

Reason to celebrate

With the culmination of the Advent season upon us, I am glad to have this opportunity to reflect on this holy season in the context of all that we have accomplished over the past year and now face together as members of this local Church, the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Christmas, as we know, provides an occasion to again celebrate the defining intervention of God in human history, such that all reality is reordered in light of his great mercy, unconditional love and call to share in equal measure that which we have received through Jesus, His Only Begotten Son. It is both a gift and a necessity that we seize this opportunity to realign our perspective, not only as we strive to make sense of the challenges we confront in the life of the Church today, but also in order to refresh our spirits and reassert our commitment to carrying out the work of Christ's Gospel.

As I have traveled throughout the archdiocese celebrating Mass, attending listening sessions and meeting with parishioners in these past months, it is clear to me that many Catholics are suffering from a parallel crisis of Catholic identity that is very much a byproduct of the ongoing and painful saga that our Church has been confronting very conspicuously since 2002.

Many have understandably questioned, or have been asked to explain, why they are still Catholic. We struggle to explain the inexplicable to family members, friends and associates - to our children. We grasp for words and context to help ourselves and others make sense of that which defies reason, understanding and belief.

In a very real way, there is a sense that we are somehow also defined by the criminal acts of those who betrayed their faith, their vows and very identity as members and leaders of the Catholic Church. We feel a sense of guilt by association. We are simultaneously outraged and, at the same time, deeply saddened and disappointed. We want most of all to again feel pride in our Catholicism, without qualification or excuse - to be at peace in our mind and souls, to again feel joy and to be hopeful.

What gives me hope and great energy - as I hope it does you - is the abundant

evidence of what continues to be a vibrant and active faith throughout our archdiocese. From the selfless service of our priests and lay women and men with whom they minister in the parishes of the archdiocese, to our principals and teachers and consecrated religious serving in institutions ranging from education to healthcare, the work of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being accomplished each and every day and in so many ways through countless acts of charity and service to others. It is the relentless work of being Christ to others – providing food to the hungry, clothing and shelter to those who have not, and comfort and resources to those in the grip of addiction or faced with no options, no hope.

We have every reason to celebrate both the immeasurable and measurable impact of our faith over this past year through the many and varied ministries of our Church, including the outreach and support provided to nearly 12,000 immigrant families and individuals at the Esperanza Center; the more than 230,000 meals served by Our Daily Bread; the education of more than 30,000 young people in our 70 primary and secondary schools; the nearly 400 people placed in permanent housing; and the assistance and care provided to 1,800 seniors in 24 sponsored senior centers. These examples, and so many others, are the evidence of God's unconditional love, care and concern made manifest by you and your fellow Catholics – the undeniable reality of his abiding presence among us.

This is what constitutes our true identity as Christians and Roman Catholics and it is this ongoing legacy of selfless giving that we celebrate in this season of new beginnings – this season of renewed hope.

Let us continue to rely on one another, supported by faith in Jesus Christ who alone is the source of all the good that we reflect and accomplish. It is my prayer and wish for each and every one of you that the spirit of Christmas will enliven your celebrations with family and friends and inspire your continued witness to God's great love throughout the New Year upon us.