

The Catholic Light

DIOCESE OF SCRANTON

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*“God is Here,
Everywhere”*

Bishop Bambera's 2025 Christmas Message

Dear Friends in Christ,

In words echoed by Saint Matthew in his account of the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah sets the stage for God's redemptive plan: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us."

On January 6, 2026, the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, will conclude the great Jubilee Year of Hope by closing the Holy Door in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. In Catholic tradition, the Holy Door represents the passage to salvation – the entryway to God's mercy which was opened to humanity by the incarnation of Jesus – the ultimate and supreme act by which He comes to meet people. Traditionally, Popes have closed the Holy Door as they proclaimed, "Deus qui in omni loco" ("God is here, everywhere").

These words, which reflect those of Isaiah and Matthew, are the essence of the mystery of faith that we embrace as Christians and the heart of all that we celebrate during Advent and Christmas. They are both the foundation for our hope as believers in Christ and the motivating force of discipleship: "God is here, everywhere."

In his homily for the First Sunday of Advent, Pope Leo reflected on the reality of God's abiding presence in our lives, upon the hope that is ours through the incarnation and the responsibility incumbent upon all believers to live in the spirit of Christ's redemptive love.

Bishop Bambera's Message Continues on Page 3



The Nativity is depicted in this 16th-century painting by Italian artist Lorenzo Lotto. (CNS/Bridgeman Images)



**DIOCESE OF SCRANTON
MISSION STATEMENT**

We, the Catholic community of the Diocese of Scranton, are called through Baptism to imitate the servant leadership of Jesus Christ. In union with Our Holy Father, the Pope, we proclaim the Gospel faithfully, celebrate the sacraments joyfully, and boldly promote life, justice and peace in northeastern and north central Pennsylvania.

POLICY STATEMENT

The Catholic Light is our official diocesan journal. The publication of notices, regulations and extra-synodal decrees in said paper constitute legal promulgation for all the faithful of the Diocese of Scranton, Clergy and Laity.

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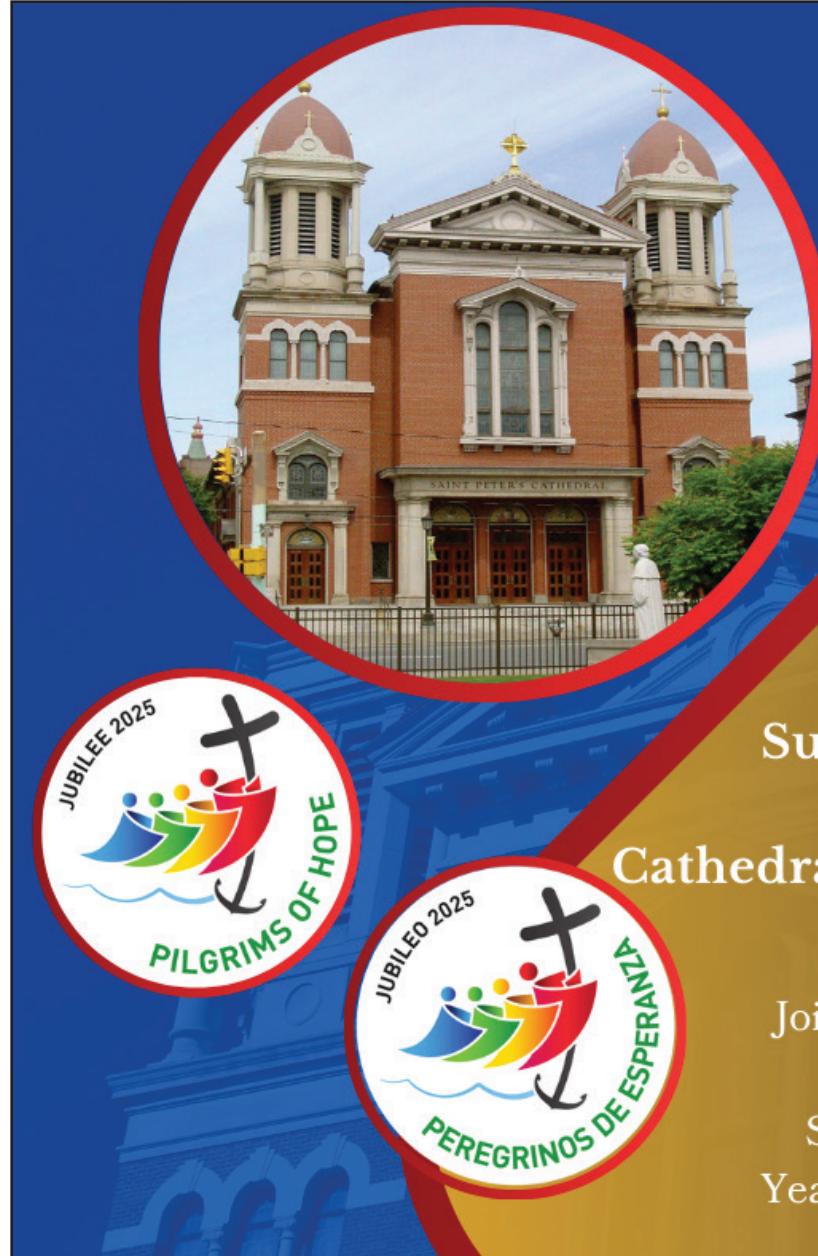


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JUBILEE YEAR OF HOPE



Closing Mass

Sunday, December 28, 2025
12:15 p.m.

Cathedral of Saint Peter, Scranton

Join Bishop Joseph C. Bambera and
the faithful of the Diocese of
Scranton as we close the Jubilee
Year on the Feast of the Holy Family.

Faithful invited to close Jubilee Year with Bishop on Dec. 28

SCRANTON - The faithful of the Diocese of Scranton are invited to gather in thanksgiving and prayer as the Jubilee Year of Hope concludes with a Closing Mass on Sunday, Dec. 28, 2025, at 12:15 p.m. at the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Scranton.

The Closing Mass will mark the final diocesan celebration of the Jubilee Year of Hope, observed throughout 2025 by the Universal Church.

All are welcome to attend, with a special invitation extended to those who participated in Jubilee

events during the year, including the Diocesan Pilgrimage to Rome in late August and September, the Diocesan Pilgrimage to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 1, 2025, and the many special Jubilee Masses and prayer opportunities held across the Diocese.

The Jubilee Year has been a time for Catholics to deepen their faith, encounter Christ more personally, and renew their commitment to live as "Pilgrims of Hope" in a world in need of

healing and peace.

The Closing Mass on Dec. 28 will offer an opportunity for our Diocesan family to come together and give thanks for the spiritual fruits of the Holy Year.

The Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, will serve as principal celebrant and homilist for the Closing Mass of the Jubilee Year.

Throughout the year, the Diocese of Scranton marked the Jubilee with opportunities for prayer, pilgrimage, and worship, encouraging the faithful to reflect

on the hope found in Christ and to carry that hope into their families, parishes, and communities.

The Closing Mass will invite Catholics to continue living that message of hope, faith, and discipleship beyond the conclusion of the Holy Year.

For those unable to attend in person, CTV: Catholic Television of the Diocese of Scranton will provide live coverage of the Mass. A livestream will also be made available on the Diocesan website, YouTube channel and all Diocesan social media platforms.

Mensaje de Navidad 2025 del Obispo Bambera

Queridos amigos en Cristo,

Con palabras que resuenan en el relato de san Mateo sobre el nacimiento de Jesús, el profeta Isaías prepara el escenario del plan redentor de Dios: «He aquí que la virgen concebirá y dará a luz un hijo, y le pondrán por nombre Emmanuel», que significa Dios con nosotros.

El 6 de enero de 2026, en la Solemnidad de la Epifanía del Señor, nuestro Santo Padre, el Papa León XIV, concluirá el gran Jubileo de la Esperanza cerrando la Puerta Santa en la Basílica de San Pedro en Roma. En la tradición católica, la Puerta Santa representa el paso a la salvación — la entrada a la misericordia de Dios que fue abierta a la humanidad por la encarnación de Jesús — el acto supremo y definitivo por el cual Él sale al encuentro de su pueblo. Tradicionalmente, los Papas han cerrado la Puerta Santa proclamando: “Deus qui in omni loco” (“Dios está aquí, en todas partes”).

Estas palabras, que reflejan las de Isaías y Mateo, son la esencia del misterio de la fe que abrazamos como cristianos y el corazón de todo lo que celebramos durante el Adviento y la Navidad. Son, al mismo tiempo, el fundamento de nuestra esperanza como creyentes en Cristo y la fuerza que impulsa el discipulado: “Dios está aquí, en todas partes”.

En su homilía del Primer Domingo de Adviento, el Papa León reflexionó sobre la realidad de la presencia permanente de Dios en nuestras vidas, sobre la esperanza que nos pertenece por medio de la encarnación y sobre la responsabilidad que incumbe a todos los creyentes de vivir en el espíritu del amor redentor de Cristo.

El Santo Padre dijo: Los frutos de la acción de Dios en nuestras vidas son un don no solo para nosotros, sino para todos... y sirven como recordatorio de que la alegría de la bondad es contagiosa... En ellos encontramos una invitación a renovar la fuerza de nuestro propio testimonio de fe. San Juan Crisóstomo habló del atractivo de la santidad como un signo más elocuente que muchos milagros. Dijo: “El milagro sucede y pasa, pero la vida cristiana permanece y edifica continuamente... Cuidémonos, pues, a nosotros mismos, para que también podamos beneficiar a los demás”.

El Santo Padre concluyó: “Si realmente queremos ayudar a las personas que encontramos, cuidémonos a nosotros mismos cultivando nuestra fe con la oración y los sacramentos, viviéndola coherentemente en la caridad, y despojándonos de las obras de las tinieblas para revestirnos de la armadura de la luz”.

Lamentablemente, aunque abrazamos con facilidad la esperanza que se nos concede mediante el nacimiento de Jesús, con frecuencia somos reacios a acoger su invitación al discipulado auténtico. No hacemos nuestra la proclamación de la salvación anunciada a lo largo de los siglos por la vida, el amor, la misericordia y el perdón de Jesús. Dudamos en aceptar su llamado a caminar tras sus huellas. Nos preguntamos por qué nos sentimos inquietos y por qué la paz en nuestras vidas, en nuestros hogares y en nuestro mundo parece tan esquiva. Nos preguntamos por qué Dios no puede ofrecernos una salida al sufrimiento y al dolor en Ucrania, en el Medio Oriente, en Nigeria, en nuestras fronteras, en la vida de nuestras hermanas y hermanos inmigrantes, en nuestros vecindarios, en nuestras familias y en nuestros corazones. Y dejamos pasar el tesoro que se nos ha dado a cada uno por medio de la fe.

Queridos amigos, a pesar de toda la agitación que enfrentamos en nuestras vidas, la buena noticia y la bendición de la Navidad es que “Dios está aquí, en todas partes”.

Él ya nos ha dado un camino a seguir lleno de esperanza, si somos lo suficientemente sabios y humildes para confiar en su presencia, abrazar el mensaje de salvación nacido en Belén y caminar con Él como discípulos fieles, haciendo nuestro el modelo de su vida por el bien de un mundo herido.

Durante estos días tan queridos, demos gracias por las innumerables bendiciones recibidas. Oremos por la paz en nuestro mundo y en nuestros corazones. Y abramos nuestras vidas a la gracia y la misericordia de Dios, ganadas para nosotros por el Niño llamado Emmanuel — ¡Dios con nosotros!

Con gratitud por el privilegio de servirles como su Obispo y con oraciones por una Navidad santa y bendecida para ustedes, sus familias y todos sus seres queridos, quedo de ustedes,

Fielmente en Cristo,

Mons. Joseph C. Bambera, D.D., J.C.L.
Obispo de Scranton

Bishop Bambera's 2025 Christmas Message

Continued from Page 1

The Holy Father said, “The fruits of God’s action in our lives are a gift not only for us, but for everyone ... serving as a reminder that the joy of goodness is contagious ... We find in them an invitation to renew the power of our own

witness of faith. Saint John Chrysostom spoke of the allure of holiness as a sign more eloquent than many miracles. He said: ‘The miracle happens and passes, but the Christian life remains and continually edifies ... Let us therefore watch over ourselves, so that we may also benefit others.’”

The Holy Father concluded, “If we truly want to help the people we meet, let us keep watch over ourselves by cultivating our faith with prayer and with the sacraments, living it consistently in charity, and casting off works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.”

Sadly, however, while we are quick to embrace the hope that we are given through the birth of Jesus, we are often reluctant to heed his invitation to authentic discipleship. We fail to make as our own the message of salvation proclaimed throughout the ages by the life, love, mercy, and forgiveness of Jesus. We’re reluctant to heed Jesus’ invitation to walk in his footsteps. We wonder why we are unsettled and peace in our lives, our homes and our world seem so elusive. We question why God can’t provide us with a way out of suffering and pain in Ukraine, in the Middle East, in Nigeria, at our borders, in the lives of our immigrant sisters and brothers, in our neighborhoods, in our families and in our hearts. And we miss the treasure that has been given to each of us through faith.

My friends, for all the upheaval that we confront in our lives, the good news and blessing of Christmas is that “God is here, everywhere.” He has already provided us a way forward with hope if we are wise and humble enough to trust in his presence, to embrace the message of salvation born in Bethlehem, and to walk with him as faithful disciples, making the pattern of his life our own for the sake of a broken world.

During these cherished days, may we give thanks for countless numbers of blessings. May we pray for peace in our world and in our hearts. And may we open our lives to the grace and mercy of God won for us through the child named Emmanuel — God with us!

With gratitude for the privilege of serving as your Bishop and with prayers for a holy and blessed Christmas for you, your family and all you hold dear, I am

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, D.D., J.C.L.
Bishop of Scranton



The Adoration of the Magi is depicted in this 17th-century painting by French artist Claude Vignon.

Catholic Television Christmas Schedule

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20

5:30 p.m.

Live from the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Scranton, Mass for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21

5:00 p.m.

Live from the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Scranton, Mass for the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Evening Prayer

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24

4:00 p.m.

Live from the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Scranton, Bishop Bambera celebrates the Vigil Mass for the Nativity of the Lord

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24

6:00 p.m. (Rebroadcast on Thursday at 4:00 a.m.)

Pope Leo XIV presides over the Christmas Midnight Mass at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24

10:00 p.m.

Choral Meditations & Mass of Christmas Eve from Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25

6:00 a.m. (Rebroadcast at 3:00 p.m. & 11:30 p.m.)

Live from St. Peter's Square, Pope Leo XIV gives the Christmas "Urbi Et Orbi" message and blessing

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25

10:00 a.m. (Rebroadcast at 5:00 p.m.)

Live from the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Scranton, Mass for the Nativity of the Lord on Christmas Day

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25

Noon

Solemn Mass of Christmas from the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC

Christmas creche, tree are signs of hope, Pope Leo XIV says

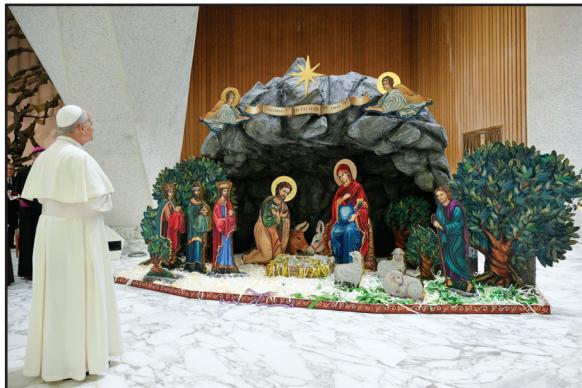
VATICAN CITY (CNS) - The Nativity scene and the Christmas tree are signs of faith and hope, Pope Leo XIV said.

"As we contemplate them in our homes, parishes and town squares, let us ask the Lord to renew in us the gift of peace and fraternity," he said, calling for prayers for all those who suffer because of war and violence. "We must eliminate hatred from our hearts."

The pope was speaking Dec. 15 during a meeting with the government representatives, artisans and donors responsible for providing the Christmas decorations in the Paul VI Audience Hall and in St. Peter's Square.

Pope Leo thanked the Costa Rican artist who created the Nativity scene for the audience hall, titled "Nacimiento Gaudium." Created by Paula Sáenz Soto, it features a pregnant Virgin Mary and 28,000 colored ribbons, each representing a life saved from abortion thanks to the prayers and support provided to many mothers in difficulty by Catholic organizations, according to a press release by the Vatican City State's governing office.

On Christmas Eve, the statue will be replaced with a different statue of Mary kneeling in adoration of the newborn Baby Jesus, and 400 ribbons will be placed in



Pope Leo XIV stops to pray in front of the Nativity scene in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Dec. 15, 2025. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



The Christmas tree in St. Peter's Square Dec. 15, 2025. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

Jesus' manger containing prayers and wishes written by young patients at the National Children's Hospital in San José.

"I thank the Costa Rican artist who, together with the message of peace at Christmas, also wanted to launch an appeal for the protection of life from the moment of conception," Pope Leo said.

"The Nativity scene and the Christmas tree are signs of faith and hope," he said to all those present. "Let the tenderness of the child Jesus illuminate our lives. Let God's love, like the branches of an evergreen tree, remain fervent in us."

The pope thanked those from a small town in the northern autonomous province of Bolzano who donated the 82-foot-tall Norway spruce weighing 8.8 tons that was lit in a special ceremony Dec. 15 when the large Nativity scene in the square was unveiled.

"For pilgrims from all over the world who will gather in St. Peter's Square, the Nativity scene will remind them that God draws close to humanity, becomes one of us, entering our history in the smallness of a child," the pope said.

"Before every Nativity scene, even those made in our homes, we relive that

event and rediscover the need to seek moments of silence and prayer in our lives, to find ourselves and enter into communion with God," he said.

The Nativity scene in St. Peter's Square for 2025 came from a diocese south of Naples, not far from the Amalfi coast. Among the gifts being offered by the shepherds are agricultural products famous from the region, such as San Marzano and Corbarino tomatoes, walnuts, spring onions and artichokes.

Both the creche and the tree will be in St. Peter's Square until Jan. 11 - the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The Vatican City State governing office said that the tree's needles and green branches will be sent to an Austrian company to extract its essential oils, and the wood will be donated to a charity.

When Pope Leo met Dec. 13 with hundreds of people acting in a living Nativity scene being held at Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major, he said the creche "is an important sign: it reminds us that we are part of a wondrous adventure of salvation in which we are never alone."

"Spread this message and keep this tradition alive. They are a gift of light for our world, which so badly needs to be able to continue to hope," he said.

Christmas reminds faithful God can be found in the ordinary, Pope says

VATICAN CITY (CNS) - Christmas is a reminder that people can encounter God in ordinary, everyday places, Pope Leo XIV said.

Born as a baby in Bethlehem, God chose to "reveal himself in a human setting," the pope said in a speech Dec. 13 to musicians at the Vatican's annual Christmas concert.

"He does not use impressive scenery, but a simple home; he does not show himself from afar, but draws near; he does not remain in an inaccessible place in heaven, but reaches us in the very heart of our little stories," he said.

Christmas, he said, "reminds us that God chooses a human setting to reveal himself." And, as such, "he reveals to us that everyday life - just as it is - can become the place where we encounter him."

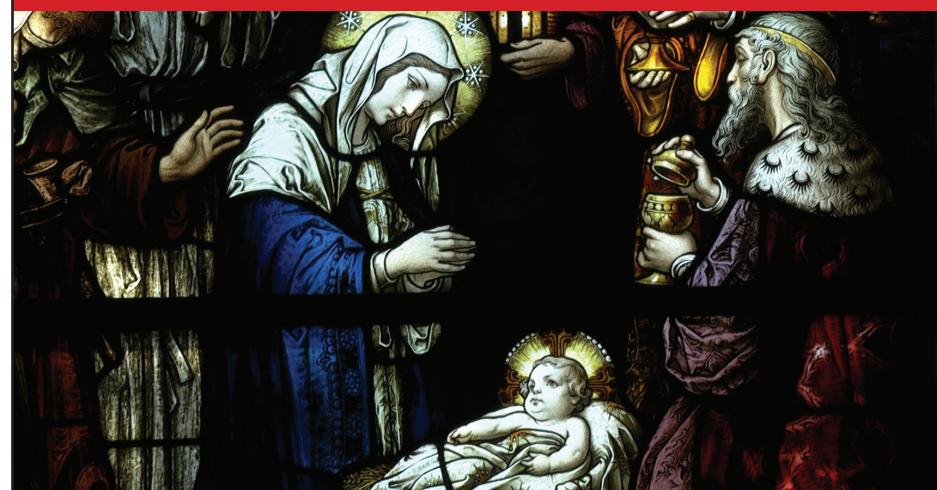
During this Christmas season, the pope said, "may music be the place of the soul: a space where the heart finds its voice, bringing us closer to God and making our humanity ever more inspired by his love."

"Music is a special path for understanding the highest dignity of the human being and for confirming one's most authentic vocation," he said, recalling St. Augustine's teaching, which linked music to "the art of guiding the heart toward God."

Bringing harmony to the world, the pope said, is to "hold together differences that could clash, allowing them to generate a higher unity. Silence too contributes to this purpose: it is not an absence of something, it is preparation, because in it the possibility of the word is formed; when there is a pause, truth emerges."

Celebrate Christmas!

Parish Mass Times for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day
can all be found online at dioceseofscranton.org



Parents grateful as Catholic Social Services helps make Christmas brighter for kids

CARBONDALE — The basement hall at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church transformed into Santa's workshop on Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2025, as Catholic Social Services of the Diocese of Scranton provided early holiday cheer for many families in the greater Carbondale area.

Catholic Social Services welcomed families from across Lackawanna County's Upper Valley for its annual Gifts for Kids distribution, offering toys, winter clothing, books, games, and stocking stuffers to the families of 284 pre-registered children.

Parents were able to shop for two brand-new, unwrapped gifts for each child — and for many, the chance to choose something personal made all the difference.

"It's joyful," said CSS caseworker Christina Hoffman, who spent the day walking with

the parents as they selected gifts. "We're making it a positive event. It is all about gift giving and being here to help one another throughout the holiday season."

For parents like Nate Jones, who shopped for two children, the help is essential.

"I'm on a budget — I get SSI — so this helps me out a lot," he said. "I know their personalities."

Danielle Pevec of Carbondale was shopping for her young daughter.

"My daughter is very tall and finding clothes for her is a little difficult, so being able to shop that way was very helpful," she said.

Pevec even spotted a family game — Pictionary — that struck the perfect chord.

"Every day, I ask her a 'question of the day,'" she explained. "Last night, I asked, 'What is something you'd like to learn with me?' She said drawing.



Danielle Pevec of Carbondale, left, looks through board games with Christina Hoffman from Catholic Social Services, during the Gifts for Kids toy distribution in Carbondale Dec. 9, 2025. (Photo/Eric Deabill)

I caught Pictionary out of the corner of my eye, and that's why I picked it. We'll be able to draw together and have fun at the same time."

Longtime volunteer Trish Smith, who dresses each year as the 'Grinch' for the toy distribution, said the day never loses its magic.

"The smiles, the people — it just brings joy," she shared. "I love the music. I love the people. It is something that brings smiles and a little bit of happiness to people."

Behind the scenes, the toy distribution takes months of planning.

Jolette Lyons, CSS Director of Lackawanna County Offices, noted that planning begins in April, with registration in the fall, and toy collections throughout the year.

"Everybody wants their kid to have a nice Christmas. Everybody wants toys under the Christmas tree for their children and so the opportunity to serve the community like this is really wonderful for us," Lyons said.

For families who missed the registration deadline, CSS offered a second chance distribution on Wednesday, Dec. 10, ensuring that no child in Lackawanna County's Upper Valley goes without presents on Christmas morning.

Catholic Social Services in Hazleton will also distribute toys to hundreds of children in that community from Dec. 20-23.

CSS helps to distribute toys for 5,000 kids in Scranton



SCRANTON — Through the continued partnership of Catholic Social Services of the Diocese of Scranton and the Friends of the Poor and Catherine McAuley Center, roughly 5,000 children in the greater Scranton area will wake up with presents under the tree on Christmas morning.

On Tuesday, Dec. 16 and Wednesday, Dec. 17, the organizations hosted their annual 'Gifts for Kids' distribution at The University of Scranton.

Pre-registered families were invited to shop for toys for their children at the event — which takes hundreds of volunteers to put together each year. The gifts are all donated by parishes, schools, individuals and businesses throughout the community.

Pittston parishes unite to spread hope this Advent through annual toy drive

PITTSTON — As Advent began on Sunday, Nov. 30, 2025, the three Catholic parishes in Pittston came together to continue a beloved tradition of providing help — and hope — to local families in need at Christmas.

The parishes of Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Joseph Marello, and Our Lady of the Eucharist collected toys and gifts that would later be distributed by the Greater Pittston Santa Squad.

The three parishes had been collecting new, unwrapped toys throughout November, but efforts culminated with a two-hour drop off event at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish Center prior to a public tree lighting and living nativity celebration.

"Our parishioners in all three parishes have been preparing now for several weeks," Father

Joseph Elston, pastor of the three Pittston parishes, explained.

"Hundreds and hundreds of families benefit from this," he added.

The Greater Pittston Santa Squad is a nonprofit that conducts a months-long effort to match toys to the specific wishes of local children. The organization interviews families, catalogs gift requests, and coordinates a major distribution day in mid-December.

In all, an estimated 1,700 children benefitted from this



A selection of toys collected for the Greater Pittston Santa Squad from parishioners in Pittston on Nov. 30, 2025. (Photo/Dan Piazza)

year's effort.

"There is a great need in the area," Father Elston said. "A lot of people cooperate and donate money and toys and time."

Parish volunteers say the response from parishioners has been consistently generous.

Continued on Page 22

Wreaths Across America ceremony honors veterans at Cathedral Cemetery

SCRANTON – Despite cold temperatures, dozens of people gathered at Cathedral Cemetery on Saturday, Dec. 13, 2025, for an annual event to honor the men and women who served our nation and now rest there.

Families, volunteers, and area veterans all participated in the 2025 Wreaths Across America ceremony this year.

“This is a magnificent event,” Mary Alice Fenwick, location coordinator for the Cathedral Cemetery’s Wreaths Across America event, said. “This is our fifth year doing the event here. We are blessed to be able to try to pay tribute to the men and women who gave everything for us.”

The Fenwick family has helped to coordinate the Wreaths Across America effort each year at Cathedral Cemetery. Mary Alice Fenwick, along with her daughter Megan and granddaughter Molly.



A ‘Wreaths Across America’ event was held at Cathedral Cemetery in Scranton Dec. 13, 2025, to honor the approximately 15,000 veterans that are interred in the cemetery. (Photo/Dan Piazza)

“We were truly blessed to have this many people come out this year. We were fortunate to have so many wreaths. We have wonderful, generous donors,” Mary Alice added.

Wreaths Across America, which began in 1992 in Maine, has grown into a nationwide effort held annually each December. Its mission is simple but profound: to remember the fallen, honor

those who serve and teach future generations the value of freedom.

“We have approximately 15,000 veterans that are interred in this cemetery, and every year, I feel like it gets a little bit bigger,” Megan Fenwick added. “The Northeast PA Marine Corps League comes every year for us. They are able to do the 21-gun salute and do the colors.”

This year’s ceremony began

early, with volunteers setting up the City of Scranton show mobile and preparing for the formal program. Members of the Catholic community were joined by local organizations, including Girl Scouts, union members, and veterans’ groups, all united in a shared purpose.

At the heart of the ceremony itself is a simple but powerful act repeated thousands of times nationwide: laying a wreath on a veteran’s grave and speaking his/her name aloud.

“It is a great way to honor our veterans, especially at this time during the Christmas season,” donor Alice McDermott said. “My dad was a veteran. It’s emotional not having him here with us, but it gives us a time to stop and think about what they did for our country and the freedoms they gave us.”

McDermott, a parishioner at nearby Mary, Mother of God

Parish, said she sees the event resonate strongly with children who participate.

“They don’t even know half of these people that they’re laying wreaths on – but they thank them,” she added. “Freedom is everything.”

Molly Fenwick, a Girl Scout Juliette, served as the emcee of this year’s ceremony.

“I started when I was around seven in Girl Scouts, and now I’m here coordinating my own event,” she said. “It’s a big event. People look forward to it every year.”

After all the wreaths had been placed on veterans’ graves, organizers reflected on both gratitude and responsibility.

“I’m just proud to be a part of this wonderful organization,” Mary Alice said.

“It’s important for the next generation to know this is why we have the freedoms we have,” Megan added.

Parish draws families into parish life by creating Advent wreaths together

WEST WYOMING – The scent of fresh evergreens filled the hall at Saint Monica Parish recently as parents, kids, and visitors all worked to build an Advent wreath for their family.

On Sunday, Nov. 23, 2025, the parish invited all parishioners to gather for a special family Advent wreath making event – focused on preparing both their homes, and hearts, for the coming of Christ.

As they gathered around long tables, tucking in branches and arranging candles, people engaged in friendly conversation, getting to know each other on a deeper level.

“We invited all our families, singles, anybody who wants to come and make their own individual wreath,” Father Peter Tomczak, pastor, said. “Advent is a very special time of preparation. We want to celebrate what is

coming and not just jump right to Christmas as people do too often. These four weeks are very important to us.”

For Saint Monica Parish, the wreath making is more than a craft project – it is one of the parish’s intentional community building events.

“We get to know each other on a more personal level, rather than only at Mass or any kind of liturgical setting,” Father Tomczak added. “We get to be together, get to know each other, the kids get to interact with each other. This is a family time, and we are a family – individual families that make up this parish family.”

Participation in this year’s event grew significantly over last year. Several dozen families took part this year.

“We provided all the materials. We provided the metal



Several dozen families from Saint Monica Parish gathered for a special Advent wreath making event on Nov. 23, 2025. (Photo/Dan Piazza)

rings that the greens will go into. We provided a little ring that the candles get put into. We provided the candles, the wires, wire cutters, and the greens too,” organizer Sara Tomsak said.

Deacon William Jenkins was thrilled to see so many families participate this year.

“We have three long tables filled with people, including the pastor who is making one for his house,” Jenkins joked. “We have a lot of artistic people trying to design and make the best green-filled wreath.”

For many participants, the afternoon was about more

than decorations – it was about deepening family prayer, faith, and hope.

Parishioner Luann Heckman, who sings in the choir, said she enjoys anything that helps the parish grow closer.

“I like doing community events where we get to bond and get to know each other’s stories,” Heckman said. “Everyone is enjoying themselves.”

This year, she hoped her wreath will help her family enter Advent more prayerfully.

“I’m going to light the candles and I’m going to say a prayer, which is something that I haven’t done before,” she added. “I’m going to pray for my family, health, happiness, and love.”

For Ruth Wright, being there with her children was a way to spread hope in her own home.

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Surge in OCIA candidates in Williamsport area brings new hope to Diocese

WILLIAMSPORT — Amid the Catholic Church's Jubilee Year of Hope, a powerful sign of renewal is unfolding in the Williamsport deanery and will bear fruit in 2026.

Nearly 40 adults in Lycoming County are currently journeying through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA)—the largest group the region has seen in close to two decades.

Brian Haas, OCIA Coordinator for several parishes in the Williamsport area, says the surge is inspiring.

"If I could pin down a definitive answer (for the increasing numbers), you can bet we'd be trying to repeat it," he said.

Haas believes cultural shifts and the rise of accessible Catholic media and evangelization efforts could all be reasons why more people are drawn to the Catholic Church today.

"We have an abundance of solid Catholic material and now openly Catholic actors and public figures that appeal to many and draw more people in," Haas said, highlighting websites like Formed.org, Word on Fire, the Hallow prayer app, and even the popular series 'The Chosen.'

Haas also believes the recent election of Pope Leo XIV – a U.S.-born pontiff – plays a role.

"The conclave and its outcome put the Catholic Church front and center of the news cycle in our country for a few weeks and that may have spurred some to finally choose Catholicism," he added.

The size and diversity of this year's OCIA group in the Williamsport area is remarkable.

Participants come from several parishes including Saint Ann, Saint Boniface, Saint Joseph the Worker, Our Lady of Lourdes, Resurrection. The current numbers also include those from Saint Luke and Immaculate Conception Parishes that are participating this year. Ages range widely, but many are young adults in their 20s to 40s, filled with enthusiasm and a desire for faith.

One participant, Lance Leidhecker, said the desire to unite his family spiritually inspired him.

"My wife and our two daughters are all baptized, and seeing their connection to the Church made me realize how much I wanted to be part of that same spiritual



Candidates in the OCIA program from Saint Ann Parish in Williamsport participated in the Rite of Welcoming with Father Glenn McCreary, V.E., on Sunday, Dec. 14, 2025.



Candidates in the OCIA program from Saint Boniface Parish in Williamsport participated in the Rite of Welcoming with Father Dias Antony Valiamarathungal, on Sunday, Dec. 14, 2025.

"Participating in OCIA has been a wonderful experience. It is a blessing to get together with a large group and learn more about the Catholic faith and about God."

**Brooke Rishel
OCIA Candidate**

foundation," he shared. "I couldn't imagine a future where they would be on their path to heaven and I might not be."

For Leidhecker, the OCIA process has brought a deeper understanding of faith.

"I've genuinely enjoyed the OCIA classes. Every session teaches me something new, and each new piece of understanding draws me closer to God and to the Catholic faith," he added. "Going to Mass on Sundays has become one of the highlights of my week. Each time Mass ends, I leave feeling spiritually cleansed, peaceful, and happy."

Another participant, Brooke Rishel, described her journey into Catholicism alongside her fiancé.

"Growing up in a different denomination, the Mass was very different from my previous experiences," she said. "Participating in OCIA has been a wonderful experience. It is a blessing to get together with a large group and learn more about the Catholic faith and about God. Growing a relationship with God is

extremely important in my life and that takes a continuous learning journey."

Brooke and her fiancé plan to marry in the Church next summer, making their journey especially meaningful.

Morgan High, whose mother's side of her family is Catholic, was always curious about the Catholic Church. After exploring different religious denominations, and meeting her boyfriend at the beginning of the year, she started to attend the Catholic Mass.

"Although it was relatively new to me, the Masses filled me with a sense of belonging and I knew from then (on) that the (Catholic) Church was my fit," High said.

High has also found the welcoming nature of the Church reassuring.

"As someone not born or brought up in the Catholic faith, I was concerned I may be looked at differently, expected to know things I may not have known, or like an overall outcast. That could not have been further from reality," she added.

Reflecting on the role of the Holy Spirit, an OCIA participant who asked only to be referred to as Jonathan, shared how he felt a persistent call to join the Church.

"I can't explain it any other way; Jesus put this on my heart some time ago, and

the more I started to listen to that persistent voice, the more I felt I couldn't keep resisting it," he said.

Jonathan said he appreciates how the OCIA process has deepened his understanding of key Catholic teachings, especially those related to Mary, which helped "a lifetime of misunderstanding and prejudice simply evaporate."

As he listens to each OCIA participants' story, Haas said his own faith journey has been impacted.

"Experiencing the Holy Spirit transforming their lives and subsequently seeing them receiving the Sacraments always moves me to evaluate my own relationship with God and moves me closer to Him and energizes me to persevere in this ministry," Haas noted.

As the OCIA participants in Williamsport, and across the Diocese of Scranton, continue to walk on their path of faith, their next milestone will be participating in the Rite of Election, which will take place at the Cathedral of Saint Peter on Feb. 22, 2026.

The faithful of the Diocese of Scranton are encouraged to keep all the OCIA candidates in their prayers, asking God to continue to guide and bless their journey of faith.

Interested in Becoming Catholic?

Those interested in learning more about the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) are encouraged to contact their pastor or local parish office for information about the process!

Eight ordained as Permanent Deacons, hope renewed for the Church's mission

SCRANTON – Surrounded by family, friends, and fellow parishioners who supported them for five years of formation, eight men were ordained to the Permanent Diaconate for the Diocese of Scranton during a joyful Mass on Saturday, Nov. 29, 2025, at the Cathedral of Saint Peter.

The day marked a profound moment in the life of the Church of Scranton, and a milestone for the newly ordained who will now serve the People of God in the ministries of Word, Liturgy, and Charity.

The Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, served as principal celebrant and homilist for the Mass, which drew clergy from throughout the Diocese.

In a homily rooted in the Gospel of Matthew, Bishop Bambera reminded the men that ordained ministry in the Church is not a place of privilege, but a call to radical service.

"To be a disciple of Jesus means to put ourselves in the humble, demanding role of servant to others, to intentionally seek the happiness and fulfillment of those entrusted to our care, regardless of the cost to ourselves," Bishop Bambera said. "There is simply no other way to understand and manifest authentic ministry in the Church."

Quoting Pope Leo XIV, the Bishop emphasized that perfection is not the requirement for ministry – credibility in witness is.

"God has called you to a vital ministry in service of the Gospel. Set aside your fears. Embrace your call with deep trust in Jesus' promise to walk with you always," he added. "Live the truth of the Gospel that is rooted in the person of Jesus. Follow always His example of selfless love and mercy."

The men ordained included Fernando B. Alves, Francisco Castelan, Michaelangelo J. Colaneri, Frank A. Fanelli, Joel Marte, Jorge A. Roca, Rafael Sanchez Velasquez, and Christian D. Saunders.

The Ordination Mass featured the rich and ancient rituals of the Rite of Ordination of Deacons.

During the Election of Candidates, each man was called by name and presented to the Bishop, who formally affirmed their readiness for Ordination.

In the Promise of the Elect, the candidates declared their intention to be ordained and to undertake the duties of the diaconate.



During the Litany of Supplication, the eight men becoming Permanent Deacons prostrated themselves before the altar, as a gesture of surrender and vulnerability. (Photos/Mike Melisky)

As the cantor of the Mass chanted in Stroudsburg, formation was both challenging and transformative.

"No one comes in thinking they know it all," he said. "Most of us know that we're not worthy to be here. We know we're here because of what others have helped us with."

But the journey was never solitary. Alves said he became close with his fellow deacons undergoing formation.

"We challenged each other and pushed

For many ordinands, it was the most moving moment of the day.

"You put yourself in the absolute most vulnerable position and completely and totally turn everything that you are over to Him," newly ordained Deacon Michaelangelo Colaneri said. "It is symbolic that you are dying to yourself and rising to Christ. When you are really in that moment, the symbolism takes true effect."

The heart of the Sacramental ritual came with the Laying on of Hands and Prayer of Ordination, as Bishop Bambera conferred the Sacrament upon each man.

Following the prayer, the men were vested with the stole and dalmatic, handed the Book of the Gospels, and welcomed with the fraternal kiss by the attending deacons – a sign of belonging to the order.

Immediately following Mass, the emotional impact of the day was evident. As the newly ordained deacons greeted family and friends, many shed a few tears.

"It's such a heart warming feeling to see friends and family that travelled for hours to come here. It's such a moving experience," Colaneri added. "This was beyond compare to anything I've ever had in my entire life."

For Deacon Fernando Alves, who has been assigned to Saint Luke Parish



After the Prayer of Ordination, each new deacon was vested by a local priest with the stole and dalmatic.

each other forward," Alves explained.

Deacon Joel Marte, one of three men who is being assigned to Saint Matthew Parish in East Stroudsburg, said the moment of vesting was unforgettable.

"When you get those garments, you see them and hear about them, but until you're getting vested, that is when everything came together," Marte shared. "That is when the tears came down."

He, too, spoke of the deep bonds forged among the eight candidates.

"We have all become very close. We've shared our family, we share stories, faith, our backgrounds," Marte said. "It is a bond I can't explain."

APPOINTMENTS

His Excellency, Bishop Joseph C. Bambera, announces the following appointments, effective November 29, 2025:

Deacon Fernando Alves, to Diaconal Ministry, Saint Luke Parish, Stroudsburg.

Deacon Francisco Castelan, to Diaconal Ministry, Saint Teresa of Calcutta Parish, Scranton.

Deacon Michaelangelo Colaneri, to Diaconal Ministry, Cathedral of Saint Peter Parish, Scranton, and Immaculate Conception Parish, Scranton.

Deacon Frank Fanelli, to Diaconal Ministry, Saint Ann Parish, Shohola; Saint John Neumann Parish, Lords Valley; and Saint Vincent de Paul Parish, Dingman Township.

Deacon Joel Marte, to Diaconal Ministry, Saint Matthew Parish, East Stroudsburg.

Deacon Jorge Roca, to Diaconal Ministry, Saint Matthew Parish, East Stroudsburg.

Deacon Rafael Sánchez Velásquez, to Diaconal Ministry, Saint Matthew Parish, East Stroudsburg.

Deacon Christian Saunders, to Diaconal Ministry, Saint Paul Parish, Scranton.

Parishes across the Diocese honor Our Lady of Guadalupe

EAST STROUDSBURG—The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe was celebrated widely across the Diocese of Scranton this month, as parishes gathered to honor the Blessed Mother under her title as Patroness of the Americas.

Observed annually on Dec. 12, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe commemorates the appearances of the Blessed Mother to Juan Diego in 1531.

Her image, miraculously imprinted on the tilma of Juan Diego, became a powerful sign of God's love and mercy, leading to the spread of the Gospel throughout the Americas.

Nearly 500 years later, her message continues to inspire prayer, unity, and hope.

The Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, joined the faithful for three major celebrations in Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and East Stroudsburg. Each event highlighted the deep devotion Hispanic Catholics hold for Our Lady of Guadalupe and the rich faith they bring to the Church.

Families Celebrate in Scranton

On Sunday, Dec. 7, Bishop Bambera celebrated Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Peter with the faithful of Saint Teresa of Calcutta Parish. The Mass, held at 12:15 p.m., was followed by a



Hundreds of faithful hold a procession through the streets of Wilkes-Barre on Friday, Dec. 12, 2025, to honor Our Lady of Guadalupe. (Photos/Mike Melisky)

festive cultural celebration across the street at the Diocesan Pastoral Center.

"The Hispanic members of our community have a great love for Our Lady of Guadalupe," Father Jonathan Kuhar, pastor of Saint Teresa of Calcutta Parish, said. "Even though she appeared in Mexico, it was for the benefit of all the peoples of America."

"It is a big thing for us. We love it," parishioner Esau Orellana said. "We all come together for this Mass. It was beautiful – the music and the songs. The Cathedral was full of people and we love seeing that."

Throughout the afternoon, families gathered to share food, music, dance, and even a reenactment of the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe.



Faithful from Saint Matthew Parish in East Stroudsburg hold a procession throughout the borough on Dec. 14. (Photo/Dan Piazza)



Prior to the Liturgy of the Eucharist at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Mass in Scranton on Dec. 7, 2025, in a reenactment, Juan Diego presents his tilma to Bishop Bambera at the Cathedral of Saint Peter.

"We're showing the story on how this all started and how she represents Mexico, Mariah Coplin, who played Our Lady of Guadalupe, explained.

"It was a beautiful moment, especially for the young kids," Luis Coplin, who played the local bishop, added. "It was very beautiful to have all the people see the history of their country."

"At first, nobody believed Juan Diego. Everybody said he was crazy," Jose Antonio Galdamez Cortez reflected, thinking about the character he portrayed in the reenactment. "We planned this for about a month. It was a lot of hard work."

Citywide Witness of Hope in Wilkes-Barre

On Friday, Dec. 12, Bishop Bambera joined the faithful of Saint Nicholas-Saint Mary Parish in Wilkes-Barre for Mass at 6 p.m. at Saint Nicholas Church and a reception afterward.

The celebration began with a large public procession through city streets at 4 p.m., drawing participants of all ages who braved the cold weather to walk, pray, sing, and dance in honor of the Blessed Mother.

"The procession was just beautiful," parishioner Adriana Sosa said. "It is our way to show

our appreciation to her, showing our love for her in this cold weather."

For many, Our Lady of Guadalupe represents comfort and hope, especially for those facing hardship.

"She appeared to Juan Diego. He was the poorest of them all. He was at rock bottom," Sosa added. "She gives us hope that no matter who we are, she will be there for us."

Parishioner Michelle Bazan noted the importance of teaching younger generations about the devotion.

"It has been carried on for nearly 500 years," she said. "If we don't pass that on to future generations, it will eventually get lost."

"This is honestly one of my favorite days of the year," parishioner Luz Castro added. "From the mañanitas in the morning, to the procession, to the Mass, and then having food and the community together, all to show our love to Our Lady of Guadalupe."

Faith perseveres through the storm

Despite heavy snowfall and strong winds, the faithful of Saint Matthew Parish in East Stroudsburg gathered on Sunday,

Dec. 14, for an outdoor procession followed by Mass with Bishop Bambera.

"It's cold out – but it shows our culture and how we express it," parishioner Adriel Lopez said. "I just like seeing everyone."

Participants from many cultural backgrounds walked together, praying the rosary and honoring Our Lady.

"It makes me feel like we're one big happy family," parishioner Rey Pomaquiza Morocho said.

Deacon Angel Luis Rivera reflected on the deeper meaning of the celebration.

"She brought two cultures together – the Spanish culture and the Indigenous people," he said. "She is our mother. It is bringing our faith to life."

He also expressed gratitude for the Bishop's presence in the Poconos.

"The Bishop is the father of the Diocese," Deacon Rivera added. "It is so lovely that our Bishop has time to spend with us. I love the fact that he takes that time."

More Photos from the recent Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrations are available on the Diocese of Scranton Facebook page.

Parroquias de toda la Diócesis honran a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

EAST STROUDSBURG — La Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe fue celebrada ampliamente en toda la Diócesis de Scranton este mes, cuando las parroquias se reunieron para honrar a la Santísima Virgen bajo su título de Patrona de las Américas.

Celebrada anualmente el 12 de diciembre, la Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe conmemora las apariciones de la Santísima Virgen a Juan Diego en 1531. Su imagen, impresa milagrosamente en la tilma de Juan Diego, se convirtió en un poderoso signo del amor y la misericordia de Dios, llevando a la difusión del Evangelio por todas las Américas.

Casi 500 años después, su mensaje continúa inspirando oración, unidad y esperanza.

El Reverendísimo Joseph C. Bambera, Obispo de Scranton, se unió a los fieles en tres celebraciones principales en Scranton, Wilkes-Barre y East Stroudsburg. Cada evento destacó la profunda devoción que los católicos hispanos tienen por Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe y la rica fe que aportan a la Iglesia.

Las familias celebran en Scranton

El domingo 7 de diciembre, el Obispo Bambera celebró la Santa Misa en la Catedral de San Pedro con los fieles de la parroquia Santa Teresa de Calcuta. La Misa, celebrada a las 12:15 p.m., fue seguida por una animada celebración cultural al otro lado de la calle, en el Centro Pastoral Diocesano.



Después de la Misa en Scranton el 7 de diciembre, actores de la parroquia Santa Teresa de Calcuta recrearon la aparición de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe a Juan Diego en el Centro Pastoral Diocesano.

“Los miembros hispanos de nuestra comunidad tienen un gran amor por Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe”, dijo el padre Jonathan Kuhar, párroco de la parroquia Santa Teresa de Calcuta. “Aunque ella se apareció en México, fue para el beneficio de todos los pueblos de América”.

“Es algo muy grande para nosotros. Nos encanta”, dijo el feligrés Esau Orellana. “Todos nos reunimos para esta Misa. Fue hermosa: la música y los cantos. La Catedral estaba llena de gente y nos encanta ver eso”.

Durante toda la tarde, las familias se reunieron para compartir comida, música, danzas e incluso una representación de la historia de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.

“Estamos mostrando la historia de cómo comenzó todo esto y cómo ella representa a México”, explicó Mariah Coplin, quien interpretó a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.

“Fue un momento hermoso, especialmente para los niños”, añadió Luis Coplin, quien interpretó al obispo local. “Fue muy bonito que toda la gente pudiera ver la historia de su país”.

“Al principio, nadie le creyó a Juan Diego. Todos decían que estaba loco”, reflexionó José Antonio Galdámez Cortez, al pensar

en el personaje que interpretó en la representación. “Planeamos esto durante aproximadamente un mes. Fue mucho trabajo”.

Un testimonio de esperanza en toda la ciudad de Wilkes-Barre

El viernes 12 de diciembre, el Obispo Bambera se unió a los fieles de la parroquia San Nicolás-Santa María en Wilkes-Barre para la Misa de las 6 p.m. en la iglesia de San Nicolás, seguida de una recepción.

La celebración comenzó con una gran procesión pública por las calles de la ciudad a las 4 p.m., atrayendo a participantes de todas las edades que desafiaron el frío para caminar, orar, cantar y bailar en honor a la Santísima Virgen.

“La procesión fue simplemente hermosa”, dijo la feligresa Adriana Sosa. “Es nuestra manera de mostrarle nuestro agradecimiento, demostrando nuestro amor por ella en este clima frío”.

Para muchos, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe representa consuelo y esperanza, especialmente para quienes enfrentan dificultades.

“Ella se apareció a Juan Diego. Él era el más pobre de todos. Estaba en lo más bajo”, añadió Sosa. “Ella nos da la esperanza de que, sin importar quiénes seamos, ella estará ahí para nosotros”.

La feligresa Michelle Bazán destacó la importancia de enseñar esta devoción a las nuevas generaciones.

“Se ha transmitido durante casi 500 años”, dijo. “Si no la pasamos a las futuras generaciones, eventualmente se perderá”.



Una mujer ora fervientemente durante la Misa en honor a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe en la iglesia de San Nicolás en Wilkes-Barre el 12 de diciembre de 2025. (Fotos/Mike Melisky)

“Honestamente, este es uno de mis días favoritos del año”, agregó la feligresa Luz Castro. “Desde las mañanitas en la mañana, la procesión, la Misa, y luego la comida y la comunidad reunida, todo para mostrar nuestro amor a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe”.

La fe persevera a través de la tormenta

A pesar de las fuertes nevadas y los intensos vientos, los fieles de la parroquia San Mateo en East Stroudsburg se reunieron el domingo 14 de diciembre para una procesión al aire libre seguida de la Misa con el Obispo Bambera.

“Hace frío, pero demuestra nuestra cultura y cómo la expresamos”, dijo el feligrés Adriel López. “Me gusta simplemente ver a todos reunidos”.

Participantes de muchos orígenes culturales caminaron juntos, rezando el rosario y honrando a Nuestra Señora.

“Me hace sentir que somos una gran familia feliz”, dijo el feligrés Rey Pomaquiza Morocho.

El diácono Ángel Luis Rivera reflexionó sobre el significado más profundo de la celebración.

“Ella unió dos culturas: la cultura española y los pueblos indígenas”, dijo. “Ella es nuestra madre. Está haciendo viva nuestra fe”.

También expresó su gratitud por la presencia del Obispo en la región de los Poconos.

“El Obispo es el padre de la Diócesis”, añadió el diácono Rivera. “Es muy bonito que nuestro Obispo tenga tiempo para estar con nosotros. Me encanta que se tome ese tiempo”.



Una gran multitud participó en una Misa especial para honrar a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe el domingo 14 de diciembre de 2025, en la parroquia de San Mateo en East Stroudsburg.

Tribunal restructures to better serve divorced and Spanish-speaking Catholics

SCRANTON – As the Jubilee Year of Hope draws to a close, the Diocese of Scranton is placing renewed emphasis on one of its quiet, but critical, ministries – the Diocesan Tribunal.

Often working without fanfare or attention, the Tribunal assists the Bishop in matters of canon law related to marriage – including declarations of nullity (commonly known as annulments), dispensations, and permissions that help couples prepare for the sacrament of matrimony.

Father Thomas J. Petro, J.V., J.C.L., the newly appointed Judicial Vicar, said a series of significant reforms and new staff appointments aims to make the Tribunal “more accessible, more pastoral, and more responsive to the needs of the People of God.”

Father Petro said the changes respond not only to pastoral realities in parishes but also to themes raised repeatedly during Synod on Synodality listening sessions – particularly the desire for greater accompaniment for those who are divorced, those who feel distant from the Church, and newly arrived Spanish-speaking Catholics.

“We are striving to put a more pastoral face on the whole process. We’ve always joked that canon law is the ‘dark side’ of the Good News. But we all see ourselves as ministers of justice – serving the People of God in a ministry of healing. That is so important for us.”

The Tribunal is currently focusing on three major areas of renewal.

1. Assigning Priest Advocates from Day One

Recognizing that petitioners may feel unsure or anxious when beginning the annulment process, every person who applies for a declaration of nullity will now immediately be assigned a priest advocate who will accompany them throughout the process. That applies to both the petitioner and the respondent.

“That is significant because sometimes people feel intimidated by the process or they have questions, especially of a personal nature, and our priests who have proficiency in canon law can help,” Father Petro explained.



Diocesan Tribunal staff members met at the Chancery on Nov. 19, 2025, to discuss new practices being implemented to assist people seeking marriage annulments. Participating in the meeting were, from left: Myles McAliney, J.D., Father Neftalí Félix Sena, Judy Myerski, Monsignor Neil J. Van Loon, V.F., Father Michael J. Boris, Father Thomas J. Petro, J.V., J.C.L., Father Michael S. Drevitch, Linda Price, J.C.L., and Father Fidel Ticona. (Photo/Eric Deabill)

2. Reintroducing an In-House Assessor

For the first time in more than a decade, the Tribunal will again have an in-house assessor, who will assist Tribunal judges by offering a psychological perspective that helps explain the circumstances surrounding a marriage at its beginning.

Monsignor Neil Van Loon, V.F., pastor of Saint Paul Parish, Scranton, and a trained pastoral counselor, has been appointed to serve in this capacity.

“Petitioners and respondents will be able to meet with our in-house assessor and have a conversation about aspects of their lives and their emotions that can help us reach a decision based upon what was really going on in their hearts and minds when they said, ‘I do,’” Father Petro said.

3. Expanded Service to Spanish-Speaking Catholics

Recognizing the growing Hispanic population throughout the Diocese, and that 25-percent of all Tribunal cases involve Spanish-speakers, two native Spanish-speaking priests have also been appointed as auditors and advocates.

Father Neftalí Félix Sena, Assistant Pastor of Saint Pius of Pietrelcina Parish, Hazleton, and Father Fidel Ticona, Assistant Pastor of Saint Nicholas-

Saint Mary Parish, Wilkes-Barre, will help conduct interviews, assist with documentation from other countries, and help individuals navigate the process in their native language.

“Both priests are currently serving in parish communities that have sizable Hispanic populations, so oftentimes they’ll know these people personally before they even apply,” Father Petro noted.

In addition to the two Spanish-speaking priests who will serve as auditors, two other priests have also been appointed to assist Tribunal judges by conducting interviews with people seeking

annulments. They are Father Michael J. Boris, Assistant Pastor of Saint Ignatius Loyola Parish, Kingston, and Father Michael S. Drevitch, Assistant Pastor, Corpus Christi Parish, West Pittston.

The Tribunal’s leadership team has also expanded.

Myles McAliney, J.D., a retired civil attorney and parishioner of Saint Paul Parish, Scranton, has been hired to serve as Moderator of the Tribunal Chancery. He will oversee day-to-day operations, manage archives, coordinate dispensations and permissions, and assist administrative notaries Judy Myerski and Heather Betts. In addition to currently serving as Diocesan chancellor, Linda Price, J.C.L., will continue to serve as a Judge on the Tribunal.

A full slate of judges, auditors, and defenders of the bond – including Monsignor Patrick J. Pratico, Father Jeffrey D. Tugdugay, Father Brian J.W. Clarke, Father Anthony J. Generose, Father Alex J. Roche, and Father Edward Shestak – will continue their service to the Diocesan community.

“I definitely think this reform of our Tribunal is part of Bishop Bambera’s vision to put a pastoral face on the annulment process, that we have accessibility to our Spanish speaking parishioners, and we make the process as expeditious as possible,” Father Petro added.

People interested in learning more about the Tribunal’s ministry or the declaration of nullity process may call (570) 207-2246 or speak to their local pastor who can direct them.

2026 PreCana Days of Reflection Dates announced

SCRANTON - The Diocesan Office for Parish Life has announced the 2026 dates that PreCana will be held.

PreCana Days of Reflection help engaged couples grow in faith as they prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage.

Each day offers prayerful guidance, practical tools, and faith-centered formation for couples to begin their life together.

The 2026 PreCana dates are:

**Saturday, February 7 - Dickson City
Sunday, March 8 - Scranton**

Saturday, April 11 - Online

Saturday, May 9 - Wilkes-Barre

Saturday, June 6 - Duryea

Sunday, July 19 - Online

Sunday, August 9 - Scranton

Saturday, Sept. 26 - Montoursville

Saturday, October 17 - Online

Saturday, November 7 - Dickson City

Sunday, December 6 - Scranton

Each class is 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

For more information or to register for a 2026 PreCana Day of Reflection, visit dioceseofscranton.org.

New Prayer Guild invites families to pray – and help make “Rosary Priest” a saint

SCRANTON – Do you and your family want to help make a saint?

You're invited to join the new Father Patrick Peyton Prayer Guild that has formed in the Diocese of Scranton.

The local effort is being led by longtime Scranton residents and business leaders David and Ann Hawk, who are members of the Order of Malta. The Guild will serve as a local chapter of Holy Cross Family Ministries, which is encouraging the establishment of prayer groups nationwide.

Membership is free and simply asks participants to pray the rosary (especially as a family), to pray for the canonization of Venerable Patrick Peyton, and to seek his intercession.

Ann Hawk said creating a Diocesan Prayer Guild for Father Patrick Peyton has grown organically from a group that already prays the rosary monthly in honor of Father Peyton at the Cathedral of Saint Peter.

Collaborating with Holy Cross Family Ministries, the Hawks are excited about the possibilities ahead.

“Seeing as Father Peyton worked at the Cathedral and his vocation was rekindled in Scranton, Holy Cross Families Ministries feels this would be a good place to try and have a Prayer Guild grow,” Ann Hawk said.

Father Peyton lived in Scranton for two years, working as a sexton at the Cathedral of Saint Peter before beginning his journey to the priesthood.

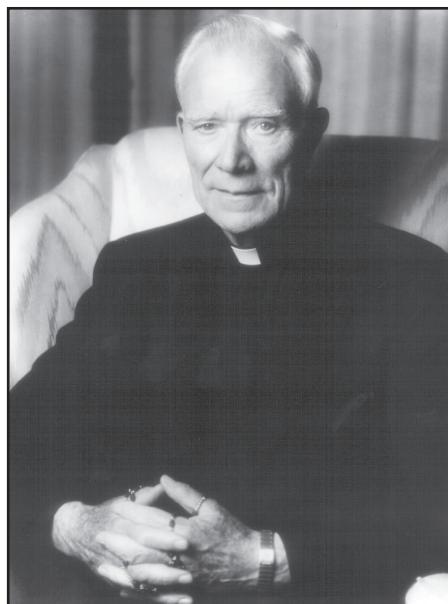
The Hawks believe his local roots make the establishment of a Prayer Guild especially meaningful.

“This wonderful man has roots in this city,” Dave Hawk said. “Scranton has a big part of this.”

Venerable Patrick Peyton was one of the 20th century's most influential Catholic evangelizers, best known for popularizing the phrase, “The family that prays together, stays together.”

Father Peyton understood the power of communication long before the digital age. He embraced radio, television, and film to reach millions, collaborating with celebrities and producing programs that promoted family prayer in a relatable way.

Reaching out to families in 40 countries with massive outdoor rosary rallies, he spoke and prayed with more



Venerable Patrick Peyton

than 28 million people during his lifetime.

Creating a Prayer Guild for Father Peyton in the Diocese of Scranton aligns with the Jubilee Year of Hope, encouraging families to deepen their faith and experience renewal through prayer.

“No matter what you're going through – if you pray – you have more peace than if you don't,” Ann said. “We live in such a crazy world ... and I think he really has a message for us!”

David Hawk, who converted to Catholicism as a young adult in 1979, said learning about Father Peyton, praying the rosary, and working to establish the Diocesan Prayer Guild has strengthened his own spirituality.

“I find it almost renewing my faith,” he reflected.

In early December 2025, David Hawk led the monthly rosary for Father Peyton at the Cathedral. It was a milestone for him.

“That rosary ... was the first time I've ever led a rosary,” he explained.

Participants in the Holy Cross Family Ministries network are encouraged to pray not only for personal intentions, but also specifically for the canonization of Father Peyton.

According to the Hawks, widespread participation is essential.

“The Vatican wants to see that he has a Guild and people praying for him, to show that this is a person that people are turning to,” Ann explained.

Dave added, “They'll be able to go to the Vatican and say we have thousands of people saying the rosary hoping that Patrick Peyton becomes a saint.”

The Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, has expressed his support for the initiative.

Locally, faithful already gather to pray the rosary on the first Wednesday of each month following the 12:10 p.m. Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Peter. All are

welcome to join.

The Hawks hope the Guild will help families rediscover prayer and find strength if they're facing challenging times.

“I'm hoping that people turn more to God and that they have such a sense of peace,” Ann said. “If he becomes a saint – Scranton will have a piece of that!”

For more information on how to join the new Father Patrick Peyton Prayer Guild, visit dioceseofscranton.org.



BISHOP BAMBERA'S SCHEDULE

December 21 - Mass for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Cathedral of Saint Peter, Scranton, 10:00 a.m.

December 23 - Advent Mass for Chancery Staff

Cathedral of Saint Peter, Scranton, 12:10 p.m.

December 24 - Vigil Mass of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas Eve)

Cathedral of Saint Peter, Scranton, 4:00 p.m.

December 25 - Midnight Mass of the Nativity of the Lord

Cathedral of Saint Peter, Scranton, Midnight

December 25 - Mass of the Nativity of the Lord

Gino Merli Center, Scranton, 9:30 a.m.

December 28 - Closing Mass for the Jubilee Year of Hope

Cathedral of Saint Peter, Scranton, 12:15 p.m.

January 4 - Mass for the Epiphany of the Lord

Cathedral of Saint Peter, Scranton, 12:15 p.m.

January 5 - Mass with the Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth

Tunkhannock, 5:00 p.m.

January 8 - School Mass for Saint Clare/Saint Paul School

Scranton, 9:00 a.m.

January 10 - Mass with Filipino Community

Immaculate Conception Church, Scranton, 6:00 p.m.

January 11 - Closing Mass of Saint Adalbert Church

Glen Lyon, 2:00 p.m.

January 12 - 16 - Region III Bishops Retreat

SAVE THE DATE!

Thursday, January 22, 2026 at 12:10 p.m.

Ecumenical Celebration of God's Word for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Saint Nicholas 5K Run brings holiday cheer and benefits parish ministries

ARCBALD — Even with temperatures only in the mid-twenties, nearly 200 runners and walkers gathered for the 17th annual Saint Nicholas 5K Fun Run and Walk at Christ the King Parish on Dec. 6, 2025.

While winter is an unusual season for races in northeastern Pennsylvania, this beloved event has become an event that many local athletes and parishioners await each year.

"It's an event that began as a fundraiser for our youth group and it has since become a huge social event here in Archbald," Father Ryan Glenn, pastor, said. "It raises funds for our parish, and it brings together the running community and walking community."

After the race, participants gather in the parish hall to enjoy hearty soups and baked goods.

"We usually have it around Saint Nicholas' Feast Day, so people are really in the holiday spirit. It's a really festive day and a lot of fun," Father Ryan added.



Nearly 200 runners and walkers participated in the 17th annual Saint Nicholas 5K Fun Run and Walk in Archbald on Dec. 6, 2025. (Photo/Dan Piazza)

"It's something unique to bring people together and to bring them to our parish community."

Amy Hassaj, chairperson of the race committee, said the event embodies community spirit.

"We have runners from all over the Valley that look forward to this. This year

was an awesome turnout," she said. "Along with all the volunteers from the parish, people that donated soups and local businesses that donated soups and baked goods, it really just brought everybody together."

For many runners, like David Schweitzer from Saint John Vianney Parish in Scott Township, it's an annual tradition.

"This is my fourth year in a row running the Saint Nicholas 5K," Schweitzer said. "Every year, this event

seems to get bigger and better. The parish does more and more to make it a great day and worth coming out to. I always have a great time here."

Schweitzer placed third in his age division and finished ninth overall.

"In past years, I've been able to run a personal record. That didn't happen this

year but that is okay. It's a nice flat out-and-back, which makes for a quick run," he added.

For younger runners, like Jack Kopa who is only a teenager, the race is an opportunity to track progress during the off-season and compete in a friendly environment.

"I've been doing it for three years now," said Kopa, who took first place in the 15-19 age group. "I cut a whole minute off my time, so it has been positive."

Since the 5K race has gotten so popular over the years, funds raised also now supports parish ministries like Christ the King's clothing closet, pantry, and community outreach.

But for organizers — more than just the money raised — they welcome the opportunity to highlight the spirit of their parish.

"This is one of our flagship events at our parish. But for as much as it raises funds, it's really a community building opportunity," Father Ryan explained.

Parish, partners unite to fight food insecurity in Scranton

SCRANTON — Responding to ongoing food insecurity in the community, Divine Mercy Parish has partnered with Friends of the Poor and the Catherine McAuley Center to host a monthly pop-up food pantry at its Davis Street campus.

Held on the first Thursday of each month, the pantry provides fresh, nutritionally balanced food to individuals and families from surrounding neighborhoods. Friends of the Poor supplies the food for the day, while parish volunteers coordinate registration, distribution, and hospitality.

"It really comes down to our amazing volunteers," Father Paul McDonnell, pastor of Divine Mercy Parish, said. "I'm very grateful and very proud of the way they work very closely, very diligently and very faithfully to make sure people within the community are being properly fed and properly taken care of."

The pop-up pantry grew out of a renewed emphasis on outreach at Divine Mercy Parish.

About two years ago, parish leaders reorganized their former social concerns committee — now known as the "Hands of

Hope" team — and began exploring ways to better serve the local community.

"It was brought to our attention by Sister Ann Walsh from Friends of the Poor that there was a real need in this area of Scranton," Father McDonnell said. "With the accessibility of our parish hall and the generosity of our volunteers, we assumed that responsibility."

The pantry has now been operating for more than a year, serving residents from Scranton and nearby communities including Taylor, Moosic, and Minooka.

The ministry reflects the Gospel call to serve those most in need.

"It is the way we live our faith," Father McDonnell added. "If we receive the Body of Christ, then we are compelled, in charity, to be Christ for others — especially the poor, hurting, lonely, and forgotten."

The pantry operates using a client-choice model, allowing guests to select the items their families need most.

"People are able to choose fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, milk, and other essentials," Alice "Nibsy" Hopkins, a coordinator with the parish's Hands of Hope team, said. "We want people to feel



On the first Thursday of each month, Divine Mercy Parish in Scranton partners with other community agencies to hold a pop-up food pantry. (Photo/Dan Piazza)

respected and comfortable."

In addition to the monthly pop-up pantry, Divine Mercy Parish maintains year-round food assistance. An outdoor pantry box is stocked with staple items, and an in-house pantry is available during set hours for nonperishable food.

"If someone comes in at an off time, we make sure there is something available," Hopkins added. "We want to respond to people when they need help."

Antonio Berardi, senior food program

manager for Friends of the Poor and the Catherine McAuley Center, said partnerships like the one with Divine Mercy Parish are essential.

"The need is strong in the community," Berardi said. "Food insecurity doesn't have limitations — there's no age barrier or color barrier."

Volunteers say the parish community has responded generously to efforts to feed the hungry.

"Our pantry started with just a table and a few canned goods, and it has really grown," Linda Kavulich, a Hands of Hope volunteer, said. "People give joyfully, whether it's food, time, or effort."

In addition to food, volunteers often provide hygiene products, cleaning supplies, books, and toys.

"We know people need more than just food," Kavulich said.

Continues on Page 22

Strategic Growth Plan in Action: Diocese investing millions in school facilities projects

SCRANTON – The Diocese of Scranton Catholic School System is turning a key pillar of its recently completed Strategic Growth Plan into action – by investing millions of dollars in long-needed infrastructure improvements.

With 19 schools across five counties, and many of those buildings approaching a century old, the Strategic Growth Plan made clear that deferred maintenance had accumulated for many years.

The Plan's first goal – the development of a master facility plan at each school – underscored the need for updated roofs, windows, HVAC systems, electrical infrastructure, masonry work, and steady annual investments.

YEAR ONE: SUMMER OF ROOFS

After a comprehensive assessment of every school building was completed by an independent contractor, the Diocese of Scranton Catholic School System took the rare step of securing a major loan to accelerate capital improvements.

With the help of this financing, \$8 million in renovations are underway across multiple schools.

"It was the summer of roofs," Luke Alar, Schools Facilities Coordinator, said.

Alar joined the Catholic Schools Office in 2023 and has spearheaded the system-wide planning effort.

"The roofs were really the low-hanging fruit that needed to be done," Alar added.

Five major roof replacements were completed or are substantially complete at Holy Redeemer High School, Saint Jude School, All Saints Academy, Holy Rosary School, and La Salle Academy.

In some cases – the projects were urgent.

Take for example the gymnasium roof at Saint Jude School in Mountain Top which was damaged in March 2025 during a major windstorm. The age and condition of the roof contributed to its ultimate failure.

"It almost looked like a monster came in and opened it like a blanket," Alar explained. "These were projects that couldn't wait. The whole theory and concept on how we came up with the first projects was building envelope – keeping



During a major wind storm in March 2025, the roof of Saint Jude School in Mountain Top was severely damaged. This roof was among five major roof replacements completed this summer at Catholic schools.

the water out and the heat on."

YEAR TWO: HVAC AND WINDOWS

Because the financing can be drawn over 18 months, effectively giving the Catholic School System two summers for work – Alar said crews will be "going as strong as we can" in summer 2026.

"We're now switching to HVAC and windows," he noted.

Among the projects already in the planning process are new boilers at Notre Dame Elementary and High School – which have shared a single boiler since construction – and Holy Cross High School, which still has its original boiler from the 1960s.

With some buildings dating back to the early 1900s, the Catholic School System faces what Alar describes as a "university-level" infrastructure situation. But rather than seeing the scope as overwhelming, he calls it a blessing.

"It's exciting and I'm blessed to have this opportunity," he said. "It is not a job. We are bringing children to Jesus. We're making saints. We're preparing their souls for heaven. That gives you more motivation and excitement to do what you're doing."

Alar added that the long-term goal – spelled out in the Strategic Growth Plan



This is what the gymnasium at All Saints Academy in Scranton looked like in November 2024, prior to a roof replacement project being completed. Trash cans were often used to collect water that would come inside the building.

– is to establish a capital budget at each school so that investment becomes annual, consistent, and sustainable.

"This is not the end," Alar emphasized. "We want people to look back and say we made wise choices and were frugal with how we spent the money."

For Kristen Donohue, Diocesan Secretary for Catholic Education and Superintendent, the facility work is more than construction – it's a promise to families being fulfilled.

"We completed our Strategic Growth Plan and identified deferred maintenance as a key component that needed to be addressed so we can continue to deliver our strong product for years to come," she said. "We made it a priority."

Donohue echoed Alar's statements that the improvements focus first on the

overall building envelope of all schools.

"We are making sure we have a sound structure in which our students, teachers, and administrators can work and enjoy their Catholic education," she said.

Donohue praised Alar's leadership, calling the work underway a "huge task for anyone." She also noted the close partnership Alar has forged with the Diocesan Office for Property and Risk Management – an office that has been invaluable in assistance with all the projects.

"There are needs within each of our school buildings," Donohue said. "We are working to address as many outstanding issues as we can now and plan to continue addressing needs well into the future. Giving our students the best facilities we possibly can is paramount."



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The Diocese of Scranton is committed to educating our students in an environment that is academically excellent and facilitates the development of moral judgment and Christian decision-making. We are proud to share the following successes of our students in the classroom and in their service to others. Each day, our schools are fulfilling their mission of preparing today's youth and young adults to become tomorrow's faith-filled leaders.



Good Shepherd Academy, Kingston

"When you give your life to God, the ordinary becomes extraordinary," was the message of the Most Reverend Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, celebrating Mass recently with students in our Diocesan Schools. "Everyone here is a saint-in-the-making; to do so, start by following Jesus' teaching to love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself."



Saint Jude School, Mountain Top



Good Shepherd Academy, Kingston



Members of the Class of 2026 enjoy the school's annual Thanksgiving feast, prepared by the dedicated kitchen team at **Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School in East Stroudsburg**.



The Living Nativity presented by the second grade class at **All Saints Academy in Scranton**.

Members of the Makers Space Club at **Our Lady of Peace School in Clarks Green** jumped into the holiday spirit by decorating gingerbread houses and gingerbread people. So much color, creativity, and Christmas cheer from these talented Falcons!



On Monday, Dec. 8, students and faculty at **Holy Redeemer High School in Wilkes-Barre** celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in a special way by also celebrating Sister Susan Brown, IHM, as she joyfully renewed her vows in front of the school community. With a heart rooted in prayer, service, and love for God's people, she continues to witness the charism of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary religious congregation.



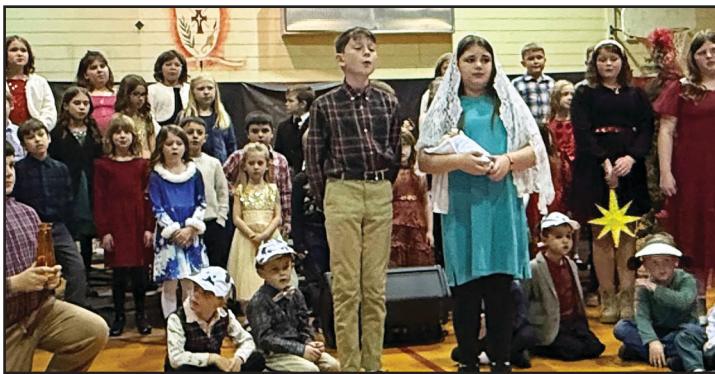
Members of the Students of Service Club at **Holy Family Academy in Hazleton** look at the donations shared by the school community for the Catholic Social Services' food pantry.



Seventh graders from **Saint Clare/Saint Paul School in Scranton** recently finished reading "Tutors Teach Seniors" in literature and brought the story to life by meeting with their nursing home pen-pals, singing Christmas songs, sharing poems and skits, and delivering gifts and cookies.



Saint Nicholas brought treats for all students who left their shoes out on his Feast Day at **Saint Nicholas/Saint Mary School in Wilkes-Barre**. Mrs. Stewart's first grade class is pictured with the toys they purchase to donate to children that are less fortunate so they may feel the joy of receiving a toy during Christmas.



Families and parishioners were treated to the sweet sounds of students from **Saint Agnes School in Towanda** as they celebrated the Advent season by performing their Christmas Program.



On the first week of Advent, students and faculty at **Saint John Neumann Jr./Sr. High School in Williamsport** hear from school chaplain, Father David Bechtel, pastor of St. Joseph the Worker, as he prepares for the lighting of the first candle, symbolizing hope.



Fifth and sixth graders at **Epiphany School in Sayre** had their instruments ready as they practiced for the school's annual Christmas concert.



Ben Mulvey, LSA alumnus and current cadet at the U.S. Military Academy West Point, made time to come and read to the Kindergarten class at **La Salle Academy in Jessup**.



The Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins sponsored "Robo's Readers" program at **Saint Mary of Mount Carmel School in Dunmore**, which rewards students who read 10 books with a free ticket voucher to see a home hockey game. These five well-read students will be going to see an ice hockey match soon.



Students at **Holy Cross High School in Dunmore** recently inducted the newest members of the National Honor Society at their Immaculate Conception Mass on Dec. 8.



Each year, the students, faculty & community at **Notre Dame Elementary School in East Stroudsburg** donate non-perishable goods as part of their annual Thanksgiving food drive to share with those in need in the Poconos.



Second graders at **Wyoming Area Catholic School in Exeter** teamed up with Mrs. Sedon for a festive STREAM challenge: How many Christmas mints can you stack? Students made thoughtful hypotheses, experimented with different strategies, and made several attempts to build the tallest mint tower they could.



Members of the Kindness Club at **Holy Rosary School in Duryea** deliver "birthday cake kits" to the Friends of the Poor, Weinberg Northeast Regional Food Bank, and the Gabriel House of Catholic Social Services. Students created the kits from donated items, knowing everyone deserves to feel special on their special day.

Diocesan youth return from NCYC energized by faith and hope

INDIANAPOLIS — Eighty-six young people and chaperones from the Diocese of Scranton traveled by bus to Indianapolis in late November to join more than 16,000 participants at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC).

During the 2025 Jubilee Year of Hope, the event served as a major opportunity for Catholic teenagers to learn more about their faith and was a reminder that the future of the Church is vibrant, joyful, and deeply rooted in Christ.

Pilgrims from nine different parishes attended this year's conference. The parishes included: Our Lady Queen of Peace, Brodheadsville; Saints Peter and Paul, Towanda; Saint Matthew, East Stroudsburg; Saint Luke, Stroudsburg; Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Hanover Township; Saint Catherine of Siena, Moscow; Saint Eulalia, Roaring Brook Township; Our Lady of the Snows, Clarks Summit; and Saint Gregory, Clarks Green.



A total of 86 young adults and chaperones from the Diocese of Scranton made the trip to Indianapolis to participate in the National Catholic Youth Conference from Nov. 20-Nov. 22, 2025.

"We were with 16,000 other Catholic kids. I've never been able to experience that before," Edward Scavone, a junior from Our Lady of the Snows Parish, said. "That was so cool."

Breakout sessions covered topics including discipleship, vocations, and social challenges.

Several Diocesan participants highlighted a session led by Bishop Joseph Espaillat of the Archdiocese of New York called "Faith Amidst the Storm."

"His energy and his

compassion for humanity — and for being so real with our kids — was incredibly moving," Christian Brown, youth minister for Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Eulalia Parishes, said.

During the session, the young adults were asked what the world needs right now. While many answered peace, hope, love, or kindness — Bishop Espaillat challenged them that what is needed more than anything right now is faith.

Marinellys Marte, from Saint Matthew Parish, said the session

— encouraged teens to approach their faith with courage.

"We talked about how there are a lot of problems in the world and how we have to use the tools God gives us to fight our battles," Marte said. "Saints weren't wimps. They were strong people who leaned on God."

Other participants repeatedly cited Eucharistic Adoration inside Lucas Oil Stadium — the home of the Indianapolis Colts football team — as a defining moment of the conference.

"It was very moving for me.

There were 16,000 people all kneeling. I was trying to fight back the tears — but then everyone on the ground floor went up and kneeled as close as they could — and I started crying," she said.

"It was a very beautiful event because we got one-on-one time with God," Layla Reyes of Saints Peter and Paul Parish, added.

Going into the conference, Natalie Weidner of Exaltation of the Holy Cross Parish, was excited to participate in a digital encounter with Pope Leo XIV.

"I think it's just great that I got to listen to him talk. Not a lot of people get that opportunity," Weidner said.

As the conference ended, participants said NCYC renewed their enthusiasm to live and share their faith.

"The power of the Holy Spirit was present here," Hannah Rocco, a senior from Saint Eulalia Parish who is preparing for college, stated. "I'm excited to see where God is calling me in the next steps of my life."

Pope tells U.S. high school students their voice, ideas, faith matter

VATICAN CITY (CNS) - Pope Leo XIV urged U.S. high school students to be "intentional" with their screen time, their prayer time and their involvement in a parish.

"One of my own personal heroes, one of my favorite saints, is St. Augustine of Hippo," the pope told 16,000 young Catholics meeting in Indianapolis.

"He searched everywhere for happiness, but nothing satisfied him until he opened his heart to God. That is why he wrote, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.'

With a livestream connection, Pope Leo spoke for close to an hour Nov. 21 with participants at NCYC.

One student asked for the pope's advice on balancing the use of smartphones and social media with "making faith connections outside of technology."



(CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Pope Leo listed many good things technology does. For example, "it lets us stay connected with people who are far away," he said, and there are "amazing tools for prayer, for reading the Bible, for learning more about what we believe, and it allows us to share the Gospel with people we may never meet in person."

"But even with all that, technology can never replace real, in-person relationships; simple things (like) a hug, a handshake, a smile — all those things are essential to being human," he

Jesus is the 'king of our hearts,' Philly archbishop shares at NCYC Closing Mass

INDIANAPOLIS (OSV News) - At the Closing Mass of NCYC, Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez shared a message of hope with 16,000 young people.

He shared with them a message he wanted them to nurture in their hearts as they returned to their homes.

"When you feel lost, Jesus is your shepherd," Archbishop Pérez said in his homily during the conference's closing Mass on Nov. 22. "Remember that. When you feel you're in darkness, Jesus is your light. When you feel you're absolutely hungry and your soul is weighed down, Jesus is your bread."

Jesus, he returned to again and again in his homily on the feast of Christ the King, is the "king of our hearts."

In reflecting on Christ the King, Archbishop Pérez said that he is not a king in the way that the world views such



(OSV News photo/Sean Gallagher, The Criterion)

rulers.

"His throne is a cross," he said. "His crown is not made of gold and gems. It's made of thorns. He doesn't wear fancy, beautiful, priceless rings on his hands. He has nails."

According to the world, Christ's death on the cross was "the worst of all ways to execute a criminal."

But, because of Christ's resurrection, the church in faith proclaims that his crucifixion was actually a great victory for him and all who believe in him.

New sensory room at Good Shepherd Academy to support students' learning and well-being

KINGSTON — An LED bubble tube and a musical touch wall are just two of many items that students can interact with while visiting a new sensory room at Good Shepherd Academy in Kingston.

The calming space is designed to help children relax, refocus, and build coping skills so they can return to class ready to learn.

The new space — the first sensory room in the Diocese of Scranton's Catholic School System — was made possible through a generous grant from the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund.

After celebrating an all-school Mass on Tuesday, Nov. 25, 2025, the Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, visited the room, prayed a special blessing, and sprinkled the space with holy water.

"Allow me to offer my words of thanks to all of you, the McGowan Foundation and all of you who had a hand in making this space possible," Bishop Bambera said. "It's incredible. We read more and more about opportunities like this in many schools. I'm so proud that we have one here at Good Shepherd Academy. It's an incredible space and it is a calming space, isn't it?"

For Good Shepherd Academy principal Jim Jones, the sensory room represents the fulfillment of a long-held hope for his school, the largest Catholic elementary school in the Diocese of Scranton.

"It has been a dream of mine," Jones said. "After COVID, many of our children were having a heightened sense of anxiety and tension, so we needed a place where our students could decompress."

The room officially opened on Oct. 1, and it has been busy ever since.

"We have multiple children in there every day," Jones noted. "Our I.I. (Individualized



A new sensory room for students was blessed at Good Shepherd Academy in Kington on Nov. 25, 2025. (Photo/Eric Deabill)

Instruction) students are in there continuously. We're so grateful for the McGowan Foundation for their support of Catholic education."

The foundation funded the approximately \$50,000 in structural and electrical elements of the project in full.

"If it was not for the McGowan Foundation, this would not be possible," Jones added. "They were gracious that they got behind our project 100 percent. They were on board from the get-go. They have been a blessing to Good Shepherd Academy."

Installed in a quiet, second-floor area of the school, the new sensory room is filled with specialized visual, auditory, and tactile equipment designed to help students self-regulate, manage anxiety, and build coping skills.

"The bubble tower is one of the highlights," Jones said with a laugh. "Everything is controlled by a cube. When you roll the cube, whatever color comes up, the lights change in the sensory room based on that."

In addition to the technology, the school also incorporated special seating from a local vendor in Hanover Township, giving students comfortable, flexible options while they relax and engage with the equipment.

"Having the students be able to go to a space where they can self-regulate and learn the

necessary coping skills for both an academic setting and a real-life setting is going to have immeasurable effects on both their personal development as well as their academic development," Mary Siejak, who has taught Individualized Instruction at Good Shepherd Academy

for ten years, said.

Siejak, who primarily teaches mathematics to students who need an adapted curriculum, said she already sees the impact when she brings students into the new room.

"When I take them to the room, maybe in about 10 minutes, I notice a measurable difference in their ability to stay focused, not only on content, but then also

to perform to their potential in the classroom," she explained.

What makes the difference?

"It's a nice quiet space. It is the resources that the McGowan Foundation put into the sensory room. Just having those elements," she added, noting that the room is designed to help regulate multiple senses in the body and allow students to become truly calm.

While the sensory room is recent years.



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Parishes spreading joy and hope locally ... and around the world

"Children Helping Children" in Luzerne County



LUZERNE COUNTY - Each year, the CCD classes and parishioners at Gate of Heaven Parish, Dallas, and Our Lady of Victory Parish, Harveys Lake, hold a collection for a local mission and a global mission.

This year, the parishes decided to help the families and children in need who rely on Saint Vincent de Paul Kitchen in Wilkes-Barre. The parishes decided to collect new pajamas to let them know that they are loved.

The global mission money collected will go to the poorest children of the world through the Missionary Childhood Association in the spring when classes have ended.

Pictured above at left at Gate of Heaven Parish are the CCD children, teachers, and Director of Religious Education, James Casey.

Pictured above at right at Our Lady of Victory Parish are the CCD children, teachers, and Director of Religious Education, Renee Boland.

Both parishes are proud to help grow little missionaries. The children were very excited to help children in need.

Holy Name Society hard at work



DUNMORE - Members of the Holy Name and Altar and Rosary Societies presented Advent calendars to the students of the CCD programs at Saints Anthony and Rocco and Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parishes. Rosaries were also given to confirmation students.

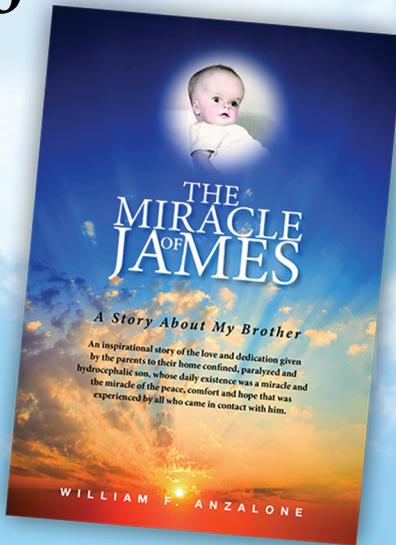
The Holy Name Society of Saints Anthony and Rocco Parish also organized the annual giving tree to benefit residents of Saint Joseph's Center in Scranton.

The Perfect Inspirational Holiday Gift

The Miracle of James

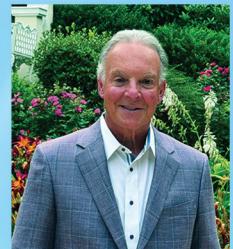
By William F. Anzalone

This is a story of my brother, who was injured at his birth. A story of a hydrocephalic, paralyzed, home confined, bedridden baby who was 100 percent dependent on my mom, dad, my sisters and me for survival. An inspirational story of young parents who were living the American dream, who had the financial means to do what they wanted and to go where they wanted and passed it all up to care for their invalid son for fifty four years. It is a story of love, dedication and sacrifice, and the belief in God, Jesus Christ and the Church, that lead my family and those who came in contact with James to witness The Miracle of James.



About the Author

Bill Anzalone is the managing partner of Anzalone & Doyle Trial Lawyers. In this book, Bill wants to share the special experience that he had living with his hydrocephalic, bedridden, home confined brother. He shares the heartache and also the joy the family experienced living with and caring for James.



Bill Anzalone is donating 100% of the net proceeds from the purchase of this book to charities and organizations associated with special needs of children and adults.

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USCCB president expresses church's solidarity with Jewish community

WASHINGTON (OSV News) - Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, expressed the Catholic Church's solidarity with the Jewish community in the wake of a Dec. 14 terror attack by two gunmen that targeted Jewish beachgoers at an event celebrating the first day of Hanukkah at Sydney's Bondi Beach.

Archbishop Coakley made the comments in a letter to leaders of the Jewish community in the U.S., following condemnations of the attack and prayers for those affected by Pope Leo XIV and Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney.

"The festival of Hanukkah begins this year for the Jewish community with a moment of profound sorrow," Archbishop Coakley wrote. "The shooting in Sydney, Australia is a painful reminder that hatred remains a threat to our lives, our communities, and the bonds that unite us."

The text of the archbishop's letter was released by the USCCB late Dec. 15.

"At the same time, the selfless intervention of a Muslim man who disarmed one of the gunmen stands as a sign of hope that compassionate concern for others can still prevail," the archbishop continued. "On behalf of the Catholic community in the U.S., I promise our prayers and our solidarity at this difficult moment."

Archbishop Coakley was referring to a beachgoer who tackled and disarmed one of two gunmen while the other gunman fired from a nearby bridge. His heroic actions were captured on a video circulating online.

The attack occurred in the early evening as hundreds were gathered for a Hanukkah celebration at Archer Park, a grassy area in Bondi Beach. Fifteen people died, including one of the gunmen; a 10-year-old girl, a rabbi and two Holocaust survivors were among victims.

The second gunman, police confirmed, was in custody and in critical condition. According to authorities, over 40 people

were wounded and taken to St. Vincent's Hospital.

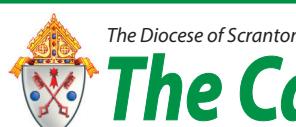
"Moments like these revive old fears and deepen a sense of vulnerability that no community should have to bear," Archbishop Coakley said. "I wish the Jewish community to know that the Catholic community stands with

them in sorrow and in resolve, committed to friendship that does not waver when fear threatens to paralyze us."

Noting Hanukkah coincides with the season of Advent observed by the Church, Jews and Catholics both share in the promise that light and hope

prevail over darkness," he added.

"May these celebrations strengthen our hearts, honor the memory of those killed and injured, and help us to build a world shaped by justice, compassion, and peace," Archbishop Coakley wrote.



The Catholic Light

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Pittston parishes provide Christmas joy to families

Continued from Page 6

"Every year, it amazes us how much we get," Brandon Jopling, Director of Music and Liturgy at Saint Joseph Marello Parish, said. "They're very supportive and very generous. We get a lot of good quality toys."

Jopling said the parishes intentionally schedule the collection on the First Sunday of Advent as a way of grounding parish life in the true meaning of the season.

"It's a way to kick off Advent and center our hearts towards the importance of what this season means," he added.

Volunteer Lisa Wallace described the annual initiative not just as a charity effort, but as a visible expression of the Gospel message.

"It shows that people care, people want to give, people want to help," Wallace said. "Everybody goes through hard times, so there is always someone out there that can help."

The Santa Squad uses the former Seton Catholic gym as workspace in the weeks leading up to Christmas. That is where volunteers sort, match, and prepare gifts for distribution.

While most parishes have a toy or gift collection, the Pittston parishes have embraced their partnership with the Santa Squad because of its mission and local impact.

"It has been a tradition for the past three or four years," Jopling said, "and we can't wait for it to continue."

West Wyoming parish engages families during Advent

Continued from Page 7

"It makes you feel like you're part of the community. We come to church and after the sermon we leave. It's nice to do things outside of coming to Mass," Wright explained. "I have two children and they both go to Catholic School. We really focus on them knowing the true meaning of Christmas, which is

the celebration, the renewal, the hope, not just about the gifts."

The sense of hope and community even stretched beyond parish boundaries.

Juana Salazar, who was visiting from Totowa, N.J., came with her children and relatives.

"It's a new tradition for my family," Salazar said. "They're loving it. It's very fun, especially being able

to do it together as a family."

As Father Tomczak watched everyone gathered around the tables, he felt a sign of a real hope.

"We want to be in the moment, preparing for the Advent season, to say we're a family, and we want to work together, worship together, pray together, and play together," he said. "To me, this is what it's all about."

Divine Mercy Parish helps meet hunger need locally

Continued from Page 14

Louise Pawlowski, another parish volunteer, said the gratitude shown by those served is deeply moving.

"You can see it in their

faces," she said. "It shows us that we are truly serving."

While the need often increases during the holiday season, Father McDonnell emphasized that the parish's

outreach continues year round.

"This is the season of giving, but our commitment doesn't end here," he said. "We are always seeking to meet the needs of our local community."

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Monsignor Esseff blesses the 'Voice of John' ministry he helped create

SCRANTON — The year was 1977 when a young nurse desperately sought out her priest-friend and spiritual advisor she fondly referred to as Father John.

She had just been the accidental witness of an infant boy mistakenly born alive. The victim of an unsuccessful abortion, he was left to die when he was discovered by the nurse who found him in the West Virginia hospital's dirty utility room — naked, cold, and alone.

"Put it down, it's an abortion," she was sternly told by someone who happened upon the gruesome scene.

The nurse returned to the room, wrapped the newborn infant in a blanket, and baptized him before his passing. She named him 'John' and promised she would be his voice.

"That night, a child died, and his ministry was born," MaryAnn Lawhon, that young nurse at the time, continues to proclaim.

With tears still flowing, MaryAnn related to Father John what she saw. His response: "God has a purpose. The Holy Spirit will guide you."

Fast forward nearly 50 years. MaryAnn Lawhon and Nicole Tranguch recently visited that same priest — Monsignor John



Monsignor John Esseff and MaryAnn Lawhon share a prayerful moment during her recent visit with the well-known retired priest of the Scranton Diocese.

Esseff, who now lives in retirement and prefers to be called "Brother John."

They reminisced about that day so long ago, and how the Holy Spirit had indeed guided "John's Ministry." A child, whose life lasted just a few hours, continues to live on as a resounding testament in defense of the sacredness of every life.

Today, Lawhon hosts the JMJ Catholic Radio program, "The Voice of John," and has authored an educational curriculum by the

'Voice of John' Christmas Card contest winner

HAZLETON — The "Voice of John" has announced high school junior student Isabella Novajosky as the winner of the pro-life ministry's 2025 Christmas Card contest.



Isabella, who attends Lakeland Jr./Sr. High School and is a member of Queen of the Apostles Parish, Avoca, learned of the annual competition from her mom, Mary Novajosky, who saw the contest announcement in *The Catholic Light* and encouraged her

daughter to submit an entry.

The contest offers students the opportunity to compose a verse to accompany the Christmas card artwork selected for each particular year.

To garner top honors for the 2025 contest, Isabella chose to reflect on one of the most quoted verses of the Bible — "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) — to complement the artistry of Linda Ross of Saint Matthew Parish in East Stroudsburg.

that suffer the loss of our unborn children," Lawhon said.

She related in detail about her recent reunion with Monsignor Esseff, during which the 97-year-old priest of the Scranton Diocese contemplatively and prayerfully held the fetal model most resembling "Infant John" in size and weight.

Monsignor told his guests, "The most painful tears, profound grief, encountered during (sacramental) confession are the tears of a woman confessing her

abortion. Spiritually, I hold her tears, and I baptize her child."

Now in his 73rd year of priestly ministry, "Brother John" blessed Lawhon's "Voice of John" ministry with this prayer: "I will symbolically say the words you spoke to 'John' that night so long ago. I baptize you John in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

For more information on the Voice of John ministry, contact MaryAnn Lawhon at (570) 788-JOHN (5646).

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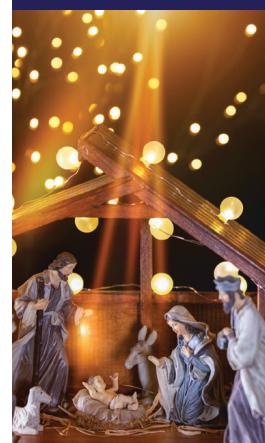
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MISSION MESSAGE

A Thrill of Hope: Learning to 'Hear' Christmas All Year

*By Shannon Kowalski
Diocesan Director,
of Pontifical Mission Societies*



There is something about the Christmas season that makes hope feel easier to grasp. For many people, December naturally invites a more obvious sense of optimism and goodwill. Everywhere we turn, cheerful songs seem to follow us, colorful and nostalgic decorations light up our homes and neighborhoods, and classic movies about generosity, forgiveness, and love play on repeat. Long-held traditions draw us back to memories of family and seemingly less complicated times. With all of this around us, it's hard not to feel at least a spark of hope and get swept up in the Christmas spirit.

At the same time, I know firsthand that the holidays can be incredibly difficult. For those who are grieving a loved one, living with an illness, facing financial stress or loneliness, "Christmas cheer" can

feel far out of reach. That's why the hope of Christmas can't be reduced to fleeting comfort — it has to be something deeper, something strong enough to hold both joy and sorrow at once.

Even many secular Christmas songs reflect that same longing. They sing about coming home, fixing broken relationships, and finding peace, usually with a sense of waiting woven in. I think that's why those songs resonate with so many of us. They name something we all carry: the hope that what feels broken can somehow be made whole again. Even without explicitly mentioning faith, those songs still point toward a deeper truth that finds its fulfillment in the mystery of Christmas.

For me, that deeper truth comes through religious Christmas music — especially my favorite song, *O Holy Night*. Every time I hear it, I'm struck by the line: "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." It feels so honest and real to me. It doesn't pretend the world isn't tired or broken, but it also insists that weariness isn't the end of the story. Something new has entered the world, and because of that, joy is still possible. It names suffering and injustice head-on and then points straight to Christ as the one who changes everything. "Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother." That's hope rooted in the Incarnation of Jesus. A hope that restores dignity, reminds us that we belong to one another, and

challenges us to live differently because God chose to draw near.

As the Church brings this Jubilee Year of Hope to a close, that message feels especially timely. A jubilee isn't just a celebration; it's an invitation to remember God's faithfulness and to become a sign of hope for others. In that light, Christmas music becomes more than a seasonal tradition. It becomes a proclamation. Every carol we sing announces that God is still at work, continuing to enter the ordinary realities of our lives.

After all, Jesus wasn't born in a palace or under extraordinary circumstances, but in a humble manger. In the same way, we're invited to look for hope not only in big moments or special seasons, but in the everyday details of life. Christmas reminds me that we don't have to wait for a particular time of year to be people of hope. While this season makes hope easier to recognize, our call as Christians is to carry it with us all year long. Hope isn't something we pack away with the decorations; it's something we're meant to live every day.

So, as you listen to Christmas music, whether it's a familiar hymn at Mass or a song playing on the radio, I pray that it helps you tune your heart to God's presence. May it bring comfort to those who are struggling, strength to those who are weary, and a reminder that Christ continues to be born into the ordinary moments of our lives.

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Lithuanian Knights celebrate 'Kucios' Christmas tradition

Knights of Lithuania Council 143, Pittston, held their annual "Kucios" celebration Dec. 6 at the Monsignor Bendik Center at Saint John the Evangelist Parish in Pittston. Nearly 60 members and guests gathered to celebrate Kucios — the traditional Lithuanian Christmas Eve meal marked annually around the world by descendants of the Eastern European country. The Kucios was followed by installation of the Council's 2026 officers and committee chairpersons by Father Joseph Elston, host pastor. Pictured, from left: Father Elston; Mike Loncoski, trustee; Ruth Wnuk, Vytis correspondent; Marilyn Fitzgerald, Lithuanian affairs; Mary Portelli, recording secretary; Janet Palladino, financial secretary and treasurer; Dennis Palladino, president and ritual; Sylvia Waxmonsky, sunshine; Don Waxmonsky, sergeant at arms; Mary Claire Voveris, trustee; Elaine Elko, historian; June Supey, public relations; and Rob Kiska, Lithuanian culture. New officers also include Eileen Kelly, vice president; Ariana Andrejeko, historian; and Linda Savinski, third vice president.



Diocese mourns passing of Bishop's executive assistant

CLARKS SUMMIT — The Diocese of Scranton is mourning the loss of a long-time employee.

Mary Jane Sheridan of Clarks Summit, who passed away Nov. 28 at home surrounded by her family, devoted more than three decades to the Diocese of Scranton — serving most recently as the Executive Assistant to the Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton.

Born March 12, 1951, in Scranton, Mary Jane was the

daughter of the late James J. and Eleanor Huber Thomas.

After spending years at home with her children, she joined the Diocese of Scranton for more than 30 years, serving in the Office of Parish Ministries, Diocesan Schools Office, and culminating her career as the executive assistant to the Bishop of the Diocese of Scranton. She was a member of the Church of Saint Gregory, Clarks Summit,

and formerly a member of Saint Patrick's Parish, West Scranton.

Surviving are her husband of 52 years, Patrick J. Sheridan; daughters Jennifer Sheridan, Ed.D., and Kristen Sheridan Wozniak, FNP, and her husband Ethan; beloved grandchildren Ellia, Ryan, and Andrew Wozniak; brothers James J. Thomas and his wife Carol; George T. Thomas and his wife Kathy; Patrick J. Thomas and his wife Gina; and sister Lori Thomas Wagner; several nieces and nephews.

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'Pope Robbie I' visits Wyoming Area Catholic

EXETER — Halloween brought an unexpected treat for the students, faculty and staff of Wyoming Area Catholic School when "Pope Robbie I" — otherwise known as Robert Joseph Baur IV, one-year-old son of Maryssa and Rob Baur of Shavertown — made a surprise "papal visit."

Nephew of Wyoming Area Catholic School teacher Ali Baur, Robbie donned papal robes (created by the school's Principal Eileen Rishoff) for his Halloween costume.

"Pope Robbie" played the pontifical role to a T, complete with his white regalia — right up to the zucchetto — and very own Popemobile.

His parents, who belong to Saint Monica Parish in West Wyoming, and the rest of his family are not the least bit surprised.

The "little Pope" was born a year ago on Oct. 22 — the feast day of Pope Saint John Paul II!



Notice Regarding Reporting Sexual Abuse of a Minor

It is the policy of the Diocese of Scranton to report any allegation of sexual abuse of a minor to law enforcement. If you are a victim of sexual abuse committed by a priest, deacon, religious or lay employee or volunteer of the Diocese of Scranton, you are encouraged to immediately report the matter to law enforcement. If any priest, deacon, religious, lay employee or volunteer of the Diocese of Scranton has cause or reason to suspect that a minor has been subjected to any form of abuse, including child sexual abuse, the matter will be reported to law enforcement.

It is also the policy of the Diocese to adhere to all civil and state regulations. To this end, the Diocese is equally committed to adhering to the norms of the *Code of Canon Law* and to upholding the tenets of the USCCB *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, which includes supporting victims of sexual abuse in their pursuit of emotional and spiritual well-being. As such, information regarding an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor should also be reported to the Victim Assistance Coordinator, Mary Beth Pacuska at (570) 862-7551.

Aviso al Respecto de Reportar el Abuso Sexual de Un Menor de Edad

Es la norma de la Diócesis de Scranton reportar cualquier alegación de abuso sexual de un menor de edad a las autoridades. Si usted es una víctima de abuso sexual cometido por un sacerdote, diácono, religioso o empleado laico, o voluntario de la Diócesis de Scranton, usted está obligado a reportar el asunto inmediatamente a las autoridades de la ley.

Si algún sacerdote, diácono, religioso, empleado laico o voluntario de la Diócesis de Scranton tiene sospecha de que un menor de edad ha sido sujeto a cualquier forma de abuso, incluyendo abuso sexual de menor de edad, el asunto será reportado a las autoridades de la ley.

Es la norma de la Diócesis defender todas las regulaciones civiles y del estado. Al fin de que la Diócesis esté comprometida igualmente a defender las normas del Código de Derecho Canónico y defender los principios de la Carta Para la Protección de Niños y Jóvenes (Conferencia de los Obispos Católicos de los Estados Unidos), lo cual incluye apoyar a las víctimas de abuso sexual en pos del bienestar emocional y espiritual.

Por eso, información respecto a una alegación del asunto sexual de un menor de edad, debe ser reportada a la Coordinadora Diocesana de Asistencia para Las Víctimas, Mary Beth Pacuska, a (570) 862-7551.

Diocese of Scranton

VOCATIONS
XLT HOLY HOURS

EUCARISTIC ADORATION, RECONCILIATION, LIVE MUSIC, SNACKS

St. Maria Goretti, Laflin - 7pm
February 5th
March 5th
April 2nd

Christ the King, Archbald - 6:30pm
January 28th
February 25th
March 25th

St. Matthew, East Stroudsburg - 7pm
After 6pm Mass
January 25th
February 22nd
March 22nd

**YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS ARE
ESPECIALLY ENCOURAGED TO
ATTEND!**



Prayer Requests for Priests

The Daily Prayer Request for Priests schedule is as follows:

December 18, Father Philbert Takyi-Nketiah; December 19, Father John Terry; December 20, Father Fidel Ticona; December 21, Father Peter Tomczak; December 22, Jesuit Father Sean Toole; December 23, Father Daniel Toomey; December 24, Father Rawel Toppo; December 25, Father Sudhir Toppo; December 26, Father Peter Tran; December 27, Monsignor David Tressler; December 28, Father Jeffrey Tugday, V.E.; December 29, Father John Turi; December 30, Father Anthony Urban; December 31, Father Dias Antony Valiamarathungal; January 1, Pope Leo XIV; January 2, Bishop Joseph C. Bambera; January 3, Father Brian Van Fossen; January 4, Monsignor Neil Van Loon; January 5, Father Shinu Vazhakkottathil John; January 6, Father Joseph Verespy; January 7, Father John Victoria; January 8, Saint Peter Priests Fraternity Father Matthew Vierno; January 9, Father James Walsh; January 10, Passionist Father Mark Ward; January 11, Monsignor Christopher Washington; January 12, Father Seth Wasnock; January 13, Father Donald Williams; January 14, Father Bryan Wright; January 15, Holy Cross Father Michael Wurtz; January 16, Father Paul Yeboah; January 17, Father Michael Zipay; January 18, Father Joseph Adonizio; January 19, Saint Peter Priests Fraternity Father Zachary Akers; January 20, Father Patrick Albert; January 21, Father James Alco.

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be upon you during this
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Catholic Happenings Around the Diocese

Monthly Meeting of the Lay Carmelites — DEC. 20, hosted by Our Lady of the Mountains Lay Carmelite Community on the third Saturday of each month; gatherings are held from 9 to 11 a.m. at the Oblates of St. Joseph Seminary/Chapel, 1880 Highway 315, Laflin. For more information, contact Chris at (570) 239-8094.

Byzantine Church Christmas Bazaar — DEC. 20 & 21, hosted by Holy Ghost Byzantine Catholic Church in Jessup; held in Holy Ghost Hall at La Salle Academy, 309 First Ave., Jessup. Begins with Christmas Cookie Walk (Saturday) from 10 a.m. until sold out; includes Themed Basket Raffle (Saturday) at 1 p.m. Also features Olive Wood Carvers from the Holy Land (Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 8:45 a.m. to noon); purchase exquisite olive wood carvings and icons handcrafted in Bethlehem, in support of Christian families in the Holy Land.

West Locust St., West Scranton; pierogi sale and theme basket raffle held each week following the church's Sunday morning Mass at 11 a.m. and Wednesday morning Mass at 9 a.m. Mass. Packages of homemade pierogi cost \$10 per dozen.

32nd Annual Free Christmas Day Community Dinner — DEC. 25, sponsored and hosted by Bob Bolus Sr. of Scranton; free community event held from noon to 6 p.m. at All Saints Academy Hall, 1425 Jackson St., West Scranton. All are welcome to enjoy a buffet-style turkey dinner on Christmas day; offered at no cost, with no reservations required. Meal delivery is available (limit two dinners per household); for information, call (272) 250-3128.

Twelve Days of Christmas Cash Raffle — DEC. 25-JAN. 5, sponsored by Exaltation of the Holy Cross Parish in Hanover Twp.; cash prizes drawn daily on Facebook. Each ticket costs \$20 for chance to win \$10,500 in cash prizes. For more information & tickets, call (570) 823-6242 or visit: www.exhc.org.

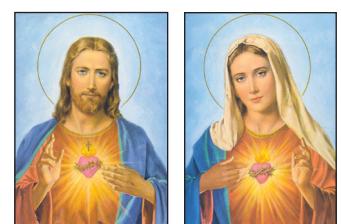
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Blue Army Reparation Vigil

The next monthly First Friday Reparation Vigil, dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary and sponsored by the Blue Army, will be held **Jan. 2, 2026**, at Saint Joseph's Oblate Chapel, 1880 Highway 315, Laflin (Pittston).

Devotions begin Friday evening at 8 p.m. with recitation of the Rosary, during which time confessions are heard. Mass of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is celebrated at 8:55 p.m., followed by benediction and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and consecration to the Sacred Heart.

The vigil continues with the crowning of the Blue Army



Pilgrim Virgin Statue, the Blue Army Pledge, Fatima prayers and Marian hymns, followed by litany and consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The vigil concludes with scapular enrollment at 10:15 p.m.

Music for the First Friday devotion is provided by Marian Devotion Ministries, led by Ernie Pappa.

Catholic Happenings Around the Diocese of Scranton

XLT: Eucharistic Adoration for Vocations — DEC. 28, sponsored by the Scranton Diocesan Office of Vocations; hosted at St. Matthew Church, 78 Ridgeway Street, East Stroudsburg, following the parish's 6 p.m. Sunday Mass. Gathering includes Eucharistic Adoration, guest speaker, music, Sacrament of Reconciliation and social. For more information, contact Kyra Krzywicki, vocation program coordinator, at kkrzywicki@dioceseofscranton.org.

2026 Three-Month Lottery Cash Raffle — JAN. 1-MARCH 31, sponsored by Gate of Heaven Parish, 40 Machell Ave., Dallas; lottery cash raffle tickets cost \$20 each, covering the first three

months of 2026 (January thru March). Winners determined by exact match of the PA Lottery nightly (7 p.m.) drawing of the Pick 3 number. Winning payouts: Monday-Friday, \$35; Saturday, \$50; and Sunday, \$75. Bonus prizes: New Year's Day (Jan. 1), \$100; Valentine's Day (Feb. 14), \$100; and St. Patrick's Day (March 17), \$100. Tickets available at the Gate of Heaven Church weekend Masses or by calling the parish office (570) 675-2121.

LGBTQ Spiritual Support Group Gathering — JAN. 4, sponsored by Mary, Mother of God Parish in Scranton; support group meeting for the spiritual needs of LGBTQ community held at noon in the former Holy

Rosary School, 312 William St., North Scranton. Group provides support & fellowship, including information on speakers and other community resources. All are welcome to attend; refreshments provided. For more information,

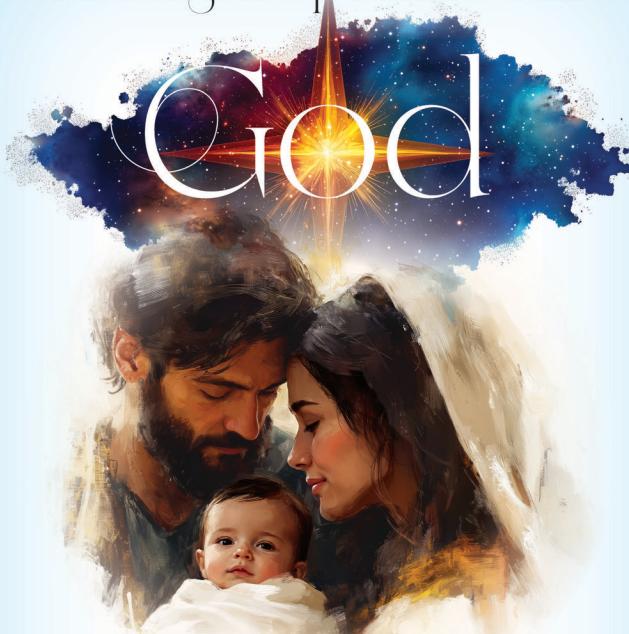
call (570) 342-4881.

Secular Discalced Carmelites

Meeting — JAN. 11, monthly meeting of the Holy Annunciation Secular Community of Discalced Carmelites (OCDS); the community gathers on the second

Sunday of the month, from noon to 4 p.m., at the Oblates of St. Joseph Seminary in Laflin. New members are most welcome. For more information and inquiries, contact Gina Romancheck at (570) 956-9272.

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Christmas*
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the blessing of Hope,
and the peace of His Love
at Christmas and always



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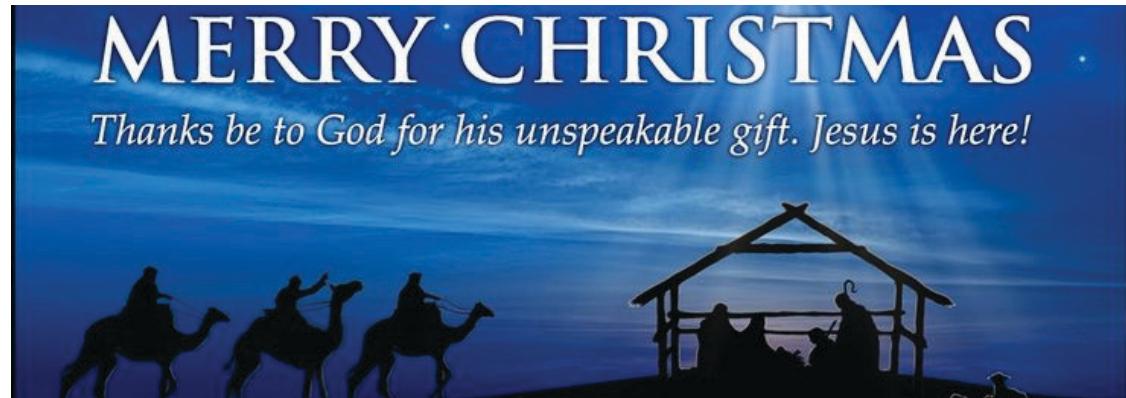
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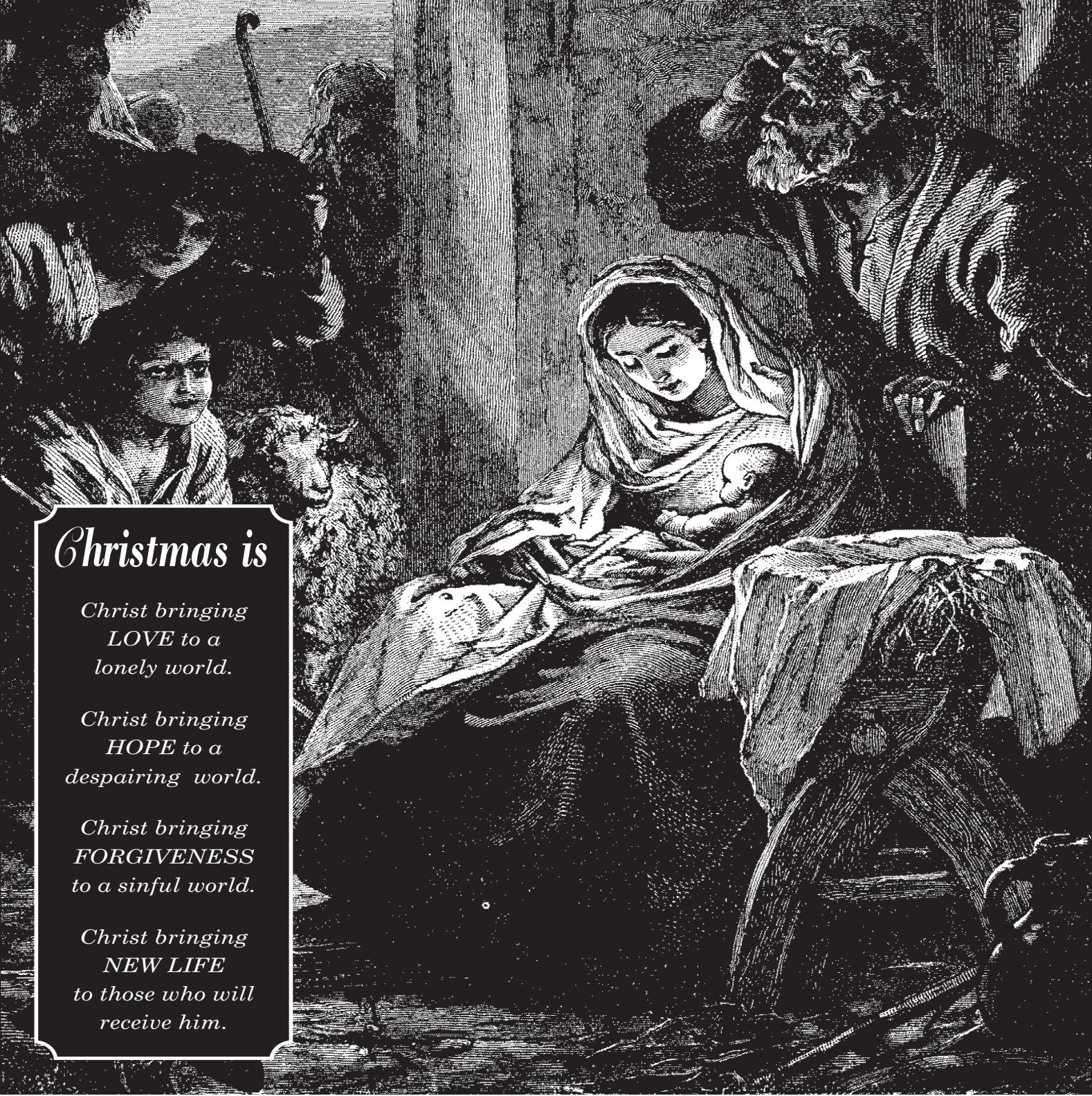
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*Christ bringing
HOPE to a
despairing world.*

*Christ bringing
FORGIVENESS
to a sinful world.*

*Christ bringing
NEW LIFE
to those who will
receive him.*

May you know the power, wonder, strength, and joy of God's Love first made visible in a tiny child cradled in His mother's arms.



**“They shall name him
Emmanuel”**



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On first trip, Pope Leo XIV highlights paths to peace

VATICAN CITY (CNS) - Visiting two countries over six days on his first foreign papal trip, Pope Leo XIV preached unity, dialogue and respect for differences as the only paths to peace.

Spending time with Catholics, other Christian leaders and top Muslim clerics in Turkey Nov. 27-Nov. 30 and Lebanon Nov. 30-Dec. 2, the pope made formal speeches about how believing in God as the father of all means recognizing one another as brothers and sisters.

But he also set aside time in a packed schedule for private talks, lunches and late evening meetings with the leaders.



Pope Leo XIV joins Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and other Christian leaders for a prayer service in Turkey, Nov. 28, 2025. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

“The more we can promote authentic unity and understanding, respect and human relationships of friendship and dialogue in the world, the greater possibility there is that we will put aside the arms of war, that we

will leave aside the distrust, the hatred, the animosity that has so often been built up and that we will find ways to come together and be able to promote authentic peace and justice throughout the world,” he told reporters flying back to Rome with him Dec. 2.

The three iconic moments of the trip were his prayer with top Christian leaders Nov. 28 at the site of the Council of Nicaea, his visit to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul Nov. 29 and his prayer Dec. 2 amid the rubble of the Beirut port explosion in 2020.

The whole trip was planned to commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea.

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