

Well, here we are coming to the end of our message series: Your Best Yes. The last four week we have been given time to reflect on how do we say yes to God and his will, even in this busy time to come up with a strategy on how to give our best yes to God. The first weekend we focused on discernment and discernment is more than just making a decision it is allowing God into our busy lives that are filled with good things, but it's about choosing the best thing that will bring us true joy and peace, which is a true and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church. The second weekend we focused on repentance which means to change our mind, heart and attitude – to turn away from sin; focusing on God's mercy and forgiveness for us. Last weekend we examined how do we live out the will of God by giving of our time, talent and treasure and saying yes to opportunities to love our neighbor as our very self.

This weekend we focus on investing for the future of our parish. Don't worry this isn't an offertory increase request homily but we have a great treasure that is coming to our parish in roughly a few hours. Christmas Catholics. Call these brothers and sisters what you will – I've heard C

and E Catholics (Christmas and Easter Catholics), once a year Catholics; CAPE Catholics [that is Christmas, Ashes, Palm and Easter Catholics], etc. This is a very crucial time for our parish and an opportunity for us to make disciples who make disciples; for us to give our best yes this Christmas.

This Monday evening and Tuesday morning our Church look very different, it will be filled to the rafters as many people from all walks of life come to our parish to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. And I can tell you as a former Christmas Catholic we often don't know why we come. Maybe its nostalgia for the days of old when we use to go to Church as family; maybe it's because of a cultural norm that Catholics do the Church thing on Christmas or perhaps it is because we are longing to know, love and serve God and trying to discover what is the best way to say yes to the Lord.

We are going to encounter people from all walks of life, and the question for us is: are we prepared to receive these little ones with great love and joy?

We know the news is not good in our diocese, the last statistic report says that we have roughly 10% of Catholics that are still attending Sunday Mass regularly – the rest are either occasional or what the survey called Fallen Away Catholics. In my generation, we have a new phenomenon of an increasing number of Catholics who are called the none – meaning they have no Faith practice in any form of religion, period. And yet with these two startling trends, we are going to celebrate Christmas with many more Catholics than we are used to for our regular Sunday celebration.

At Good Shepherd Parish – myself, Fr. Gary and our pastoral team and staff have rigorously prepared for this occasion to make sure out of all the feelings these individuals have one will stand out – I pray that those who are coming even if it is only for Christmas that they feel welcomed as they come in, during the celebration, and when they leave. What I found is interesting; in my perusing of the internet is that from all the studies I read there is not one that says a majority of people, in this case Catholics, have left the Church because of the Church's moral teaching [which we often think this is

why people have left because they don't agree with the Church's view on such and such an issue] – but in fact the number one reason people left the Church is because they did not feel welcomed...as simple as that – they did not feel welcome.

We as a parish team and staff are prepared to welcome people from a variety of Faith journeys – we have set up the hall with extra chairs for our overflow, we have our ministries all in place, Fr. Gary and I have prepared homilies that will speak not only to yourselves but to those who have come to join us with a seeking heart. All this energy and desire for us comes from our Catholic spirituality of hospitality.

We as Catholics are a hospitable people; it's in our Catholic DNA we desire to be friendly, courteous, kind and welcoming; filled with joy and hope. We see that in today's Gospel – Mary's hospitality in her visit to her cousin Elizabeth – Elizabeth's powerful words to the gift Mary brought with her – it is the gift of Christ – the one who welcomes with arms wide open. And this is simply what hospitality as a way of life, an act of love, an expression of faith, and our hospitality reflects and anticipates God's welcome. Simultaneously

costly and wonderfully rewarding, hospitality often involves small deaths and little resurrections. By God's grace, we can grow more willing, more eager, to open the door to a needy neighbour, a weary sister or brother, a stranger in distress. Perhaps as we open that door more regularly, we will grow increasingly sensitive to the quiet knock of angels. In the midst of a life-giving practice, we too might catch glimpses of Jesus who asks for our welcome and welcomes us home.

My brothers and sisters in Christ you can help us as a team and staff to accomplish this mission of welcoming and being hospitable to our Christmas Catholics; so that they may find a shelter and home here with us – so that they can discern, repent and find how to love God through their neighbour. And it's going to take a little bit a work and sacrifice for all of us. From my own personal reflection, I came up with 4 tips for welcoming unfamiliar faces this Christmas.

Number one, make room. I know this is a hard strategy but if you come early enough to find 'your seat' – the one you've sat in for the last little while - especially if it's at the end of the pews – scoot over. Try to be in the middle of the pew bench so that those who may arrive a little tardy don't

feel out of place trying to pass over us to sit in the middle. If you see someone who looks like they can use a seat especially a stranger, and you have enough strength and vigour and are able to stand for the entire celebration offer your seat up.

Number two, smile. Joy is contagious and when we see people smile; we ourselves start smiling, and by smiling we actually have an emotional and physical reaction – we start to actually feel joy. By smiling, we reveal the joy of the season of Christmas. No one wants to hang out with a bunch of grumpy or sour people – people who complain or lament that the Christmas Catholics are here – sigh let's deal with this and get back to our regular Sunday. Let's try even if it's a challenge to smile just a bit more this Monday evening and Tuesday.

Number three, be welcoming and strike up a conversation– these individuals need more than just a polite nod. A kind word and gesture will go a long way. Just approaching someone, you don't know personally and welcoming them, having a little chat in the narthex or having a polite whispered conversation in the pew can make an important connection. If you personally see someone you

know and haven't seen in our parish for a while say hello and tell them it's great to see you here with us this Christmas. The Church may be a bit noisier with young families and children, and that's okay – reassuring them that this is a place where they can feel welcome is key. Now, this doesn't have to be a scripted conversation – we're not trying to sell them insurance but just pray to the Holy Spirit for discernment on how to engage in the conversation. The only Gospel many people will read is how we live and act towards them

Number four, Participate – The best Masses I have ever attended is one where people are singing, responding and fully engaged in the liturgy. If people come and see that no one is singing or joining in the prayers, they'll wonder what the point of coming. But if people feel the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they will want to come back for more.

If we follow these 4 simple steps, we may not bring all the Christmas Catholics home to our parish, but we can cast out our net and see what we get. I want to end with a story I once heard that really sends the message home about investing in the gift of hospitality.

A Pastor transformed himself into a homeless person and went to the 10,000-member church that he was to be introduced as the head pastor at that morning. He walked around his soon-to-be church for 30 minutes while it was filling with people for service, only 3 people out of the 10,000 people said hello to him. He asked people for change to buy food – no one in the church gave him change.

He went into the sanctuary to sit down in the front of the church and was asked by the ushers if he would please sit in the back. He greeted people to be greeted back with stares, dirty looks, and people looking down on him. As he sat in the back of the church, he listened to the church announcements and such. When all that was done, the elders went up and were excited to introduce the new pastor of the church to the congregation. "We would like to introduce to you our new Pastor." The congregation looked around clapping with joy and anticipation. The homeless man sitting in the back stood up and started walking down the aisle. The clapping stopped with all eyes on him. He walked up the altar and took the microphone from the elders (who were aware of this

disguised pastor) and paused for a moment then he recited,

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

“For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ‘The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

After he recited this, he looked towards the congregation and told them all what he had experienced that morning. Many began to cry, and many heads were bowed in shame. He

then said, “Today I see a gathering of people, not a church of Jesus Christ. The world has enough people, but not enough disciples. When will YOU decide to become disciples?” He then dismissed service until next week.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I pray that we may not only be hospitable this Christmas but at all of our Sunday Masses because we are called to be rooted in Faith, living in service and making disciples..