



Dear Saint John Vianney Family,

This will be a year we remember for the rest of our lives. Who would have thought, back in January or even February, that we were going to tumble down this particular route in history? Casually entering any pew for Mass, going to the movies or visiting a loved one in the nursing home – all the things we took for granted, now seem like ancient history and another universe.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, I think it is helpful to meditate upon Christmas itself as the means of healing our hope. I do not mean “Christmas” as depicted on the Hallmark Movies Channel. There is nothing wrong with that kind of Christmas, if you enjoy watching it or if you can somehow conjure it up in your own life. The problem is simply that if you believe life is *always* supposed to look like that kind of Christmas, you will quickly come up empty (especially in a year like 2020). No, rather, I am referring to the real-life Christmas of history.

At a non-descript census station in some backwater province at the edge of the Empire’s world, the Savior of the human race appeared among us. This Savior’s birthplace was determined by a distant, occupying ruler deciding how best to collect his taxes from his unwilling citizens; His parents were forced into cramped quarters among livestock for the King of the Universe’s delivery room. The first following this Messiah drew was that of lowly, unbathed shepherds (the upper-crust guests with the good gifts would show up much later). Who would have thought, who would have predicted, that God would tumble down this particular route in our history?

Yet the glory of the real Christmas is that God willingly chose to do so, to be “God-with-us” right in the middle of our self-inflicted mess and that He knew (while all the world slept) that this was the “fullness of time” for His miraculous Work. What seems to be only so much tragedy and inconvenience and frustration does not stand above or beyond God’s saving hand. Every aspect of our life experience – the things beyond our control, the things that seem to rob us of our dignity – have already been addressed by God and turned into redemption by His presence among us.

Our family of parishioners here at Saint John Vianney Church has seen our Lord’s blessing in this real-life sort of way. It is not that everything has gone as beautifully as it does on film or that our lives have been all sunshine and easy living. None of you needs anyone to spell that out. It is rather that, in spite of all the tragedies we have suffered this year and the setbacks and frustrations, our Lord has been with us with His unflagging persistence. Our families are finding the Lord in a new way in the midst of their homes. Our ministries are finding new, creative ways to minister to our community and our parish family. In the middle of a pandemic, our parish school (one of our largest ministries) has found new flocks of families interested in a solid, Catholic education. In contrast to many parishes, our collections have stayed the course (and I want to express my deep gratitude for your faithfulness in providing your support for the good of the Church). Our sanctuary has grown more beautiful, with much more on the horizon. In short, through the grace of God and your faithfulness to your families and our parish family, we have not only survived but found new ways to thrive. In these times of fear and setbacks, as in all times, God is with us.

Although I have only been with you all as your pastor for these last few months, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for each of you and my joy in being with you here. You are an amazing parish family and each of your families brings something unique to table. I am proud (in the sense of a father) to be your pastor and humbled to be a part of this family. May God bless your family, our parish family as a whole and our community at large this Christmas season and may you all have a very Merry Christmas.

Sincerely Yours in Christ our Incarnate Savior,

Father Richard Childress