

The Corner **OUTREACH**

*Saint Augustine and Saint Francis Xavier parishes’
newsletter for Winter 2020-21*

How will Christmas be different for you ...

There is no doubt that this Advent and Christmas season will be very different from any other. As Catholics all over grapple with the changes and make adjustments to holiday traditions one thing is for sure. The holiness of the season and the love and warmth of family will not be missing. The Corner Outreach interviewed some SASFX parishioners to find out “How will Christmas be different for you this year?”



Christmas tree at Saint Francis Xavier would have over 100 gifts for children and adults Pat Kabacinski, this tradition will be on pause for this year.

How will this Christmas season be different? We have been isolated, from our families, including our St. Francis family, for the better part of 8 months. All the children in our family will be almost a year older than the last time we saw them in person. One is only 8 months old and we have only seen him once since he was born. No family dinners with 2 dozen or more family members. (That might not be so bad, no arguments, no clean-up afterwards.).

As for St. Francis, we miss seeing the all the parishioners that are part of our lives. Both Patty and I have been in the Church for most of the weekday Masses and the prayer time afterwards. Much of the time, the Church empty. It is silent and almost lifeless. This hurts the heart.

There will be no giving tree this year. There will be no gifts wrapped for needy children and adults placed by the altar due to the Corona Virus. Think about that? Over 100 children

will not be getting gifts “from Santa” as he will not be able to stop by their school this year. And another parish that we cannot purchase approximately 50 gifts for their needy. All due to the safety concerns to prevent the spread of COVID.

The stress of living with the virus, civil unrest, and the elections is almost too much to bear.

This Christmas season, will be unlike any other we have experienced. While many events cannot be held and gath-

erings will be smaller, each gathering will be something extraordinary, a celebration like no other. Being able to share the Joy of the birth of Christ with whatever family members or friends we are with. Filled with happiness, sharing what we have. And that time together will renew our spirit for the year ahead.

Seeing St. Francis filled with parishioners, joining together, celebrating the birth of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, that represents our real Church, the family of the St. Francis Xavier parish. Standing strong in face of adversity, in prayer, praising the Lord, Jesus Christ. Each moment of this season will be precious, and one we will always remember.



Sam and Beth McGovern with daughters, (right) Caitlin and Emma will have a virtual Christmas

My family and I consider ourselves lucky to live in the parish I grew up in just a few blocks away from both my parents and my brother's family. We've quarantined as a group all through the pandemic, and, for that reason, we haven't had to miss any holidays with them. Unfortunately, that has not been the case with my wife Beth's family in Chicago. They've missed birthday celebrations and our annual visit for Thanksgiving. And so we're determined to make it there for Christmas.

To make it possible, we are taking precautionary measures to make sure we all prepare for the trip, and that we limit contact with people while we travel. While we normally fly, this year we'll drive the 800 miles with our two daughters and our dog Shea. Our kids are regularly tested for Covid due to school rules, and we follow strict social distancing rules daily. My wife's family plans to fully quarantine for two weeks before we arrive – not even going out

to shop for Christmas or pick up take-out. The long school break we are getting this year means we can quarantine for two weeks when we return to NYC before school starts again in January.

We'll have to skip some traditions this year. No breakfast with Santa as part of Saint Francis's Faith Formation Program or photos with Santa at Macy's. No festive lunches, visiting cousins and childhood friends, or Christmas-shopping expeditions. And while my in-laws won't host their usual massive Christmas Eve dinner for extended family, we'll experiment with some new activities such as opening presents over Facetime with cousins, aunts and uncles, and virtual Christmas mass (although our girls are excited to attend in holiday themed pajamas rather than their traditional Christmas finery).

But some traditions will remain the same. In the weeks before the road trip, we'll decorate the house and my parents will host "McGovern Christ-

mas" a week or two ahead of the real holiday. There will be eleven of us this year (two more than normal) as my brother Michael and sister-in-law Michelle had twin girls (Fiona and Violet) this spring. And once we're in Chicago, our kids will see their grandparents for the first time in months. We will bake cookies and share family dinners, play boardgames and chase a new puppy around the backyard. We will build snowmen in the yard (if there's snow!) and have homemade hot chocolate. We will have the kids set up the Nativity under the tree and open the advent calendar as they count down the days to Christmas. Despite so many things being different, we'll celebrate how blessed we are to be

together as a family.

—*Sam McGovern*

Traditionally as Christians we focus on the birth of the child Christ, the Messiah.

At St. Augustine's it meant sharing the celebration with the three diverse congregations in the format of the tri-lingual mass including the children participating in the performance of the Nativity Scene.

It's always been an opportunity, for our parishioners to share the richness of our cultural diversity. The conclusion of the mass is followed by a collation which allows parishioners to interact and celebrate the blessed gift of the birth of our savior.

This year due to the pandemic and parish mergers I anticipate that the new normal will not facilitate the traditional celebrations. However, we will still be cognizant of the blessing of the Nativity. Merry Christmas!

—*Reneida E Reyes*

Christmas 2020

For the past ten years, ever since my mom died, my partner Bob and I have had a pretty consistent Christmas routine: Midnight Mass at St. Augustine's, a little B&B after returning home while reclining in our favorite chairs by the fireplace with our tree glowing and our cats, Linus and Lucy, purring away. On Christmas morning, after checking out what Santa dropped off, we'd head to Connecticut for dinner with my dad, now 95, my two younger brothers and their teenage kids. The next day the entire clan would gather at my sister's house for the grand celebration. With six siblings, their spouses, kids and grandkids, this easily adds up to more than 60. My dad would give the blessing over the lavish buffet dinner, followed by gifts for the little kids and



Bob Biegen and Tom Wargo with cats Lucy and Linus at their home on Christmas years ago

then a raucous grab-bag for the rest of us with rules that not only allow but encourage stealing other's gifts, which in-

evitably leads to high anxiety, howls of laughter, screams of protest, and general pandemonium. Luckily, no one has been seriously injured... yet! The next day, we'd go to the movies to enjoy a film suitable for both little kids and my dad, a Marine, who cannot tolerate curse words and likely never used them. Last year it was Mary Poppins. Then Bob and I would head back to Brooklyn.

This year, there will be no mass gathering of the clan, no enormous buffet dinner, no grab bag, no movie. It will be eerily quiet. Zoom just doesn't cut it, although I'm sure there will be some attempt at it. It will be a wistful holiday, for sure. But, just like in Bethlehem, there will be hope. We'll hope for that star above the stable to guide us to a new year of transformative peace, joy, and love.

—Tom Wargo

Meet Our New Cantor Clayton Graves Williams



Hello Hello, I am Clayton Graves Williams, the youngest child of Clarence and Hendrean Williams, and born in Detroit, MI. I made my way to NY when I attended Manhattan School of Music for my graduate studies, which I completed in 2014; where I began my professional singing and acting career. I think of myself as a full entertainer, much like the versatile Entertainers of the Golden Hollywood era. Upon graduating I've been featured in Television such as Law & Order, Blue Bloods, Bull, The Blacklist Commercial campaigns and performed with noted conductors, companies such American Opera Projects, Encompass Opera, The New York Philharmonic, Harlem Opera Theatre and Mile Long Opera. You can find more information about my professional work on my website: www.claytongwilliams.com

I've been a member of the St. Francis Xavier choir since

2018. I come from a very musical and spiritual family. My parents are both preachers' kids and are very active in the church. Needless to say I was reared in the church and I am a church boy through and through; active in every church function and organization growing up. Though the church choir especially was my home. Music plays such an important part in my worship. We are all given a gift and singing is my form of ministry and gratitude to God for his many blessings and protection over my life. I am so thankful that God has led me to St. Francis Xavier. It has been a great experience full of warmth and generosity. I look forward to my continued services at St. Francis Xavier as we worship together. Lastly, A little trivia about me. I am a Libra, 6ft tall, My nickname is Clayton G. or ClayClay. My form of exercise is Hot Yoga, I am a big dog lover. My favorite fruit grapes, favorite number is four because of four part harmonies and it's a perfect number for group outings not too big or too small; it's just right. No one feels left out, and we can always pair up. My favorite color is Orange. And finally, a quote I live by: "No one is going to hand you a ladder; If you want it bad enough you'll build your own"

Reflections on Our First Nine Months Together

By Fr. Richard J. Breton

My beginnings at St. Francis Xavier Church were very eventful. I don't know if you remember back to February 2020. Pastor Bill had just retired and there was a buzz in the air about who would replace him. I was sent as an assistant to a new pastor that I never met and, I had never even been given his name. It was total blind faith on my part, however, having had formation with the Jesuits prior to becoming a diocesan priest, I abandoned myself to the will of God as St Ignatius entreats us to do in his Spiritual Exercises. I trusted in God and came to our Church On February 3rd 2020.

The first five weeks were great! We started, right from the outset, by having a lot of fun. Do you remember the "Smile Contest" we began? People met Steve Kabcinski in the vestibule of the church after Mass. They gave him their very best and biggest smiles, and he snapped amazing pictures. Everyone looked so happy. We started to collect them and placed them on big poster boards. It was our plan to collect these images and draw three winners of our contest at the parish Pot Luck Supper in the middle of March.

Alas, that supper, and that contest, that function never happened. It was canceled out of an abundance of caution, because a new virus from China was making its way to America. Very few things were known about the COVID-19 virus at the time, but it proved to be very scary with alarmingly

high infection rates. One week later all our Catholic Churches in heavily infected areas suspended public religious services. This was unprecedented in our nation's history. What a very sad day it was to be informed by Deacon Dobbins that we would be shutting down our churches as of March 20th.

I thought of all the wonderful Masses we celebrated in those short six weeks together; how I always felt so comfortable with the people of St. Francis Xavier. I would share with you my love for Jesus in the Eucharist with such joy that it felt, for me, like I was celebrating my first Mass thirty-one years ago when I was newly ordained.

I also loved sharing my stories with our people from the pulpit. A very wise Jesuit professor who taught me "Metaphysics" while I was a student at Fordham University, used to say: "The shortest distance between two minds is by way of a story." This is why Jesus always spoke publicly in parables, so people could readily understand his profound and seminal teachings.

I am reminded of one such humorous story from my undergraduate academic years at Fordham. I remember receiving a letter before graduation from a national honor society called Phi Beta Kappa. I was so naive about academia, that I called my brother-in-law (he was the closest thing to "Google" that I had in the 80's), and asked him if this was a good thing to join, and whether I had to attend meetings or pay dues. He emphatically told me that it was a good thing to join, so at my commencement

from Fordham, I graduated Phi Beta Kappa, Summa Cum Laude.

I went on to graduate school, again at Fordham, to receive my Masters in Philosophy, became a Jesuit novice for about a year and then headed to the Seminary on Long Island to receive my Masters of Divinity and became a Priest for the Brooklyn Diocese on June 3rd 1989. I rounded-out my degrees in 2008 when I received my Bachelors of Fine Arts from Pratt Institute in metal smithing, jewelry and art history.

This academic component was only part of my life—an important part—because it helped me with my "hands on" creativity. As an adolescent I built H.O. scale railroad models. Afterwards, I wanted to try my hand at carpentry, so I remodeled a friend's basement, and read do-it-yourself books along the way. Then it grew into cabinetmaking when I made a built-in Euro-style server with glass doors and oak veneers for my parent's sun room. Afterwards, I set up a permanent shop in my parent's garage where I made furniture and then progressed to woodcarving. This is where I carved my first religious sculpture of a monstrance in the shape of a flame called "The Living Flame of God's Love."

Finally, God placed on my heart a very large project in two media that were unfamiliar to me. I was called to sculpt a 1,000 pound stone tabernacle, with two rolling stone doors and a stained-glass eight-pointed star monstrance perched behind the two 35 pound

sliding doors. I did some research in trying to get imitation stone that would weigh less, but it never looked like the real thing. I reinforced my workshop, ordered real Indiana Limestone, said some prayers and threw myself into this new adventure.

About a year later “The Whisper of God’s Love” was completed. Why a “whisper?” Because, even though it is a large tabernacle, the Eucharist beckons to us when the doors are opened and the eight-pointed star is lit-up on its points. The six-inch host at its center pulses with the vibrancy of Jesus’ heart supplicating us to (as in the Garden of Gethsemane): “Pray with me, stay with!”

Carved in stone above these very doors are the words: “Christ Is Risen.” How is Jesus risen? Today, until the day of his return, He is risen in the Eucharist. That is why I am so happy to celebrate Mass, because the Risen Christ comes to me and you—to us—to lift us out of the doldrums of life, and to help us have hope in all the various circumstances of our lives!

This leads us back to the tragic pandemic that we are all still experiencing. When the churches were shut down, Fr. Gabriel arrived from Italy to spend time with us at St Francis. He was here to help with the Masses at St. Augustine’s Church (our new sister church), however, since all our churches were closed, he live-streamed the Mass everyday. This allowed me the freedom to go to the mountains; to the property God has tasked me with creating a “mini City of God.”

In 1998, while co-leading a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, I finally found a home for that 1,000-pound tabernacle I sculpted in 1996. I always wondered why God put it on my heart to create it, but I complied with His deep promptings (I can’t rest or find peace inside, if



I don’t follow through with what He places on my heart), and found out while on pilgrimage through a deep prayer experience. During a Holy Hour Service at St. James Church in Medjugorje, I discovered that I needed to come back to America and create a place in nature that could display and house this stone tabernacle.

The same Jesuit Priest, Fr. Norris Clarke, SJ, who taught me metaphysics at Fordham, introduced me to waterfalls. When I first prayed by a waterfall with a dozen other graduate students on a field trip, I saw the water flowing over the falls as God’s love and graces overflowing into our lives. The pool where the water collected at the base of the natural waterfall was like the pool of our hearts where all of God’s love and graces collect. Then, as the pool overflows in nature becoming a stream, giving life to all the plants and creatures along the way; so too God’s graces flow through our lives giving life to all those we encounter along the way. Each of us is an ever-flowing stream of God’s love and graces, and this is how our lives can become a blessing to all those we encounter. It is all God working through our open and contrite hearts—seeking and ready to do His will.

I came back from that Medjugorje

pilgrimage looking for a parcel of land that featured a waterfall. On the airplane ride on the way back I mused about how could I ever afford to purchase such a property, if even such a property existed. I thought perhaps, I could miniaturize some of my larger sculptures and create a few religious pieces of jewelry. I could share with people this incredible story of my “divine commission” and offer the jewelry in exchange for a donation to this mission.

I was led to a professional jeweler who helped with getting some nice pieces made, and then I met a little support group who would help me make some special rosary bracelets and accompany me to people’s homes and church groups to share my story. Try as I might, whatever donations I would receive, it was never enough to afford property. Enter my parents. They saw all that I was doing: working as a full time priest at St Helen’s Church and doing all I could to find and afford the beginning of “God’s city.”

My mom happened to relate my search for a property to a friend who later saw an advertisement for a 46-acre parcel of land with brook, 95-foot waterfall and 4-bedroom chalet in Barryville, NY—within two hours from New York City. I saw the property and my parents—John and Ann—purchased it for my mission in 1999 with their savings. My mother was a tremendous woman of faith, and my dad was a great provider. Together they teamed up to make this dream come true.

I started a not-for-profit 501 (c) 3 corporation called Eternal Flame of Hope Ministries in 2001, that seeks to bring people closer to God through art, nature and Eucharistic Spirituality. Over the years we built a large chapel for about 90 people directly in front of

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Reflection of Our First Nine Months Together *continued*

the waterfall. We placed the stone tabernacle in the center.

In 2006 I donated the property to The Ministries, and over the years we continued to improve the grounds with park-style lighting, a large 36-foot wide gazebo and an adjacent comfort station at the top of the mountain. In fact, during the pandemic, I worked with local contractors to create and build two hermitages near the gazebo. They will be used for creativity and prayer. My hope is to invite the entire parish family of St. Francis and St. Augustine for a day of prayer in the mountains once the pandemic is finally over.

In the future, God willing, I would like to begin remaking some of my religious jewelry designs, to help with donations for an overnight dormitory in the woods of Heaven's Embrace (the name of the retreat property). I would then invite groups from our parish family for overnight retreats.

I believe the inability of the modern person to hear the "voice of God" within their lives, is directly linked to the many distractions that compete for attention on a daily basis. This spiritual facility would provide an opportunity to reset our relationship with the Lord, and continue our path of following and loving Him with all our hearts, with all our souls and all our minds (Mt 22:37). Amen.

Christmas Message for 2020

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of this Christmas season is that we are finally putting to rest the year of 2020! Who ever thought twelve months ago that we would have the year that we had? The effects of a global pandemic, racial unrest, and political polarization have taken a toll on us all. Yet we come back to this special time of the year—a time of cold, short days that are paradoxically filled with warmth and childhood memories. As our vulnerabilities have been exposed this year, may we never forget the vulnerability of God. This year, may we more than ever embrace the helplessness of the Christ Child. Jesus comes to us completely vulnerable in order that he might completely unite to our vulnerability. I find the words of Pope Francis most appropriate this Christmas season:

On this holy night, while we contemplate the infant Jesus just born and placed in the manger, we can reflect on how we welcome the tenderness of God? Do I allow myself to be taken up by God, to be embraced by God, or do I prevent God from drawing close? "But I am searching for the Lord," we could respond. Nevertheless, what is most important is not seeking God, but rather allowing God to seek me, to find me and to caress me with tenderness. The question put to us simply by the infant's presence is: do I allow God to love me?

More so, do we have the courage to welcome with tenderness the difficulties and problems of those who are near to us, or do we prefer impersonal solutions, perhaps effective but devoid of the warmth of the gospel? How much the world needs tenderness today! The patience of God, the closeness of God, the tenderness of God.

The Christian response cannot be different from God's response to our smallness. Life must be met with goodness, with meekness. When we realize that God is in love with our smallness, that God made himself small in order to better encounter us, we cannot help but open our hearts and pray: "Lord, help me to be like you, give me the grace of tenderness in the most difficult circumstances of life, give me the grace of closeness in the face of every need, of meekness in every conflict."

Know of my prayers for you this Christmas and may the New Year bring unexpected blessings! Peace,

Fr. John Gribowich

We are a lively community where interesting things happen. Please feel free to peruse our website, call with any questions and/or follow us on Facebook: @staugustinercparkslope; @stfxbrooklyn

St. Augustine - St. Francis Xavier

Saturday Vigil Mass

5:00 PM at St. Francis Xavier

(225 6th Avenue)

Sunday Masses

9:30 AM at St. Francis Xavier

(225 6th Avenue)

12:00 Noon at St. Augustine

(116 6th Avenue)

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