

The nativity icon is full of beautiful symbolism.

In the centre is the infant Christ lying in a manger. The Virgin Mary is beside Him, and an ox and an ass are behind Him. Christ being born in a cave is not in the Bible, but it is an ancient tradition, dating back to the first and second centuries. He is dressed in burial clothes to foreshadow His death. His location in a cave also foreshadows the grave in which He would be buried and where He would resurrect. *When Adam and Even were first created, they were clothed in the glory of God. That was their natural state. But when they fell into sin, they lost this clothing of glory and became aware of their nakedness. Clothed in animals' skins (which represent death), they went into exile outside of the Garden. Yet opposite now happens, God made Christ who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ is exiles from the Father.*

Bottom left and the Virgin Mary, she is not looking at Him. Instead, she is looking at her betrothed, Joseph, interceding for him. The tradition tells us that after the birth of Jesus, he walked out of the cave, battling doubts. The old man next to him is supposed to be the devil who is, of course, filling his mind with all sorts of doubts and angry thoughts.

Sometimes when God shows up in our lives, it raises questions and doubts. God bestows His grace upon us, but then He seems to withdraw a little bit, allowing difficulties to test and deepen our faith. We may wonder why things happen the way they do. But if we persevere, then things will gradually become clear.

Top & middle. At the very top is a blue shape sometimes called a mandorla. It signifies the presence and the glory of God. It beams from the heavens, pointing to the Christ child, which shows His descent from heaven to the earth. On the left, the three kings (magi) are traveling from afar, following the star in the sky. Angels appear in the heavens above and tell the good news to the shepherds (on the right) in the field so that they can see this divine child born in the little town of Bethlehem.

I sometimes wonder if the shepherds and angelic chorus appeared after Jesus' birth more for Joseph's sake than anything else.

May we be comforted in the fact that our Saviour has come into this world to heal every messy, doubting, sinful part of us. There is nothing a repentant heart has done that will permanently push God away from it. And there is nothing that you have done that he has not already helped someone else through, someone else who is considered a saint.

Bottom right. The women at the bottom right are midwives who display that the Son of God was truly born as a human, and did not merely appear to be human as some early heretics claimed. There is a fountain that they are about to wash the Christ child in because He had, in some sense, an ordinary, messy birth.

The ox and ass are two of the most ancient symbols that appear in nativity icons and sculptures. In the ancient Church, the ox symbolized the Jews, for it was a clean, kosher animal that they could eat. It could also be easily trained to pull a plough and assist in various ways. The Jews had the Law of Moses and it helped keep them (or at least a remnant) clean and obedient to God. The ass, on the other hand, is a stubborn and wilder animal. It is unclean and not kosher, therefore, it represents the Gentiles who did not have the Law of Moses to guide them away from their pursuit of indecent and immoral behaviour.

In Christ, these two seemingly opposed groups came together to form one people. As the Bible says, For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility (Eph. 2:14).

Above are the angels, below are the shepherds, midwives, and people. To the left are the three wise men, the three kings, the magi who travel a great distance bearing expensive gifts. To the right are simple, poor, uneducated shepherds. In the center is Christ, who brings all of these different people together in Himself. He unites heaven and earth, rich and poor, wise and simple, educated and uneducated, locals and foreigners, obedient and rebellious men, the confident and doubters; all these find their place in Christ.

Christ was the mystery hidden throughout all ages – just as his coming in the cave was hidden from most people. But the glory of this mystery is Christ in you (cf. Col. 1:26-27). In this way, the cave became an icon of every heart that opens itself to Christ.

Caves, with all of their mystery and darkness, hidden chambers and secret places, are truly a reflection of the dark, mysterious heart within each one of us. But like the cave Christ entered on Christmas day, our hearts can become the dwelling place of His majestic glory. Like the ox and ass, we have both clean and unclean things in our hearts – the things that are good and not so good. We have the devil whispering doubts or evil things to us. But we also have the Mother of God, praying for us.

All the distractions in our lives pull us outside of our hearts. Because of that, we have terrible self-awareness. But when we enter into our hearts, we find that Christ is there. But what does that mean?

Imagine Joseph getting up and walking away from the devil, saying, "I'm tired of listening to you and your lies." He prays to God to help him; he gets up and walks to the cave where Christ and the Mother of God are. That is the beginning of descending into the heart. Of finding the mystery hidden from all eternity, dwelling within our hearts as He once dwelt in a cave near the little town of Bethlehem.





St Francis Xavier Catholic Parish

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Ruakaka; Hikurangi; Whangarei Heads; Maungatapere; Maungakarama; Matapouri; Poroti; Pipiwai.

PARISH STAFF: Fr Brian Prendeville sm (pp), Fr Peter McDermott sm, Fr Trevor Tindall sm, Fr Peter Janssen sm, Deacon Jim Nees, Deacon Nimo Ponifasio. Janet Ponifasio, Marjorie Abraham-Quinn.

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Christmas 2023

Together let us make this Christmas the best Christmas we have ever celebrated.

This desire to do this comes from within. "I want to make this the best Christmas I have ever celebrated". We are in charge of our hearts, our actions and our pockets. Others will be full voice saying this is what makes a good Christmas. "Shopping, Fooding, And Drinking: We celebrate because of Christ. Christ makes our Christmas.

I hope and pray you will have the best Celebration you have ever had. Christmas Christ among us. Christ our Saviour is Born. To thank you all. The people of Whangarei and the Districts thereof. Thank you for your faith and your endurance and your stamina to keep being disciples of Christ Jesus. We can say in spite of all the hurdles that come our way, Thank you for your support and enabling the church to continue with its Mission of proclaiming Christ, in season out of season, thank you for your faithfulness. Always with the purpose to draw and share what we ourselves receive. Christ Jesus the gift of the Father.

For all those who have been constant in your service to those who are sick and elderly. For the faith in the communities of enabling Sunday to be held holy and sacred even when there no priest available.

For the huge number of people who do lots of little unnoticed tasks in our community and in and around our church community, the Physical work and the caring work of each other thank you.

To our schools of Pompallier and St Francis Xavier and all the children in your care, we thank you. Our big mission, is to see the desire for our Schools be immersed in the gathering of our worship on Sunday. The history of our parish, if we allow the pioneering work of our ancestors who worked tirelessly for Education in our parish to lapse, it is as if a heritage has been forsaken. Pray for our students their families and their teachers. With great gratitude to Mr. Craig McKernan for his 24 years of service as Principal.

To the tireless work of all those in ministries of service and caring for the needs of people thank you.

For Janet the face of our parish at the office for her commitment and service joining with the expertise of Marjorie helping out in the Administration deep gratitude. We are indebted to your service.

To the Religious Sisters of Our Lady of the Mission, thank you for your witness in our Parish. To Sister Fatima who has taken up the role of Hospital Chaplain, thank you.

With my brother Priests of the Society of Mary, and our Deacons Jim and Nimo, thank you for your commitment and service to the people of Whangarei. Your willingness and generosity in your service.

On a personal note, deep gratitude to God that I continue to regain my health and wellbeing, and your prayers for my recovery which I acknowledge is the work of Gods healing and your prayers and encouragement. Mary our mother has been interceding for me.

Lastly to wish you all the best Christmas you ever have had before, measured by your receiving every grace and blessing upon you that you need.

Fr Brian Prendeville S.M.

Fr Thomas Patrick O'Connor SM RIP

Father Tom's ministry was mostly in parishes throughout the country, and in many of them he was parish priest and superior. After completing a full term at Whangarei, Tom was on holiday but on the way to his next appointment in Wellington he suffered a heart attack and, within a few months, a stroke. These health setbacks, along with others over time, he bore with patience tinged with a determination to continue doing as much as he could for as long as he could.

Father Tom O'Connor died last Sunday.

In the later part of the next Month the opportunity to gather for a Memorial Mass. Date to be determined.

Tom retired to Marist Centre in 2020 until his need for professional care led to his moving into Te Hopai Home. We are very grateful for the care he has received there and, from Rowan Donoghue and the community at Marist Centre. Tom was admitted to Wellington Hospital on 5 December 2023, having suffered another stroke. He has not been well since and has been receiving palliative care.

He died peacefully around 4pm.

Icon of The Nativity of Christ: Explained. Leaflets are available in the Sanctuary by the Crib to take home.

CHRISTMAS THOUGHT: May God grant you the light of Christmas, which is faith; the warmth of Christmas, which is love; the radiance of Christmas, which is purity; the righteousness of Christmas, which is justice; the belief in Christmas, which is truth; the all of Christmas, which is Christ.



From the Parish Pastoral Council. May the miracle of Christmas fill your heart with joy and peace.



Solemnity of Mary The Holy Mother of God. You are invited to start the New Year in a prayerful way. All are welcome to attend 8am Mass here in our Church Monday 1 January 2024.

Society of St Vincent de Paul wish to thank parishioners for their generous support this year with donations and food. To those who have purchased gifts and food to be given out for Christmas, we thank you so much for your kindness and spirit of giving. May God bless you all. Wishing you all a very blessed Christmas. *Anna Williams*

Haere Mai! Nau Mai! All are invited to the Anniversary of the first Mass in New Zealand which was celebrated at Totara Point on 13 January 1838. Outdoor Mass will be celebrated at 11:00 am at Totara Point on the 14 January 2024. Bishop Lowe will celebrate Mass. Shared picnic will follow. All welcome. Joe McMonagle has offered to take a 12 seater bus if needed. Koha welcome. Sign up sheet is in the Church foyer.

SUNDAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS

ST FRANCIS XAVIER:

(From Sunday 31 December)

Mass 6:00pm (Saturday Vigil); 8:00am, 10:00am (Sunday)

RUAKAKA

10:30am Mass 31 December 7, 14, 28 January.
10:30am Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion 21 January.

HIKURANGI

8:00am Mass 7 January
10:00am Mass 21 January
10:00am Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion 31 December, 14, 28 January

WHANGAREI HEADS

Combined Community Service 31 December.
6:00pm Vigil Mass Saturday 6 January
8:30am Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion - 14 and 28 January.

Thank you to those who have visited us in the Parish Office over the past year. It has been a pleasure to have been of service to you all. We have enjoyed meeting the many new parishioners and families. To the kind parishioners who have helped in the Office, folding Bulletins etc, you have considerably lightened our work load, we thank you.

"Disciples wear working boots but leave a trail of angel footsteps"

May God fill your life with love, joy, and peace this Christmas and throughout the New Year.
Marjorie and Janet

Prayers please for these people and their families.... and those who are sick and their caregivers especially:

Ben Hutton, Margaret Hibbert, Brian Plunkett, Rebecca van Altvorst, Peter Harris, Bob Connor.

Recently deceased: Padraigh (Pat) Kinsella, (Australia, brother of Theresa Kinsella), Fr Tom O'Connor S.M, Barbara Ashwell.

Anniversaries: Bob Klenner, Harry Aben, Jack Cebalo, Ken McKay, Graeme Palmer, Peter Cox, Pat Hayes, Vic Treacher, Richard McLeod, Teresa Davis, Prue Torkington, Bill McCarthy.



Newcomers - please make yourself known to a greeter before Mass. Please take a *New Parishioner Pack* from the Church foyer, fill out and return to the Parish Office. Thank you.



It costs \$5,270.24 per week to meet running costs of our Parish.
Eftpos Machine is at the rear of the

Please remember the Parish in your Will

