Religious congregations planning for future

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The 1927 motherhouse of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit, as seen from the back.

The new facility rising in the distance.
The new motherhouse of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit is set to open in the spring.

Work is progressing on The Commons at Providence Heights.
An artist’s rendering of the residential health care facility being built for the Sisters of Divine Providence.

Two religious congregations are preparing for a future that includes caring for more of their own. The Sisters of the Holy Spirit of the Diocese of Pittsburgh are building a modern and smaller motherhouse, while the Sisters of Divine Providence are constructing a residential health care facility for their members.

“Our current building is too large and in disrepair,” said Sister Grace Fabich, general superior of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit, whose motherhouse in West View was built in 1927. “Our new facility, in addition to including community offices, a chapel and living quarters, will feature amenities that our sisters will need as they age.” The Sisters of the Holy Spirit were founded as a diocesan congregation by Bishop Regis Canevin in 1913. They were one of the first in the Pittsburgh area to establish a home to care for the elderly, Bishop Boyle Home for Aged Women, located on the motherhouse property, which includes about 30 acres. The Sisters also operated Holy Ghost Guest Home in Allison Park and taught in many parish schools.

Currently there are 22 sisters in the community. Fifteen work in ministry at various locations, including the Martina Spiritual Renewal Center, Marian Manor Nursing Home in Green Tree, which the congregation sold in 2008, at Saint Paul Seminary, and in parishes.

The new motherhouse is expected to be ready in the spring. Sister Grace said the old building will be demolished and the land used for parking. The Martina Spiritual Renewal Center that formerly was Holy Ghost High School for girls, will continue to offer retreats, workshops and weekend events.

To the north in McCandless Township, the Sisters of Divine Providence are building a three-story residential and health care facility for the current and future needs of their community. The building, called “The Commons at Providence Heights” will include health care rooms, private independent rooms, and one and two-bedroom apartments. Providence Heights is the provincial motherhouse for the Sisters of Divine Providence and adjacent to La Roche University and Providence Heights Alpha School. The Sisters are active in teaching, as well as in campus
ministry, health care, pastoral care, social work, and social justice concerns. The congregation was founded in Germany in 1851.

The Commons at Providence Heights is scheduled to be complete in September 2022.
Look to Mary this Advent

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By Father Richard S. Jones

Chaplain, UPMC Mercy Hospital

Through years of priestly ministry, I have developed an email list on which I send weekly reflections, stories, quotes, prayers, pictures, and songs to family, friends, and faith companions. I view it as a ‘loop of grace’ to continue sharing the faith journey with those God has sent into my life.

It is a small reflection of how we are always connected with each other in the communion of the saints. And first among the saints to whom we need to stay in close relationship is the Blessed Mother. This month we have a special opportunity to honor her and grow closer to her on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8.

This momentous day honors Mary's conception in the womb of her mother, Anne, without stain of original sin. Our legacy from the first rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden, original sin caused Adam and Eve to “become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image” (CCC 399). All of us – except Mary – have inherited this distorted vision of God. Mary, however, is the living conception of God's own perfection.

The teaching that Our Blessed Lady was free from original is implied, though not explicit, in Scripture through the angel's greeting, ‘Hail, full of grace!’ Over many centuries, Mary was venerated as God's purest creation and
as the ‘new Eve’ and ‘Mother of all the living.’ Mary was chosen; Mary was loved; Mary was full of grace. Many Catholics had a deep devotion to Mary as the Immaculate Conception.

In 1846, the bishops of the United States unanimously chose the Blessed Virgin Mary in her Immaculate Conception as patroness of our country. Michael O’Connor, the first bishop of Pittsburgh, was among them. On December 8, 1854, in Ineffabilis Deus, Pope Blessed Pius IX proclaimed solemnly the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and formalized the Church’s longstanding belief that Mary was redeemed from the first moment of her conception.

It states: ‘We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed in firmly and constantly by all faithful.’

In every year and season of our lives, as a people of faith who have received a call through baptism, we are charged and challenged to live in holiness. Mary is our best companion in this, because she did so perfectly. Advent is the perfect time for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, because it focuses on Mary’s journey and calls us to be like her.

Mary looks at us with a mother’s gaze of immaculate and unconditional love. Mary is the New Eve, “a sign of sure hope” (Lumen Gentium, 68), who reverses the course of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Through Mary’s obedience, the beauty of the Immaculate Conception moves us to beg God for his forgiveness, his friendship, and his grace.

As a seminarian at the Theological College of the Catholic University of America, I served as a pilgrim guide for visitors to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, located just across Michigan Avenue from my residence. Although I was the only Pittsburgh seminarian studying in Washington at that time, I never felt alone near Mary’s House.

We still look to Mary, whose immaculate conception paved the way for the birth of her Son Jesus as our Savior and Lord, to show us how to live as people of faith in our everyday lives. Like Mary, each of us is called to be an instrument of God’s love, a vessel of God’s grace, a channel of God’s communication, a messenger of God’s hope and healing, and a blessed adopted child of God.

As we celebrate this feast of the Immaculate Conception, may our hearts be opened a bit wider for the coming of her divine Son. May we carry out God’s will obediently, humbly, and joyously as Mary did. What greater gift could we offer the world...the nation... the church...the family?

Each December 8, Mother Church holds before us her very best. Mary stands ready to accompany us on our pilgrimage of faith.
In the sometimes hectic pace of the holidays, the faithful may find the Christmas and New Year weekends busier than usual on the Church calendar.

“With Christmas Day falling on a Saturday in this year, there are a few adjustments to Christmas Masses and in the following week’s Masses,” said Father Tom Kunz, diocesan vicar for canonical services. “In fact, this year, the celebrations are compressed into successive weekend days.”

For the Vigil of Christmas, 4 pm is the earliest time a vigil Mass may be scheduled on Friday, December 24. For Christmas Day Masses, check your parish’s bulletin or website for times.

The Feast of the Holy Family comes the very next day, on Sunday, December 26. No vigil Masses will be scheduled for the Feast of the Holy Family on Saturday, December 25 because the Christmas holy day takes precedence.

January 1, 2022, New Year’s Day, the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God, falls on Saturday. It is not a holy day of obligation but Catholics are still encouraged to participate at Mass on that day.

The Solemnity of the Epiphany is transferred to Sunday, January 2. Vigil Masses on Saturday, January 1, are permitted for Epiphany.

Again, parish bulletins and websites are the best places to confirm Mass times.
Amen to Action tops goals for meals, volunteers

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The pandemic forced Amen to Action out of the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in downtown Pittsburgh, but it may be one of the best things that’s happened in the five years of the event.

Not only did more than a million meals get packaged for the hungry in southwestern Pennsylvania, more volunteers got involved through neighborhood churches across the region and took ownership, according to one leader.

Cindy Deschaine, pastoral associate for “The Great Grouping” of parishes in Ambridge, Baden, Conway and Franklin Park, served as a coach for 10 churches that hosted packing events on four weekends in November. She said more than 3,000 volunteers signed up to pack meals of dried ingredients such as beans, oatmeal and pasta into individual servings.

She visited Mount Ararat Baptist Church in Pittsburgh’s Larimer neighborhood on November 13, and a week later went to Saint Joan of Arc Church in South Park, part of Saint Catherine Labore Parish, and found both sites buzzing with excitement.

“It showed the ecumenical heart of what Amen to Action was meant to be,” Deschaine said. “There were people of all ages, and many kids. People from all denominations went to different churches.”

When it was all over, the volunteers put together 1,004,772 meals.

Amen to Action grew from a series of conversations that Bishop David Zubik hosted with diverse Christian leaders ranging from Catholic and Baptist to Eastern Orthodox to Pentecostal. It’s sponsored by the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation.
“I think the most important part of Amen to Action is to think about the title,” Bishop Zubik said while volunteering the day after Thanksgiving at Saint Jude Parish in Pittsburgh’s East End. “What we do here is to say it is not just enough to pray with our lips. We have to do it with our actions.”

At North Catholic High School in Cranberry, many students volunteered as part of their charitable work they do every year. Collectively the student body volunteers nearly 12,000 hours every school year.

*Saying a prayer before packaging meals at St. Joan of Arc Church on Nov. 20.*
Stress and anxiety is not just a grownup problem—it affects young students and needs to be addressed and handled well, according to a counselor in a Pittsburgh Catholic elementary school.

“There is a need to increase awareness and minimize the stigma,” Kacy Run told Father Tom Burke on Catholic Education Plus. “The ways we address stress and anxiety is pivotal. Providing coping skills are critical.”

Run was hired this school year at Northside Catholic Assumption Academy in Pittsburgh’s Brighton Heights neighborhood, thanks to support from the Extra Mile Education Foundation. She strongly supports social-emotional learning, reminding students that “they may be facing challenges, but they have God-given ability.”

Catholic Education Plus airs Sunday Dec. 5 at 6:30 a.m. on KDKA-AM. Following the broadcast the show will be available at: https://www.audacy.com/kdkaradio/podcasts/catholic-education-plus-20662

Run appears on the show with principal Rosanne Kwiatkowski and preschool teacher Amanda Zieger, who works with three-year olds. She said they’re transitioning more easily into kindergarten after two years in preschool.

“I'm a big advocate for early learning,” Zieger said. “I see them more prepared for kindergarten.”

“They also have more confidence and love to be challenged,” Kwiatkowski added. “Families are also benefiting from Catholic education by staying with us longer.”

Northside Catholic Assumption Academy began as Saint Cyril's School in 1930, run by the Sisters of Mercy. A kindergarten was added in 1948, and as enrollment grew, a new school was built in 1967.
The name was changed to Northside Catholic in 2011, then the school merged with Assumption in Bellevue in 2018. That's also when it began receiving support from the Extra Mile Education Foundation to help low-income minority students.

Plans are underway for an open house at Northside Catholic Assumption Academy during Catholic Schools Week starting January 30.
Three generations ago, a popular Pittsburgh priest, Msgr. Vincent Rieland, contracted a skin cancer that scarred him such that he no longer could celebrate Mass in public, and he was forced to cover his face with a cloth at all times.

At his funeral Mass, Bishop John Wright used the phrase, “The priest at the altar has no face. He represents the face of Christ.” In this powerful sermon, the bishop in true Christian fashion turned a tragic human disfigurement into a reflection of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ.

This story came back to me as our clergy team talked about whether to publish in our weekly parish bulletin the names of the priests who are saying Mass. Several parishes in our area already do this. Several parishioners have asked me to copy this practice on the weekends and weekdays.

Arguments in favor are that the people should know who comes out of the sacristy before they decide to attend Mass. Different people like different priests, and this gives the faithful the opportunity to go to a particular Mass and hear whom they like. An argument against it is that it pits one priest against another in a kind of popularity contest. Who likes who better? Who is the more charismatic, attractive, eloquent? Another argument against is that if at the last minute a priest gets sick, or priests trade Masses for one reason or another, and the “wrong” priest comes out for Mass, people get mad and feel betrayed. The bulletin got it mixed up. Why did they make that mistake?

On our most recent weekly Zoom conference call, the deacons and priests weighed in on this issue. To my surprise, they were unanimous in opposing listing which priest would say Mass in the bulletin. They felt the arguments against were far stronger.
I agree. We will continue to publish the times of Masses, and the intentions of the Masses, but not which priest will be the presider.

There's a personal aspect to this decision. I've never been known as a "charismatic figure." Some priests (and bishops and deacons) just seem to attract a following, by their style of leading prayer, tone of voice and eloquence of words. I'm not one of them! Take the example of Bishop Fulton Sheen. Seventy years after his top-rated TV show went off the air, Sheen's sermons are still popular on video and in print. What about the hundreds of bishops and priests who were preaching and laboring in the 1950s at the same time Sheen ministered, whose words and actions are forgotten?

Theologians like to talk about the “human particularity” of Jesus. He lived in a particular time (first century), in particular places (born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, died in Jerusalem in western Asia). If you believe in the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin (as I do), Jesus was about 5'10” tall and weighed about 140 pounds, with the usual beard of men of his time. He miraculously healed many, which attracted thousands of followers. He certainly had a creative way with imaginative stories and parables about the Kingdom of God, which were repeated and shared across the towns and villages. He was, without a doubt, a charismatic figure.

Yet those of us who are called to minister in Christ's name (both lay and ordained) are not asked to imitate his particularity, creativity or popularity. We are asked by God to be ourselves, with all our gifts and faults. And being ourselves, we are called to minister in the name of Christ, to be in Wright's words, “the face of Christ.” Priests indeed are “faceless” at the altar as we consecrate the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ our Savior.

Sometimes we represent the “attractive” Christ, who drew crowds to hear him preach and heal. Sometimes we represent the “repulsive” Christ of Good Friday, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “He had no majestic bearing to catch our eye, no beauty to draw us to him. He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering and pain...held in no esteem.” (53:2) In every celebration of the Eucharist, Christ works in and through the priest at the pulpit and altar.

I realize that some of us clergy are more popular than others, and I have no problem with “roaming Catholics” who travel to different churches and parishes to catch a particular priest or bishop saying Mass once in a while. Nevertheless, know that Christ resides in the words and actions of every ordained minister, and that we point past our own human frailty to the enduring and saving face of Jesus Christ.