

A review of the 2009-10 legislative session
PCC recaps issues from Harrisburg, page 3.



FaithLife

Undeclared champs
Mercyhurst Prep girls soccer team wins state championship, page 4.



www.ErieRCD.org

BI-WEEKLY NEWS BULLETIN OF THE DIOCESE OF ERIE

December 19, 2010

Church Calendar

Events of the local, American and universal church

Feast days



Holy Family

Epiphany

- Dec. 21 St. Peter Canisius
- Dec. 23 St. John of Kanty
- Dec. 25 Nativity of the Lord (Christmas Day)
- Dec. 26 Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
- Dec. 27 St. John
- Dec. 28 Holy Innocents
- Dec. 29 St. Thomas Becket
- Dec. 31 St. Sylvester I
- Jan. 1 Mary, Mother of God
- Jan. 2 Epiphany of the Lord
- Jan. 9 Baptism of the Lord

Midnight Mass from St. Peter Cathedral on WJET-TV

For the 15th straight year, WJET-TV channel 24 will broadcast Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve live from St. Peter Cathedral in Erie. The broadcast will begin at 11:30 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 24.



Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God – Jan. 1 (holy day of obligation)

“Called in the Gospels ‘the mother of Jesus,’ Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth, at the prompting of the Spirit and even before the birth of her Son, as ‘the mother of my Lord.’ In fact, the One whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father’s eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the church confesses that Mary is truly ‘Mother of God.’” – *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 495

National Migration Week – Jan. 2-8

“Renewing Hope, Seeking Justice” is the primary theme for the 2011 National Migration Week. The observance began more than a quarter century ago by the U.S. bishops to provide Catholics an opportunity to take stock of the wide diversity of the church and the ministries serving them.

Pope Benedict XVI is focusing on migrant families for his 2011 World Day of Migrants and Refugees message, which is posted at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/migration/index_en.htm.

National Vocations Awareness Week – Jan. 9-15

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord marks Jesus’ initiation into public ministry. At his baptism, Jesus is named the Beloved Son of God. With this celebration we recommit ourselves to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Initiated through our baptism we, too, are favored by God, commissioned to proclaim Good News with our lives.

National Vocation Awareness Week is a time for reflection. All Catholics are encouraged to:

- Take time to pray for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.
- Reflect on our own vocation and strengthen our personal relationship with Christ.
- Educate our young people about the importance of silent prayer and taking the time to truly listen to God’s voice in our hearts.

For information on vocations in the Diocese of Erie, visit www.ErieVocations.org or call 814.824.1200.



GIVE LOVE and Christmas will last forever

A Christmas message from Bishop Donald Trautman

How much does God love us? How much does God care about us? How interested is God in our lives? The answer lies in the manger of a Bethlehem stable. Look at the Nativity scene and see Jesus, Son of God, lying on hay in a manger, a feeding box for animals. A stable for animals serves as a maternity room for the King of Kings. In the poverty and simplicity of this Bethlehem scene, Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and became man. The waiting of the Old Testament was finally over. The Messiah had come — Emmanuel — God with us — now dwells among us.

It is in this humblest of settings, this Bethlehem stable, that we see the extent of

God’s love for us. God stoops low to rescue us, to save us, to give us new life. God loves you and me with all of our faults and failings; God loves us with all of our broken promises and broken commandments. God knows our broken hearts and comes to teach us how to love — to love as God loves. Christmas is the feast of love, the feast of Christ’s love for us.

Why does God stoop so low to come to this Bethlehem stable? Why such humble beginnings for the King of Kings? Shepherds were the first to come and see the newborn. The shepherds lived in the fields. They were poor people, unwashed, unkempt, not the most prestigious well-wishers, but they were chosen by God to be the first to come



The OLP Family and School Association (FSA) presented a living Nativity Dec. 4 at Our Lady of Peace Parish in Erie. Students

from preschool through 8th grade performed an evening of Scripture and song reflecting the Christmas story.

and greet the newborn Savior, his mother and foster-father Joseph. Jesus chose the shepherds to teach that his mes-

sage was for the poor and the powerless, the meek and those forgotten by society. He offers “peace on earth to everyone

who pleases God” (Luke 2:14). In the Bethlehem stable See CHRISTMAS, page 3

Elk Co. Catholic schools form new system

Schools take steps to ensure future of Catholic education in St. Marys

From staff reports

ST. MARYS — There’s a rich history of Catholic education in St. Marys and Elk County—from the Benedictine fathers in the mid-1800s to the Diocese of Erie today.

The Catholic schools in St. Marys are making sure that history continues by taking steps to ensure the future of Catholic education in the area.

Elk County Catholic High School and St. Marys Catholic Elementary School System have combined to form a new entity, the Elk County Catholic School System (ECCSS), giving the St. Marys area a unified Catholic preschool through 12th grade school system.

The announcement was made Nov. 18 by a transition advisory board, which was chaired by Bishop Donald Trautman—at the request of the existing school boards

and the pastors—with reviewing and evaluating strategic alternatives for Catholic education in the region.

Board members reviewed enrollment and financial data as well as physical plant considerations. The board’s work culminated with a series of meetings held over the summer of 2010 with stakeholders including the boards, faculties and administrative staff of both systems as well as parents and community members.

Operations of both prior school systems will continue as they have for a period of time as the many details of full integration are worked out to ensure a smooth transition for students and families in the St. Marys area. St. Boniface School in Kersey and St. Leo School in Ridgway will remain independent parish elementary schools; both will enjoy full access to and collaboration with schools in St. Marys, as they have in the past.

“Catholic education is con-



The newly formed Elk County Catholic School System gives the county and greater St. Marys area a unified Catholic preschool through 12th grade school system for the first time in its history. Representing those schools are, left to right, Ben Hoffman (7th grade) from St. Marys Catholic Middle

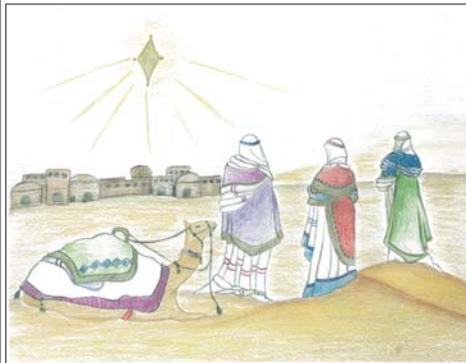
School, Samantha Straub (Pre-K) from St. Marys Catholic Elementary School, Jessica McLaughlin (12th grade) from Elk County Catholic High School and Elizabeth Anderson (2nd grade) from St. Marys Catholic Elementary School.

stantly changing, and it has to change in order to survive,” said Father Michael Ferrick, pastor of Queen of the World Parish in St. Marys. “This

is an opportunity for us to strengthen Catholic education for the next 10 to 20 years.” Father Ferrick said when he came to St. Marys four

years ago, there was a grass-roots movement of people already working on ways See SCHOOLS, page 2

St. Luke student’s artwork is HCA winner



A drawing of the three wise men by Erin Jenkins, a 7th grader at St. Luke School in Erie, won national honors in the 2009-10 Holy Childhood Association (HCA) Christmas Artwork Contest. Jenkins’ artwork was chosen as one of 24 winners selected from among some 10,000 entries submitted by children in Catholic elementary schools, religious education programs and home schools.

Jenkins’ artwork, along with the other honorees, is featured on the HCA website for kids at www.hcakids.org. In addition, her artwork will be displayed at the National Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., during the Advent and Christmas Seasons. Jenkins also attended a Mass for winners and their families at the National Shrine, along with her parents, Chuck and Lisa Jenkins of Erie, Dec. 10.

Bishop clarifies pope’s comments on condoms

By Bishop Donald Trautman
Bishop of Erie

Editor’s note: Bishop Donald Trautman has written the following clarification regarding Pope Benedict XVI’s comments on condoms featured as part of a book-length interview in “Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times,” which was released Nov. 24. Bolded emphasis is original.



Bishop Donald Trautman

The comments of Pope Benedict XVI in the recently released book, “Light of the World,” regarding condom use have stirred significant attention in the media. As a result, there is much confusion about what the Holy Father meant. Pope Benedict’s remarks were in no way whatsoever a change in the church’s long-standing teaching that condom use is always harmful and destructive to

the human mind, heart and body. Sexual intercourse, by God’s design, is a full, total and loving gift of two persons to each other within the lifelong commitment of marriage. Condom use for any reason greatly distorts the exchange of that gift.

Pope Benedict’s comments were made in regard to a very specific hypothetical situation: male prostitution. See CONDOMS, page 3



IN THE U.S.

Green Bay bishop becomes first in U.S. to approve Marian apparitions

Bishop David Ricken of Green Bay has approved the Marian apparitions seen by Adele Brise in 1859, making the apparitions of Mary that occurred some 18 miles northeast of Green Bay the first in the United States to receive approval of a diocesan bishop. Bishop Ricken made the announcement in Champlain, Wis., during Mass at the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help Dec. 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. More than 250 invited guests filled the shrine chapel to hear Bishop Ricken read the official decree on the authenticity of the apparitions. He also issued a second decree, formally approving the shrine as a diocesan shrine. The decree on the apparitions' authenticity comes nearly two years after Bishop Ricken opened a formal investigation. On Jan. 9, 2009, he appointed three theologians to study their history. Brise, a Belgian immigrant, was 28 when Mary appeared to her three times in October 1859.



Adele Brise is pictured in an undated photo. In 1859, when she was 28, she saw apparitions of Mary near her home in what is today Champion, Wis. Brise taught the Catholic faith to children and began a community of Third Order Franciscans.

Hundreds protest late-term abortion doctor's arrival in D.C. suburb

About 300 people stood outside a German town abortion clinic in biting cold weather for several hours Dec. 6 to protest the arrival of LeRoy Carhart, a doctor from Nebraska who performs late-term abortions. Carhart left Nebraska to come to Maryland after his state passed a law prohibiting abortion after the 20th week of pregnancy. The doctor also will perform abortions at a clinic in Iowa. The *Washington Post* reported that Carhart chose the Maryland location based on a number of factors, including which jurisdiction had the most favorable laws for abortion. The Rev. Patrick Mahoney, director of the Christian Defense Coalition and a lead organizer of the protest, said, "We don't want Maryland to become the late-term abortion capital of America." Rev. Mahoney also encouraged people to visit the website, <http://kickout-carhart.com>, for updates and information on Carhart. Only a handful of pro-choice supporters gathered outside of the abortion clinic that is part of a larger business park.

While a cardinal, pope asked for swift action against abusive priests

A newly disclosed letter reveals that as early as 1988, the future Pope Benedict XVI pressed for swifter and more streamlined procedures to punish priests guilty of "grave and scandalous conduct." The letter, written by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger when he was head of the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, expressed concern that the normal process for dealing with such priests — which typically involved a request for dispensation from priestly obligations — took too long and was seen more as a favor than a punishment. Eventually, with Cardinal Ratzinger's involvement, the penal procedures were simplified and sanctions were strengthened. But in 1988, the cardinal's suggestion of a "more rapid and simplified penal process" was rebuffed by the Vatican's canon law experts. The letter was cited in a lengthy article published Dec. 1 by the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*.



Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

AROUND THE WORLD

Vatican Christmas: Short on snow but big in spirit

While snowfall is a rarity and Santa Claus is seldom seen, Christmas at the Vatican is truly unique. Cranes erect an enormous evergreen alongside the granite obelisk in St. Peter's Square and workers nested in cherry pickers buckets adorn the tree with lights, ornaments and tinsel. This year's tree is decorated with 3,000 gold and silver balls, and 1,500 white and yellow LED lights, which have lower energy consumption and greater durability. The tree will be topped with a flashing star. Construction of the larger-than-life nativity scene takes weeks and yards of thick burlap keep curious eyes from seeing the final product until its unveiling on Christmas Eve. But even further from the public eye are the holiday traditions of the papal household. While Pope John Paul II had close to an open-house attitude, Pope Benedict XVI is much more discreet. In addition to the public events, Pope Benedict celebrates Christmas privately with the members of his papal household.

Vatican, PLO resume talks toward building comprehensive agreement

The Vatican and the Palestine Liberation Organization have resumed diplomatic talks and agreed to establish a working group dedicated to drafting a comprehensive agreement between the two parties. The talks are aimed at establishing "a comprehensive international agreement regulating and promoting the presence and activities of the Catholic Church in the Palestinian territories, so strengthening the special relations between the Holy See and the PLO," said a joint statement released by the Vatican Dec. 9. The statement was issued at the end of initial talks, which were held Dec. 7 "in a cordial atmosphere" at the headquarters of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

By the Way...

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Erie was recently awarded a \$25,000 grant from Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield to support its "Families in Need" programs throughout the 13 counties of the Diocese of Erie.



Jason Koshinski

The grant will be used for new projects, as well as help continue certain programs, said Mary Maxwell, executive director of Catholic Charities. The project will directly address poverty.

"It will help something as simple as letting 30 refugees have beds, Maxwell said. "These things are concrete and real. They're basic services that they need."

The funds will also assist Catholic Charities' Counseling and Adoption services, rural ministry, the Better Homes Social Service Center outreach program, Project AWESOME (Assistance with Education, Shelter, Organization, Money management and Employment) and drop-out prevention.

Catholic Charities has been working with Highmark ever since it sought sponsors for the annual Catholic Charities Ball, Maxwell said.

"(Highmark has) our gratitude for the confidence they have in Catholic Charities to apply this kind of grant to the work that we do," she said. "They've entrusted us with a responsibility, and we intend to steward that well."

In addition to Highmark's sponsorship of the ball, this second year it has given Catholic Charities a significant grant. Highmark covers 11 of the 13 counties in northwestern Pennsylvania that make up the diocese.

The National Association of Church Personnel Administrators (NACPA) board recently elected Father Jay Schultz, pastor of St. Boniface Parish in Erie, as chairperson of strategic planning. The move also means that Father Jay will serve as a member of the executive committee of the board.

NACPA is a membership organization dedicated to the development and promotion of just personnel practices rooted in Gospel values. Members include clergy, religious and lay men and women from across America and the world who share this dedication.

It was almost a year ago that Father Schultz celebrated the first Mass in the newly renovated St. Boniface Church at midnight on Christmas Eve.

Saint Vincent Health Center in Erie was ranked No. 1 in the state of Pennsylvania for cardiac and vascular surgery for 2011, according to a published study by HealthGrades, the leading independent healthcare ratings organization.

Saint Vincent Health Center is also among the top 10 percent in the nation for cardiac services, cardiac surgery, pulmonary services, vascular surgery, prostatectomy and critical care.

The nation's nearly 5,000 hospitals were all included in this sweeping study, which examined mortality rates and complication rates from government data from 2007 through 2009.

Blessings at Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Jason Koshinski is editor of FaithLife. Contact him at JKoshinski@ErieRCD.org or 814.824.1171.

Schools take steps to ensure future of Catholic education in St. Marys

SCHOOLS, from page 1

to not only secure the future of Catholic education in the area but make it thrive.

"We're viewing this as something that's very positive," he said. "We're doing it to make ourselves stronger and to provide the best Catholic education possible to the people of Elk County. It's a new era in Catholic education."

The primary local governance of the ECCSS will reside in a 12-member board of directors comprised of three persons nominated by each pastor of the three Catholic parishes in St. Marys and three additional members from among St. Leo Magnus, St. Boniface, Holy Rosary, St. Mark and St. Joseph parishes in Elk County.

The new board members include: Rosemary Carnovale, Holy Rosary; John Johnsonburg, Mary Dewitler; St. Leo, Ridgeway; Pamela Fritz, Sacred Heart; St. Mary; Diane Gahr, St. Boniface; Kersey;

James W. Hoffman, St. Mary; William Hoffman, Queen of the World, St. Mary; Thomas Jesberger, Sacred Heart, St. Mary; Joseph Kim, Queen of the World, St. Mary; Conrad J. Kogovsek, St. Mary, St. Mary; Bradley Kraus, Sacred Heart, St. Mary; Robert O'Leary, St. Mary, St. Mary; and Rita Ordway, Queen of the World, St. Marys.

The board will be responsible for the educational, financial, personnel and facility policies for the new school system, including engagement of the president of the system. Its initial task will be to recommend ways in which the two previous school systems can begin to merge administrative and business activities.

It has committed to involving all interested parties: parents, parishioners, faculty, administrators and others, as it considers strategies related to building usage, consolidation and more.

"We're viewing this as something that's very positive. We're doing it to make ourselves stronger and to provide the best Catholic education possible to the people of Elk County." — Father Michael Ferrick

"The goal is to provide quality, affordable education, firmly grounded in the Catholic tradition," said C.J. Kogovsek, chairman of the Elk County Catholic School System Board of Directors. "Catholic education has played an important role in Elk County since its inception, and we join with Bishop Trautman and the Education Office of the Diocese of Erie as well as local pastors in looking forward to continuing that tradition for generations to come."

The idea of creating a unified preschool through twelfth grade school system began at the grassroots level according to Mary Agnes Marshall, supervising principal for the St. Marys Catholic Elementary and Middle Schools. "It is exciting to see it come to fruition after much hard work," Marshall said. "Parents, benefactors, boards, pastors and administrators within the community have realized for quite some time that this move will enable strategic planning that will result in

efficiency of operation, strengthening of financial stability and ensuring quality educational programming."

John Kowach, headmaster at Elk County Catholic High School, agreed and cited countless hours of hard work by many people committed to Catholic education.

"Their vision for the future will strengthen both the spiritual and educational mission of our schools," Kowach said. "The children and young adults we serve will certainly benefit from a very conscious and unified coordination of programs that will promote faith formation, service to others and academic growth." Kowach said the new system will also allow for the coordination of advancement efforts and financial operations, ensuring the continuation and stability of Catholic education in Elk County for many years to come.

Patricia McLaughlin, director of the Catholic Schools Office for the diocese, commended parents and supporters of Catholic education for the time and effort they put into the school system on behalf of their children.

"The Diocese of Erie is very proud of the continued tradition of Catholic education in the Elk County area," McLaughlin said.

Her sentiments were echoed by Father Nicholas Rouch, the diocese's vicar for Education, who said he's been impressed with the dedication of the people in St. Marys.

"Their goal has been to think strategically in order to maintain strong Catholic education in the area," Father Rouch said. "Their process was comprehensive and inclusive, and their recommendation to the bishop made sense. We move forward with a renewed sense of purpose and strength."

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Italy Regular: May 14-22 **Italy South:** Sept. 10-22...
Italy /Holy Land: March 20-April 1 / May 9-22...
Italy /Switzerland: April 2-14 / April 30-May 2...
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A review of the 2009-10 legislative session

By Amy B. Hill
Pennsylvania Catholic Conference

Health care reform. Abortion. Adoption. Gay marriage. Education.

These are among top issues tracked by the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (PCC) in the 2009-10 legislative session. What happened and where do we go from here?

Health care
In March 2010, the U.S. Congress passed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Life-affirming health care for all has long been a concern of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Despite this consistent advocacy, the law was passed without adequate statutory restrictions on using federal tax dollars to pay for abortion coverage, fairness for legal immigrants or sufficient conscience protection for health care providers.

In the new session, it is likely that legislation will be introduced in Congress to address these con-

cerns. The PCC will pursue legislation to restrict abortion coverage in the state's implementation of the insurance exchanges.

Social concerns

New procedures for voluntary open adoption agreements were signed into law. It is easier now for a prospective adoptive parent to enter into a voluntary agreement with the birth relative of a child to permit contact if desired. Adoption professionals see this as a positive change that may encourage more women to consider adoption when faced with an unplanned pregnancy.

The Pennsylvania Marriage Protection Amendment was not successful during this term, but major cases addressing marriage in other states are working their way through the courts. There



Amy B. Hill

may be new opportunities to pursue the marriage amendment in the next legislative session, giving Pennsylvanians the chance to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman in the state constitution.

Catholic education

In 2009, the successful Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program was cut \$15 million with a promise to cut another \$10 million in 2010. Thousands of students lost their scholarships to Catholic schools.

But, thanks to the dedicated effort of the Advocates for Catholic Education and others, the scheduled cut in 2010 was prevented. Legislative leaders realized that further cuts would be problematic for many families across the state, so they retained the \$60 million for EITC.

The budget cuts in 2010 were averted, but predictions point to even greater economic challenges in the new legislative session. PCC and the Advocates for Catholic Education in Pennsylvania will need to keep up the effort to

promote EITC.

Furthermore, many candidates in this election voiced support for school choice. Helping parents access the best education for their children will be another top priority.

The 2010-11 legislative session

The recent election dramatically changed the political landscape presenting new opportunities and new challenges. More than ever, concerned Catholics need to participate in the public debate. The PCC and the Pennsylvania Catholic Advocacy Network have a lot of work to do in the new year. We need everyone to get involved. Log on to www.pacatholic.org to sign up for the network and learn more about the Catholic perspective on important political issues.

Amy B. Hill is communications director of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference — the public affairs arm of the Pennsylvania's Catholic bishops and the Catholic dioceses of Pennsylvania.

Bishop clarifies pope's comments on condoms

CONDOMS, from page 1

Prostitution of any kind is a destructive misuse of the gift of sexuality which is always deeply harmful to the human person. When a prostitute knows that he carries the AIDS virus, and chooses to use a condom in order to help protect his "client" from acquiring the virus, then this is at least a sign of hope. Such condom use could be seen as a sign that the prostitute was at least beginning to consider the consequences of his actions, and have at least some regard for the welfare of the other person. Pope Benedict was not in any way saying that prostitution or condom use can sometimes be morally acceptable or good for the human person. Prostitution remains a destructive abuse of the gift of sexuality. Condom use, in some extremely immoral situations, can be seen

as a small step in the right direction. It could be a sign that the person is beginning to emerge from a completely self-centered attitude, to one which begins to consider the good of one's neighbor. It might be the first step away from a destructive lifestyle, to one which embraces God's plan for sexuality.

This is a complicated issue which requires much study, thought and prayer to fully understand. The diocese has posted a link to further commentary on the pope's remarks by the National Catholic Bioethics Center at www.EthicCD.org.

The book, "Light of the World," is an extraordinary publication that captures the pope's thoughtful insights on a wide variety of topics. I will reflect on additional commentary in the book in the March/April edition of *Faith* magazine.

Briefly

Financial aid workshops at Gannon

ERIE — Gannon University will host financial aid workshops at 6:30 p.m. on Jan. 12 and at 6:30 p.m. on Feb. 16. The workshops are free and open to the public and will be held in room 1200 of the University's Palumbo Academic Center, 824 Peach St., Erie.

The workshops will include an overview of the entire financial aid process, including definitions of common terms, an explanation of the various aid programs available and a step-by-step review of the questions on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Advance registration is not required. For more information, contact the Gannon University Financial Aid Office at 814.871.7337 or 1.800.GANNON.U (1.800.426.6668).

Pro-life Prayer Breakfast Jan. 15

ERIE — The 33rd annual Pro-Life Prayer Breakfast, sponsored by People for Life, will be held on Saturday, Jan. 15 at the Ambassador Conference Center, 7794 Peach St., Erie, beginning at 9 a.m.

Dr. Joel Brind, co-founder of the Breast Cancer Prevention Institute and a leading authority on the science linking abortion with breast cancer, will speak on "The Abortion/Breast Cancer Link and Cover-up."

Dr. Brind is a professor of human biology and endocrinology at Baruch College, City University of New York.

Reservations are \$12.50 per person, \$6.50 for children ages 3 to 12; children under 3 are admitted free. Reservation deadline is Jan. 10.

Tickets can be purchased online at www.peopleforlife.org, through the mail or at either of People for Life's two offices, 1625 W. 26th St. or 1611 Peach St., in Erie.

For more information, call 814.882.1333 or 814.459.1333.

A Christmas message from Bishop Donald Trautman

CHRISTMAS, from page 1

we find no pride, no greed, no hatred, no lies, no self-centeredness. In the Bethlehem stable we see the foundation for our own personal peace and world peace.

On Christmas everyone receives the perfect gift — the gift of the Savior — a gift that is personal, priceless — a gift that shows the extravagant love of God for us.

Gift-giving and Christmas go together, not by tradition or custom, but by necessity. Giving grows out of the very meaning of Christmas. St. John tells us: "God so loved the world that God gave his only Son" (John 3:16). God's love for us led to his giving of his only Son to rescue us from sin. Note the word "love" precedes the word "give." Love leads to giving. The sheer force of God's love for us prompted God's gift of his only Son.

When you examine the circumstances of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, you realize the extent of God's love for us. Mary and Joseph had to make that long journey of 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A pregnant young woman riding a donkey 80 miles — think of the physical discomfort and the weary journey; and when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, they learned there was no room for them in the local inn for travelers. Think of their disappointment. This was a striking foretaste of the rejection Jesus would experience later in life from disciples, neighbors, religious authorities, political leaders and from us. There would be times when some of us would say we would have no room for Jesus in our life.

Without another woman to help, Mary gives birth to her son, wraps him in swaddling clothes and lays him in a feeding trough for animals. There was no basin,



Religious education students at St. George Parish in Erie presented a living Nativity with live animals Dec. 12 outside the church. Pictured, left to

right, are Quinn Maloney, Elise Heinlein, Hannah Sebastian, Joe Zeigler, Bailey Maloney and Austyn Little.

no crib. Smell the hay and the dung in that stable. Why is there such poverty for the newborn Savior of the world? Surely this is not how to begin the story of salvation. Who would have planned the entrance of the King of Kings into our world in this desolate setting? Why does God allow such hardship to fall on Mary and Joseph, good and holy people? Why is God's only Son treated in this fashion?

From the worldly point of view everything is all wrong, but actually every detail is correct. Our God is a humble God who identifies with the poor and the lowly. Mary and Joseph show great faith and trust in handling these circumstances. Mary and Joseph carry out God's will with love. The poverty and the simplicity of the Bethlehem stable teach us to look for peace and happi-

ness where God dwells.

When things go wrong in our lives, we need to imitate the faith and trust of Mary and Joseph in God. We need to imitate their perseverance in doing God's will.

To those who are ill — to those who are confined to their homes, to the aging and lonely, to those who find this Christmas without the support of friends or family, to those in our armed forces, I say focus on the gift of God's overwhelming love for you — the gift of the Savior. To those who are unemployed or suffering divorce or the breakup of the family or a friendship, I say focus on the gift of God's overwhelming love for you. Nothing else really matters. Nothing else really counts. Our Savior endured loneliness, weariness, disappointment, ridicule, hurt and even death. He did it for us. Be faithful to him, and you

will rise to an endless day of happiness in heaven.

This Christmas there is no one without a gift. We all receive the gift of a Savior. Our heavenly Father gives us the perfect gift, Jesus, our Savior — the way, the truth, and the life. Let us bond with him, seek him out and be faithful. Let us respond to the extravagant gift of God, our Savior, with gratitude and holiness. Let us open our hearts and love God and love one another. Give love and Christmas will last forever.

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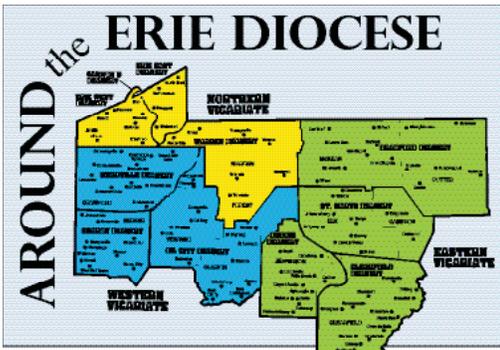
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Visit ErieRCD.org/faithlife.asp to download quick and easy photo tips on a wallet-size card.



Mercyhurst Prep girls soccer team wins state championship



ERIE - The Mercyhurst Prep girls soccer team won its first-ever PIAA Class AA soccer championship Nov. 19 with a 3-0 win over South Park in front of more than 400 at Hersheypark Stadium in Hershey.

Kaylin Akery scored the game's first goal in the first half, which proved to be the game winner. Sarah Kaiser scored twice in the second half for Mercyhurst Prep. The Lakers finished the season with seven consecutive shutouts in playoff games.

Mercyhurst Prep, the No. 1

team in the state and No. 7 team in the country, finished with a 22-0-3 record, capturing the District 10 and Region 4 championships along the way to the state title.

The Mercyhurst Prep boys soccer team reached the PIAA Class A championship game before falling to New Hope Solebury 2-1 at Hersheypark Stadium Nov. 20. The boys won the District 10 championship and finished second in Region 3 along the way to their runner-up performance in the state cham-

ampionship. The Lakers finished the season with a 21-2-1 record.

Pictured are Mercyhurst Prep's girls and boys soccer teams along with their trophies during a welcome home rally at the school.

In postseason honors, Becca Costello (soccer captain) was named to the PSCA All-State team and to the NSCAA regional All-America team for 2010. She was named D-10 Girls Player of the year and named to the All-State soccer team. Max Weber (soccer captain) was named D-10 Boys Player of the Year.

Venango Catholic High School shows its 'High-Q'

OIL CITY - On Dec. 4, KDKA TV's "Hometown High-Q" out of Pittsburgh featured the academic team of Venango Catholic High School from Oil City. Taping, which was held Oct. 16, pitted Venango Catholic against teams from Riverside High School and Greater Latrobe High School, both in the Pittsburgh area. After the competition ended, which consisted of five rounds of college-bowl style questions, Venango Catholic emerged as the winner and will move on to the playoffs, which will air in the spring.



"Hometown High-Q" host Ken Rice poses with VCHS team members senior Aquila Lesko, junior Ryan DeLaney and junior Jake Smith (team captain).

Community Outreach Group helps people bundle up



ERIE - The Community Outreach Group hosted its annual clothing distribution party Dec. 4 at St. Patrick Parish's Cauley Center in Erie.

The event brings about the opportunity for free clothing to be given to the area's needy, said Tim Nowakowski, a member of the Community Outreach Group.

In addition to the clothing, visitors enjoyed a free hot meal. Santa was also on site to distribute toys to the children. Blankets and toiletries were handed out as well.

The outreach group was started by a group of men who had made a Cursillo weekend together and wanted to reach out to those less fortunate, Nowakowski said. The group prepares for the distribution party by collecting clothing throughout the year.

The first giveaway in 1999 at St. Mark Parish in Lawrence

Park consisted of about 300 coats that were given away to 100 people. Approximately 2,400 people passed through the Cauley Center at this year's event.

The party was staffed by a number of parish and community volunteers, including members of Gannon University's baseball team.

St. Stephen School sponsors food drive

OIL CITY - Eighth grade students at St. Stephen School in Oil City recently sponsored a food drive for the food pantry at St. Elizabeth Center. Students throughout the school were asked to do service for others and earn canned goods to donate to the center in the spirit of cooperation. The students' goal was to donate 1,000 items to the center. They exceeded it by donating a total of 1,385 items.

Boxing up the items are (pictured left to right) eighth graders Allison Guth, Devin Zagor and Critter Fink (kneeling).



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