Combermere Diary (February 2015)

by Paulette Curran.

By the time you get this newspaper, Lent will be on the horizon. But, due to the practicalities of getting out this newspaper, I am writing this column a few days after Christmas about what happened in December.

This Advent, amidst all the celebrations and preparations and while we waited prayerfully for the birth of Christ, we were in a time of prayerful waiting in another way as well.

For in Our Lady of Visitation, our "home for the infirm elderly," which is simply a wing of the St. Mary’s building, one of our priests, Fr. Jim Duffy, was very slowly dying.

In Madonna House Toronto where he was stationed, he had been getting weaker and weaker, his body succumbing to age and illness. On November 2nd, when it was clear that MH Toronto could no longer take care of him, he came home to Combermere.

Marie Javora, a staff worker from MH Toronto who is a nurse, continued caring for him here along with Catherine Lynch. Others, too, helped in various capacities.

Throughout Advent, his life slipped slowly and peacefully away. Though he was only able to receive a few visitors, and those very briefly, we were very aware of his presence, especially at St. Mary’s.

It was a beautiful way to die—this slow ebbing away of life. Fr. Duffy had very little pain and was conscious and lucid to the end, and he was surrounded by our love and prayers.

On the practical level, the three work departments most affected—the kitchen, the handicraft department (which is responsible for decorations), and the sacristy, at what was already one of their busiest times of year, were preparing for a funeral which could happen at any time.

Some of us thought he might hang on until January 1st, the solemnity of the Mother of God, for Fr. Duffy had a great love of Our Lady. But this was not to be.

He died at an even holier time—at the very beginning of Christmas, close to the end of our Midnight Mass.

We celebrated Christmas as usual, "as Fr. Duffy would want," and the funeral was scheduled for January 3rd.

Christmas and Christmastime were unusual in another way as well. On Christmas Eve, we began to lose our snow. The temperature went above freezing, and on and off we had freezing rain and rain for three days, our Christmas days off.

Gradually, as temperatures continued to hover around freezing, our beautiful snow alternately melted into slush and water and turned into ice.

Results: Combermere no longer looked like a Christmas card, the paths were slippery and the men had to sand them, and there was no ice skating, cross country skiing, tobogganining, or sledding.

But, be all of this as it may, both Advent and Christmas were essentially the same as always. Busy, busy, very beautiful, and spiritually very rich.

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One lovely addition to our customs on St. Nicholas Day was praying part of the Byzantine Rite Vespers for the feast. This was introduced and led by Paul Moore.

On December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we had the blessing of the upstairs chapel, the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, which is now our adoration chapel, by Fr David May.

This followed the completion of phase one of the renovation of that chapel, which began a year ago, on the 60th anniversary of the first blessing of the chapel.
The Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe was, as always, one of the most delightful and childlike days of the year.

In the morning, we processed to the island chapel and sang mañanitas, loving morning songs, to Our Lady, "received gifts" from her (a line from her words to St. Juan Diego), sang part of the Mass in Spanish, and had a Mexican supper.

In the evening, we had a dance, which included a presentation of the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The dance was, like our members and guests, international: Korean, Mexican (a ribbon dance) and American (the Virginia Reel).

Our Advent and Christmas, besides including a number of customs and tradition, have so many lovely little touches and "extras." Joanne Weisbeck, for example, with some helpers, made a whimsical gingerbread house.

And in the main house, a building in which every space is used—or so we think—Teresa Gerhed, head of the library, managed to find a corner in which she put Christmas books and comfortable chairs where we could curl up and read Christmas stories during our days off.

And then there was Christmas caroling—groups of us going from house to house in the area. What a joyful evening, and what a chance to bring those beautiful old carols live to our neighbors!

And Christmas, well ... How could one ever adequately celebrate the wonder of God himself coming to earth as one of us, as a baby, to bring light into our darkness, to save the whole world.

We celebrate with everything we can, music, decoration, Masses, food, etc., etc., etc.

Just one of the many nice "touches" at Christmastime is entertainment—songs, instrumental music, stories, etc.—by staff and guests just after supper.

And another which we haven’t mentioned for a while: the doll table. These dolls, dressed in diverse national costumes, represent many nations from around the world. Some date from the early days of Madonna House, and new ones are given to us each year. They are a delightful way of proclaiming that God came for all people.

And what other news are there besides Christmas and Advent?

We had the opportunity to see what Susanne Stubbs, director general of women, described as "The World Premiere Off-line Showing" of the 12 short online videos that Villagers’ Media had done for us about Madonna House.

You can see them, too, (See our ad on p. 8.) We are hoping that this will be a good tool for the New Evangelization worldwide—whether people come here through them or not.

Those making these videos were touched by Madonna House.

One of them said, "A great grace seemed to accompany us all, all the way through. There are so many moments when MH people gave us new thoughts to live by... What they know they know deeply, and the words that come from this are also felt deeply by those listening."

And lastly another lovely thing happened: the bishop of our diocese, Bishop Michael Mulhall, came to visit with our applicants (those in formation). He had tea with them, said Mass for them, and gave them a talk about the Church today in the context of the theology of history.

There’s more I could write about, but I have run out of space. Blessed, grace-filled Lent to each of you.

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