

St. Mary's Messenger

St. Mary of the Assumption
Roman Catholic Church

Winter 2020
Volume 11 No. 4

Traditions of the Season

The Christmas Crib

St. Francis of Assisi first popularized the custom of using a Christmas crib or crèche to represent the Nativity in 1223, when he celebrated Christmas Mass in a cave with a hay-filled manger and a live ox and ass.

The Christmas Tree

Though Christmas trees play no part in Scripture and have only in the last few centuries found their way into the Christian celebration of Christmas, they are sacred signs of God's life-giving presence among us, and their lights remind us of Christ, "the Light of the world." (John 8:12)



Christmas Carols

Popular songs called carols (from the Greek choros, a sung dance) celebrate the events of the Christmas season. The oldest known carol is O Come, O Come Emmanuel, from the 12th century. A popular English carol, The 12 Days of Christmas, enumerates a series of daily gifts that in the original 1780 version totaled 364 – a gift for every day until next Christmas!

From the Pastor ...

The Advent/Christmas Season: Celebrating the Time



In this issue of *Messenger*, you will find some stories, prayers, and suggestions for keeping the Advent/Christmas season. Observances this year will be different and yet, in some ways, can be traditional. "Family" may find that they can celebrate the season more regularly at home – together. Friends will be remembered, sometimes in person, but often times on Zoom or through a variety of electronic avenues. We hope that sharing together the religious traditions of Christmastide will enrich and strengthen our faith in the One whose birth truly is "the reason for the season."



As starters, here are a few things that are sometimes overlooked, or even misunderstood, about Advent/Christmas: There are always four Sundays in Advent, but not always four full weeks of Advent. Christmas was not always celebrated on December 25 – other dates were chosen in early Christian times (see page 3). Special prayers called the *O Antiphons* are prayed or sung during the last week of Advent (see page 2). The 12 days of Christmas follow Christmas – they do not anticipate Christmas (see page 4); the 12th day of the season is the Feast of the Epiphany. The Christmas season ends with the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. We have a rich Christian tradition surrounding this season: This year, let's capture a bit of its wonder and joy!

Here's a prayer for the season written by St. John Henry Newman:

"May each Christmas, as it comes, find us more and more like Him, who at this time became a little Child for our sake. May we too be more simple-minded, more humble, more affectionate, more resigned, more happy, more full of God."

- Fr. Paul

"God never gives someone a gift they are not capable of receiving. If He gives us the gift of Christmas, it is because we all have the ability to understand and receive it."

- Pope Francis

Offer a Mass For a Loved One

As a way to remember a deceased loved one, or for the intentions of someone living, please consider offering a Mass for them at St. Mary's. The usual donation for such Masses is \$15.

You may select Mass dates and times, based on availability. To do so, please contact the Rectory or mail the name of the person for whom a Mass is being requested to: St. Mary of the Assumption, 1 St. Mary's Hill, Lancaster, NY, 14086. Checks should be made payable to "St. Mary of the Assumption." Please include your name and phone number.

Live Streaming Continues

St. Mary's continues to live stream Masses from the Church on Saturdays at 4:30 p.m., Sundays at 10 a.m. and weekdays at 12 noon. This service will continue, regardless of circumstances surrounding any Covid-19 mandates or restrictions, for those unable to attend Masses in person. Live streaming can be accessed via Facebook, YouTube, or at <http://stmarysonthehill.org/live-streams/>.

Volunteers Needed: Can You Help?

Volunteers are needed to assist St. Mary's with live streaming services as the coronavirus pandemic continues. Ushers are also needed at Masses throughout the week.

Last but not least, volunteer assistance is needed with the three major events planned to benefit St. Mary's in 2021: Mega Raffle, our golf tournament, and an autumn fundraiser.

If you can help in any of these areas, please call the Rectory at (716) 683-6445. *Thank you!*

The O Antiphons: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

The O Antiphons refer to the seven verses recited or chanted preceding the Magnificat during Vespers of the Liturgy of the Hours. They cover the special period of the Octave before Christmas, December 17 to 23. These antiphons form the basis of the Advent hymn *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, which was set to music in 15th century France.

- **December 17: *O Wisdom***, O holy Word of God, You govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation.
- **December 18: *O Sacred Lord*** of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come; stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.
- **December 19: *O Flower of Jesse's Stem***, You have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before You. Come; let nothing keep You from coming to our aid.



- **December 20: *O Key of David***, O royal power of Israel controlling at your will the gates of heaven: come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom.
- **December 21: *O Radiant Dawn***, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice, come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.
- **December 22: *O King*** of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart, O Keystone of the mighty arch of humanity, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.
- **December 23: *O Emmanuel***, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God.

Parish Sources for Covid-19 Updates

As of the deadline date for this issue of *Messenger*, Lancaster and most surrounding areas were in a Covid-19 orange zone. The situation and status may have since changed – and may continue to do so. Your best sources for current information on Christmas and other Mass schedules, as well as any other questions you have, are:

- Calling the Rectory at (716) 683-6445.
- Visiting stmarysonthehill.com.
- Following St. Mary's on Facebook or Twitter.
- Downloading our parish app.

Further information is also available in our bulletins – on the website or in Church. However, it may not be as current as online sources, especially if unexpected Covid-19 status changes occur.

*Stay safe and healthy this Christmas season.
Prayers and blessings to you and your loved ones!*

When Was Jesus Born?

There is no record of a birth certificate for Jesus. In fact, the Gospels are largely silent as to the date of his birth, and the two that do speak about it contradict one another. Matthew 2:1 states that Jesus was born "in the days of King Herod," who died in March or April of what would eventually be called 4 B.C. Luke 2:2 states that Jesus was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria; that is, not until the year now called 6 A.D.

What about the actual date – December 25? It's possible that this is correct. It is known that some churches began keeping December 25 as the solemn feast of the Nativity very early on – and this date has been celebrated as Jesus' birthday since 336 A.D.

Some scholars think Christians began celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25 because it was the pagan feast of the Unconquered Sun, proclaimed by the Roman emperor in 274 A.D. According to the calendar at that time, December 25 would have been the winter solstice (celebrated on December 21 today), the shortest day of the year, when hours of sunlight stop "shrinking." Since Christians knew that Jesus was truly the Unconquered Son of Justice, what better day to feast his birth?

Another group of scholars suggests that early Christians marked Jesus'

birth based on the words of John the Baptist, who proclaimed that "Christ must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30) They theorize that John was hinting that his birthday fell on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, which was June 25 on the ancient calendar. This means that John was conceived on September 25, and Luke 1:26 tells us that John was conceived six months prior to Jesus. In a time when most people did not know math, such calculations were respected as sacred knowledge.

The first official mention of December 25 as a holiday honoring Jesus' birthday appears in an early Roman calendar from 336 A.D. The celebration of Christmas spread throughout the Western world over the next several centuries, but many Christians continued to view Epiphany and Easter as more important.

Some, including the Puritans of colonial New England, even banned its observance because they viewed its traditions—the offering of gifts and decorating trees, for example—as linked to paganism. In the early days of the United States, celebrating Christmas was considered a British custom and fell out of style following the American Revolution. It wasn't until 1870 that Christmas became a federal holiday.

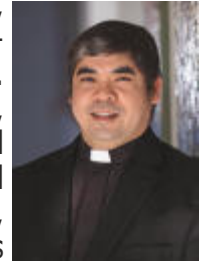
The Significance of the Jesse Tree

During Advent, the Jesse Tree represents the ancestry of Jesus as a member of the royal family of King David, whose father was Jesse. Through this family history (Matthew 1:6-16), the story of God's salvation plan is recalled in the royal line, from Jesse to the coming of the Messiah.

Each day during Advent, an ornament is added to the Jesse Tree. Normally, children attending weekend Masses at St. Mary's are invited to participate in Jesse Tree ceremonies. This year, Covid-19 has made this annual ritual impossible, but Jesse Tree ornaments are being added weekly. Each ornament represents a family member, event or prophecy that moved God's plan to fulfillment in Jesus.

Fr. Mario Named Parochial Vicar at Niagara Falls Parish

Rev. Mario Racho, who was named parochial vicar at St. Mary's in June 2019, has been reassigned to St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Niagara Falls, where he serves as parochial vicar. Fr. Mario's assignment at St. Vincent de Paul took effect November 9.



Fr. Mario was ordained on June 1, 2019 and his appointment at St. Mary's took effect June 17. He grew up in Balilihan, Bohol, in the Philippines and is a graduate of Philippine Maritime Institute, where he earned a bachelor's degree in marine transportation. He worked at an industrial company for several years before entering St. Paul's Seminary, Siland, Cavite, where he studied philosophy and communications. He was ordained a transitional deacon in September 2018 and graduated from Christ the King Seminary, East Aurora, in May of 2019.

Before Cana Set For February 20

Once a year, St. Mary's hosts a day-long Before Cana program for couples preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church. Our 2020 program will be held on Saturday, February 20 from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Before Cana is a Buffalo diocesan requirement prior to being married in the Church. To register or for more information, please call the Rectory at (716) 683-6445.



Celebrating the 12 Days of Christmas at Home

To celebrate the 12 Days of Christmas in your home, gather each day, perhaps around a light meal, and read the suggested biblical passage. Then, share what you can do to make Jesus' presence more real in our world. As Vatican Council II reminded us, "Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, we bring the light of Christ to all persons."

First Day of Christmas

Luke 2:1-18

Mary and the shepherds see in this Child the revelation of God's love for all, especially the poor. How might we recognize and respond to the needs of the poor?



Second Day of Christmas

Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59

St. Stephen models our call to witness Jesus' message of love, despite the cost to us. How might we reach out to love and help the poorest among us?

Third Day of Christmas

Luke 2:22-40

Simeon's message to Jesus' parents reminds us that sorrow is part of every life. How might we respond to the sorrow that many are experiencing in their lives and relationships?

Fourth Day of Christmas

Matthew 2:13-18

Jesus' birth threatened King Herod, who murdered many innocent children to remain king. Where are innocent persons being persecuted today – and how might we try to help them?



Fifth Day of Christmas

1 John 1:1-4

God has been revealed and become visible in Jesus. How might we act today to make God visible in ourselves and to recognize His presence in those around us?



Sixth Day of Christmas

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

When the holy family become refugees fleeing Herod's persecution, Joseph must trust God's plan to protect Jesus and Mary. How might we respond to help refugees and immigrants find better lives?

Seventh Day of Christmas

John 1:1-18

Jesus, God's Word made flesh, invites us to embody in ourselves the loving, forgiving, nurturing ways of God. How might we better model these Godly ways in our relationships?

Eighth Day of Christmas

John 1:19-28

John the Baptist prepares the way for others to discover and draw near to Jesus. How might we "make straight the Lord's way" in our daily activities?

Ninth Day of Christmas

John 1:29-34

John the Baptist knows that God's Holy Spirit is at work in Jesus. How might we show our trust that through the Holy Spirit, God is also working in us?

Tenth Day of Christmas

John 1:35-42

Jesus asks His would-be disciples, "What are you looking for?" How might we answer this same question or better understand who Jesus is and who we are as His disciples?

Eleventh Day of Christmas

John 1:43-51

Inspired by his experience of Jesus, Phillip invites Nathaniel to come and meet Jesus, too. How might we reach out to share what we know and love about Jesus with someone else?



Twelfth Day of Christmas

Matthew 2:1-2

The Gentile Magi follow the star as the sign of God's inclusive love for all people. How might we make real God's inclusive love in our society, especially among the most vulnerable and excluded?



After Christmas Day ...

The days after Christmas provide a period of calm, during which the spiritual meaning of the manifestation of Jesus as God with us can be explored. Use this time to reflect on how God is revealed to you, especially in your relationships. Spend some time in silent prayer before the Christmas crib or tree.

Invite God to touch your heart at the wonder of the Incarnation.

Celebrating With an Advent Wreath

One way to prepare for Christ's coming into our lives is to make an Advent wreath for your daily household worship. This traditional circular wreath reminds us that God, like the circle, has no beginning and no end. Evergreens on the wreath symbolize our everlasting relationship with God, the source of continuous new life.



The wreath has four candles, three purple or violet, and one rose. On the First Sunday and Week of Advent, the first candle is lighted. Then, an additional candle is lighted on each Sunday until Christmas.

Purple is a royal color, reflecting the kingship of Christ and also repentance. The rose candle, lighted on the Third Sunday of Advent, represents joy. Thus, the colors of the candles illustrate the themes of Advent: kingship, repentance and joy. And, they are reminders that the incarnation has transformed the darkness of hatred and evil into the light of joy and love.

Let your Advent wreath become the center around which your household gathers each night during this joyous, but sometimes frenzied, season of celebration – especially this year. As you celebrate with your wreath, include your favorite Advent hymns and songs, Scripture readings, and prayers focusing on Christ's threefold Advent – past, present and future.

Advent wreath kits are available for purchase on weekdays at the Rectory. Kits are priced at \$10 including candles. Replacement candles are priced at \$4 each.

A Prayer for Lighting Your Advent Wreath



Lord God of all creation,
You came among us as an infant
in Bethlehem long ago.
Come to us now
as we prepare to celebrate your birth
and look forward to your coming
in glory at the end of time.
May the light of this wreath remind us
of the power of your steadfast love for us
over the darkness of fear, evil and death.
May we praise you all the days of our lives.
Bless our preparation for your coming.
Amen.



Feasts of Mary During Advent & Christmas

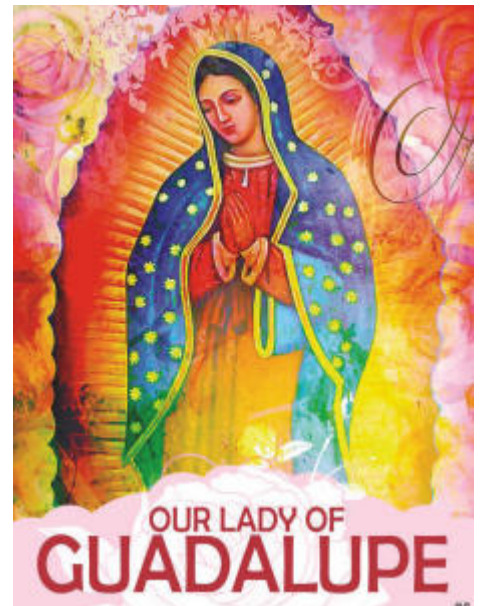
When Mary said yes to God, Christmas became possible. She agreed to bear Jesus in her womb. During Advent, we need to be able to say our own "yes" to God as we prepare to celebrate Christmas and bear Jesus in our hearts. Feasts of Mary during this season include:

Immaculate Conception December 8

Mary, conceived through an act of love by her mother and father, was born free of original sin and its effects, from the first moment of her existence. This special privilege was conferred on her through God's grace in anticipation of the Redemption.

Our Lady of Guadalupe December 12

This feast celebrates the apparition of Mary to Juan Diego in the hills near Mexico City in 1531. Diego's cloak bore the image of Mary and has become Mexico's most popular religious symbol. This appearance encouraged native peoples to embrace Christianity.



Mary, Mother of God January 1

The Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.), one of the earliest councils of the Church, declared that Christ was divine as well as human and that Mary, therefore, could be called not only the Mother of Jesus, but also the Mother of God.

Woodworkers Needed

St. Mary's presents a gift - a handcrafted wall cross - to each child on the day of their Baptism. Woodworkers are needed for this ministry.

The specific cross design is up to the woodworker. Crosses need to fit into a box approximately the size of a shoebox. Our typical cross size has been approximately 6 to 8 inches tall. Each cross needs to include a method to hang on a wall.

Approximately 50 children are baptized each year at St. Mary's. The quantity of crosses made is also up to the woodworker. For more information, please contact Deacon John Owczarczak at (716) 683-3269.

Reach Out to Us Anytime!

**You can reach members of our
parish staff via email:**

Fr. Paul Steller, Pastor:
paul@stmarysonthehill.org

Sr. Therese Chmura,
Faith Formation Director:
therese@stmarysonthehill.org

Deacon Dave Jerome:
dave@stmarysonthehill.org

Deacon John Owczarczak:
john@stmarysonthehill.org

Business Manager Bob Over:
bob@stmarysonthehill.org

Cemetery Director Danny Rinow:
danny@stmarysonthehill.org

Music Director Andrea Ross:
andrea@stmarysonthehill.org

Communications Coordinator
Diane Zwirecki:
diane@stmarysonthehill.org

Events Coordinator
Mary Kate DeMarzio:
marykate@stmarysonthehill.org

Bookkeeper Heather Pierce:
heather@stmarysonthehill.org

St. Mary's Elementary School
Principal Kim Kwitowski:
kwitowskik@smeschool.com

A Prayer for the New Year

Help us, O God, to fulfil all the duties
which life brings to us.

Help us to honor our families,
to be loyal to our friends,
to be true to our loved ones.

Help us to be diligent in our studies,
to be conscientious in our work,
to be wise in our pleasure.

Help us to be brave in danger,
to be strong in temptation,
to be uncomplaining in pain,
to be cheerful in disappointment.

Help us to remain humble in
prosperity, to remain hopeful
in adversity.

Help us at all times to live that our
life and conduct may make it plain
that we belong to You.

Give us the strength to bear lightly
our joys and sorrows.

Give us the strength to make our
love fruitful in service.

Give us the strength never to disown
the poor or bend our knees before
insolent might.

Give us the strength to raise our
minds high above daily trifles.

And give us the strength to surrender
our strength to Your will with love.

Amen.



Mega Raffle Grand Prize Raised to \$30,000

St. Mary's sixth annual Mega Raffle will take place Friday, June 11, 2021. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Mega Raffle sold out for the fifth straight year in 2020, although the live drawing event was cancelled.

In 2021, the Mega Raffle Grand Prize has been raised from \$25,000 to \$30,000 - with a total of 21 cash prizes being awarded. Only 1,000 tickets will be sold. Tickets remain priced at \$100, which, in addition to a chance to win cash prizes includes admission for two to the live drawing event.

Additional cash prizes include one \$5,000 prize, one \$1,000 prize, one \$500 prize, two \$250 prizes, two \$150 prizes, and ten \$100 prizes.

There are also three Early Bird drawings: for \$250 on March 1, \$150 on April 1, and \$100 on May 1.

To order your Mega Raffle tickets online, visit stmarysonthehill.com or scan the QR code below.



2021 Calendar Club

Thank you to all who have supported St. Mary's 2021 Calendar Club. As of Messenger deadline, a limited number of calendars were still available for purchase. Cost is \$20.

By purchasing a calendar, you have a chance to win a cash prize each day during the year. Proceeds benefit our parish and school.

For more information, please contact jesskulpit@gmail.com.

St. Blaise: Patron of Throat Ailments

by Barbara Owczarczak, Pastoral Minister

Blaise was born in Sebastia, Cappocia, Asia Minor. It is believed he was born to an affluent family. The legend of St. Blaise was written 400 years after his death. It notes that Blaise studied philosophy in his youth, and then became a doctor. He was thought to perform his duties as a physician with faith and grace.

Upon the death of their local bishop, Blaise was appointed to replace him. He was reputed to have miraculous cures of both mind and body.

It was in 316 that Agricola, governor of Cappadocia, came to Sebastia by order of Licinius, to persecute Christians. Bishop Blaise, after receiving a divine command, moved to the wild, to live as a hermit in a cave. He is believed to have healed any sick or injured animals that came to him.

It was during a search for animals to use in the Roman arena that Blaise was discovered by hunters and arrested. The story goes that while on his way to jail, a mother whose child was choking on a fish bone, lay her child at his feet, and the child was immediately cured. This is why St. Blaise is

invoked for protection against injuries and illness of the throat.

Refusing to renounce his faith, Blaise was tortured as a Christian, his skin torn with wool combers' irons, and beheaded in 316. By the sixth century, St. Blaise's intercession was invoked for diseases of the throat. Records from the eighth century show the veneration of St. Blaise in Europe, making him the most popular saint of the Middle Ages.

St. Blaise is also venerated as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, a group of saints invoked as early as the 12th century in Germany and who are honored on August 8. They include:

- St. Denis of Paris (headache and rabies)
- St. Erasmus or Elmo (colic and cramp)
- St. Blaise (throat ailments)
- St. Barbara (lightning, fire, explosion, and sudden and unprepared death)
- St. Margaret (possession and pregnancy)
- St. Catherine of Alexandria (philosophers and students, and wheel-



wrights); St. George (protector of soldiers)

- Sts. Achatius and Eustace (hunters)
- St. Pantaleon (tuberculosis); St. Giles (epilepsy, insanity and sterility)
- St. Cyriac (demonic possession)
- St. Vitus (epilepsy), and
- St. Christopher (travelers)

The German Dominicans promoted this veneration, particularly at the Church of St. Blaise in Regensburg. In addition to throat illnesses, St. Blaise is the patron saint of animals, wool combers and wool trading. The Blessing of St. Blaise ceremony, which began in the 16th century, continues today on February 3, his feast day.

A Reflection for the Season

We do not dare to believe or trust the incredible truth that God could live in us, and live there out of choice, out of preference. Whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light, which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons. If you dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, then you will truly understand what is beyond words and explanations because it is too close to be explained: the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and God are in all truth One Spirit.

- Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*

More Saints to Celebrate

- St. Lucy: December 13
- St. Peter Canisius: December 21
- St. John of Kanty: December 23
- St. Stephen: December 26
- The Holy Innocents: December 28
- St. Thomas Becket: December 29
- St. Elizabeth Ann Seton: January 4
- St. John Neuman: January 5
- St. Agnes: January 21
- St. Marianne Cope: January 23
- St. Thomas Aquinas: January 28

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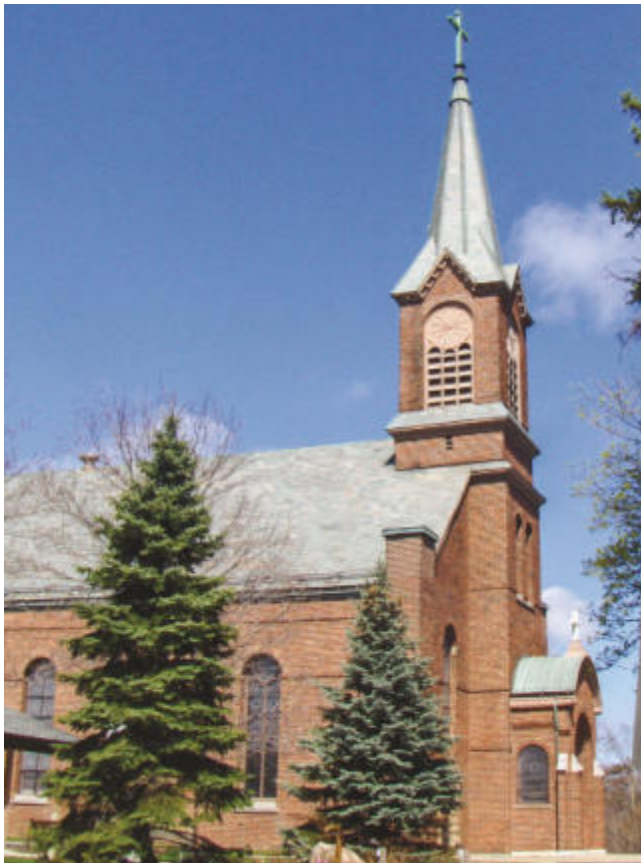
Rev. Paul W. Steller, Pastor
Rev. Msgr. W. Jerome Sullivan, Weekend Associate
Dr. David Jerome, Permanent Deacon
John Owczarczak, Permanent Deacon
Diane Zwirecki, APR, Editor
Ray Milkowski, Sr., Photographer



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Masses

Monday – Friday: 12 Noon

Saturday: 4:30 & 7 PM

Sunday: 8 AM, 10 AM & 12 Noon

Weekday, Saturday 4:30 PM and Sunday 10 AM Masses
are livestreamed.

Visit <http://stmarysonthehill.org/live-streams/>.

Livestreamed Masses are also available on Facebook and
You Tube @St Mary's on the Hill.

*Please call the St. Mary's Rectory at (716) 683-6445
for Holy Day Mass schedules.*

Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession)

By Appointment Only at This Time

*Appointments may also be made by calling
the St. Mary's Rectory at (716) 683-6445.*