

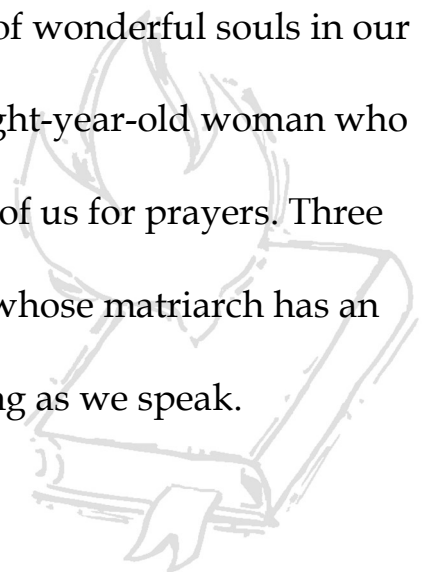
Homily
Holy Family - C
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
December 25-26, 2021

Sir 3: 2-6, 12-14
Ps 128: 1-2, 3, 4-5
Col 3: 12-21
Lk 2: 41-52

This year, I am wearing a gift of this Christmas chasuble from my family some twenty-five years ago. I keep reflecting how, on that day, three of us were ordained as a priest and I am what is left from that class... That said, so many people supported me on the journey; whether I was worthy of those support and prayers. I have no idea.

All I know is that this vocation is what God has called me to do; I am nothing but a vessel. Hopefully I serving as a priest well enough so that at times, God can work through me.

I do know over the last couple of weeks that God has done wonders for me by having me encounter a whole bunch of wonderful souls in our community. Prior to Christmas, I met a sixty-eight-year-old woman who is suffering from lymphoma, who has asked all of us for prayers. Three times this last week, I spent time with a family whose matriarch has an inoperable cyst in her neck, who actively is dying as we speak.



This last week, I celebrated two funeral Masses for long-time parents and active members in our parish community. First, I celebrated the funeral Mass of Carol Preston, whose husband Rick once served as the principal of St. Patrick's Academy in Momence. Carol and Rick both played percussion instruments and met in band class. Because Carol was one of the few in the group who could keep beat with the bass drum, I likened her motherhood to keeping a steady beat with a family that thrived off the constant rhythms of her serving as wife and mother to this blessed family.

I celebrated a funeral for Al Hart, who was married to wife Joyce for over seventy years. Joyce used to kid her husband with a very "ironic" sense of humor - she used to say (when the family had limited means) that Al would bring her just a few flowers to reflect the happy years in their marriage. At the funeral, Joyce told me how, after seventy years, she felt as if she had a hole in her heart. I had to kneel in front of Joyce during the funeral because she was hard of hearing; I told her that every Christmas poinsettia flower in the sanctuary represented how many

beautiful years the two of them *really* had together and every Christmas light represented the wonderful moments she and Al shared together.

I celebrated a funeral Mass for José Guerrero-Garcia, whose life tragically was taken from him at age forty-eight. José left behind a wife and three children who were in deep grief. Among all our Christmas Eve liturgies, we found time to celebrate the eighth day Memorial Mass for José; two members of our St. Patrick's Choir were kind enough to come and play on Christmas Eve. They insisted on not getting paid – they offered their service to the glory of God and this grieving family.

I was thinking back about one of the first secretaries who worked with me in Cary, IL when I left seminary to spend time with my father in 1988 when my mother died. I was a youth minister in Cary, IL and Pat Shainauskas was the secretary there. She and husband Frank used to invite me to their homes, accompanied by their hundred cats to spend time together as a type of second family. When Pat died a few years later, I was honored to celebrate her funeral; when Frank remarried, I had the honor to celebrate the marriage between him and wife Louise. Frank and Louise were kind enough to attend my twenty-fifth

anniversary dinner last June in honor of my family and certainly in honor of first wife Pat.

I think about Ben and Helen Cabay from Joliet, IL. Ben and Helen were married for over sixty years at the time; Ben was a contractor who built numerous houses and business structures in Joliet and helped the bishop of the time significantly with chancery projects.

I built a really nice relationship with Helen and Ben. When Helen was dying a few years ago, Ben asked me to visit them to offer his wife the anointing of the sick. After our visit, I ended up subsequently calling the bishop's office because this couple had done so much for this shepherd of the diocese, who once blessed this couple at their sixtieth anniversary party.

I came to find out that Helen died of cancer on a Sunday and Ben died the next day from a broken heart. Again I called the bishop's office – he really needed to celebrate that funeral Mass in Thanksgiving for their wonderful contributions of life.

I was thinking about how my family has offered me so many models of faith. Sometimes it is not the big gifts that have impacted me so

deeply, although I am appreciative of whatever is given, but the small ones really make a difference in my life.

I was thinking about my brother, Ben, who made something really ugly but beautiful at the same time. When my family did not have a whole lot of money on the farm, my parents decided that one Christmas we were not going to buy each other gifts but instead make each other something from the heart.

My homemade gifts were cookies and cakes – I enjoyed baking at the time. My brother Ben made for me this absolutely horrible looking sweatsuit. I do now think I am every going to wear this gift outdoors but this sweatsuit means everything to me because brother Ben made this for me from his own hands. I have held on to this thing for forty years or so only because it is a symbol of what I need to do for others as he gave to me from the work of his hands. Hopefully, I can do the same for you.

My sister Linda went one step bigger. She made me this, this two-hundred-pound quilt. My sister decided to sew for me this beast that was made from the wool of the lambs that we used to raise on the farm.

This gift is so important to me because it reminds me about those we serve. So many of our folks are like lambs – young, fragile, beautiful and vulnerable creatures who very much need the support and the protection of others for them to survive from the wolves of the world. Pope Francis once preached about making sure that we encounter the smell of the sheep in our lives. If we are good shepherds and not the bad ones described in scripture, if we are taking care of the right sheep, then we are doing the work of God that this quilt symbolizes. There are so many young lambs in our community and so many precious gifts that every time I look at this thing, which weighs about two hundred pounds (or at least it feels like it!). I would suffocate if I ever slept underneath this thing; nevertheless, this quilt serves as an image concerning what I need to do in this parish.

I was thinking about the cards and letters I have been receiving this Christmas season, this advent season from so many individuals in the community and throughout the world. From my family in Poland to my friends in Australia and Israel and New Zealand and beyond, Shibly Kando was kind enough to ship 250 olive wood rosaries to me as a gift

for all of you. As you know, Israel is not doing well because of the pandemic. Despite their hardships, Shibly was exceedingly kind to send these rosaries to me as gift to all of you. A couple of years ago, I distributed all the olive wood rosaries I had to the people of St. Anne's on St Anne's Day, but I ran out of rosaries for the people of Momence. When I get these rosaries, I will distribute them to the faithful in Momence. As for all of you, the Poor Claire sisters of the Annunciation Monastery had made a couple hundred Rosaries for the kids and the parishioners of our community... and you gobbled all of them up! Everybody has taken my rosaries... which is a wonderful thing. (By the way, I am hoping that the rosaries are a symbol that are being used in the homes to plant those seeds in the garden.)

So many folks have sent cards and letters from throughout the world. Some of them I cannot read because I need to get them translated; a few of them I wanted to share with you today because they really have wonderful sentiments in them that have really affected me.

This card comes from Marco and Alicia, who gave a medal to take with me on the Guadalupe Pilgrimage our Hispanic community will

take to the Holy Land in February, if it still takes place. Marco and Alicia asked me to take this medal to be in solidarity with them on my journey to Africa. They said...

... This medal of our lady is most important to the shrine of our loving mother of us all. Please carry this medal with her image so that you will never get, and always remember that your sheep little or big may forget sometimes about your ministry, but God will never forget you with Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Love, Marco and Alicia

Marco & Alicia, I very much appreciate your sentiments.

I received this card from a woman named Brenda who is in my RCI program over in my last parish. Some time ago, Brenda was having great difficulties in her life. She has moved out of state because she is trying to restart life. She gave me a beautiful card that says...

I am still in Arkansas trying to sell my house. I am so proud to be Catholic. I thank you for making it happen. Your friend, always Brenda and my dog, Luke.

Brenda, Luke, Gabby and I are in solidarity with you. You are absolutely wonderful and spectacular people.

A woman named Carol Ohligschlager had written me a note stating that her husband Ed had died earlier this year. Ed and Carol were so good to me at St. Mary's Church in Plano, Illinois. For the first ten years in my priesthood, no matter what was happening during the day, I would end my Sunday at St. Mary's in Plano, celebrating Masses in Spanish and often in English for the people of faith and Ed and Carol.

So many folks in that community were incredibly supportive of me during my first years of the priesthood. Plano was next to my hometown of Sandwich, Illinois, where I celebrated one of my first Masses as a priest and the funeral mass for my father earlier this year. I very much think about the people in Plano, even though as time moves on, few of the members from the parish who you know often come and go in life.

Most likely, those I knew from my former parishes have moved on and a lot of the current parishioners do not know who I am, but this ministry is not supposed to be about me anyway. The ministry I offer is about the Spirit that works through me and works through you as well. If we are doing God's work, no matter who the people are, we

are all in solidarity with this gift, this gift of the Holy Spirit, which unites us all is what bonds the members of the Holy Family and reminds us how St. Joseph, the Blessed Mother and our Lord Jesus Christ endured in good times and certainly the bad ones. We know that Mary and Joseph endured a great deal so that their Son, our Lord, could enter the world; we know that Mary received this gift of the Holy Spirit in her womb so that the Savior of the world became incarnate and so that through this incarnation, we might follow God's example and allow God to lead us to eternal life.

As we are taught in the faith, St. Joseph adopted Jesus into his life so that Jesus could adopt all of us into his. Jesus adopted us. We are all united together by the Spirit. We may not live in the same domestic household; we may not be united directly by blood, but we certainly are brothers and sisters in Christ. I am very appreciative of all of you. All your signs, symbols, rituals, cards and letters... for everything that you have done - I may not respond to each gift you offer and each thing you do but certainly I respond to you in Spirit.

Please know, I do love you in God's name. I will do the best I help you out. I usually do not have enough energy to cover everybody, but I do the best I can with what God has given me; I do the best I can spiritually to take care of all of you. Please continue to support your local parishes, support each other, support your families. Please show God, in this Church, how much you carry Jesus' name by extending that spirit and gift the family to the people that you and I meet. This is our prayer.