

Dear Friends and Associates,
God be with you--

A White Christmas came early for us. We had almost a foot of snow within 24 hours. Our family brother from Connecticut said, "This is just another day back East." For us it was the closest thing to an old-fashioned winter that we have had in a long time. December 25 was clear of snow and ice, so we had the best of both worlds.

Fr. Paul mobilized his helpers to create tasteful Christmas decorations in our church, refectory, guesthouse and hallways. Jill, our daytime guest master was campaigning for an artificial tree on that side of the house. Fr. Paul (a card-carrying liberal) proved too much of a conservative, so we had a real tree there, too. The Franciscan Friars came over for mid-night Mass, and helped good cheer flow during the reception afterwards. Sr. Martha entertained us with her expert flute playing as well as gracing us with a multitude of meals of Vietnamese origin. Sr. Martha is from The Congregation of Mary Queen in Springfield. The sisters visit us for their retreat time bringing much of their joy and happiness with them. We are well blessed with their calm presence during this time of change with the Vietnamese monks arriving.

Abbot Matthew from Our Lady of Divine Grace in Vietnam celebrated Christmas with us. He was visiting his monks, who are residing in a few monasteries and seminaries in the USA. They learn English and pursue studies for the priesthood.

Fr. Peter travels with Abbot Matthew to facilitate communication both with the students and also with the faculty. Fr. Peter came to this country as a refugee over 25 years ago. He was ordained a priest, and gained U.S. citizenship. Being a Dominican friar, Fr. Peter served in parishes and as chaplain at a university for 20 years. On a visit back to Vietnam, he felt called to the contemplative monastic life of the Cistercians there. He entered Our Lady of Divine Grace abbey. His background and experience makes him a very good leader of the four Vietnamese monks, who will be the original group sharing our community life here. The other three have been given religious worker visas by the U.S. Embassy at Hanoi. They are due to arrive later in January.

The headlines claimed an "Arctic Vortex" hit the area with the new year. Webster defines Vortex as a swirling mass of water or air, like a whirlpool or whirlwind. The result was another cover of deep snow and ice, plus very frigid (below zero) temperatures. In spite of some problems, our heating system carried on. The Achilles heel was our fire sprinkler lines. A pipe burst in our infirmary wing. The high-pressure pump kicked on, as it is supposed to do when a fire opens a sprinkler head. Water gushed from the break, flooding part of the ground floor, as well as some basement rooms below.

Christian Bothers Insurance covers the damage. However, we are learning the ropes involved in NFPA approved pipe repair, demolition and drying of water damage, and reconstruction plans and contracts. Adding to the irony is sunny and very windy weather, following the record-breaking cold. Never a dull moment.

A Light of Salvation

Today is the last day of the Christmas season. A period of two and a half weeks celebrating the light of God's revelation, which the birth of Christ sends forth into the darkness of our own fallen world.

At midnight Mass on Christmas, the angel tells the shepherds, "I bring you good news of great joy for all the world. Tonight there is born for you in the City of David, a Savior who is the Messiah, Christ the Lord." Then the Glory of God shown around them and a multitude of angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to the people of God's good will."

At dawn, the second Mass on Christmas is called the Shepherd's Mass. "They said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem to see the word, which has been revealed to us.'" They found the baby wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger. They told all in the countryside what they had heard and seen. This is

God giving the light of His new revelation first to the poor and lowly of His Chosen People as He had promised through the prophets.

The third Mass on Christmas Day has St. John's Gospel reveal the divine origin of this newborn Light. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In Him was Life, and that Life was the Light of men. That Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it...to as many as receive Him, He gives power to become children of God...and the Word was made Flesh, and dwells among us. God Himself has come to save His people. This is the revelation.

During the octave of Christmas, Holy Mother Church explores the sidelights of this newborn Light. There is the feast of the Holy Family, and the feast of the Holy Name of the Child-Jesus/Savior, and of course the feast of Mary, Mother of God.

On the twelfth day of Christmas, the Light of Salvation goes out to the entire world on the feast of Epiphany. The Magi/wise men from the Gentiles, see His star, and come to worship the newborn King of the Jews. The people who dwell in the lands of darkness have seen a great light. The Light of God's revelation reaches to the ends of the world.

Now we come to the last day of the Christmas season. The Infancy Narratives are completed. Jesus passes from His hidden life to begin His public ministry. This ending is a new beginning. The law and the prophets spoke to Israel until John the Baptist. No one born of woman under the Old Covenant is greater than he is. John comes in the spirit of Elijah, preparing the way of the Lord. He personifies and symbolizes the continuity and fulfillment of the Old Covenant, leading unto the Messiah and His New Covenant.

In her liturgy, Holy Mother Church shows us that the baptism of Christ brings an even greater revelation. Today's first reading from Isaiah identifies Jesus as the Suffering Servant, Who brings justice to the nations. In the second reading, St. Peter tells us that Jesus experienced His baptism as the Messianic anointing of the Holy Spirit and of power giving Him in His human nature the grace to carry out His vocation as the Suffering Servant, Who offers His life for sin. In today's Gospel, when Jesus comes up from the water, after confessing by that prophetic parable in action, that He carries on His shoulders the sins of the world and must undergo a baptism of purification for the forgiveness of those sins, the heavens are opened for Him. He sees the Holy spirit of God descending like a dove, and coming upon Him. A voice comes from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.

This is a theophany--a full revelation of the Holy Trinity. God is the Heavenly Father, Jesus is the divine son, Word made flesh, and God is the Holy Spirit, Who flows from the union of the Father and Son. The light of God's revelation now opens to us even the deep things of God.

Where do we fit in? What practical message does this feast leave for us? Remember what St. John said in his Gospel? "To those who receive Him, He gives power to become children of God." Though faith in Christ and receiving His baptism, we have been anointed with the gift of His Holy Spirit of adoption. Our vocation is to strive to live as true children in the family of the Holy Trinity. This is what our Holy Mother Church expresses in the three prayers at Mass today...***May we always be well pleasing children to Thee...and may the offering of your faithful be transformed into the sacrifice of Him, Who in His compassion washes away the sins of the world...and nourished by these sacred gifts, may we faithfully listen to Your Only-Begotten Son, and may we be Your children in name and in truth, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.***

In the Sacred Heart,
Your monks of Ava