

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God  
January 1, 2020  
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It happened in October of 1992. I was a seminarian, completing my last year of studies in Washington DC. On weekends, I assisted at a parish in Silver Spring, MD, where I served as a deacon.

As a new deacon, I got to do many things for the first time. My first baptism. My first wedding. So I was also excited when the pastor asked me to do the blessing of the pets on feast of St. Francis.

We gathered on a beautiful afternoon, in the yard in front of the rectory.

People brought their dogs, their cats, their birds, their fish. One boy brought his green lizard.

A ten year old girl carried her pet in a small cage: Fluffy the hamster.

As we got ready to start the blessing, I made a rookie mistake. I said to the people, “if you want to hold your pet during the blessing, feel free.”

People picked up their cats and small dogs. The little boy was told by his mother, “Leave the lizard in the cage.” The little girl held Fluffy the Hamster gently in both hands.

I went around, said the official prayer, and sprinkled each pet with a little bit of holy water.

But when I sprinkled Fluffy the Hamster, the water startled the little critter. Fluffy squirmed. The little girl panicked. Fluffy jumped out of her hands and onto the grass. The little girl screamed. Her mother yelled, “Get Fluffy!”

Mayhem ensued. An older woman said, “keep that mouse away from me.” She stepped back too quickly, and fell on a rhododendron. The dogs started to bark.

The cats, meanwhile, saw a hamster on the ground... This got their attention, and the cats started to twist in the arms of those holding them.

Of course, one cat got loose. And that's when it happened. In the blink of an eye, Toby the Cat grabbed Fluffy the Hamster with his mouth, and shook Fluffy violently until there was nothing left to do except call Bliley funeral homes.

Fluffy was dead.

Yes friends, the first time I blessed animals, it led immediately to a hamster murder.

Children were crying. Adults were yelling. One older man walked toward me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "If I'm ever in the hospital, please don't come and bless me."

A memorable blessing...

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Which makes me remember a blessing that I received in a hospital. The year was 2012, and Bishop Walter Sullivan was at Saint Mary's Hospital. He was dying. I went with another priest, for what I knew would be my last visit with him.

We talked briefly – he did not have much energy. I told him how much I admired him, how much I respected his leadership and was grateful for his friendship. I told him that I loved him.

As we were getting ready to leave, I asked, "Bishop, would you please bless me?" He raised his hand, said a brief prayer, and blessed both of us.

Then he grabbed my hand and said, "Now, go bless someone. Every day."

I have been striving to live up to that blessing ever since. I've been trying to bless someone, each day.

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Every year, on January 1st, the very first reading of the very first mass of the New Year is about... *blessing*.

We are in the Book of Numbers, back in the first five books of the Old Testament. Moses and the people of Israel are in the midst of their journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

As they go, Moses instructs the people on how to worship God, and how to serve God by living a holy life.

In the midst of these instructions, Moses teaches the priests how to bless the people. We hear it every year, on January 1<sup>st</sup>:

*The Lord bless you and keep you.*

*The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look kindly upon you and give you peace.*

Yes, that is the kind of blessing that we need in 2020. In a world full of conflict, we need the blessing of God's peace. In a world of struggles, we need the blessing of God's kindness. In a world where so much gets lost, we need to be 'kept' by God, kept safe, kept in the palm of his hand.

By the way – in that blessing prayer, it says, “The Lord make his face shine upon you.” In Hebrew, what that really means is this: “May the Lord *smile* at you.”

How blessed we would be in 2020, if we pictured God, our creator, *smiling* at us constantly!

When I wake up in the morning, groggy and yawning, the God who made me is smiling at me.

When I do something good, something that Jesus teaches in the Gospel, God is smiling at me.

When I laugh at something beautiful, shed a tear over something meaningful, God is smiling at me.

In 2020, when you do something kind, something generous, something honest, God is smiling at you.

In 2020, when you choose to be patient, when you choose to forgive, when you choose to let go of anger, when you choose to pray, when you choose to unite rather than divide, God is smiling at you.

“The Lord make his face shine upon you” – that is, *may you sense the smile of our saving God.*

In today’s Gospel, the shepherd’s hasten from the fields to the place where Mary and Joseph are watching over the Christ-child. The shepherds have already been blessed by the appearance of the angel and the singing of the heavenly choir. They share all of this with the parents of Jesus. They marvel at the child. When they see him, how could they not smile?

What a blessing it is to see Jesus, in the flesh! God is richly blessing this rag-tag, smelly group of shepherds.

Then, having experienced this blessing - seeing Jesus in the manger - they depart. But they cannot keep all of this corked up inside themselves. Luke tells us that as they go out into the night, they are glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard.

I wonder if any of the neighbors woke up and wanted to yell at the shepherds, telling them to be quiet as they went back to their flocks?

The shepherds, who had been blessed, couldn’t keep this blessing off their lips, and the sound of their praise must have echoed off the walls of the homes and fields of Bethlehem.

In other words – they *were* blessed. Now they need to *go* and *share the blessing.*

Days like this invite us to pause, looking back with grateful hearts. No matter what challenges you’ve experienced in 2019, you have also been blessed by God in

2019. How do I know that? You're still here!

You have been blessed. By God. By others. By life. Don't let the new year begin without remembering how you've been blessed. Say thank you.

And then, remember what Bishop Sullivan said to me in that hospital room after he gave me his blessing. He said, "now, go bless someone, every day."

Because you are blessed by God, you have the graced ability to bless the lives of others - in the most simple or profound ways. You have the ability to change the world, *someone's* world, every day.

Wouldn't this *new* year be a *blessed* year if we decided to share the gift of Christ's love with someone, every day, in a concrete way? The possibilities are endless. The blessings are real. Today, let the sharing begin.

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