

CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION

CATHOLIC CHURCH

Meeting Christ in the Manger and in the Stranger

The Christmas Eve Dinner

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As parishioner Catherine Erickson recalls, her family's involvement with the Christmas Eve Dinner began because they themselves were not from the Bismarck area and were drawn to spend this holiday with others.

"We're often here without a lot of family, so that prompted us to serve," Catherine says. "It's something we enjoy doing and it's become our family tradition."

Each year, on Christmas Eve, Ascension opens our doors to welcome those in need. Buses transport people from several different homeless shelters to come and join in the holiday dinner. A beautiful Christmas dinner with all the trimmings is served, and all of the guests receive a gift, along with the opportunity to choose personal care items, if needed.

The Erickson family has been involved with the dinner since its beginnings, with Catherine and her husband, Mark, having served in a number of different roles — from dishwashers to greeters, and their two musical daughters have provided music for the event.

Today, despite their children being married and living across the country, it continues to be a favorite family Christmas tradition, year after year.

"So far, one of them has always been there," Catherine says with a smile. "I think my faith has been beautifully affected by participating in this as a family."

Although the dinner itself takes place on Christmas Eve, there are a number of different ways that parishioners can become involved in

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The Christmas Eve Dinner is an opportunity to come celebrate the joy of Christmas.

DECEMBER 2018

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ascensionbismarck.org



After Years of Struggle, Eric Loh Embraces Faith and Service

For many years, parishioner Eric Loh was in a pretty bad place — he was involved with drugs, in and out of treatment, in and out of the legal system. And over the course of one night, his life would be changed in a very abrupt way.

“In ‘08 I left a bar, and I ended up rolling my vehicle,” Eric says. “They found me 100 feet from my vehicle, with three broken vertebrae and my lungs were collapsed. I wasn’t supposed to make it through the night. But by the grace of God, He allowed me to live and I have been sober for over 10 years now.”

Eric was released from prison last Christmas, and it wasn’t long before he re-registered at Ascension and began getting involved in the community.

But his relationship with God began deepening much earlier. After surviving the near-fatal car wreck, he decided he wanted to turn his life around, and his time in prison became an opportunity for his growth to begin.

“When I was down in the correctional center, I attended catechism every Monday night for nine years,” Eric says. “I read so many books about God and our faith, and realized God is so real and so big, and there was just so much I was so unaware of. We have such a beautiful faith, as Catholics.”

Eric recalls that through it all, he particularly enjoyed reading stories of the lives of the saints.

“Going to prison might have stunk, but it’s done and over with and I have a whole new life that I’m so thankful for every day,” he says.

While in prison, Eric found ways to give back to the community, including a project he organized to aid the Salvation Army and sharing his story through



After years of struggle, Eric Loh is happy to be able to give back and serve his community.

Teen Challenge, and in college classes. Today, he continues to serve whenever a need arises. From volunteering at Ascension’s Spring Dinner to raising money for school supplies for homeless children, Eric is passionate about giving back.

“I try to give back whenever I can and do the right thing,” he says. “For so many years of my life it was just ‘me, me, me’ — but it’s not supposed to be about me, it’s supposed to be about ‘you.’”

According to Eric, finding the right support and fellowship has been invaluable to helping him stay on right path.

“You need to surround yourself with positive people,” he says. “You need someone to encourage you and point you in the right direction, somebody you can talk to and be honest with.”

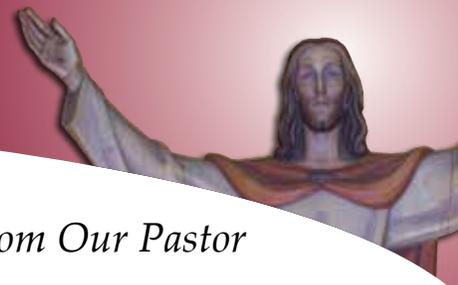
The grace of the sacraments — especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation — and prayer have also played a big part in Eric’s recovery.

“On my way to work in the morning I say my prayers,” Eric says. “I pray out loud and I just thank Him for all the blessings I receive every day. And I go to Confession every week.”

He is grateful for the support that he’s found at Ascension and looks forward to finding more ways to serve and become involved. Eric also encourages anyone who is struggling with addiction to turn to God.

“God is love and I’m so thankful that those chains of addiction are broken in my life,” he says. “Going to prison was one of the biggest blessings of my life. I’m so proud of the person I am today and God still has a plan for my life.”

If you or a loved one is struggling with addiction, please visit the website for **SAMHSA — Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration — at samhsa.gov**, or call **SAMHSA’s National Help Line at 1-800-662-HELP (4357)**.



A Letter from Our Pastor

Stewardship Possibilities are Endless at Christmas

Dear Parishioners,

When I think of December, the first thing that comes to mind is Christmas. While that may seem to be the obvious topic, there really are a number of other possibilities. I could think of *Advent*, a season of preparation. I could think of the *Immaculate Conception*, as we celebrate God's gift to the world in Mary. I could think of *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, whose popularity has spread far beyond the Hispanic community. Of course, December also holds the first day of *winter*. And because December marks the end of the civil year, I might be developing my resolutions for the New Year!

But instead, I think about Christmas. It is when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Babe in the manger in Bethlehem, who is the eternal Son of God made man.

The basic truth of Christmas — celebrating the birth of Jesus the Messiah, God Incarnate — is plenty of reason for us all to rejoice and worship. But we've piled such an additional load onto our Christmas observance that worship may be lost in the shuffle.

Think about what weight Christmas has to bear. We have to put up the decorations, or make travel plans to visit relatives. There is also the Christmas dinner to plan and cook. And then, we still have Christmas presents to buy. No wonder the Christ Mass becomes an afterthought!

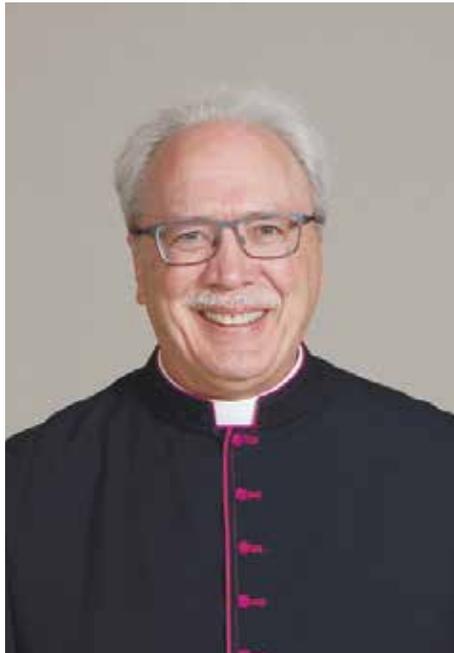
Yet, we still have a wonderful opportunity this season — an opportunity to combine our Christmas activities with our stewardship commitments. Treasure, although challenging, is the simplest. Shouldn't the most expensive Christmas present we give be the one to Jesus, Whose birthday we're celebrating? Risen and glorified, He needs nothing we have. But His Body, the Church, continues Jesus' mission here on earth and always needs additional resources.

Time and Talent may be a little more complicated, but can't we spend a little more of our time in worship

and prayer? Maybe you can attend Mass each day of the Christmas Octave. Have your family gather for prayers together in the morning or at dinner, in preparation for Christmas Day and through the Christmas season.

And there are so many opportunities to share our Talent! Sing in the choir for the Christmas Masses. Help decorate the Church. Cook or bake for someone who is shut-in. Invite someone who will be alone to share Christmas dinner with your family. Offer to work in a soup kitchen. The possibilities are endless.

With a little planning, we can make this hectic time one of real blessing both for ourselves and others. Pray for me that I can keep Christmas properly, and I'll pray for you. And by the way, have a merry Christmas!



Sincerely yours in Christ,

Msgr. Jim Braaten
Pastor



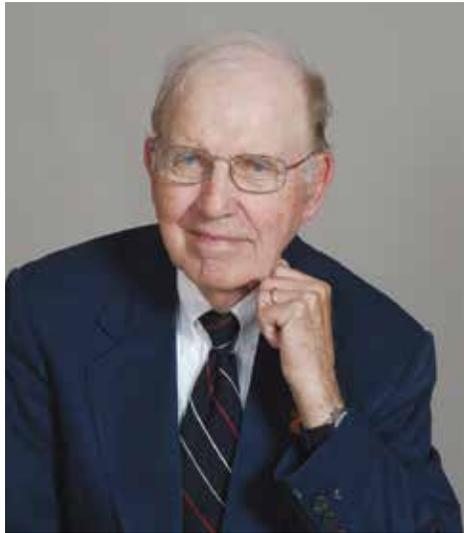
FAREWELL AND THANK YOU

Celebrating a Life of Service

Ever since his youth, Deacon Ray Grabar has felt a call to do something great for the Church – to live his life for the glory of God and the love of his fellow man.

“My high school principal was a priest, and he would often call me into his office and tell me I should consider a vocation to the priesthood,” Deacon Grabar says. “Although I didn’t think I was meant to be a priest, I did think there would someday be something I could do for the Church. When the diaconate program started up, I knew that was what I should do, so I joined the third or fourth class.”

Our parish has been abundantly blessed by Deacon Grabar’s decision many years ago to answer God’s call to serve the Church. He was ordained to the diaconate by Bishop John Kinney on May 18, 1986, and has served his entire 32 years of ministry



Deacon Ray Grabar

at Ascension Catholic Church. Deacon Grabar has genuinely lived out the words of his ordination to the fullest extent, “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice with what you teach.” Having served our faith

community for over three decades, Deacon Grabar is retiring from the diaconate, and in honor of his decades of service, our parish recently hosted a retirement celebration to thank him for all he has done for us.

Deacon Grabar’s journey to the diaconate began as a youth, and as he was growing up, his family moved around quite a bit. Later in life, this planted in him a desire for greater security and stability for his own children.

“Moving wasn’t strange to me, and I had a lot of experience with meeting new kids,” he says. “I was also in the Navy, which brought me to move around a lot as well. However, when I began raising my own family, I made up my mind that we wouldn’t move around. We always lived in Bismarck, so my kids could stay at the same schools. We have been members of Ascension for 40 years.”





YOU, DEACON RAY GRABAR

Service and a Love for Christ

For 30 of those years, Deacon Grabar served as an active deacon in our community. He radiated Christ's mercy to others, such as by assisting with wake and burial services, helping with the food pantry and bringing Holy Communion to those in need.

For the past few years, Deacon Grabar has been semi-retired, but he continued to perform limited services for our faith community, such as Communion services and Baptisms.

When Deacon Grabar and his late wife, Loretta, were raising their eight children, they generously shared the Catholic faith with them.

"We prayed the Rosary as a family for many years, and we read the Scriptures together," Deacon Grabar says. "We did our best."

Despite their busy schedules, they still tried to give to our parish community however they could.

"One thing I have really enjoyed about being a deacon is bringing Communion to shut-ins. When you see people unable to walk or do things people are ordinarily able to do, it makes you feel fortunate you can do the things they can't do."

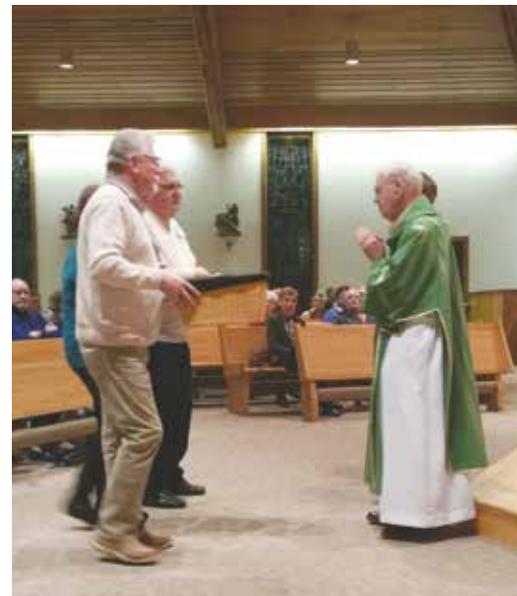
— Deacon Ray Grabar

"After Loretta and I were first married, we didn't have much money, so we couldn't contribute a lot to the church," he says. "So I decided that I would use my talents by serving in other ways, and I volunteered to be a

door-to-door donation contact for the God Share program. It was a great learning experience for me. When I went to the poorest areas of Bismarck, even though the families there didn't have much money, they would donate all the cash they had on hand. It really impressed me."

Although Loretta passed away two years ago, Deacon Grabar continues to enjoy spending time with his 20 grandchildren.

"One thing I have really enjoyed about being a deacon is bringing Communion to shut-ins," he says. "When you see people unable to walk or do things people are ordinarily able to do, it makes you feel fortunate you can do the things they can't do. I also really like doing Baptisms. It is so wonderful to know that we are bringing new children into the Church."





Pastoral Council Helps Our Pastor Fulfill the Parish Mission

Here at Ascension, we are blessed to have a pastor who is dedicated to helping us parishioners grow closer to the Lord. Indeed, Msgr. Braaten does a wonderful job of nurturing our spiritual growth! With him, there are both staff and volunteer parishioners working faithfully to help make the pastoral vision for Ascension a reality. You may already know some of them: the parish office staff, our deacons, and the directors of various ministries—to name just a few. One group, however, may be less well known, as their work tends to take place behind the scenes. This invaluable group of parishioners forms our Pastoral Council, and their primary purpose is to serve in a consultative role to Msgr. Braaten in fulfilling the parish mission.

Bobbie Grassel, current Chair of our Pastoral Council, explains that one of the group's main roles is to keep a pulse on the wants and needs of parishioners, and to bring that information back to Msgr. Braaten to see how the parish might be able to respond.

"We're a kind of liaison between Monsignor and the parish people," she says. "We'll talk about some things that he is wondering about, things that are coming up around the parish, planning that's going on, or some things that may come from the bishop [that affect the parish]."

Another goal of the Pastoral Council is to keep communication flowing between parishioners and the pastor.

"I think the council gives the parish a voice, and there's nothing anyone is trying to hide," Bobbie says. "Monsignor really listens to what we have to say, and he also explains the reasons for things to us. It helps to get all of the things that need to be talked about out into the open. Being on the

council, I feel like I have more of a voice, and if people talk to me about something, I can bring it to our meetings."

The Pastoral Council meets on the first Tuesday of the month from September through May. Each meeting opens with a prayer, a spiritual reading, and the opportunity to briefly share a personal faith reflection before turning to the business side of things. Working and praying side by side every month leads council members to cultivate meaningful relationships with one another and feel even more invested in the mission of our parish. Our current Parish Council members are Bobbie Grassel (Chair), Josh Hager, Cody Volk, Leona Kuntz, Dan Hopfauf, Wanda Rose, Don Weidner, Julie Luger (Secretary), Beth Kathol (Business Manager) and Msgr. Jim Braaten (Pastor).

Bobbie has found serving on the Pastoral Council over the past six years to be truly rewarding.

"It is really interesting," she says. "I didn't know about everything that goes on in the background of the parish. The council provides a chance to get to know other people better, and to hear about all of the ministries. When you're on the Pastoral Council, you see that there is a lot going on 'behind the scenes,' and there are more people helping out than a lot of people realize. And it makes you feel like you really belong — I think that might be the biggest thing for me, that I feel like Ascension is my parish because I am a part of this."

As Bobbie looks to the future, she is excited by the opportunities that will continue to come to Ascension as this dedicated group of parishioners works together to help make our parish a wonderful place to worship and grow in faith!

Parishioners who have any concerns or suggestions they would like to be brought before the Pastoral Council — as well as those who may be interested in serving on the council — are encouraged to contact Bobbie Grassel at 701-222-8536.



The Christmas Eve Dinner *continued from front cover*

...serving, even if they aren't able to be present at the dinner. Groups gather to wrap presents, fill bags of treats and set up the room prior to Christmas Eve.

Catherine hopes that whether or not guests are religious, this experience is a positive one and they get a glimpse of God's love.

"For many people, that is their only Christmas," she says. "We get all kinds of people, from all sorts of circumstances. We don't judge and we welcome warmly."

Although caring for those in need is something that we should be concerned with all year long, the Christmas Eve Dinner is a unique way to recognize and serve Christ in "the least of these."

"We should see God's face in all the people we meet." Catherine says. "And we forget that sometimes — it's easy in our busy lives to forget that. You hope you see God in them and they see God's joy in us. You leave there feeling so good about the Christmas message and that you've done something right."

Catherine encourages fellow parishioners to become involved in serving at the Christmas Eve Dinner.

"I would encourage anyone to do it as a family," she says. "The joy you feel when you are done, it isn't something most of us feel very often."

"For many of us, it is the one experience we have each year where we really do serve others less fortunate than ourselves, in a way that is truly 100-percent giving," she adds. "For us and for many families, it connects you to Christmas, to the family, and the real meaning of Christmas, the real reason we're all celebrating."



The Erickson family has been involved with the Christmas Eve Dinner for many years, with their daughters providing music for the evening.



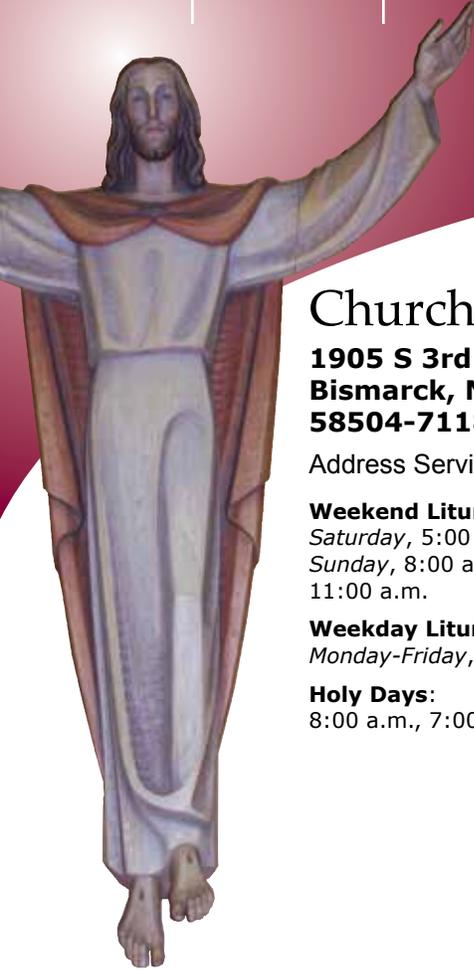
Parishioners are invited to become involved in serving at the Christmas Eve Dinner.



Serving at the Christmas Eve Dinner has become a family affair for the Ericksons.

The Christmas Eve Dinner is held from 5:30 p.m. until 7 p.m., Dec. 24, in the Community Room. Parishioners will be gathering to wrap gifts on Dec. 15, at 10 a.m. in the Community Room, and on Dec. 21 at 7 p.m. to fill treat bags and set up the Community Room for the dinner.

For more information, or to volunteer to help with preparations and/or serve at the Christmas Eve Dinner, visit our parish website: www.ascensionbismarck.org or call the Parish Office at 223-3606.



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Weekend Liturgy

Saturday, 5:00 p.m.

*Sunday, 8:00 a.m., 9:30 a.m.,
11:00 a.m.*

Weekday Liturgy:

Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m.

Holy Days:

8:00 a.m., 7:00 p.m.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Dec. 8

*Solemnity of the Immaculate
Conception, Mass at 8 a.m.*

Dec. 8

*Sacramental Celebration of
First Reconciliation at 10 a.m.*

Dec. 8 and 9

*Ladies of Ascension Bake Sale,
after all Masses*

Dec. 12

*Mexican Feast and Our Lady of
Guadalupe Celebration, during
all Faith Formation Classes*

Dec. 15

*Gift wrapping at 10 a.m.
in Community Room for
Christmas Eve Dinner*

Dec. 20

*Parish Reconciliation Service
at 7 p.m.*

Dec. 21

*Set up dining room and bag
treats at 7 p.m. in Community
Room for Christmas Eve Dinner*

Dec. 24

*Christmas Eve Dinner,
5:30-7 p.m. in Community
Room*

Dec. 27

*Altar Server Appreciation Party
in Community Room*

Christmas Eve, December 24

4:00 p.m. & 10:00 p.m.

Christmas Day, December 25

9:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m.

New Year's Eve, December 31 —Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

5:00 p.m.

New Year's Day, January 1 —Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

9:00 a.m.