



THE VISITATION

THE PUBLICATION OF NATIVITY HOUSE

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St. Joseph of the Incarnation

by Dave Spesia

God's sneaky-awesome presence among us begins with Advent's anxious expectation; it culminates in the contemplative season of Christmas. The divine Author, Producer and Director of the drama of human history enters the stage that he himself created as a seemingly insignificant actor — in diapers and swaddling clothes, no less.

From the start, St. Joseph was there along with the marvelous Mother of God, who “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (Lk 2: 19). The Scriptures do not share a single word spoken by Joseph, but they invite us to enter into his silent reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation: What was Joseph thinking and feeling, as the Holy Family journeyed through Mary's pregnancy? What awe filled his heart, as he reflected on God's revelation to his beloved bride-to-be?

Before any of the Apostles or Evangelists or Doctors of the Church, it was humble Joseph who stood beside the Blessed Mother contemplating the reality of the Word made flesh. The Catechism of the Catholic Church articulates four reasons why the Word became flesh (nn. 457-460), and doesn't it make sense that Joseph reflected on these reasons, discussing the wonderful action of God with Mary?

“The Word became flesh for us in order to save us by reconciling us with God” (CCC, n. 457). Joseph knew that God's covenantal relationship with his chosen people was a promise of divine assistance in

response to original sin. He also knew that the promise required fulfillment and that salvation would be connected to the blood of the Passover lamb which had saved the Israelites from slavery and death. As he rocked baby Jesus to sleep, Joseph's heart considered the possibility: “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn 1:29).

“The Word became flesh so that thus we might know God's love” (CCC, n. 458). Joseph knew that God's covenantal love was a gift. The great commandment, “You shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength” (Dt 6:8), was a free response to God's wholehearted love for his people. As he adoringly watched Mary nurse the newborn, Joseph's mind raced to connect the dots in this amazing picture: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (Jn 3:16).

“The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness” (CCC, n. 459). Left to his own devices, Joseph knew it was impossible to keep God's Law. (Although it seemed somehow different for his beautiful bride-to-be!) Moses and the prophets were themselves heroic yet imperfect witnesses to the holiness Yahweh desired of his people. As he tended to the fire, perhaps Joseph heard a still small voice whispering the words that Jesus himself would later speak, “I am the

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Sacred Friendship

by Venus Wozniak

Over the course of the last many months we have been blessed with the joy of many visits from dear friends. After each visit I was left pondering the joys and fruits of these friendships. These visits felt like little mini retreats – good food, great conversation, fun playtime, rich prayer time. When the visits, no matter how brief (a few hours) or sustained (5 days,) were finished and our friends packed their vehicles, hugs and well wishes exchanged I was left to ponder the uplifting of spirit that came with the sharing of life that transpired.

Each of these visits were with friends who, each in their unique way, seek to live out the Good News. They

strive to live in relationship with others, seeking through relationship the experience of Jesus. We would share stories of the journey of relationship, the challenges, the joys. I found myself learning so much from these friends. I was touched by the intentionality with which they live and ponder God moving in their lives.

After the most recent visit I was left with these words: Sacred Friendship.

I think back to the apostles. One of my most favorite plot twists in the Bible begins with the Ascension of Jesus. One of the 12 asks Jesus, “Are

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Community in the Family

by Christina and Stephen Moncrief

In our marriage we seek to live as Jesus taught the early church. In this desire, we long for community. We desire to journey in authentic, vulnerable relationships where we can experience and share Christ's love. However, community takes many forms and callings are not always easy to hear. We do not know God's plan for our family. In our marriage we are continually reminding each other to listen to how God is calling us individually to community and then bring these longings together for discernment. And in preparing this article this is what we did. Our shared experience comes from living in L'Arche, a community of people with and without disabilities.

Stephen: My greatest memories of life come from the experience I have had from living in a L'Arche community. I have journeyed through many emotions throughout L'Arche and have experienced so much growth from relationship with people with disabilities.

I believe Henri Nouwen said at one point that he learned more from L'Arche than he ever learned from fellow professors at the universities where he taught. This was very true for me. I learned more about humility, acceptance, love, and spirituality through my relationship with L'Arche members than I had ever learned before. I learned this mostly because I was in an environment in which I could allow my guard to be down. I was free to be vulnerable and with that vulnerability I did not need to waste time protecting myself from irrational fears. I was free to be everything that God called me to be.

This is what community is for me: a safe and sacred space for me to be

held in a level of acceptance that is not known in the world; an acceptance that comes with the open arms of a core member I've never met as I walk into the door; an acceptance that comes from a core member that turns from screaming at me to apologizing to me with utmost sincerity. L'Arche is where I learned what it meant to feel loved by God. I don't know if it is essential for me, but I do know I miss it when I am away.

Christina: Community is one of the ways God reveals God's self most clearly for me. I know God as relationship through the Trinity. It is no small revelation in the Gospel of John when it is stated God is Love. I experience relationships as the essence of that which life is about. We first and foremost are in relationship with others. The activities we take part in throughout each day are the context for which we live our relationships. When I remember to put relationships first I not only meet the person in front of me, but I encounter Christ.

As a married couple we know we are called to community. How do we discern the charisms of our own domestic church? How do we weed out the distractions from our culture and live intentionally for others? Do we recognize our love for L'Arche and join this community for life? Or do we create our own unique faith based community, the one rumbling around in our hearts?

For now, this is the question which sits in our heart. We continually take this into prayer, both individually and together. In prayer we remind ourselves not to seek answers but to listen and sit with the questions. At this point, God has brought us to a communal space on Christina's

family vineyard while we listen to God's plan for our life together.

Where is God calling your community/family? How do you discern God's call for your community?

It is too easy to be distracted by the norms in our present culture. It is important for each community/family to discern where to put their energy.

St. Joseph

way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6).

"The Word became flesh to make us 'partakers of the divine nature'" (CCC, n. 460). In the Garden of Eden, the man and woman walked in friendship with the Lord. The Tempter's taunt, "You will become like gods," was the lie of lies. It preyed on human pride, confusing the fact that the intimacy of Eden was always already a partaking in the divine life. Joseph sensed that the divine revelation in Jesus would restore God's original plan. The love that filled his heart when he held baby Jesus hinted at these most beautiful words which his Son would later speak: "Whoever loves me will

There are many ways to live intentionally with others such as being mindful of the earth, focusing on acts of mercy, or being mindful of economic systems you support with your spending. What charism do you take on in your community/family?



Stephen and Christina live in Geneva, OH

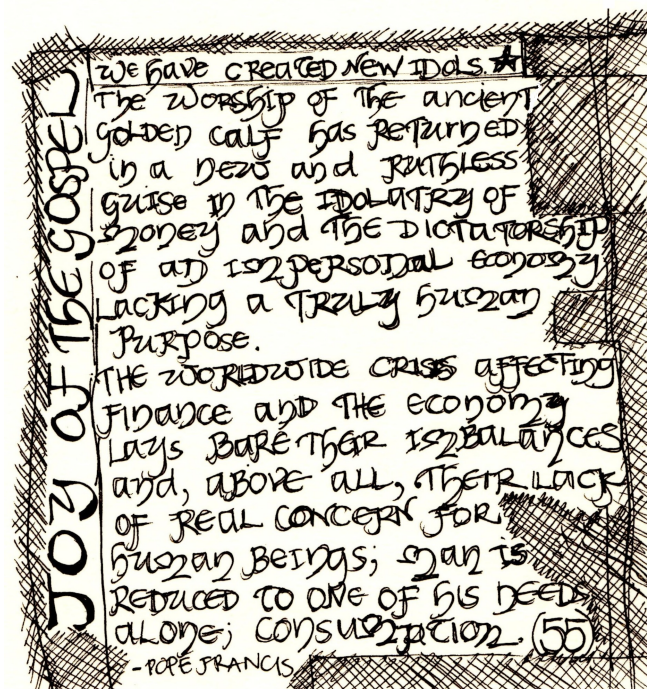
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keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (Jn 14: 23).

St. Joseph invites us to look at the Incarnation anew, as we say with our Lady, "Let it be done to me according to your word." After all, the Holy Family stands as a witness to the fact that the Word made flesh invites each of us into the warm heart of God's Trinitarian love!



Dave serves the Diocese of Joliet in Evangelization and Catechesis. He is a husband and father of five and may be found online at: everydayevangelization.blogspot.com



Solidarity

by Sean Ruane

Henri Nouwen, the famous theologian and author, once said- “compassion can never coexist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other.” I believe this definition perfectly exemplifies the idea of solidarity. What is solidarity? Well, solidarity can mean a lot of things and it can be used in a number of different contexts. In regards to catholic social teaching, solidarity is about living in unison with our fellow brothers and sisters. Rather than seeing people as “other”, we open our hearts and minds, so that we may see people no longer as “other,” but as our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we live in solidarity, every person around the world becomes our brother or sister. With solidarity, there is no time to label people as “other” or to cast them aside. As Mother Theresa puts simply, but quite eloquently- “if you judge people, you have no time to love them.”

A few months ago, as a member of the University Ministry staff at Lewis University in Romeoville, I had the opportunity to take five student leaders to the Nativity House for a day of service and bonding. Those five students took part in service that day in preparation for their leadership role on a social justice retreat called “Catalyst.” On Catalyst, we hope to open the eyes of students to the injustices of the world and the ways in which we can fight injustice and be “catalysts” for change. Our service at the Nativity House in October was important because it allowed those five student leaders to see two wonderful people- Venus and Justin Wozniak- living socially and environmentally just lives on a daily basis.

When it comes to the work that Venus and Justin Wozniak are doing at the Nativity House, I believe solidarity specifically refers to “living in community with one another.” At the Nativity House, Justin and Venus have opened up their home to single, expectant mothers. In a society primarily dominated by two parent families, the Wozniaks have opened up their home, their garden, and their arms to single women who could use the support of a community setting. Venus and Justin not only open their home to single, expectant mothers, but they also work with them to maintain the house and the massive garden in their backyard. Venus and Justin live in true solidarity with these women, hoping to provide a stable and loving community that will support, guide, nourish, and ultimately, set them forth to live a joyful and prosperous life after moving on from the Nativity House. The work that Venus and Justin are carrying out at the Nativity House has inspired me and the five students that accompanied me that day. We are grateful for their hospitality, for their willingness to allow us to serve and grow in our knowledge of social justice, and most importantly, for the incredibly delicious chili that they cooked for us that day.

When you get a chance, spend a day out at the Nativity House. Learn more about the environment, gardening, sustainability, and finally, go there, and learn what it means to truly see everyone as a brother or sister in Christ. Go to live in solidarity for a day.



*Sean is the Coordinator of
Social Justice Education
at Lewis University*

Human Dignity for All

by Nikki O’Keefe and Erin Richards

According to Catholic Social Teaching all humans were created in the image and likeness of God. This ideology can also be known as human dignity. Every human being has worth and should be respected equally. No one can take away anyone else’s right to human dignity.

At the Nativity House human dignity is portrayed in a fabulous way. The Nativity House wants to eventually house expecting first time mothers, and include education, support, and healthy nourishment for them. They will take 1 to 2 moms at a time and they are expected to be in school or holding a steady job. Many times in society people judge what they do not understand, and even though single mothers are more of a social norm in today’s society, not everyone accepts it. When society passes these judgments it hurts these young mothers and leads them to believe that they made some sort of mistake. Instead of turning their backs, those at the Nativity House want to help and invite these women in. It is a way of showing them that they are worth something and that they have human dignity, something that no one can ever take.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2013 there were 12 million single parent families, and more than 80% of those families were run by single mothers. Instead of leaving all mothers to fend for themselves, Nativity House wants to help as many as they can throughout the years. If these young, single mothers feel loved and supported they are more likely to strive to do better for themselves and their child. Respecting themselves is something that is crucial to their success as mothers. The Nativity house will make sure that the mothers know

what they are doing when it comes to raising a child and making sure they do not feel alone or abandoned.

There are many young, single mothers out there, but times are changing. Many of those mothers are employed or going back to school. Places like the Nativity House are there to offer support to help them make it work. Instead of society looking down on people, we need to raise them up. Every single person should be given basic human dignity and not looked at as if they are less of a person than anyone else.



*Nikki and Erin are students
at Lewis University*

No human life exists that is more sacred than the other, just like there is no human life qualitatively more significant than another solely in virtue of resources, rights, economic opportunities and higher social status.
Pope Francis. 9/15/2014

A Reflection on 'Environment Justice'

by Michael J. Harris

I was excited that I had the opportunity to do service at the Nativity House. My eyes were opened up as I learned new information about nature and how it affects those around me.

I had no idea what lasagna gardening was until I was at the Nativity House. I just knew lasagna as the delicious Italian dish.

According to an organic gardening website, lasagna gardening is a no – dig, no – till organic gardening method that results in rich, fluffy soil with very little work from the gardener. The name “lasagna gardening” has nothing to do with what you’ll be growing in this garden. It refers to the method of building the garden, which, essentially, is adding layers of organic materials that will “cook down” over time, resulting in rich, fluffy soil that will help your plants thrive.

From this experience I took a lot home with me. It was astounding to me how two wonderful people could see the future even before the future comes. Venus and Justin Wozniak have an amazing calling in their lives.

The couple allows others to get fresh produce from their garden. These

people must work on the garden, to understand the meaning behind God’s beautiful food.

So, after the experience, I dove into the topic of environmental justice. It was something that intrigued me for some time after going to the Nativity House. What does it mean to be environmentally just?

To me being environmentally just does not simply mean learning how to garden or where healthy produce is being sold. To me, environmental justice means that somebody is acting in a way that promotes and respects the dignity of the earth. For instance, an environmental issue could be a water drought in an developed countries or a food dessert in local communities. We as humans must see how we can a) act in a way that is best for humans and the environment b) work to alleviate the issue.

Because of my service at the Nativity House, my eyes have been opened and they can now never be closed. The environment is sacred and both God’s nature and people must be respected.



Michael is a student at Lewis University

Subsidiarity

by Joseph Baltuska

How much do we really know about our neighbor? In the past, the bonds people had with each other in communities were much stronger. Everyone knew their neighbor on each block and would socialize with them. Not only socializing, but helping them out whether it would be babysitting or looking after a house while a person is on vacation. This ideal is very much absent in our generation. My time at the Nativity House was heartwarming, not only our core Catalyst team helped out, but other people from around the neighborhood helped out with the planting process at this urban farm. Whether it was picking up tomatoes and peppers, lasagna planting, or composting, people banded together and did their part. The goal of the Nativity house is to help and serve others in times of need. But who helps the helpers? The Core Catalyst team found time in their schedule to offer their practice of subsidiarity to the Nativity House.

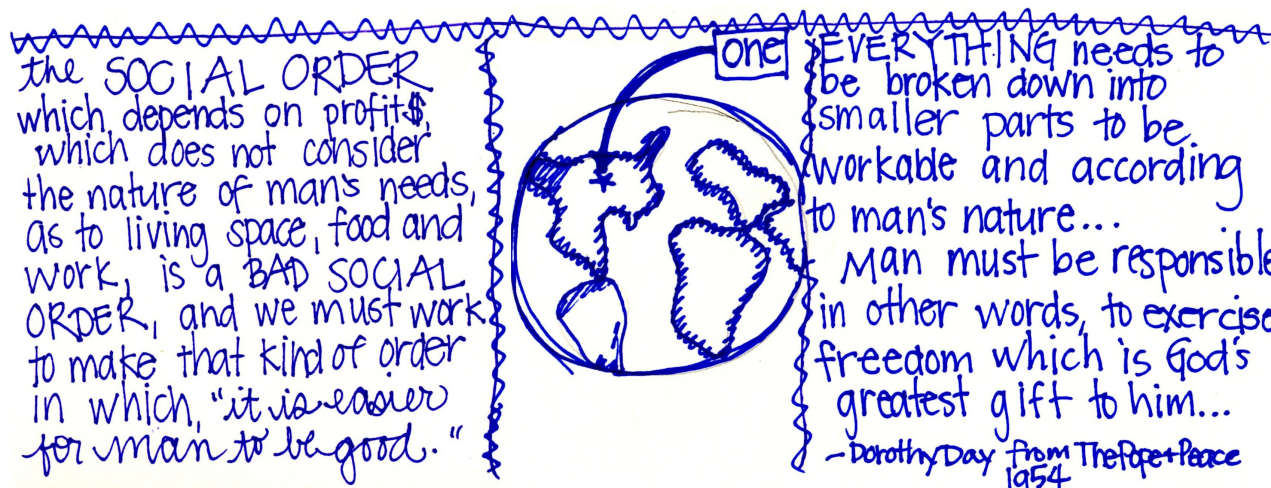
We know that subsidiarity is an organizing principle that asserts that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralized competent authority. Political decisions should be taken at a local level if possible, rather than by a central authority. What we did at the Nativity House was offer free labor out of the kindness of our hearts, and

were given a day to work on God’s good earth to grow food for a better tomorrow.

Whether it was Sean and I composting, Nikki and Erin lasagna planting, or Hailey and Mike picking up the bountiful crops, each son and daughter of God did their part. What if this small, already established community at the Nativity House could continue to grow and more societies allowed this type of community support to take place? When the average American worker comes home and watches the news, all they see is crime in their cities. What if there was more of an emphasis on empowering the community by banding together and creating a common good for the rest of society? God loves and understands, but people need to look around them and understand the problems that take place. To give a hand in subsidiarity, as one of God’s children, is to better understand one another.



Joseph is a student at Lewis University



Portraits from the Field

Adyan and the Cast of a Prayer in the Middle East

by Michael Driessen

Whenever one of my students or someone in my family asks me “where are the peacemakers in the Middle East today?” (or, what I think they are often wondering, “why are there no peacemakers in Islam today?”) I tell them about Adyan, a group of interfaith friends in Lebanon. Adyan means “religions” in Arabic and the group was founded by a sunni (Muslim), a shia (Muslim) and a Maronite (Christian). Lebanon endured a long civil war from 1975 to 1990, that was fought along religious lines, Sunni, Shia and Christian, although it was always more complicated than that, and these religious lines are largely the same that have been tearing apart Lebanon’s neighbor, Syria, for the last three years. Over a million Syrian refugees are now living in Lebanon, who altogether make up a quarter of Lebanon’s population today. So peace in Lebanon is fragile, religious violence is seeping back into Lebanon’s barely reconstructed city centers and if there ever was a place that inter-religious dialogue has real meaning and real risks, it is here.

Dr. Nayla Tabbara and Fr. Fadi Daou are the director and co-director of Adyan and their interfaith friendship anchors everything the group does. They have just written a beautiful book together on “Divine Hospitality” in which the two put themselves in intimate conversation as a Muslim and a Catholic theologian to think about God and peace and the possibilities of interfaith friendship.

Adyan began as a prayer network. As a response to violence in the country,

Adyan gathered Lebanese Christians and Muslims together around prayer intentions, in which each faith prayed separately, but prayed together in intention as well. So much of their force and authenticity remains rooted in this common prayer and this attempt to live in what they call “spiritual solidarity,” to make spiritual solidarity a cornerstone of peace in the region.

In doing so, they have helped change the religious landscape in Lebanon both in its spirituality and its political presence. In their communion, they allow people to touch the possible fruits of interfaith dialogue. They teach us, they have taught me, that when we make ourselves hospitable to religious others, we allow those religious others to witness to us about God. Their faith, their everyday practice of prayer, their love for their family and neighbors, speak to the heart and call others deeper into their “continuous return to God,” as they write, and to their neighbors and to their land. The return to God and to one another has real consequences and Adyan has tried to build those consequences through their work.

I asked Nayla if Adyan is a religious community. She said, “Early on we were using the idea of community, but... we became an NGO. We are volunteers. Maybe God wanted it this way. To build not a monastery but a village.”

Adyan’s website chronicles a multitude of activities they have taken on to help build this village. They have dedicated themselves most of all to the Lebanese youth,

creating interfaith youth clubs where religious lines are turned into spiritual wells of growth. Their students become leaders in their schools. They persuaded the state to adopt a new national religious education curriculum this year which will teach that religious pluralism is religiously rich. They organize regional conferences, do interfaith teacher training, and they have launched solidarity campaigns with Syrian refugees.

And in the depth of all of that their remains their dedication to spiritual solidarity as an act of faith in God which allows them to touch the violence of the region, to enter

formal political spaces and to inhabit these places differently in the divine light of God.

I have often felt overwhelmed by the immense suffering of the Syrian population today and I also feel unworthy of this participation of mine in their pain. When I am lost in the Middle East I return to Adyan and the joy that lights around their faces together and I recognize hope.



Michael is Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at John Cabot University, Rome.

Charity begins at home

by Hailey Gurgul

One of my most favorite Catholic Social Teachings is the Call to Family, Community, and Participation. Growing up, my family has always followed the proverb, “Charity begins at home.” If children learn to love and help those nearest to them in their early years, they will love and help their fellow brothers and sisters when they grow up. In other words, charity begins at home, but it does not end there. There is an overwhelming need for charity everywhere. For example, just following the law and voting are among the simplest ways to serve your community. It is not just “the thought that counts,” but the action of following through with that thought. Women would still not be able to vote, diverse people would still be segregated from the rest of society, and the entire world would be at war with each other, if it wasn’t for people participating in the constant battle for human dignity and social justice.

Working at the Nativity House, I could clearly see this social teaching

was well practiced. Although they are just a family of three at this beautiful house, they are greatly impacting many lives. These wonderful parents, Venus and Justin Wozniak, are teaching their daughter something very important. They are showing her that working hard and helping others is both fun and rewarding. As the three of them work together, they build a safe and warm environment to shelter expectant mothers and also make good use of their own resources. After a full day of harvesting vegetables, constructing more gardens, and chasing chickens, my group from Lewis University and the wonderful Nativity House family sat down at the table, for some homemade vegetarian chili and some super delicious cornbread. I feel privileged to have helped out at the Nativity House and am excited to return again!



Hailey is a student at Lewis University

Friendship

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you going to restore the kingdom now?" This is what they were all thinking! Still! After Jesus taught them, prepared them for three years, was tortured, died and conquered death in the Resurrection – after all that – they were still confident that this Messiah was going to kick out the Romans and restore the earthly Jewish Kingdom to all its glory under the kingship of David. They still didn't get it!

It's really amazing how patient Jesus is with them, or not. He responds with a quick quip, "That is not for you to know. But what is going to happen is that you are going to go to the ends of the earth and tell people all about me, spread my Good News." I can only imagine the quizzical glances that the Apostles were shooting each other. With which Jesus responds, "Don't worry, I am going to send you my friend the Holy Spirit and then you will have everything you need to get it done!"

And with that the Heavens open up and Jesus is taken up. The apostles are there staring up into sky and two figures robed in white say, "why are you staring up into the sky?" Um, what do you mean why am I staring up into the sky. Jesus was just here!

Telling us how we are going to tell the world about him and now he's not.

The apostles, with the Holy Confidence of the Holy Spirit, do it! They go to the ends of the earth and they tell everyone they know about Jesus and his Good News. Thank God they did.

They spent three years together, living with Jesus, learning from him. They were the first intentional Christian community. After all of the Ascension business noted above, they kept doing just that. Living together, praying together, sharing everything so that no one among them was in need.

When it became apparent that the Holy Spirit was nudging them in the direction of world-wide travels, I can imagine that it was challenging to leave the safety net of their friends in Christ. The original twelve were probably pretty comfortable with each other. They knew the way of life that they were striving for because they had experienced it first-hand together. Departing for world-wide mission work must have been on some level terrifying. The message and way of life they were

commissioned to spread was vastly different than anything anyone else in the world was doing.

I can imagine that when one Apostle caught word of another's doings in his corner of the world that a flood of emotion came – comforted in the news of their friend in Christ continuing the work. This gives new light to the reading of the epistles. These are letters of encouragement to continue in the life of Christ. They encouraged each other in ways only they could because they shared a very special encounter.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help

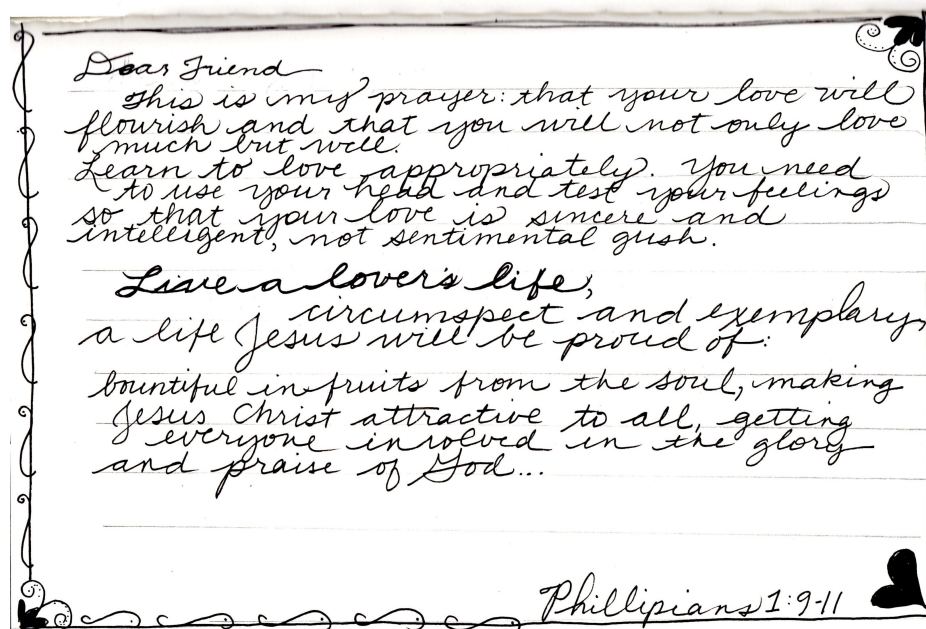
you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. Phillipians 1:3-11

It is this sacred friendship that continued to root them to Christ and encouraged them in the task of living out the Gospel message.

We all need sacred friendship. It is important that we examine and ponder the bonds of sacred friendship between Jesus and his Apostles and among the Apostles and the first Christian communities. It is in these texts, the epistles, that we are given examples of how to encourage one another and hold one another accountable to Christ.

During this time of Advent, as we await the incarnation of Christ, let us take some time in the stillness to ponder the sacred friendships in our life. It is in these friendships that we are rooted more deeply to Christ. Sacred Friendships = Encounters with Jesus.

Venus is the Director of Faith Formation at St. Dennis in Lockport, IL. She can be reached at venusad@nativity-house.org



Nativity House Interns

Nativity House is currently accepting applications for stipended internships. Please see our website for application materials.

About The Visitation

This newspaper, The Visitation, is a publication on topics of social justice, spirituality and theology. It is published four times a year by the Nativity House Project. Submissions are accepted from readers everywhere.

To contact us, email us at:

newspaper@nativity-house.org

Past issues are online at:

<http://www.nativity-house.org>

About Nativity House

Nativity House will serve as a shelter for first-time mothers in need of residence in the southwest Chicago suburbs. The project will also foster a mothering community offering education and support for all mothers. As of 2014, the program operates an on-site community supported farm (CSA) that will provide nourishment for the mothering community and the greater community. Overall we envision a healing environment focused on the dignity of each person, the dignity of work, and stewardship of the earth.

The project is administered by a board of directors and an advisory committee of individuals with a broad range of experience. Nativity House has formed positive relationships with relevant local organizations that will be extremely helpful in carrying out the mission of the house. Nativity House was recognized as a public charity in August, 2011.

To connect with us regarding this project, please email Venus at:

venusad@nativity-house.org

Postal mail should be addressed to:

Nativity House
17141 W. 143rd St.
Lockport, IL
60441

We extend the sincerest thanks to all.

Easy Essay

by Peter Maurin (1877-1949)



What makes Man Human

1. To give and not to take
that is what makes man human.
2. To serve and not to rule
that is what makes man human.
3. To help and not to crush
that is what makes man human.
4. To nourish and not to devour
that is what makes man human.
5. And if need be
to die and not to live
that is what makes man human.
6. Ideals and not deals
that is what makes man human.
7. Creed and not greed
that is what makes man human.



Letters

I just want to say thank you! I just received and finished the latest issue of The Visitation. I appreciate that it is short and sweet and filled with articles that make me think.

I read the article "Life with the WV Chemical Spill" first, being from WV. Molly hit the nail on the head. I know exactly what she's taking about; folks don't seem to know it's a state, with a proud, hardworking history. And I loved her reference to Appalachia as a Less honorable part of the Body. Christ came for the Least, so I am ever-hopeful for my beloved West Virginia. :-)

I am going to download and read The Joy of the Gospel. I, too, often live in perpetual Lent rather than in our home of perpetual Easter. Christ IS risen, as I daily proclaim myself and the children in the (Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) Atrium. Thanks for reminding me!!

Wishing you much joy in your work!

Peace,

Felicia
South Bend, IN

St. Catherine of Siena

by Lisa Smith

From the beginning of her life, Catherine of Siena was determined, stubborn, and single-minded – qualities that served her well in a journey to sainthood. Catherine Benincasa was born on March 25, 1347 to Giacomo, a wealthy wool dyer, and his wife Lapa, in Siena, Italy. While her twin sister did not survive long, Catherine grew to be a cheerful and happy little girl in a large family of 25 children. It is said that she began having visions around the age of six, when she saw Christ with the apostles Peter, Paul, and John. This vision inspired Catherine, the following year, to make a secret vow giving her entire life to God. By the time she was twelve, Catherine's mother began to focus on marriage for the girl, and urged her to pay attention to her appearance. Catherine attempted for a time to dress in the popular fashion of the day, but this sort of vanity did not mesh with her spirit. Much to her mother's dismay, Catherine cut off her beautiful hair in order to dissuade all discussion of marriage.

In response to Catherine's stubborn refusal to marry, her family forced her to do menial household work and they never allowed her to enjoy the solitude she desired. Through this, Catherine remained cheerful and patient; she later wrote that this is the

period when God taught her how to build an interior "private cell where no tribulation could enter." Catherine began a life of extreme asceticism, sleeping and eating very little, keeping to herself with prayer and fasting. At the age of 16 she was allowed to take the habit of a Dominican tertiary. Her absolute dedication to a life with Christ is what separated Catherine from the average person.

Eventually, Catherine entered public life to minister to plague victims. She became well known as an arbitrator of disputes. Many people looked to Catherine for advice. Her experiences led her into correspondence with Pope Gregory XI and what would become perhaps her most influential act. The church had been split since 1309, when Pope Clement V moved papal headquarters to France. Catherine felt strongly that God's desire was for the pope to return to Rome; she expressed this in written correspondence to the pope, and eventually they met in person. Shortly after receiving Catherine's plea, the pope returned to Rome in 1377. Additionally, Catherine founded a women's monastery in early 1377. She authored several books that include her letters and prayers.



Catherine died on April 29, 1380 at the age of 33. Pope Pius II canonized Catherine on June 29, 1461. Due to her brilliant writings, Catherine was named a Doctor of the Church in 1970, by Pope Paul VI. In October 1999, Pope John Paul II named her as one of the six patron saints of Europe. Catherine of Siena is a model for the church in her singular

focus on Christ, and her ability to live a life true to her heart's desire as she followed God's plans with joy.



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Further reading:

Catherine of Siena. Catholic Online, 2014.

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