

PREPARING NOW FOR CHRISTMAS EVANGELIZATION

by Harry Winter OMI (printed in www.omiusa.org, Wed., Dec. 10, 2014; www.v2catholic.com. Dec. 12).

One of the unforeseen developments of the early Christmas Eve Mass has been it turning into a family celebration of Christmas. We now have standing room only for the 4 pm to 6 pm Christmas Eve Masses, as the children of the parish present Christmas pageants. Many of those attending are non-practicing Catholics or even non-Christian spouses. Some from these groups attend the other Masses of Christmas too.

This is a great opportunity to draw them back to the practice of their faith or interesting them in Catholicism. If done gently and joyfully, people who have silently dropped out, even angrily, will return to the practice of their faith.

First, during Advent Masses, remind those attending, both in the bulletin and in homilies, that their Christmas attendance is crucial for drop-out family members and friends. The children in parochial school and Religious Education classes can be urged to invite family members who do not attend regularly, to come with them at Christmas. Who can refuse the invitation of a little child?

At the Christmas Masses, even during the introduction, a gentle welcome can be given to those "we have not seen since last Easter." I have never had a person become angry if this welcome is done gently and with a smile.

We sometimes forget that the flowers and other decorations, the hymns, "the Christmas spirit," are all strong invitations to our faith. Many of these we are targeting may not come back on the Sunday after Christmas or New Year's, but if we remind our parishioners to invite them for Epiphany, this "Christmas spirit" still continues.

St. Eugene de Mazenod was especially joyful at Christmas. He was ordained on Dec. 21, 1811, and according to the custom of the time, spent the next days in retreat. His First Mass was the first of the three Christmas Masses, at midnight Christmas Eve. He was installed as Bishop of Marseille on Dec. 24, 1837, with reverence but not pomp. Francis Flanagan, OMI, in his one volume abridgement of Canon Jean Leflon's four volume life of St. Eugene, spends three pages (201-203) describing this event. He highlights the surprise and joy which St. Eugene's pastoral inaugural letter that he read from the pulpit Christmas Eve, brought to his former enemies among the clergy and secular authorities.

May all of us, whether we are involved with Christmas Masses or not, pray that we may spend time and energy attracting people back to the faith at Christmas. St. Eugene will help us.