

St. Anthony Indian Mission

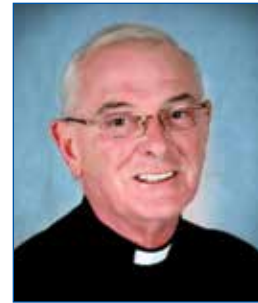
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From the desk of Fr. Patrick McGuire

Greetings once more from a very, very cold Zuni Pueblo. We fell behind in correspondence during December and I apologize for the delay in replying to letters. Thankfully, we have now caught up and settled into a more normal routine in the office. We wish you and your family everything that is good in the new year of 2023!

School resumed on January 3rd with the students quickly returning to their routines, while at the same time brimming with excitement and sharing their stories of holiday adventures. We have not quite left Christmas behind as many of the grades still have to hold their Christmas class parties. Normally these would have been held before Christmas, but this year the week before Christmas break coincided with "Deshkwi" which is a traditional Zuni period of fasting (including trading for four days) in preparation for the winter solstice, (celebrated according to the Zuni calendar). Respecting local customs, the Christmas celebrations at School were restricted to Santa's arrival and a few minor events. I enlisted a gentleman from another parish to play the role, which he carried out expertly. The younger students were filled with excitement while the older students were heavily engaged in debating just who Santa was. I was interrogated thoroughly, but I held out and the identity is still my secret.

There is little new to report from St. Anthony's as we move into 2023. Studies have resumed in the usual fashion; parent/teacher conferences are taking place as I write; and basketball practices are in full swing as well. (We host our first tournament of the season next week!) Sadly, our head cook is moving to Wisconsin; we will surely miss her. We presented her with a keepsake -- a pottery bowl made by a former student.



In recent years, the long-standing tradition of the adults performing a Nativity play before the Vigil Mass of Christmas has had to be canceled because of Covid restrictions. This year I was determined to restore this tradition, and so I invited volunteers from our student council to take part. From there it took on a life of its own.

Initially, I was looking for six to eight participants, but as it turned out no less than 27 came forward! There was no way I was going to disappoint any of these volunteers and so, much to my amazement, I set about writing a script to include all of them. During the first week of their vacation, every one of the 27 turned up each day for rehearsal. With a sigh of relief, I stepped aside and let Ms. DeeAnn (computer and library teacher) direct the play. During that week, two amazing things happened to make me stop in my tracks.

The first was on Tuesday at the end of the rehearsal. A third grader came up to me and handed me one of the Sunday collection envelopes from the table at the back of the church. Inside were a few small coins. Obviously, the lad had spontaneously put in the few pennies he had in his pocket. I felt as if someone



had given me a gift beyond value. The Gospel passage of the widow's mite filled my mind for days afterwards. Obviously, it was not the about money but about the utter goodness to be found and brought to the surface in the mind of a little child.

The second incident occurred on Thursday. As practice was ending, a second grader came up to me holding a tiny teddy bear. She said her grandma had made it from some rags. Then she added simply: "It's for you." My heart was in my mouth as I accepted the gift. Beautifully made out of next to nothing, I was moved to thoughts of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, born into poverty in the backwaters of society, yet one who would change the history of the world for those who would accept Him.

With unashamed sentimentality that little bear found its way into the manger of our Bethlehem scene in the church, where it lay next to the figure of the Christ Child raising his hand in blessing. I hope grandma was able to visit the beautiful Bethlehem scene.

Come Christmas Eve, our church was packed. I can't remember when we last had to add chairs to the pews. Our 27 children processed with great dignity into the church, all outfitted in traditional Zuni dress. Two of the 8th graders called the little ones forward and proceeded to tell the Christmas tale of redemption to the little ones, while older students took roles as Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, inn keeper and wise men. With simplicity and innocence, the tale was told and the "actors" were all lost in wonder as the story unfolded. The line spoken by Joseph in accepting the offer of the stable still resounds in my mind: "Any space will do." Indeed, we need make only a tiny space for Jesus and he will enter with the blessings we need.

Forgive me if I feel so very proud of our children. Their traditional Zuni dress for the play spoke volumes about the Christmas message of God entering our humanity for all people. The pride and dignity with which the children carried their own heritage was a sight to behold. The generosity of the little ones told me that the Gospel message of generosity and goodwill was taking root and guiding young hearts.

That little play demonstrated the value of our endeavors at St. Anthony School to teach our young people to take pride in their own culture and let the Gospel take hold so as to experience God's love and let that love flow through them into our world. I know too well that they are only children, but I see so much good emerging from them that I thank the Lord for allowing me some small part in unleashing that potential into their lives -- and through them into the community at large.

No day is ever routine at St Anthony's. Thank you for making it all so wonderfully possible.



Sincerely,

Fr. Patrick McGuire