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## Christmas 2015

*The manger scene – why it holds special significance for Catholics*

By FR. LUKE FONG

THE arrival of Christmas is never a silent affair these days. In fact, even in countries that are not considered “Christian”, the Christmas season makes its presence loud and clear in the way that stores, malls and hotels get decked out with lights and decorations. Sometimes, this “ringing in of the season” begins at the end of October, albeit with the hope that what rings even louder are the cash tills.

The irony of it all is that the very first Christmas was really a silent affair – so much so that some spiritual writers viewed it as God “slipping behind enemy lines”. Without any earthly fanfare and welcome party to usher in the world’s greatest VIP, the birth of Jesus, who was God-made-man, was anything but loud, brassy and

showy.

One of the ways this was brought out clearly is seen when we read Luke’s infancy narrative. Always having a penchant and leaning towards the poor and the outcast, Luke makes it clear that Jesus was born in a manger. For many, it doesn’t account for much of a difference whether this was a stable, a manger or a barn. But theologically, there is a great difference, and more so for us Catholics. Why is this so?

The manger, as Biblical scholar Raymond Brown says in his now famous commentary, is a place where animals feed. Those knowing some French will know that the word for ‘eat’ is manger, spelled in the same way, but pronounced differently. Jesus would later say that he came to be bread for the life of the world, and our Church has never taken that to be symbolic but has always venerated

### *Christmas Message*

*IN a few days, the Saviour will be born in our midst. It is a time to rejoice and spread the joy the newborn King brings to this world. It is also a time to reflect on the year that is coming to an end and the New Year ahead. We, in Singapore, are blessed with peace and harmony. Let us thank God for his kindness and for the numerous blessings he has showered on us this year. We are now in the Holy Year of Mercy and as we wait for Christ’s coming let us remember the words of Pope Francis. Mercy, he said, is “the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sins.”*

*On behalf of Fr. Cary Chan, Fr. Luke Fong and Fr. Joseph Jeannequin, I wish all our parishioners a very Happy and Blessed Christmas.*

*Fr. Adrian Yeo,  
Parish Priest, IHM*

the consecrated host at Mass to truly be the same Jesus Christ, body, soul and divinity, who walked on the face of this earth more than two thousand years ago. That we call this the Blessed Sacrament attests to the fact that we take Jesus’ words literally and seriously.

This, for Brown, was significant enough for Luke to make it clear that Jesus was born in a manger, a feeding trough. His incarnation was to save the world, and he was to give himself as food for our souls. Born in a place to feed animals, Jesus himself became the substance of salvation where he becomes the food for us all.

The images of stables do not

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bring this truth out loud enough. After all, stables are predominantly for horses, and in the time of Jesus, horses were used more by armies and in the king's service rather than domestic farm animals. Barns are farm buildings, and Jesus was

certainly not born in a barn or farm. Perhaps it is because through the years that we have been libertine with the way that we have chosen to "romanticize" the nativity of Jesus that we miss the connection that Luke wanted to make. It does seem like another point scored for those who have taken the Christ out of Christmas.

Perhaps it is about time that we Catholics re-appreciate the manger scene, and allow waves of gratitude to sweep over our hearts and minds as we make that connection of the newborn infant Jesus with Jesus the Eucharist, our bread of life, and seize the opportunity to share this with our friends and relatives, evangelizing others with this truth of our faith. ♥

## ... are you FORMED?

By CHRISTIAN KWAN

We often complain that the Catholic Church is boring and that the only activity that most Catholics are involved in is attending Sunday Mass. Our hectic lifestyle, our family commitments, and the demands from our job gives us very little time for any involvement in church activities and participation in any faith enrichment courses. As a result, we always feel inadequate in our faith.

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# Bible Quiz Night

By DENISE TAN



**Y**OU might have imagined our parish's Bible Quiz Night on Nov 13 to resemble a mathematical Olympiad, but the event was anything but that.

Organised by the Bible Apostolate Team (BAT), the quiz was held in the St. Gregory Hall and saw a positive turnout of 17 enthusiastic teams, composed of four members each, and supported by an enthusiastic audience.

The competition began at 8pm with an introduction of the Game Rules, which many were relieved to find did not prohibit the use of Bibles and mobile devices as reference tools. It was also clear from the start that the night was not about winning as nobody even knew what prizes they were playing for, besides "bragging rights" as suggested by Fr. Luke.

The competition consisted of five rounds of five questions each, with scores tabulated at the end of each round and answers revealed every two rounds. Participants were reminded to cross the box of their chosen answers and only shade them to omit wrong choices – election style.

Before the quiz began, Fr. Adrian offered the opening prayer and refreshments were served. Soon, participants whipped out their smartphones and whispers of "get Google ready" were heard throughout the hall.

The first question worth five points was flashed on the screen: On which day of creation did God create chickens? This was an easy one that almost everyone got right. The



The winning team with Fr. Adrian.

answer was on Day 6, although Fr. Luke asked what if the egg came first.

The question to first stump participants was question four. It asked, "Which is the longest sport in history that can be found in the Bible – tennis, bowling or archery?" Logically, most answered archery and were baffled to find out that the answer was tennis (as it was mentioned in Genesis 41:46 that Joseph served in Pharaoh's court). This was the first of many puns, which had everyone laughing and playfully jeering.

As the night wore on, teams asked each other if Elijah was bald (You can be mauled by bears for making fun of a bald headed man. Who was that man?), if ass meant donkey, and if Job had bad breath



Searching for answers.

(Who was the first man accused of bad breath in the Bible?) After the first round, organisers suggested working with a shorter time limit for greater challenge but they were met with a resounding "no".

A few hung phones later, it was time for round five. This round disallowed all types of referencing, much to the dismay of participants who were left to their own devices of smart guesses and rational thinking.

Question 23 asked: "Whose hair was as grown like eagles' feathers; nails like birds' claws – Elisha, Michael or Nebuchadnezzar?" Rose Fernandez, who was from team Tsum Tsum together with her husband,

daughter and friend, rationalised that such a man must have "gone mad" and Nebuchadnezzar "sounds most like it". She got the answer right.

For the answers that they did not get, Rose and her team merely laughed it off. "At least now we



Quiz masters & part of their support team.

know, that's the whole point," said Rose.

Her husband, Terrence, also said that the purpose of the event was to build a closer community and have fun, although he joked that the BAT "should not write for Saturday Night Live".

Finally, after the last round, it was time to reveal the winners. Three consolation prizes were given out to teams The Gift, EPL1 and LOWC. In third and second place were teams Life G4 and ECHM respectively and the ultimate champion, who won 4 copies of the book 'The Church According to the Heart of Pope Francis,' was team Youth Catechists.

The team was made up of youth facilitators Vanessa Ee, Samuel Lau, Sean Lee and Zachary Tan.

When asked about their winning strategy, Vanessa said: "We used a combination of mobile devices, hardcopy Bible, logic and attempted understanding of the context. Black-and-white was used when we couldn't come to a satisfactory answer, but we still went with the choice that made most sense. So basically, a lot of group discussion, Bible knowledge, and an appreciation for cheesy jokes." ♥

# Reaching out during Advent

By MATTHEW TAY



AS Christmas approaches and jingle bells start ringing, it is important to remember that while we are celebrating the birth of Christ, the month of Advent is also known as the month of giving. In our parish, some church ministries organised projects to help parishioners give back to the community.

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP) decided to get a Christmas wish list from needy families living within our parish boundaries. They then put these requests on gift cards with the name of the item and placed them on a board at the church piazza (above). Parishioners were then asked to choose one or more cards and buy the gift for the needy family.

Once the parishioners bought the items they handed them over to the SSVP members who gift wrapped the items and presented them to the needy families. Said SSVP member and one of the organisers of the Advent outreach programme MaryAnn Joseph: "The aim of our advent project was to give parishioners a little taste of the SSVP experience, that is to help a neighbour in need beyond just monetary contribution – by giving that person a small portion of the parishioner's time and effort."

Parishioner Celia Sim applauded the SSVP's effort. "SSVP is doing an incredible job," she said. "This drive is a great idea. It is something different which enables the parishioners to contribute to the needy families."

Members of the RCIA in the parish encouraged parishioners to take part in the 'Walk for Rice', which is an annual advent event at Punggol Waterway (right). The

Walk for Rice is jointly organized by SouthEast CDC and NTUC FairPrice Foundation. For every 200m that one walks FairPrice donates one bowl of white rice and one bowl of brown rice to vulnerable residents. On Dec 5, 113 parishioners turned up for the walk and the event raised 5,724 bowls of rice for the needy families.

As in previous years, the Epiphany group gave out Advent pledge cards for those praying for the conversion of non-Catholic friends and family of parishioners. They were asked to hang the pledge card on a Christmas tree placed outside the church.

The Epiphany group also ran a 'Sponsor a Child' programme. This allowed parishioners to sponsor a child in Rhiau Island, Indonesia, for their 2016 tuition and/or living expenses.

Giving to the needy was not the only Advent programme done by our parish. The members of the Liturgy of the Word for Children (LOWC) organised an arts and craft session for the children in the parish. During the planning session with Fr. Luke Fong, LOWC decided on an activity that will emphasize Advent

as a time of waiting, something that young children may find difficult to do. They also wanted to focus on the real reason for waiting, which is Jesus. Therefore, after floating various ideas around, they decided to make a set of nativity figurines using salt dough, which is a mixture of wheat flour, salt and water. This medium, which works similar to play dough, would enable the children to experience 'waiting' as the dough hardens and dries with the aid of an oven. Around 33 children turned up for the session on Dec 6 to create their very own nativity figurines, which was made possible with the help of LOWC members who guided the children to make the figurines using simple child-friendly steps. LOWC is also preparing the Children's Choir for the Christmas Day service.

In addition to the various Advent outreach events, the parish hosted three Advent talks spread over three Fridays, from Nov 27 to Dec 11. The talks were given by the IHM Priests. The first talk by Fr. Luke was titled 'Advent as awaiting Mercy in the Old Testament', the second by Fr. Adrian Yeo was titled 'Advent as experiencing Mercy in the





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Epiphany group promoting the 'Sponsor A Child' & Advent pledge card projects.

arrival of Jesus' and the final talk by Fr. Cary Chan was titled 'Advent as living Mercy till the second coming of Jesus'.

The talks helped parishioners to reflect and understand the entire meaning of Advent. Parishioner Audrey Kok said she decided to attend the talks so that, together as a parish family, she could prepare for the Lord's coming meaningfully in love and joy. "It was an experience of gratefulness for God's mercy through Jesus which overwhelmed me. It was something I so often take for granted," she said. "I asked myself, what should my response be to God's loyal love for me? In my everyday life, I pray that the Holy Spirit be my guide and strength to humbly spread this love to all whom God send my way. In my weakness, His loyal love will be my constant strength and courage." ♥



Hanging a pledge card.

## Parishioners give thumbs up to bus service

By PATRICK JONAS

ON Nov 1, the long-awaited shuttle bus service to cater to residents living near Kovan and Lorong Ah Soo was launched. The bus makes seven round trips every Sunday, starting from Kovan bus terminus and stopping at the bus stop in front of the Paya Lebar Methodist Girls School (PLMGS) before arriving at IHM. The first trip starts at 7.50am and reaches the church (in front of the Retreat House on Kovan Road) at 8am after picking up parishioners at the PLMGS stop. The bus continues on its loop service starting from Kovan bus terminus at 8.10, 9.20, 9.40, 10.15, 10.35 and 10.55am.

Those who have taken the bus service are a happy lot. Andrew Khng, who boards the bus from PLMGS stop, had this to say in a posting on the IHM facebook page: "Thank you for the excellent initiative by our parish in organising this free Sunday bus shuttle service to Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for Sunday masses... We appreciate the time and effort taken by the organisers and coordinators in greeting and ensuring that parishioners got on the right shuttle bus ride at the three points. A job well done! God bless all these fine



parishioners involved in making it so convenient especially for senior citizens and parishioners who don't own a private car in commuting to IHM church for Sunday masses."

Another parishioner Philip Ee also complimented the efforts of the church but requested whether one more pick-up point could be introduced. He feels that many living near the Hougang Avenue 1 Hainanese Market would benefit. Some living in the vicinity would want to have their breakfast before heading to church and the bus stop in front of the market would be ideal for this group of people, he said.

The bus service will run initially for a period of three months, after which a decision will be taken whether to continue with it or not. This depends on the number of parishioners using the service. ♥



## PPC ends its term

THE Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) of IHM completed its two-year term this month. The PPC, which started its term in Jan 2014 had its last meeting earlier this month. PPC chairman Pierre Paul Chua and Parish Priest Fr. Adrian thanked all the members of the outgoing PPC for the multiple initiatives they undertook to make the IHM parish a vibrant and active one.

A new parish pastoral set up will be put in place early next year. ♥

# Parish Day of Recollection

By COLIN LEE



**I**N May, IHM parish priest Fr. Adrian Yeo set out to meet every parish group in the church. This was part of the efforts to build communities within the parish. Once he had met all the groups, a Day of Recollection was held on Sept 24.

Described as “something different” by an organising member from the Parish Pastoral Council, little content was taught directly that day; rather, insights were gleaned mainly through activity-based learning.

The theme of the day was “We are Community”. Parishioners streamed in from before 9am to exhibit their willingness to build up the physical body of Christ. For some, this entailed personal sacrifice

and an element of trust. “When I decided to attend the recollection and to forgo family and holiday break, I was trusting and following what I believed to be God’s plan for me – to reveal His love through His Church,” said Caren Tan, a parishioner of over 16 years.

Following the opening address by the parish priest, the Gospel of the day was proclaimed and those present were invited to reflect on how community can add value in their personal faith journey.

This was followed by a series of activities that served to strengthen bonds among the participants, who were by then broken into smaller sharing groups. In one such activity, participants took turns to give and receive affirmation;

while at another, they grew increasingly open to each other in their sharing, covering topics such as personal strength, passions and bad habits.

A card game, called ‘Barnaga 5 tricks’, after the lunch break brought out the competitive nature in some and left a deep impression on many. This unusual card game made use of poker cards and was played in groups of four with each pair attempting to win more sets than the opposing pair. Additionally, the losing pair after each

game was rotated to another table. The caveat – unknown to players, groups were given different sets of rules to play by.

“At some point, I realised that everyone understood the game differently but because we were not allowed to talk, it made it more difficult,” said Alexander Choo, who attended the retreat with his elder sister. “Nonetheless, the game illustrated pertinent lessons for community building, especially in areas such as communication and perspective-taking,” added his sister, Amanda.

By mid-afternoon, parishioners shared with others in their groups the milestones and major turning points in their lives. This was followed by a period of intercession as participants took turns to pray for each other.

Amanda, found it to be both meaningful and a great opportunity to build bonds. She said: “The sharing allowed me to understand the problems that people in my community face, which helps me be more understanding.”

The recollection ended around six in the evening and guidelines for building community were presented and time given to participants to testify to the positive experience they had that day.

“I have enjoyed this day spent with God’s people,” concluded Caren, who was among those who testified. “Through the various activities and breakout sessions I was able to partake of His grace and spiritual nourishment. The day has given me insights into the value and joy of what an apostolic communion with Jesus means.” ♥







# A day at the Willing Hearts soup kitchen

By DENISE SEOW



**M**Y experience spending a day helping out at Willing Hearts is something that I will not forget easily. I learnt a lot by being part of such an amazing organisation even though it was only for a day -- about giving without having second thoughts and that a person's dream can truly become reality.



we overcame that challenge and managed to be there on time. We were welcomed with opened arms. I remember how Uncle Tony, the founder of Willing Hearts, welcomed us. "Come in, we welcome anyone who wears Jesus around their neck," he said as he saw the crucifix I had around my neck. By his simple greeting, subconsciously, a smile was put on my face.

Our first task was to pack food -- like fried fish, eggs and cooked

styrofoam boxes I moved on to helping at other stations as well. Such as, cooking a humongous quantity of eggs and delivering pots of rice to the packing stations. The amount of hard work and effort that is put into preparing food as early as four in the morning, every day without fail continues to amaze me.

Uncle Tony has made his dream of helping others a reality and beyond that, was able to rally volunteers from all walks of life to join in the cause.



Willing Hearts is a volunteer-run, non-profit organisation that was set up to help provide food for the needy in Singapore, regardless of race or religion. The organisation operates a kitchen that prepares, cooks and distributes about 5,000 meals or more to many distribution points scattered across Singapore.

The day started with me dragging myself out of bed at five in the morning. Just getting to the soup kitchen at Kembangan at 6am, where the kitchen of Willing Hearts is located, was a challenge for me and my group of friends. We wondered how we were going to stay awake for the rest of the morning. But

vegetables -- into styrofoam boxes. As we packed the food, we chatted with some of the volunteers there. They ranged from secondary school students to working adults from all walks of life. It was interesting to hear the reasons why they decided to wake up early in the morning to help out. One volunteer, a woman in her 60's, said she was one of the early birds at the kitchen. She could not sleep properly at night. So instead of struggling with her lack of sleep, she decided she could put her time to good use and volunteer at Willing Hearts.

The morning passed by really fast. From packing food into

What is inspiring is that he does not expect anything in return except for the smiles of the people around him. This experience reminded me of what Mother Theresa once said: "We cannot do great things, only small things with great love."

Willing Hearts was set up in 2005 by Mr Tony Tay. The food prepared at its kitchen is provided to the elderly, the disabled, low-income families, children from single-parent or otherwise poverty-stricken families, and migrant workers in Singapore. ♥

*Denise Seow is a member of COY and a Secondary Two catechist.*

# Solace in the time of sorrow

by DOMINIC ABRAHAM

The Our Lady of Sorrows ministry was started with a simple aim: Pray for one another. The ministry was born in IHM way back in 1973 when Fr Louis Loiseau was the parish priest. This meant the group, which started with 15 men and 13 women, would come together and pray for the souls of the departed within the IHM parish. Today there are 80 members in the group and they visit the wake of parishioners who have moved on and offer prayers for the soul.

The group gathers at the venue of the wake at 8pm on all days the wake is held, to offer prayers. They pray the rosary for the departed soul and for the members of the family of the deceased. Sometimes when there is more than one wake at the same time, the group splits into two, thereby making sure they are present to support both families in their time of grief.

To ensure they are able to gather for prayers at short notice, the group has a system in place. One of the members is named the liaison officer, who is at the top of the call tree. Below him are 7 sub-leaders, each heading a team of 8 to 10 members. When the family of the deceased informs the parish seeking the comfort of this ministry, the parish office gets in touch with the liaison officer, who in turn informs his set of seven sub-

leaders. They then reach out to their individual teams and in a matter of minutes all members are contacted. Soon a group from the ministry is formed to offer prayers at the wake.

Requests for the group to pray at a wake have to be made before 4pm. This is to give the members enough time to come together. The ministry members attend wakes only of IHM parishioners. But when a family member of an IHM parishioner belonging to another parish passes on, and there is a request made for the group to pray at the wake, they treat it as a special case and attend the wake.

The office bearers of the ministry are elected every two years. It is currently headed by Peter Low. Past leaders include Goh Bah Soon, Francis Chong and Francis Liew. Most of the new members who join the ministry are from the RCIA, and sometimes family members of the deceased choose to join the ministry based on the love and support they experience during their hour of need. Said Victor Nai, who has been a member of the ministry since 1987: "We turn to our Mother in our time of need, and possibly that is what brought about the name of this ministry".

The ministry bears all expenses through member contributions. Once in a while, the family of the deceased gifts the group an ang pao.

Apart from praying at the wake,

the ministry gets together in the church on the second day of each month to pray for all the deceased souls of the parish. The group also offers mass at their own expense for each departed soul and informs the family the day and time of the mass and requests them to attend.

In addition, on All Souls Day, members of the group assist relatives of those who have the ashes of their loved ones in the IHM columbarium to light candles in memory of the departed souls.

Most of the members have been part of the ministry for many years. Catherine Low who has been a member since 1989, says that when she went through health issues, she continued to feel strong and attributes it to the prayers of the departed souls. Joseph Koh, the current liaison officer feels that "not many parishioners are aware of this ministry and the service they perform".

The ministry members come together on Sept 15, the feast day of Our Lady of Sorrows, for a special mass, followed by dinner. The group is looking forward to welcoming more parishioners to their ministry to help provide comfort to the family of the grieving by their prayers.

Those interested can contact Peter Low, the co-ordinator, at 97324276. ♥



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