



## ADVENT: WEEK 4 AND CHRISTMAS

### SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22 – SATURDAY, DECEMBER 28

For the past 18 months the Diocese of Gaylord has been involved in an extensive process leading us to discern a Mutually Shared Vision for the Roman Catholic Church in Northern Lower Michigan. On November 24, 2013, which closed the "Year of Faith," the diocese released a vision document titled, "Shining Christ's Light; Sunrise to Sunset," sharing insights gained through the process and revealing a plan for the future. The entire document is available at parish offices and on the diocesan website at [www.dioceseofgaylord.org](http://www.dioceseofgaylord.org).

During this season of Advent, a time of waiting and preparation, this weekly series of daily reflections has been created to help us as we await the coming of Christ. In our diocese, we are also waiting and preparing for the appointment of a new bishop. Based on Holy Scriptures and drawing from the five core values highlighted in "Shining Christ's Light: Sunrise to Sunset," these materials may be used for personal or group study.

**Communio: We participate in the love shared by the Trinity to heal divisions and bring all toward union with God.**

*"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13)*

In spite of its relatively young age, the Diocese of Gaylord has already been blessed with a very clear identity and sense of unity. Bishop Szoka is especially to be credited with his literally groundbreaking work in creating, in a relatively short time, a unified diocese from portions of two very distinct dioceses (Grand Rapids and Saginaw).

The work of creating and maintaining unity is by no means finished. There is a need to redouble our efforts to promote the Sacrament of Reconciliation (described earlier in this reflection) and hope that those efforts will be beneficial for maintaining the unity of our families and parishes, the building blocks of our local Church.

There is also much to be done to strengthen our commitment in unity to the work of the Church even beyond our parish boundaries. As becomes apparent each year at the time of the Catholic Services Appeal, there is a need to develop a greater sense of shared responsibility for the work of the diocese and of the Universal Church. It would seem one way of addressing that need would be to make sure the various consultative bodies in the diocese are representative of the local Church, bringing together people from various areas and viewpoints, and to make sure these groups are appropriately utilized in the diocesan decision-making process.

Those who participated in our listening sessions also pointed to the need for more effective communication if we are to be a unified Church. They noted that there often seems to be gaps in communication, with people in the pew not being aware of what is going on in the diocese or in neighboring parishes, and with diocesan officials not realizing what is being scheduled and undertaken in our parishes.

To promote a greater sense of communion in the Church, we need to be mindful of the call to be an inclusive Church that respects distinct cultures and their contribution to the faith. In this regard, we need to make sure we are recognizing, for example, the valuable contribution to the unified fabric of our Church that can be made by the members of the Hispanic and Native American communities, finding ways to support them in their unique expression of the faith not only for their spiritual benefit but also for the benefit of the diocese as a whole. We would be weakened as a Diocesan Church, moreover, if we ever lost sight of the significant spiritual and material needs of the migrant workers who

labor among us for parts of the year. Christian solidarity requires we be aware of the particular pressures they and their families face when challenged by health issues, indebtedness, or immigration difficulties.

Parishioners expressed their concerns that the unity of our Church is diminished when we fail to embrace our Catholic brothers and sisters who are divorced or separated from their spouses and who so often feel alone and excluded from Church life. We also need to be attentive to those who are divorced and remarried, even without the benefit of a declaration of nullity. As Pope Benedict XVI noted, "the divorced and remarried continue to belong to the Church, which accompanies them with special concern and encourages them to live as fully as possible the Christian life through regular participation at Mass, albeit without receiving communion, listening to the word of God, Eucharistic adoration, prayer, participation in the life of the community, honest dialogue with a priest or spiritual director, dedication to the life of charity, works of penance, and commitment to the education of their children." (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 29)

Another issue in building a more unified Diocesan Church is the need for a greater recognition of the special needs of our brothers and sisters with disabilities of many sorts and the importance of making sure they are able to participate in the life of our parishes.

Two additional groups identified in the course of the listening sessions as requiring additional outreach would be our youth and young adults. In addition to the catechetical efforts mentioned earlier, it is recognized the demands of *communio* require that we increase our efforts to involve young people in the ministries and life of the Church. While many of our parishes strive to include high school students as liturgical ministers and catechists, there are still many young people, both teens and young adults, who lament their efforts and offers to serve the Church have been ignored.

One particularly hopeful sign in the area of youth and young adult ministry is the number of young men who are actively discerning priesthood as diocesan seminarians or members of religious communities and the number of young women who are similarly engaged in discerning whether the Lord might be calling them to various forms of consecrated life. The seeds for such loving trust on the part of these young people surely reflect not only the fervent prayers of the faithful for this intention and the existence of supportive parents, parish communities, pastors and vocation directors, but also the great work that has been undertaken by so many of our parish youth ministers.

In addition to all that is being done to promote unity and *communio* within the diocese, we also recognize the charge that we have received to work for unity on the broader plane as well. Since entering into a sister-relationship ("*hermanamiento*" in Spanish) with the Diocese of Matagalpa in 2004, we have been earnestly striving to build solidarity between our two local Churches.

The goal of building *communio* also extends to our efforts to build relationships with those who have been baptized outside of the Catholic Church. While most of the work of ecumenism takes place at the parish level and is lived out in our communities, particularly in our common works of charity, we recognize that there also needs to be a diocesan component. The covenant that was signed more than a decade ago by the leadership and members of the North/West Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Michigan, the Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan and the Diocese of Gaylord continues to bind us in a particular way with our Lutheran and Episcopalian brothers and sisters.



## Daily Reflections:

### Sunday, December 22, 2013 – 4th Sunday of Advent

- **Scripture:** ... the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)
- **From a Mutually Shared Vision:** “We participate in the love shared by the Trinity to heal divisions and bring all toward union with God.”
- **For Reflection:** Jesus is the visible expression of the love of the Trinity. Jesus is the soothing balm that brings healing into the divisions within our lives, our families, and our world. Jesus is the one who leads us to the Father. In these final days of Advent, for what in our lives, our families, our world, do we ask Jesus to heal? In what ways can we co-minister with Jesus in bringing about comfort to those who are hurting?

### Monday, December 23, 2013 – Monday of the 4th Week of Advent

- **Scripture:** O King of all nations and keystone of the Church: come and save man, whom you formed from the dust! (6th of the “O” Antiphons)
- **From a Mutually Shared Vision:** “The work of creating and maintaining unity is by no means finished. There is need to redouble our efforts to promote the Sacrament of Reconciliation ... and hope that those efforts will be beneficial for maintaining the unity of our families and parishes, the building blocks of our local Church.”
- **For Reflection:** The sanctity of life and the stability of family are the building blocks for our Church and our society. Only with Jesus as the keystone can the fullness of human life be respected and the dignity of family be maintained. What are the ways you live out respect for life? How do you support the values of marriage and family life? With whom do you need to be reconciled as we approach the Feast of Christmas?

### Tuesday, December 24, 2013 – Tuesday of 4th Week of Advent

- **Scripture:** O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death. (7th of the “O” Antiphons)
- **From a Mutually Shared Vision:** “... it is recognized the demands of communion require that we increase our efforts to involve young people in the ministries and life of the Church.”
- **For Reflection:** Many of our youth and young people are experiencing the darkness of the various “isms” – e.g. secularism, hedonism, materialism, consumerism, that pervade our society. As disciples of the Lord and His Church we need to reflect the light of Christ to these younger members of our community. By our willingness to listen to them, to reach out to them, and to pray with them, we provide youth and young adults the opportunity to feel the Radiant Dawn in their lives. How will you bring the Light of Christ to those young people in your family, your parish, your community? What ways can they become more involved in the ministry and life of the Church?

### Wednesday, December 25, 2013 – Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

- **Scripture:** How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, “Your God is King!” (Isaiah 52:7)
- **From a Mutually Shared Vision:** “To promote a greater sense of communion in the Church, we need to be mindful of the call to be an inclusive Church that respects distinct cultures and their contribution of the faith.”
- **For Reflection:** We celebrate the Feast of Christmas – God becoming one like us in all things but sin. Emmanuel – “God with us” – came for all people, to save all people, and to bring all people to the Kingdom of His Father. As His disciples we are called to be inclusive, to be reaching out to all in compassion and mercy. Do our words and actions bring about a sense of “communion”? What do we need to change in our lives so that we bring forth the presence of Christ to others?

### Thursday, December 26, 2013 – St. Stephen, First Martyr

- **Scripture:** ... do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. (Matthew 10:19)
- **From a Mutually Shared Vision:** “One particularly hopeful sign in the area of youth and young adult ministry is the number of young men who are actively discerning priesthood as diocesan seminarians or members of religious communities and the number of young women who are similarly engaged in discerning whether the Lord might be calling them to various forms of consecrated life.”
- **For Reflection:** At World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro this past summer Pope Francis encouraged young people to go out into their parishes and dioceses and let their voices be heard. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that all of us, whether young or old, are able to witness to Jesus Christ. It is by the power of that same Spirit that we stand for life and speak for the most vulnerable in our society. Are we, like Stephen the first martyr, ready to speak Christ’s truth no matter the resistance from others? Are we willing to listen to the voices of the younger members of our Church, and support them in their discernment of what God wants for their lives?

### Friday, December 27, 2013 – St. John, Apostle, Evangelist

- **Scripture:** ... what we have seen and hear we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:4)
- **From a Mutually Shared Vision:** “In addition to all that is being done to promote unity and communion within the diocese, we also recognize the charge that we have received to work for unity on the broader plane as well. Since entering into a sister-relationship (“hermanamiento” in Spanish) with the Diocese of Matagalpa in 2004, we have been striving to build solidarity between our two local Churches.”
- **For Reflection:** We are Catholics, members of a Universal Church. In solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world, we have the responsibility to share with and learn from each other. Together we proclaim the truth of Christ, transforming our societies into the world which God intended. How much do you know about our sister Diocese of Matagalpa? How are we similar in our practice of discipleship and how do we differ?

### Saturday, December 28, 2013 – The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

- **Scripture:** This is the message that we have heard from Jesus Christ and proclaim to you: God is light, and in him there is not darkness at all. (1 John 1:5)
- **From a Mutually Shared Vision:** “The goal of building communion also extends to our efforts to build relationships with those who have been baptized outside of the Catholic Church. While most of the work of ecumenism takes place at the parish level and is lived out in our communities, particularly in our common works of charity, we recognize that there also needs to be a diocesan component.”
- **For Reflection:** The message of Jesus is the same for all His disciples – love your neighbor. We have countless opportunities to put this mandate of the Lord into practice – food pantries, shelters for homeless families and individuals, homebound and hospice volunteers, advocates for the marginalized and forgotten. Where and how is God calling you to serve His people?