full of women on the second floor. I was inspired by the ceremonial bows which all the Muslims in attendance made toward Mecca. I was blown away by the palpable warmth of all the worshippers as they greeted us as part of their worship.
Following the service, we had the opportunity to have a late lunch of middle eastern foods. I gained a much deeper appreciation of the Muslim community and of their beautiful culture.

More importantly, I came away from that blessed afternoon excited about what we—Muslims and Catholics—can do together to tear down walls of prejudice and to build bridges of peace.

Being with the Muslims gave me a much deeper insight into their faith, their love and their impressive desire to do good.

I also came away from my mosque experience even more aware of how divisive our culture can be to ascribe negative, sometimes even hateful, feelings to and about a whole group of individuals because of the ugly behavior of a few.

While several months have passed, because of the impact of COVID-19, I am not only looking forward to but am excited by what we, Muslims and Catholics, can do together to build a better world in this part of God's good earth.

My friendship with Efty and the recent letter from Pope Francis have inspired me to seek new ways for people of all faiths—and of no faith—to work together. We have to look within our souls and unlock the possibilities of joining hearts and hands with others to build a better world out of love for God.

But even more important than looking ahead, this opportunity provided for me (and hopefully for you by my retelling the story) the opportunity of how we have to look within our hearts and unlock so many more possibilities of joining hands and hearts with others to build a better world out of love for God.
Yes, as I witnessed the men gathered in the mosque “bowing toward Mecca,” I again dreamt of the good things that we can and must do for the honor and glory of God and for the service and salvation of each other.

As I share this marvelous memory with you, I go back to last Christmas Eve Mass at our Cathedral. I smile when I recapture the joy of being with Efty. I thrill remembering the joy of introducing an impressive Muslim to my sister and brother Catholics. And as I muse on that sacred night, I appreciate even more the song of the angels in the Little Town of Bethlehem: “Peace on Earth—Good Will to All!”

Come to think of it, those same angels were with us too on Christmas Eve 2019. They were singing the same message.

“Peace on Earth—Good Will to All!”

A good thing to remember as we search for the new normal born out of COVID-19.

“Peace on Earth—Good Will to All!”
Hi tech helps overcome obstacles

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By Bill Hill

Technology is playing a critical role in helping to bring together the South Hills parishes of Nativity, St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Virgin, St. Germaine and St. Valentine in January.

To keep the merger moving in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Father John Skirtich and his staff used Zoom videoconferencing for virtual parish assemblies.

“We preferred to meet face-to-face because you get the dynamics of a large group, the give-and-take, but when that couldn’t happen, we turned to Zoom,” he said.
“Our virtual parish assembly in September to discuss our progress on the merger was well received,” Father Skirtich said. “I think it demonstrated we’re moving forward on this journey, growing closer together, toward becoming one people, one parish.”

Parishioners agreed.

“I truly appreciated the good humor of the clergy as well as the comprehensive and informative reports,” said Lisa O’Malley of St. Valentine Parish. “I’m especially looking forward to how our new parish will reach out to our larger community.”

Added Theresa Yauch of Nativity Parish, “Nicely done and easy to understand. Thank you!”

“I was extremely impressed by the collaboration between Father Skirtich and his staff,” said Linda Ritzer, diocesan secretary for parish services. “There was a hospitable feel to the video, like a fireside chat, even without an in-person presence.”

The 40-minute video included presentations by pastoral associate Mary Beth Green on statistics for the grouping and common ministries that are being combined. Director of operations Debbie O’Brien discussed staff and parish operations, noting that all four churches will remain open, with more Masses being added as pandemic restrictions ease. The staff will remain mostly intact with some jobs realigned.

“I am truly fortunate in these four parishes, each with robust faith formation, prayer and outreach programs that complement each other,” Father Skirtich said.
Merging into one parish will require one administrative center. Father Skirtich plans to use funds from *Our Campaign for The Church Alive!* to create a working area for the staff at St. Germaine.

Parishioners now await Bishop David Zubik’s decision on their new parish name, due in November.

“In early January, our grouping officially begins operations as one people, one new parish, fully engaged,” Father Skirtich said.
On Tuesday October 20, 2020, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court heard arguments in the highly anticipated case of Rice v. Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

Legal scholars across the state have expressed great concern that a Supreme Court decision that upholds a right to sue in cases similar to Rice, where none previously existed, could open a flood gate of litigation which could affect a number of institutions across the state including the church.

A number of groups across the state have filed formal concerns with the Pennsylvania Supreme Court arguing that under the Pennsylvania Constitution,
reviving time-barred claims can only be done by a state constitutional amendment - not by ordinary legislation and certainly not by judicial activism.

The case triggers a review of a recent Superior Court decision that cast aside years of judicial precedent and held that, in certain cases, a jury could decide matters involving how long people have to file a lawsuit after allegations of a crime. If the court decides not to uphold the current law, it opens the potential for hundreds of cases that previously would have been thrown out of courts due to time limitations, to move forward against institutions across Pennsylvania, inclusive of the Church. The financial impact would be severe and far-reaching.

Ms. Rice's counsel presented arguments in an attempt to bring a lawsuit against the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown in spite of the fact that the case falls outside of the current statute of limitations law. Rice's attorneys argued that even though in many cases the allegations may be decades old, and witnesses and documents may be unavailable, or memories faded, dioceses and other institutions should be forced to defend themselves in court. Currently, defendants in most other lawsuits could not be forced to do so.

Diocese of Pittsburgh General Counsel Christopher G. Ponticello stated that he viewed the Superior Court ruling as, “a flawed decision that lacked a sound basis in law.” Rather, he said, “the opinion turned decades of jurisprudence and legal precedent on its head”. Ponticello went on to caution that, “the court should refrain from acting in a legislative capacity in an attempt to eradicate well-settled law.”

At this point it is unclear when the Supreme Court will release its decision in the case.
Catholic at Home: A Piece on Peace

OCTOBER 23, 2020

Categories: Columns
Tags: Catholic at Home, Featured

I’m a pretty positive person. Some might say almost to the point of being annoying. Can’t help it. I really DO see the bright side in situations and people. I see challenges as blessings and opportunities to learn. I wake up happy and optimistic about the day ahead.

Even for people like me, this year has been rough. We haven’t been able to go to school or work, see our friends, eat, play, worship, shop, give birth, or even die and be buried as normal. There’s fear over health and money. The news is heavy. Our world feels heavy. We are tired, sad, confused, and frustrated.

As I walked through my neighborhood a few nights ago, a neighbor was at her mailbox glancing at the things she’d received. I smiled and asked, “Anything good?” “It’s going straight in the garbage,” she said. “It’s all political. I can’t take it anymore.”
We need peace. We crave peace. But, how do we find peace in times of trouble?

That question makes me think of a Gallup Poll study I read years ago. It analyzed how people find peace. The survey asked people to rank nine different statements, and the one that received the highest number of “strongly agree” responses? “My faith gives me inner peace.”

This study said, “This indicates that most Americans expect something of intrinsic value from their faith. They want their faith to have a steadying effect upon their lives, providing inner assurance in the midst of life’s challenges.”

As Catholics, we know that true, lasting, inner peace comes from a loving relationship with Jesus, rooted in trust. To feel God’s gift of peace, we cannot allow situations in our lives to strip us of our connection with Christ.

In his pastoral letter of March 20, 2020, “The Other Side of Corona,” Bishop David Zubik said, “As we become aware of what is missing in our spiritual life—whether that is the Mass or the peace that should come through a relationship with Jesus—the Holy Spirit is nudging us, is speaking to our hearts with an invitation to become closer friends with Jesus, to draw on His love and share it with others.”

So then, in our important pursuit of peace, how can we find ways to become closer friends with Jesus so that we may share His love with others?

A frequent part of my prayers includes asking for help to fully trust in God for all things, so that I may move through my day with the calm confidence that His love provides. That gift of peace is what allows us to show up ready to support others, even in the most difficult times. Through those acts of service, we feel His presence, and a peace that fills our hearts and minds.
We know that the Bible teaches us to live in peace with everyone through showing kindness, compassion, gentleness, and respect. Have you ever taken a few minutes at night to analyze your day through that lens? It’s pretty enlightening. How many times did you show kindness to someone? Compassion? Gentleness? Respect? Don’t beat yourself up if your numbers are low. Be grateful for the awareness and think about how you can do better.

As we remain distanced from each other in a physical sense, His love can keep us connected in a deep way, if we commit to work on softening our hearts, letting Him in, and becoming a disciple. “Peace I leave with you, my own peace I give you; a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Let not your hearts be troubled or afraid” (John 14:27).

God always provides. He promises to hear our prayers. I pray for your health, happiness, and peace.
Take 5 with Father Dan Waruszewski

OCTOBER 23, 2020

Categories: Columns
Tags: Featured, Take 5 with Father

Father Dan is the parochial vicar of the Butler/Center/Lyndora/Meridian Grouping. He is also the director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry in Butler. He was ordained in 2017.

1. How did God call you to the priesthood?

My mom homeschooled my brothers and me when I was in the fifth through the eighth grade. We had the privilege of attending daily Mass at St. Athanasius Church. Father Jim Bachner in his first assignment inspired me with his energy and friendliness as a priest. One day while he was saying Mass, I had a profound sense that some day I needed to be on the other side of the altar, saying Mass. I wrestled with this call through high school and entered St. Paul Seminary after I graduated.
After two years, I discerned out of seminary and transitioned to St. Vincent College, where I earned my bachelor’s degree in Computer Information Systems. I began working in IT support for a medical manufacturing company and assisting with a youth group on the side, which brought me a lot of fulfillment. A year later, I joined National Evangelization Teams (NET) Ministries and traveled around the country with other young Catholics to spread the Gospel. One day before a Mass with NET, a priest who was rumored to be able to read souls told me that the Lord was calling me to come follow Him. After more deep prayer and discernment, I reentered St. Paul Seminary. In a sense, I can say I always knew I was called to the priesthood, but after that time of discernment away from the seminary, I was certain of this call.

2. **What is the most meaningful aspect of your ministry?**

The Mass. There’s something beautiful about proclaiming the Scriptures in a public place. But the Eucharist is the center of it. To consecrate the Eucharist, receive Him, and give Him to the faithful charges me up. People come to Mass worried and anxious about the things going on in their lives. I hope that they can encounter Jesus in the Eucharist in a profound way and that our homilies as priests and deacons open their hearts to deeper faith. I also love greeting people after Mass, of course, now from a safe social distance while I wear a mask. Those encounters have opened so many doors for ministry.

3. **What is the most challenging part of your ministry?**

For me, the toughest part is meeting everyone where they’re at. I meet people of all ages and walks of life. People have a lot of different expectations and needs. In all my interactions with people, I try to discern what the Lord wants me to say. I’m learning how to love everyone I meet in the way they need it and to be a father to the people I serve.
4. What do you wish people knew about the priesthood?

If you are called to the priesthood, you will find nothing as fulfilling, dynamic, or life-giving than this vocation. It is a challenge to balance all the work that needs to be done, but it’s exciting that no two days are alike. My day job is trying to bring people to heaven.

Although we are conformed to Christ, priests are real people who have good days and bad days. We have fears and doubts that we need to give over to the Lord, just like everyone else and always appreciate your prayers.

5. What is your hobby, or what do you like to do in your free time?

I love biking. My brother, who is also a priest, and I have biked from Washington DC to Pittsburgh (335 miles) and from Albany to Buffalo (400 miles)! I enjoy exploring new trails. I also love playing pickup sports like ultimate frisbee, and going out to dinner with friends or going over to families’ homes for dinner.

Father Dan bowling with the young adults of Butler, before the COVID-19 pandemic
Father Dan on a bike ride with his brother, Fr. Stephen Mary TOR