

## BULLETIN -- DECEMBER 27

**Thank you** to all who have joined us during these Christmas holydays, to grow in love for our incarnate Lord and Savior, to renew family bonds, to mend and/or strengthen old friendships, or just to worship in a church filled with family, ethnic, and urban memories and made beautiful by our liturgy elves for its 92<sup>nd</sup> Christmas. (The *parish* is 111, in case you're proofreading ☺.) Blessings on you and yours!

**Christmas in Santa Fe, New Mexico**, had special meaning 137 years ago. A French architect had designed the chapel for the Sisters of Loretto in close imitation of the famous "Sainte Chapelle" in Paris. However, it was a small chapel, and he forgot to provide enough room for a staircase leading up to the choir loft at the rear, 22 feet above the main floor! One carpenter after another had tried to find a way to solve the problem without success. They were unanimous in saying it couldn't be done.

A few weeks before Christmas, on the ninth day of a novena the Sisters were making to St. Joseph, imploring his assistance in their dilemma, another carpenter arrived, his burro laden with wood. He said he had come to build a staircase, and that it would be done for Christmas. He asked only that he be left alone in the chapel and in a fenced yard, and that no one be allowed to watch him working. On Christmas Eve, both the carpenter and his tools were gone. The Sisters entered the chapel, and before their



eyes was a beautiful spiral staircase gracefully winding up to the choir loft. It has 33 steps, one for each year of Our Lord's life. It has no nails, only wooden pegs. Everything is perfectly fitted together, and the wood in each bannister has been so carefully turned that everything feels symmetrical to anyone ascending or descending. The spiral makes two complete 360-degree turns with no central support. It seems to float on air, and has a very delicate bounce or "spring" to the step.

I'm using the present tense because the staircase still stands, just as it did on that Christmas Eve in 1878. Architects and engineers have been called in to study it, and all shake their heads and say they cannot understand what keeps it in place. The Sisters never did find out who the mysterious carpenter was. He disappeared without payment or any further communication. A young girl who lived with the Sisters said that she had talked to him, and he told her his name was José -- Joseph.

I had the rare privilege of walking up that stairway to the choir loft and back down again during a visit to Santa Fe in October, 1979. The aged Sister who was showing us around displayed great awe, even though the stairway was very familiar to her. I asked her how much use the stairway had actually gotten when the convent and school were in full occupancy.

"Oh, Father," she replied, "we had the whole choir up there every day, sometimes three or four times for services and for practice."

“I’ll bet everyone walked very gingerly up and down, to keep it in such marvelous condition,” I mused.

“Father,” she answered with a coy smile, “we were schoolgirls. We used to slide down the bannisters. We used to see how many girls we could pack onto the staircase from top to bottom all at once. That staircase has seen a lot of use, and a lot of abuse. And look how beautiful it still is. Not a spindle out of place, or even loose!”

So there’s a Christmas story for you. The Sisters devoutly believe that it was St. Joseph himself who built it. When the Son of God became incarnate, the miracles and signs have never stopped. You just have to have a faith that will, like a 137-year-old wooden spiral staircase, hold up under lots of stress. I’ll bet St. Joseph will help out if you ask him. We may not all be Holy, but we’re all Family.

**Marriage running aground?** Please keep in your prayers those couples participating in the local Retrouvaille. The French word *Retrouvaille* (pron. reh-troh-VYE) means “recovering” or “re-finding.” It is the name of a wonderful retreat and follow-up designed for couples whose marriage has become troubled or stressed, unloving or uncaring. If your relationship has grown cold or distant, if you are thinking of separation or divorce, or are already separated or divorced but want to try again, ***there is help available!*** Remember, something prompted you to take the plunge and get married. Now rekindle that something and make it even better. The next Retrouvaille weekend here in the diocese is being held February 12-14. Additional weekends are available elsewhere in Michigan, as well as in northern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Brochures are available in the back of church, or you may call **752-7004**, or find them at <http://retrouvaillegrandrapids.org>. You are not alone!!!

**A sense of direction.** About twice a year, the Police Department engages me to teach city geography to our police recruits, most of whom are young enough to be my grandchildren. One of the things I strive to drill into them is the need to be aware of their surroundings at all times. “Always know where you are!” I repeat to them over and over. This might seem obvious to most of us older folks. After all, we had to pass tests in map reading when I was in grade school! But if you talk with people two or three generations younger than you, you will often discover that they have little or no sense of direction and no concept of the layout of their neighborhood or community. They know where this store or that store is, but they’re at a complete loss to name any of the streets around them or describe how to get there without a GPS. How could they, when their eyes and noses have been buried practically since birth in their hand-held devices? These devices can connect them with people and information on other continents, but most of the time they don’t have the foggiest idea of where they are. The looming prospect of driverless cars will only exacerbate the problem. Why even bother having a windshield? No one will be looking out of the cocoon on wheels, engrossed as they will be in their social media. A *really* good resolution for all of us drivers would be to keep our hand-held device out of reach while we are behind the wheel. A *really* good resolution for all of us passengers would be to keep our hand-held device out of reach while we’re in the car. Got that? Now be aware of your surroundings, know what street you’re on, and have a conversation. Connect with others later. Connect with each other *now*. God bless you!

Fr. Den

**Thought for the week:** “Instead of giving money to found colleges to promote learning, why don't they pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting anybody from learning anything? If it works as good as the Prohibition one did, why, in five years we would have the smartest race of people on earth” (Will Rogers, American humorist, 1879-1935).