

From Fr. Fleming's Desk

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It's that time of the year again, the time when lots of folks will tell me, "So, Father - this is your busy season, right?" Well, this next month and a half will be a busy time for me (as it will be for you) but perhaps you (like me) wonder if there's ever a season when things *aren't* pretty busy!

As I mentioned last weekend, the fact that Christmas falls on a Monday makes for a very busy weekend at December's end - yes, even busier than a regular weekend. So on Saturday, December 23, we'll have Mass at 5:00 p.m. for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. On Sunday morning, December 24, we'll have *just one Mass* at 9:00 a.m., also for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. We've changed the schedule in light of the weekend's demands on all of us and because we need time to change the décor in the church from Advent to Christmas - before the 4:00 p.m. Mass on Christmas Eve (which is that very day!) - a Mass for which some folks will be arriving around 2:30 p.m. in order to make sure they get a seat! So Christmas Eve Masses will be celebrated on Sunday, December 24 at 4:00 p.m., 6:30 p.m. and midnight. And, Mass on Christmas Day will be celebrated at 8:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. Oh, and did I mention that both Fr. Sheehan and Fr. Gallagher are going to be away for Christmas? That leaves yours truly in the presider's chair in the sanctuary for all the liturgies on Christmas weekend. Now, *that* will make for a busy time - but I'm looking forward to it! SO many people come home to the parish and our prayer at Christmas and as a pastor I'm grateful for the opportunity to be with all of them in prayer.

So, how will the next month and a half be a busy season for you? I know: there's so much to do, so many people to see, so much shopping and cooking and preparations to take care of. And while it's ALL somehow related to Christmas, it's this very busy-ness that tempts us, leads us to forget that very important truth that JESUS is the reason for the season... I know that phrase has been overused but when something is true, I'm not sure that you can ever say it or read it or ponder it too often. In light that...

GIFTS: How much money, time and energy will I spend on Christmas gifts this year? You might recall that in a recent letter in the bulletin I suggested estimating one's Christmas expenses and deciding, ahead of time, to give an equal amount or 50% or 25% or 10% to charity. How does the amount of money I'll spend on gifts, wrapping and postage compare with how generous I'll be to those in need this Christmas, those who need my gift much more than many of the people on my Christmas list?

TIME: How much time will I spend on Christmas "stuff?" Stuff like shopping, wrapping, decorating, and partying? And, how does that time compare to the time I'll spend in prayer this season? Will I be more (or less) faithful to Sunday Mass and Christmas Mass this season? Here's an idea for using time well this Advent: Join us in the lower level of the church on Sunday night, December 17, just after the 5:00 p.m. Mass. Elizabeth Smith, our pastoral associate, will lead a session on "Clearing a Space: crowded houses, minds and souls." After Elizabeth's presentation we'll go upstairs for a candlelight Advent Evening Prayer Service of song and prayer. Another good use of time: come to confession in preparation for celebrating Christmas (Confessions: every Saturday from 4:00-4:30 and on Wednesday nights, December 6, 13 and 20 from 6:30-8:00 p.m.) And just at home: plan to find some quiet time for prayer, by yourself, at home by the crèche or the Christmas tree...

FAITH: Could there be a better season for sharing our faith with others? This is a season when just about EVERYONE is especially open to a spirit of generosity and giving. It's a time when just about everyone has at least a basic understanding of what Christians celebrate at Christmas. How might you and I take advantage of this seasonal openness to find ways to share our faith with others - especially with others who may have drifted away from the life of our parish and its prayer?

SECRET SANTA: Some families and work places have a "Secret Santa" program for exchanging small gifts with relatives and colleagues. How might each of us be a "secret Santa" for someone in our lives who really needs something we're in a position to give - whether that be something material, spiritual, or social? AND... how might I be a secret Santa to myself. By that I don't mean splurging on some expensive toy I've been wanting but rather, caring for myself (materially, spiritually, socially) in a way that will help me grow as a person, as a Christian? Sometimes, the last person we care for is our own self - how can some healthy self-care be part of my Christmas season?

Well, those are some pre-Advent thoughts and suggestions for us all. One last thing: just as shopping and parties and all the rest of the season's activities take time and planning, so does an Advent-Christmas season require some planning on our part. We all have a week before Advent begins - let's begin by planning now how each and all of us might plan to ensure that Jesus is the reason for the season - for *our* season.