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News of This 'n' That around St. Leonard's

St Leonard's Parish
Mass Times:

Issue No: 908
349 Springvale Road, Glen Waverley
Mon – Sat 9.15am (except Wed. Communion Service at 9.15am)
Sat (Vigil) 6.00 PM

7/12/19
Ph: 9560 9469
Sun: 8.30 AM and 10.00 AM

TIMELINE OF TNT SUBMISSIONS

Issue	Parish Office Submissions	Electronic submissions	Published
909	Fri 28/02/20	28/02/20	8/03/20

NOTE: Electronic submissions to Fr John – glenwaverley@cam.org.au

RECENT PARISH ACTIVITIES

Over the past few months, our Parish Pastoral Leadership Team (PPLT) has organised a number of events for our wider Parish Family to enjoy. Fr John and the members of our PPLT: Jan Richards, Margaret Laws, Maureen McKenzie and Tina Giacco, wish to thank all those Parishioners who have supported us by coming to our events. In September, Parishioners were invited to view an inspirational film about the life of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928-1996) from the Archdiocese of Chicago. In October, we held our Parish Dinner, and in November, we celebrated Fr John's 40th Anniversary of his Ordination to the Priesthood. On Sunday, 1st December, we hosted a special Volunteers' Morning-Tea.

FILM: CARDINAL BERNARDIN

The film about Cardinal Joseph Bernardin was held in the Yarn on the 22nd September. We had twenty-two people who came along to view the film. The following points provide a few insights into some significant life experiences endured by Bernardin.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928-1996) experienced love and joy in his family life. He listened to God's call and decided to become a Priest, rather than a doctor. He responded to this calling to the Priesthood as a result of his deep love of Jesus and his beliefs in the Trinity and Incarnation. Cardinal Bernardin believed in 'a consistent ethic of life' (Genesis 1:31) – which provides all people with a moral framework with which one can address all social issues. He used the metaphor of a "seamless garment". This was Bernardin's metaphor for life; it was modelled on Jesus' tunic which was "without seam, woven from the top in one piece" (John 19:23). Cardinal Bernardin was passionately anti-abortion, anti-euthanasia, anti-capital punishment, anti-nuclear arms, and anti-social injustices; such as, poverty.

A significant turning point in Cardinal Bernardin's life occurred when he was challenged by some seminarians who suggested that he did not pray enough. Cardinal Bernardin responded with a desire to become more holy, and to pray fervently. So he rose at 5:30am each day for morning prayers, including the Rosary; this was followed by Mass.

A significant life experience which caused Cardinal Bernardin to trust in God, and to deepen in his understanding and interpretation of his religious beliefs, was the episode of sexual abuse allegations by Steven Cook, a former seminarian. This was a deep personal challenge which would have public ramifications for Cardinal Bernardin and the Church. Steven Cook's allegations were that Cardinal Bernardin had sexually abused him when he was a seminarian. This was a direct attack on the Church because Cardinal Bernardin was Archbishop in one of the biggest dioceses of Chicago in the USA. Cardinal Bernardin was

flabbergasted, shocked and humiliated at these allegations. During this time many people 'abandoned' him and believed that he was guilty. The Cardinal felt alone, abandoned, humiliated, drained and destitute. Cardinal Bernardin had to draw upon his faith, as he meditated on the first of the Sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary, the "Agony in the Garden". He identified with Jesus who had been left alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, as He suffered, aware of the false accusations against Him. "This is the first time that I have really understood the pain and agony you felt that night," said Cardinal Bernardin of Jesus. Cardinal Bernardin prayed fervently and had to trust in God. Consequently, Cardinal Bernardin's cross was lifted as he drew strength from his faith in Jesus. He was able to face the public and the pressure the media had generated. He had gained so much inner strength that he stated emphatically, "I will tell the truth and the truth will set me free, and if any of my advisers don't like it, they can go to hell." (Bernardin DVD) At a Press Conference, Cardinal Bernardin denied the charges and insisted that he had always lived the Catholic ethics and teachings concerning chastity and celibacy. He had decided to live out the Incarnation principle – suffering for salvation – and offer his suffering for the salvation of the world.

Four months later, Steven Cook retracted his allegations and the case against Cardinal Bernardin was dropped. Cook accepted that he could not be certain that it was Cardinal Bernardin who had abused him. Cardinal Bernardin had also grown immensely in his faith and experienced a more profound and deeper understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Forgiveness, when he personally met with his accuser, Steven Cook, and forgave him. Cardinal Bernardin had said that he prayed for Cook every day and would continue to do so. Just as Jesus had forgiven His accusers and assassins while on the cross, so, too, did Cardinal Bernardin forgive Cook. As Cardinal Bernardin stated, "I harbour no ill feelings towards Steven Cook, I have compassion for him. I have prayed for him and will continue to do so." Cardinal Bernardin showed no resentment, bitterness or revengeful feelings or animosity toward Cook. He had gained a deepened understanding of the power of God's forgiveness, especially through his belief in Christ's witness, when Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). Through this ordeal, Cardinal Bernardin had been personally transformed, "I was being emptied of myself in a way I could never have anticipated, and I wanted to let go and place myself in the hands of the Lord." Cardinal Bernardin's beliefs in the teachings of Christ, and the belief in the reality of evil were strengthened and deepened as a result of this significant life experience.

Another Significant Life Experience Cardinal Bernardin faced was dealing with cancer. Cardinal Bernardin was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in June, 1995. As a result of his treatment and numerous visits to the hospital, he became the unofficial chaplain for cancer patients. He was able to draw upon his beliefs in Jesus, and connect his personal sufferings with the sufferings of Christ. Cardinal Bernardin ministered to others, telling them and encouraging cancer patients to have faith and trust in God, and to believe in God's healing power. He encouraged people to be strong while enduring their suffering.

A year later, his cancer recurred, this time in the liver. The prognosis was dire; his cancer was terminal. "This changes everything. Now I have the chance to live what I have been telling people all year." (Bernardin DVD). His life expectancy was less than a year. He realised that his greatest contribution could be how he deals with the cancer and how he could continue to shepherd his people. Now Cardinal Bernardin had to pick up and carry his cross in a way that he had never done before. Yet, he continued to help others, by "shepherding everybody through their treatment" (DVD).

When Cardinal Bernardin faced death, he did so with grace and taught people how to die with dignity. Never did he ask the question, "Why me?" Rather, he asked, "How can I best

respond?" He focused on how best to respond to God's call and deal with his suffering, just as Jesus did. Jesus had asked the Father's help in dealing with his 'hour' (John 12:27). Through his ordeal, Cardinal Bernardin developed a method for dealing with suffering and facing death. It was threefold: first, he said, "Put yourself in the hands of the Lord"; second, "see death as a friend"; and third, "begin letting go". In short, he believed that he had to accept the situation, trust in God, and act in faith.

Cardinal Bernardin accepted that his body did not respond to treatment and thus abandoned his chemotherapy. His prayer to God was, "Not my will, but your will be done" which reflected Jesus' final prayer prior to his death on the Cross (Luke 22:39-42). Cardinal Bernardin was at peace; he had surrendered his life to the infinite and Eternal love of God.

PARISH DINNER

On October 13th, the Parish held its Parish Dinner. This event was a great success with the Community Centre alive with the noise of great conversations; much laughter, and great fun! We were entertained by the music of some wonderful singers and musicians from both our Parish and School Community. The food was delicious and the company was great! It was so lovely for Parishioners to either form new friendships, or to deepen already established friendships.

FR JOHN'S 40th ANNIVERSARY OF HIS ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

On Sunday, 10th November, our Parish Family gathered to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of Fr John's Ordination to the Priesthood. This is a wonderful milestone! As a Parish Family, we gathered to give thanks to God for the gift of Fr John's Priestly Ministry to Almighty God. We also joined to thank God for Fr John's commitment and gift of his Priesthood to our Parish and to all the People of God. It was a joyous morning-tea, as Parishioners came along to share this wonderful occasion with Fr John. The occasion was extremely happy and awesome! Congratulations, Fr John!

VOLUNTEERS' MORNING-TEA

On Sunday, 1st December, we gathered as a Parish Family to say thanks, and to show our gratitude to all the volunteers who serve God, and who serve each of us in our Parish. We have over 500 volunteers who give their time, efforts and friendship to help us all. Our morning-tea was a special way for us to give our sincerest thanks to all these wonderful people.

Finally, our St Leonard's PPLT would like to thank every single person who has helped us by setting-up; assisting on the day, or cleaning up after each of these events. We extend our immense thanks to you all! We are a wonderful Parish Family! May God bless us all!

Tina Giacco on behalf of the St Leonard's PPLT.

WHY DO WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS ON 25TH DECEMBER? – Paul Noone

Christians all around the world celebrate the birth of Christ on 25th December. But just why do we celebrate Christ's birthday on that date?

In the fourth century, Pope Julius 1 undertook a detailed investigation into the date of the birth of Jesus Christ. On the completion of this investigation, he announced that henceforth Christ's official birthday would always be celebrated on 25th December commencing in the year 336.

Prior to this ruling, there had been confusion and debate by different groups of Christians. There is evidence that Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ as early as the second

century. But no-one was certain about the year, the month or the date of the birth of Christ. The bible does not mention the date of the birth of Christ although there is reference to the time of his death. Researchers were aware that a census was held in AD20, AD34 and AD48. From that research it was considered Christ was not born in those years and probably born in either in 6BC or 8AD.

Astronomical considerations relating to a 'bright star' as expressed in the bible point to 6BC as the nearest year. Some early writers believed the date was 16th May, others 6th January, History praises Pope Julius 1 for making a binding decision even though the date was not accurate. But his choice of 25th December was an astute decision.

In the Northern Hemisphere, the 25th of December was the date of the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year. After the Solstice, the days grew longer. The Winter Solstice was important because the people relied mostly on agricultural products. At the time of the Solstice, they would be aware if they had sufficient food to survive the remaining winter before the planting of the new crops. Starvation was not uncommon in these times. So, the Winter Solstice was a time of special festivities. These festivities were popular for thousands of years by the people and their pre-Christian religions.

Just as important, the ancient religions believed that the Winter Solstice was the time of the annual birth of the 'God of Sun' or sometimes expressed as 'The Sun God'. Both Pope John II and Benedict XVI, when they were Cardinals in 1993 and 2009 respectively, commented that it was natural to transpose the victory over Darkness (Winter Solstice) to the coming of Jesus Christ.

It should be noted that the Jewish festival of Lights starts on the 25th of the month in the Jewish calendar which occurs about the same time as December. Jesus was a Jew so some historians consider that this could have been one of the reasons that helped to select the 25th December.

We cannot be entirely sure of the reason for the decision for the selection of date of the birth of Christ but the feast of 'the God of Sun' at the Winter Solstice is today accepted as the dominant influence in the decision-making process.

In **1582**, the Gregorian Calendar replaced the Julian Calendar because, from advances in the study of astronomy, the latter did not exactly reflect the actual time it takes the Earth to circle around the Sun. Most European countries adopted the new calendar in 1582 but others gradually adopted it over the next 200 years. In **1752**, US, UK and its colonies officially accepted the Gregorian calendar. Some orthodox Christian nations and groups now celebrate Christmas Day near 7th January because that date reflects the 25th December in the old Julian Calendar. The Julian calendar was named after Julius Caesar when it was introduced in year 48BC.

Interestingly, in Australia as in Western Society, Christmas has become a national event for everyone, Christians and non-Christians. Christmas is now big business to such an extent it is part of the economy. But to Christians, it remains a time to remember and reflect just why we practice the Christian faith and part of that reflection is to spread love, joy and happiness with family and friends.

WOMEN MUST HAVE A GREATER ROLE IN CHURCH: POPE FRANCIS

People may have different ways of praying and serving their communities, but the Church needs laity, priests, religious, parishes and lay movements to collaborate in order to be truly "Catholic", Pope Francis told members of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life. He said

that more must be done to include women in roles of advising and governance, but without reducing them to having just a “functional” role.

The task of dicastery members and consultants, he said, is to see the world around them with “the heart of the Church”, that is, to go beyond one’s personal, local interests to seeing the wider, “catholic” view of the universal Church and the whole world. The Church, as a mother, wishes for “harmony among all her children and does not engage in favouritism or partiality.”

“Therefore, it is important also for (the dicastery) to always propose positive models of collaboration among laity, priests and consecrated men and women, among priests and faithful, among diocesan and parish organisations, and lay movements and associations, among young and old, to avoid sterile comparisons and rivalries and always to encourage fraternal collaboration with the aim of the common good of the one family which is the church.”

The Pope warned against the “clericalisation” of the laity, pointing specifically to problems he has seen with permanent deacons. In Argentina, he said, there was a common tendency to want to turn excellent laymen into deacons or when someone became a permanent deacon he would end up as a “wannabe” priest.

The second important point, he said, is not to be afraid to do more in putting women in advisory and governance roles. Women can be the head of a Vatican dicastery, he said. In fact, two women were on the final list of candidates for leading the Secretariat for the Economy. The role of women must be more than just “functional” he said. (Source: CathNews)

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS- P. Noone

The 25th December became the official date for the celebration of the birth of Christ in the year 336. Although the evidence is sparse, Research shows that in the first and second century, Christians did celebrate the birth of Christ. But this was a period when Christians were persecuted for their beliefs, so the celebrations would have been very ‘low key’ indeed. By the fourth century, leadership in the Roman Empire had changed and the persecution of Christians had ceased. Christians were able to openly celebrate the birth of Christ on the 25th December each year. We know that the 25th December was also the date of the Winter Solstice and the people of pre-Christian religions had been celebrating this feast day since ancient times.

As Christianity spread throughout Europe, the Christians noted that a number of the local ancient religions had their own various festivities as the Winter Solstice was very popular. So, the Christian communities, rather than antagonise, moulded their Christian celebrations with many of the celebrations of the early pre-Christian religions. This enabled all the people to celebrate their much-loved midwinter revelries.

Some sects of Christianity frowned on some of the type of revelry of the pre-Christian period and, to this day, continue to refrain from particular types of celebrations.

However, over the centuries, many types of revelry have emerged in which Christians and non-Christians participate. Some of these celebrations are a combination of the pre-Christian and Christian times, others are purely of Christian origin and surprisingly many are of the pre-Christian customs which have remained unchanged.

In this article, we will give a **thumb-nail summary** of just one popular tradition from each of these three categories.

The Christmas tree was a custom of German-based ancient religions for centuries. The trees were brought into their homes to signify new life during the darkness of winter. The Germanic tradition continued and expanded enormously in the 16th century when practised by the Christian Lutherans. As Germans emigrated to other parts of the World, they took the tradition with them.

Some parts of Europe took some time to adopt the tree as part of the Christmas celebration. But today, the tradition of decorating a Christmas tree in their homes has been embraced by millions of people worldwide of all faiths and cultures. In 1982, Pope John Paul II accepted a Christmas tree from his native Poland and placed it in St Peter's Square with a life-size scene of the Nativity. This practice has continued ever since with a different European nation gifting a Christmas tree to the Pope each year. The same nativity crib has been used over the 37 years with the same beautiful set of handcraft character pieces.

Chanting had been part of rituals from ancient times. But the earliest record of singing of a **Christmas carol** occurred in the year 129 AD. The carol was sung by the bishop. Carols continued to be sung in the Latin language mainly with monastic music.

The majority of people did not understand the Latin language and the monastic music did not express their Christmas spirit. That all changed when St Francis of Assisi in the year 1223 created a nativity scene in a cave and the villagers sang carols in their local dialect. By the year 1400, the idea spread rapidly throughout Europe.

Today we have such meaningful and beautiful carols as 'Silent Night', 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing', 'Little Town of Bethlehem' and 'Away in a Manger' all of which express the event of the birth of Christ.

We keep these traditions by having a Christmas tree and Crib in our local church and singing with full gusto those special carols.

Finally, **gift-giving** is an ancient pre-Christian custom. It was practised at the time of the Winter Solstice – the half-way mark of the Winter. The people would then know if they had sufficient food to last them the remaining winter months. If necessary, they would exchange their particular specialised goods.

The custom continued after the arrival of Christianity. However, early Christians at the time believed it was part of the Christian ideal to give to the poor and needy rather than to each other.

Today, we do not believe gift-swapping as inferior. We continue to give to the poor and needy but we believe that gift-swapping between family, friends and colleagues is a symbol of attachment, a feeling of acknowledgement. In some ways, our individual internal Christmas spirit is built on this tradition of gift-swapping and is carried into our spiritual celebrations.

HOW DO I SHARE MY FAITH ABOUT THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS?

Are you carrying a hurt or a grudge with a family member?

Is there any chance you can find some way to be reconciled?

If this would be really tough, then pray during the season of Advent that God will help you find the right words and the right time to make your peace.