Faith IN WV
DECEMBER 21, 2025
DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

From St. Francis' First Crèche to West Virginia's Nativities
A Treasured Story of Faith, Hope, and Humble Beginnings

The Nativity is among the most treasured sights in our parishes and homes at Advent and Christmas. More than a seasonal decoration, it stands as one of the sweetest and most honest tools of evangelization. In a single scene, it reveals history and our Christian beginnings, brings the prophetic words to life before our eyes, pointing us toward our hope of eternal life with God.

Even a young child, barely able to speak, can understand and share the simple truths of the Nativity: a baby welcomed by the whole world as the Prince of Peace with a blessed loving mother and a courageous father, and the reverent awe shown by animals, shepherds, and the wise and royal. The scene teaches without complexity, inviting hearts gently into the mystery of Christ.

As the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston honors its 175th Anniversary, look with gratitude at Nativity scenes from both present and past. In doing so, acknowledge not only their beauty, but also their history and profound purpose. These scenes unite generations of faithful across West Virginia with the universal Church and with a tradition that stretches back more than eight centuries.

Bishop John Swint, the fourth bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling, reflected deeply on this mystery in his 1947 book of Christmas homilies, *The Sweetest Story Ever Told*. He wrote that the Nativity has always taught that Christ, born a helpless "Babe in Bethlehem" and adored by shepherds and Wise Men, "was true God and true man." Though He assumed human nature, He never ceased to be God. Bishop Swint reminded the faithful that our hearts should be filled with joy and gratitude at Christmas, echoing the Gospel of John: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. . . full of grace and truth." Those who

St. Francis Xavier Church in Moundsville displays a life-sized outdoor Nativity cut out and painted on plywood in the 1940s or 50s by the Sisters of St. Joseph who worked at the parish and school. The set had been stored in the church's bell tower for nearly 40 years but has once again recently found a place of honor on the church property along Seventh Street.

SPECIAL FAITHINWV EDITION

In celebration of Christmas, FaithInWV will publish a special edition showcasing Christmas and the Octave of Christmas – Dec. 25 through January 1st.

Dated December 25, the e-bulletin will be released on December 24th via Flocknote to its 15,000+ readers, social media for our readers around the world, and the FaithInWV.org website to be archived along with more than 300 issues. We hope this issue guides its audience into a blessed Christmas season and grateful beginning of the new year.

receive Him are given the power to become children of God.

Our love for the Nativity scene traces back to its origins, when St. Francis of Assisi, who, over 800 years ago in 1223, created the first living Nativity in the small town of Greccio, Italy. Saint Francis' intent was simple and profound: to evangelize through sight, to awaken wonder and awe at the humble Newborn King, and to connect Bethlehem directly to the celebration of the Eucharist.

Saint Bonaventure recounts that on Christmas Eve of 1223, St. Francis preached about "the Babe of Bethlehem" from beside the scene itself. Thomas of Celano, St. Francis' first biographer, explained that Francis wanted all to see with their own eyes the poverty and vulnerability Christ embraced—lying in a manger between the ox and the ass. The Church records a miracle from that night: Giovanni Veleti reported seeing a real infant appear in the empty manger, whom St. Francis tenderly held. Other miracles followed, including healings connected to the straw of the manger. From its very beginning, the Nativity was marked by grace, humility, and living faith.

That same spirit continues to move the Church today. Earlier this week, Pope Leo XIV spoke to the faithful portraying the Holy Family in Vatican City's living Nativity, calling them a joyful sign of discipleship and "pilgrims of hope," bearers of consolation and inspiration in daily life. Pope Francis, in his 2019 Apostolic Letter on the Nativity scene, reflected on St. Francis' first crèche, where the Eucharist was

The Nativity of the Basilica of the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Charleston, features a woman approaching the scene holding her young child, and she is dressed more like a European native, which is reminiscent of what you could find in a Polish or German Catholic Nativity scene.

Scene of the Crib

St. Alphonsus Parish "Crib" scene past and present.

celebrated over the manger. In doing so, the priest emphasized the inseparable bond between Bethlehem and the altar. The Nativity, Pope Francis wrote, still reveals God's tender love and nearness, teaching every generation to believe that God is with us and that we are with Him.

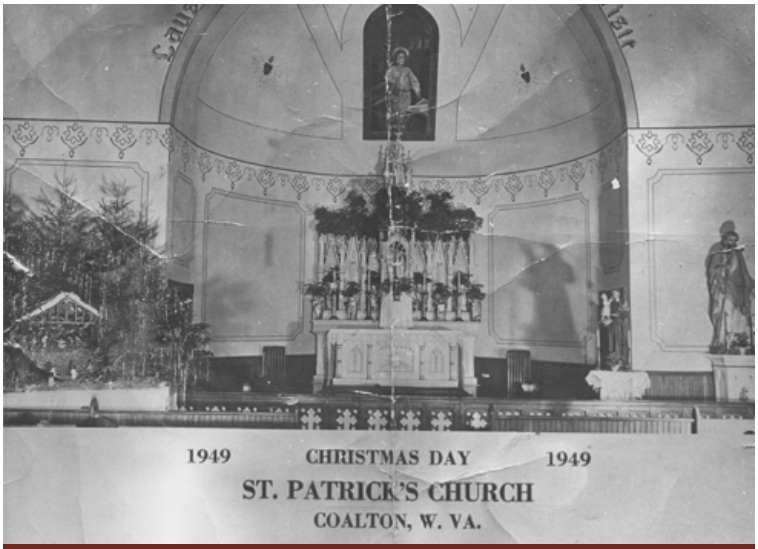
In West Virginia, this centuries-old tradition is deeply cherished during Advent and Christmas. In many parishes, a family or child is blessed each year with the honor of placing the Christ Child in the manger

at Christmas Mass, a quiet yet powerful act of faith passed from one generation to the next.

While detailed records of Nativity scenes in the Diocese since its founding in 1850 are limited, the influence of immigrant cultures is clear. Polish *Szopki* (Nativities) featured elaborately painted backdrops and figures reflecting Polish heritage. Saint Ladislaus, the first Polish Catholic Church in the diocese was founded in 1903. The Poles who settled in WV were from sections of Poland with customs also influenced by Austria and Russia, therefore the Nativity and decorations reflected their rich expansive heritage. Italian *Presepi* (Nativities) were often ornate, adorned with fine fabrics and gold accents. German parishes typically displayed a humbler *Krippe* (Nativity), crafted of wood and set within a stable or grotto. At St. Alphonsus in Wheeling, founded in 1856, parishioners obtained a magnificent "Crib" scene with molded figures and a painted Bethlehem backdrop, complete with palm trees and a starry, illuminated sky. Lovingly preserved, the figures and stable remain in use today.

German families historically were among the first to place Nativity scenes in their homes beneath Christmas trees, sometimes with snowcapped stables. Irish and Appalachian Nativities reflected simplicity and resourcefulness, fashioned from hand-carved wood or humble materials, reverent and warmly heartfelt. Irish parish, St. Patrick's of Coalton, WV, displayed a Nativity with figures quite small, but the scale of the locally crafted stable and cut evergreen trees draped in tinsel surrounding the Nativity made it grand.

Across cultures and centuries, the Nativity endures. In West Virginia and throughout the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, it remains a living witness to the humble birth of our Lord Jesus Christ—first shown to the world by St. Francis of Assisi, and still teaching, evangelizing, and drawing hearts to Bethlehem, where God chose to dwell among us.



St. Patrick's 1949: Saint Patrick's mission church of Coalton, WV, traditionally displayed a Nativity with figures quite small, but the scale of the locally crafted stable and cut evergreen trees draped in tinsel surrounding the Nativity made it grand. The parish was established in the 1850s for Irish immigrants in the area and in 1918 the present church building was constructed to serve the influx of Italian Catholics moving into the area for coal mining jobs. The photo was taken in 1949 of the church.

Four altar boys sing Christmas carols in front of the Nativity scene at St. Ladislaus Church in 1949. Saint Lads, as it was fondly called, was the first Polish Catholic Church in the diocese, founded in 1903.

DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

Join Us for Mass of the Nativity of the Lord

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25 • 12:00AM

BISHOP MARK BRENNAN - CELEBRANT
FROM THE
CATHEDRAL OF SAINT JOSEPH

Mass Livestreamed
DWC.ORG
FACEBOOK.COM/DIOCESEOFWHEELINGCHARLESTON

MASS WILL BE BROADCAST LIVE

WTRF-TV7/CBS WHEELING
WDVM MARTINSBURG
WVNS/CBS BECKLEY/BLUEFIELD
WOWK/CBS CHARLESTON/HUNTINGTON
WBOY/NBC CLARKSBURG/MORGANTOWN

Contact your parish for Christmas Mass times

Office of the Bishop

Diocese of Wheeling–Charleston
1311 Byron Street
Post Office Box 230
Wheeling, West Virginia 26003

A Christmas Message, 2025

Dear members of the household of the faith,

As we move into the last days of Advent and see the great feast of Christmas just ahead, I want to extend to you my hope that you and your loved ones will experience a renewal of your faith and love during this holy season.

Remember what we celebrate: *God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that anyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life* [John 3:16]. This is no small matter. God became man in Jesus so that our twin enemies, sin and death, might be defeated and we might become by grace the holy children of God we were created to be and inherit the fullness of eternal life.

In a world full of conflict and suffering, what God has done – what Jesus preached and the Church continues to proclaim – is truly good news. It's too good to keep to ourselves. I urge you to speak to others of your faith in Jesus Christ when opportunities present themselves and tell them how your relationship with him within the Church he founded has brought you strength and blessings. *Do not be afraid*, says the Lord; *From now on you will be catching men* [and women and children, too! Luke 5:10]. If a fisherman, at times headstrong, at times timid, could tell others of Christ, so can you and I.

A beautiful Christmas carol begins: "It came upon a midnight clear that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold: Peace on the earth, goodwill to men, from heaven's all-gracious King. The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing." It is Jesus our Lord who brings peace to human beings, both the inner peace that comes from a clear conscience and trust in God, and peace among people, who learn to forsake jealously and violence and embrace friendship and mutual aid. It is that Lord whom we must serve and whom we must make known to others.

Hear the angels sing once again of our Savior's birth. Rejoice that God has not abandoned us even if we have so often abandoned Him. Love is at the core of God's being. Let us learn from Him to love and to share with others the faith that is fulfilled by love.

A Merry Christmas and peaceful New Year to you all!

Sincerely in Christ,

+Mark E. Brennan

+Mark E. Brennan
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston

THIS IS... #FAITHINWV!

EVERY VOICE WAS A GIFT

PRINCETON'S SACRED HEART BEGINS A BELOVED CAROLING TRADITION

Mercer County's Sacred Heart Parish in Princeton held an event that they hope will become a joyful and beloved Christmas tradition – one that captured the spirit of the season, bringing connection, love, and hope to a too often forgotten community.

Laura Wyatt, office manager of the parish and campus minister for Concord Catholic Newman Center shared the following for our FaithInWV readers:

As the snow cleared and temperatures dropped on Dec. 12th, parishioners gathered to bring holiday cheer to homebound community members - longtime parishioners who have given generously of their time and love to our parish for many years.

This was our chance to give back by singing for them and letting them know they are cherished, remembered, and always part of our Sacred Heart family.

We met at the church to pick up our materials: lists of names and addresses, songbooks, and Santa hats. Volunteers gave rides, filling their cars with excited carolers. At 6:00 pm, we set out. At each home, we sang favorite Christmas songs. Seeing the excitement and joy on their faces was unforgettable.

It felt special to bring smiles to people we care about.

"Silent Night" touched everyone, and we ended each visit with "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," along with a small gift and a card signed by everyone.

In return, we received big smiles and warm "God bless you!" wishes.

Family members who opened their doors were very grateful.

The Wheby family said, "That was wonderful, we thank you all!"

Our carolers shared their thoughts about the night. Some talked about the joy they brought to others, while many valued simply coming together as one parish family. Everyone felt honored to take part.

We're grateful to Pastor Fr. Joseph Augustine for this wonderful idea—encouraging us to sing to those in our community and bring cheer to our parishioners.

Afterward, we returned to the parish hall for a celebration with delicious food, sweet desserts, warm drinks, and fun games. The laughter and fellowship truly showed the Christmas spirit and God's love among us.

It was a joyful evening with our Sacred Heart family!

This is just the beginning.

We are already looking forward to next December's caroling adventure.

FROM SEMINARIAN TO DEACON

Mastran Journeys Closer to the Priesthood

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has spent the last few weeks preparing for the ordination to the transitional diaconate for Seminarian Clifton Mastran. The ordination set for 10 am December 20th at the Cathedral of St. Joseph is the first since 2023 - the transitional diaconate ordination of now Fr. John Soplinski, who also serves as the director of vocations for the diocese and has worked closely with Mastran as a peer and now mentor for several years.

In an interview with Colleen Rowan, editor of The Catholic Spirit, Fr. John said, "Clifton has had a long and winding road to this day and has persevered in his vocation admirably. He is a prayerful man and a worker, so we look forward to his ministry in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. We hope to see many of the faithful who have prayed for and supported Clifton attend. . . We earnestly pray for Clifton as he takes his vows of prayer, obedience, and celibacy.

Mastran graduated from Pope St. John XXIII National Seminary in Massachusetts. He selected Msgr. William Fay, a representative of the seminary, and Fr. Dennis R. Schuelkens, Jr., of St. Joseph the Worker and Sacred Heart of Mary parishes in Weirton, to vest him.

At the diaconate ordination Mass, the bishop presents the Book of the Gospels, so the new deacon can proclaim the Good News and model his life after Christ – stating "Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach."

Mastran, who worked for nearly two decades at the U.S. Department of Defense, told Rowan during his interview for The Catholic Spirit, that he is beyond grateful for his ordination and furthering his journey to priesthood.

"To receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the gift of this vocation from Christ is an untold blessing, and, for me personally, Christmas is apparently coming a few days early this year" he told Rowan. "And while the ultimate present and gift of the Priesthood of Christ will have to wait until tentatively May, I look forward to serving the good people of West Virginia and all of the Church as a deacon before serving as a happy, humble, and holy priest! Merry Christmas and may God be with you all in this joyous season!"

Transitional Diaconate Ordination of *Clifton Mastran*

View the Mass at: dwc.org

WHEN GOD'S GIFT OF PEACE CHANGES EVERYTHING

Charleston's Timothy Kawash's Journey to Seminary

The following is the vocation story of Timothy Kawash of Charleston and the Basilica of the Co-cathedral of the Sacred Heart. He wrote it for the Josephinum Times – the newsletter for alumni and friends of the Pontifical College Josephinum and shares it with FaithInWV for our readers.

Looking back on my journey to seminary, on the surface are all the "right things."

I am a cradle Catholic and attended Catholic school all my life.

My Dad is a permanent deacon.

At age nine, I started altar serving and never really stopped.

Religion was one of my favorite classes in grade school.

Yet, despite my faith being important to me in childhood, I never really considered the priesthood.

In fact, as a teenager, I gradually became more focused on secular things.

Though some high school classmates said I would be a priest, I had no interest in it. However, something life-changing occurred after my sophomore year: I had an authentic encounter with the love of God.

One day, while listening to religious music, I felt the unmistakable, profound peace of Christ. I realized the importance that my faith should have in my life, which lead me to desire deeper union with God. Around that same time, a young, newly ordained priest was assigned to my parish. He became a role model for me and was always there to hear my confession or give me encouragement.

It was then, at age 17, that I first had thoughts of the priesthood. By the time I graduated from high school, I felt convinced that God was calling me to be a priest. But my own fears and doubts held me back.

I began college, started going to Mass every weekday, and got involved in various activities with other Catholic students.

Sadly, though, I eventually found myself turning back to worldly desires and ambitions. My Mass attendance dwindled only to Sundays.

As I approached my senior year, I felt God calling me back into a deeper relationship. Providentially, one of the campus organizations I belonged to began the year with a retreat, which increased my desire to be closer to God.

One day shortly after the retreat, I felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to attend Mass. As I was praying, I felt the same unmistakable peace of Christ that I had felt years earlier. Knowing that I needed to follow this peace, I began going to Mass as often as possible, spending more time in Eucharistic Adoration, and praying a daily Rosary. Soon, the desire to be a priest returned, and I entered seminary the following year.

I have been really blessed to be in formation at the Josephinum. There is a great fraternity among seminarians, strengthened by everything from praying together to playing sports.

In particular, I have really enjoyed the opportunity to study Scripture in depth, taking a close look at the amazing accounts of God's love for His people; a love I hope to share with others as an ordained priest.

ROSARY CRUSADE FOR VOCATIONS

May 13, 2025 - May 13, 2026

Pledge to say Rosaries for vocations in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

Let's go all out for Jesus and the Church!

Make yours count! Log your Rosary pledge at: DWC.ORG/ROSARY-CRUSADE where you will find resources for all ages.

"Remember each priest, consecrated person, deacon, and Catholic marriage is truly a result of strong and intense prayer. Be that grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, friend, or parishioner that reverently prays for them." -Sister Martha Gomez, R.G.S. Delegate for Consecrated Life

Living Nativity

by Moundsville Area Ministerial Association
& McMechen Ecumenical Association

Dec. 22, 2025

5:00 - 7:00 pm

We invite everyone to participate in this FREE community event!

Where:

St. Jude Church

710 Jefferson Ave.
Glen Dale, WV 26038

Featuring Faithful from the following Churches:

Trinity Episcopal Church

St. John Catholic Church

St. James Catholic Church

McMechen United Methodist Church

First Christian Church

Glen Dale United Methodist Church

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church

Moundsville Church of the Nazarene

St. Jude Catholic Church

Details:

The event begins and ends at St. Jude Hall with Christmas Caroling, Refreshments & Fellowship

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JANUARY 10TH & 11TH 2026

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-ST. JOHN PAUL II

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4030 MIDDLEWAY PIKE KEARNEYSVILLE, WV 25430

DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

2026 Men's Discernment Retreat

WWW.WVPRIESTS.ORG

FEBRUARY 13 - FEBRUARY 15

PRIESTFIELD PASTORAL CENTER

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- **HEAR TALKS ABOUT PRIESTLY LIFE AND DISCERNMENT**

Register Today!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14

The virgin shall be with child.

Responsorial: Psalm 24

"Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory."

Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7

Jesus is the son of David and the Son of God!

Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24

Joseph, son of David, have no fear; take Mary as your wife.

CLICK HERE FOR FULL SCRIPTURE TEXT

PRAYER INTENTIONS

For the Church, Pope Leo XIV, our bishops, priests, and deacons, especially our newly ordained – Deacon Clifton Mastran – that together the Word of God is proclaimed with courage, confidence, and great love by word and deed, leaving no doubt that God is truly with us, let us pray to the Lord. . .

For leaders around the world, that they, like Saint Joseph, may exercise obedience and kindness as they make the difficult decisions necessary to obtain peace and justice on this earth, let us pray to the Lord. . .

For those who are grieving the loss of a loved one especially in this coming season of joy, that they may find consolation and hope in the Lord's promise, let us pray to the Lord. . .

For our faith community, that Mary and Joseph's obedience to the Lord may be a model for us today, let us pray to the Lord. . .

Lord hear our prayer

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Berkeley Springs	FM	107.9
Clarksburg-Bridgeport	FM	97.5
Dunbar - Charleston	AM	1450
Grafton - Clarksburg	AM	1190
Keyser - coming soon	FM	98.9
Montgomery - Beckley	FM	89.7
St. Marys - Parkersburg	FM	105.3
Star City -Morgantown	FM	89.7
Summersville	FM	91.3
Wheeling - Martins Ferry, OH	FM	90.7
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Liturgy of the Hours

LITURGY OF THE HOURS

Pray the prayer for this day, this hour! EBREVIARY.COM LITURGY OF THE HOURS

Scan the QR code or visit the link below to view a PDF version of the Liturgy of the Hours.

MASS ONLINE

Saturday 6pm Masses will continue to be livestreamed from the Cathedral of St. Joseph, and will be available on our website each Sunday at DWC.ORG.