CATHEDRAL’S FIRST-EVER CHOIR SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN
It has been my pleasure and honor to help create the Nativity scene for the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah for the past eight Christmas. Every year we try to make the Crèche a meaningful Christmas experience, by bringing the gospels alive, to spiritually enrich the lives of all who view it.

In 2013, I was primarily responsible for the set up, design and theme for the Crèche as Brother Robert was less involved than other previous years because of his condition. I originally came up with the creche 2013 theme from birth to death as I looked at the stable and the crucifix set in the empty space. The question arose in my mind, how can the two different themes be united as one? Then, the answer to my question came through the holy gospels that inspired me to place the City of Jerusalem between the stable and the crucifix. Here is the double meaning of the city; Jesus was born outside the city in the countryside of Bethlehem, and he was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem on a hill called Golgotha.

Jesus was not accepted as the Messiah more than 2000 years ago, and some people still have difficulty accepting Jesus as our redeemer today. Another important imagery meaning of the Christ child and crucified Christ is his physical appearance. When we contemplate the image of the sweet baby Jesus lying in the manger, we see the nakedness, humility, vulnerability and poverty of the suffering God man on earth. When we contemplate the image of the adult crucified Jesus, we see his nakedness, sufferings, sacrifice and great love for the human race.

Monsignor O'Neill took great interest in the set up this year, offering valuable advice on the relationship of the various elements, particularly on the relocation of the city to the right side of the Crèche in front of the crucifix on St. Anthony's altar, because of his many trips and experiences in Holy Land.

Monsignor noted that "the previous arrangement placed the City in the center of the display which was completely out of proportion in size to the surrounding objects. The current arrangement, which depicts the Shepherd's Field, then Bethlehem in the center and the Damascus Gate and City of Jerusalem to the extreme right in front of the Calvary Shrine on its own to the right of the Crèche, to the rear, depicted outside the walls, which is more geographically correct."

The juxtaposition of the Creche, the City, Calvary, with the crucifix, looming above the City of Jerusalem, up on Calvary, presages the the fulfillment of our Savior's mission here on earth at the end of Lent.
Just two months ago, we were all admiring the beautiful Christmas crèche which contained a vista from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from the birth of Christ to his place of suffering, death and resurrection. The two are intimately connected.

The message of Pope Francis to the Church for this holy season of Lent, reminds us of St. Paul’s words to the Church in Corinth: “that Jesus Christ, though he was rich, for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich.” The child in Bethlehem who was visited by the three Kings from the East, bearing treasures for him, freely chose to make himself poor, in order to redeem us from our sin. Pope Francis writes: “Christ, the eternal Son of God, one with the Father in power and glory, chose to be poor; he came amongst us and drew near to each of us; he set aside his glory and emptied himself so that he could be like us in all things. God’s becoming man is a great mystery! But the reason for all this is his love, a love which is grace, generosity, a desire to draw near, a love which does not hesitate to offer itself in sacrifice for the beloved.”

With that in mind, our goal for this Lenten season, should become much clearer. We seek to imitate Christ the Lord, by making ourselves poor in order to share in the riches of Christ, the Son of God. Isn’t it interesting that we always look upon the Christmas season as a time for giving, for charity, for generosity of spirit. It makes us feel good to bestow upon those whom we love, and those whom we do not even know, a share in the riches we have received. Ironically, though we often think of it in a different way, the Lenten season is meant to be just such a time: a season in which to make ourselves poor, and to draw near to those who are in need, in order to share in the riches of Christ, who made himself poor for our salvation. That is certainly different.

As Pope Francis says: “Christ’s poverty, which enriches us, is his taking flesh and bearing our weaknesses and sins as an expression of God’s infinite mercy to us. Jesus’ wealth is that of his boundless confidence in God the Father, his constant trust, his desire always and only to do the Father’s will and give glory to him.”

Lent offers us an annual opportunity to deepen our trust and confidence in God; to freely make ourselves poor, so that others might be enriched by God’s grace.

St. Peter Chrysologus makes this point beautifully when he writes about our threefold strategy for Lent. He says, “There are three things by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other. Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; they cannot be separated. If you have only one of them or not all together, you have nothing. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God’s ear to yourself.”

Lent is a fitting time for self-denial. The Pope says: “We would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our own poverty. Let us not forget that real poverty hurts: no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance. I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt.”

Yes, even Lent is meant to be a season of joy! Despite our penance, we are consoled by the fact that we are being enriched by the mercy and the obedience of Jesus. When we imitate Him, in emptying ourselves, we are filled by God’s grace, which is all we really need. Make this a season of real self-denial, and of real joy.
Rehearsals began in January for the Cathedral’s first-ever Choir School for Children, a program that is already demonstrating its quality and value to the parish community. This new school is still accepting students in grades 3 through 8 with class and rehearsals occurring every Sunday, from 3:00-4:30 p.m. until May.

Children who enroll enjoy exposure to a broad set of musical disciplines, according to McDowell Fogle, Director of Music at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The curriculum is impressive, covering music theory and application, elements of music history, vocal production, chant, sight-singing and other aspects of music in relation to theology. “Our main goal is to create a safe and sacred environment where our students can activate their musical talents and spiritual purpose through our rehearsals and lessons,” said Molly Nuttall, Director of the Choir School for Children.

Classes are taught by Nuttall with assistance from Kelly Balmaceda, the Cathedral Cantor, renowned for her captivating vocal performances on Sundays.

Under the supervision of Nuttall and Balmaceda the Choir School will do more than edify and instruct children in the discipline of music. According to Fogle they will also perform. Currently the class is expected to sing as a choir at Sunday’s 11:30 a.m. Mass every four to six weeks. Additionally, the class is scheduled to sing at the 10 a.m. Easter Mass, performing compositions such as Ralph Vaughan Williams’ Five Mystical Songs. Concerts and various repertoires for the community are on the horizon in addition to the first concert, tentatively scheduled for May.

Involving children early in the art of music will not only lead to future talent for the parish, but can yield immediate rewards. “I think that awakening the spirit within a child through music is extremely rewarding,” Nuttall said. “There are so many children who have a great deal of potential in the arts, and our program gives them a safe, comfortable, and revered place to better themselves as musicians.” The real challenge involved with the Children’s Choir, according to Nuttall, is recruitment. For this reason parents with children in the 3rd through 8th grades are encouraged to consider participation.

For parents interested in exposing their children to worship music through the choir, they can contact Nuttall or Fogle at savcathedralmusic@gmail.com to get started. “There are no prerequisites or auditions, as we would like to further the knowledge of any child who has an interest in the arts, regardless of skill level,” said Nuttall. “But we try to challenge the group by always working towards a new goal, whether it be singing in multiple parts, adding soloists, or creating smaller ensembles for performances.”

In a regular year practices begin in August and generally follow the school calendar for holidays and breaks. There is a tuition fee of $75 per semester ($150 per year) for students to join, as the program integrates music theory, history, and performances. Fee includes purchase of a cassock, surplice, textbook and music. Scholarships are available, according to the Cathedral’s music website: www.sjbmusic.org.
When Pope Francis was Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, he was known to sneak out at night in Buenos Aires to break bread with the homeless, sitting with them on the street and eating with them, to show that they were loved. Recently there has been speculation that Pope Francis is sneaking out of the Vatican under the cover of darkness, disguised as a priest, to give money to the poor and homeless on the streets of Rome.

Now he calls on us to do likewise,

“To love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete; it means seeing in every person the face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely.”

Lent affords us an opportunity to rediscover the mercy of God and become more merciful toward our brothers and sisters. Almsgiving helps us respond to our neighbor’s needs and share with others whatever we possess through divine goodness. The Christian Service Committee encourages all parishioners to heed the Holy Father’s words and help others in need.

Every March, the Cathedral Parish is responsible for contributing food to the Savannah Social Apostolate Food Basket Program which goes to provide meals to the needy of our city. We’d like to see that basket overflowing with food every Sunday in March as the need is so great. A can of soup is welcome but a bag of groceries each week is preferred. So put the bulletin insert on your refrigerator and bring a bag of groceries to church every week.

The drive starts Sunday, March 2nd and runs through the entire month. Boxes will be maintained in the vestibule of the Cathedral for parishioners to deposit items of non-perishable food for this much needed cause: canned fish, meats, stew, vegetables, hearty soups, pasta, spaghetti sauce, peanut butter and jelly are always needed.

Please be generous and help Sister Julie keep the shelves at the Social Apostolate filled. Lent is a favorable time to bear witness to the Gospel of Charity and fulfill your Lenten responsibility for almsgiving before we get to Easter. The Food Drive is a chance to be of service to your fellow man.

“Happy is he who has regard for the lowly and the poor; in the day of misfortune the Lord will deliver him.” (Psalm 40:2)
Wednesday, January 22nd marked the forty-first anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, the case in which the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in all fifty states. In memoriam of the fifty-six million unborn babies who have been sacrificed on the altar of abortion since the Court’s ruling in 1973, pro-life supporters from around the country (and the world) gathered in Washington, D.C. to brave dangerously cold temperatures and a snow storm to stand in solidarity with those who cannot stand for themselves.

The annual March for Life in Washington, D.C. is the largest pro-life gathering in the world and estimates for this year are over a hundred thousand, but whatever the final count, those who marched were dedicated. With wind-chill temperatures in the negatives, it was clear that marchers are committed to the cause of protecting the unborn.

Most newsworthy, aside from the weather, was the number of young people who participated in the March. High school and college kids certainly outnumbered the old-timers, and their enthusiasm was encouraging. Although not usually known for advocating moral issues, more and more young people are picking up the torch from their predecessors and vocally taking to the streets, and to their government and peers, indicating that the future of the pro-life movement has strong and healthy torch-bearers waiting in the wings.

The March for Life rally started at The Mall between the Washington Monument and the U.S. Capitol building. Pro-life speakers included politicians, clergy and every day citizens with a story to tell. Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family, a longtime friend of the pro-life movement, expressed his optimism for the future as science continues to show that the unborn feel pain and have working body parts and organs much earlier than pro-abortionists will admit. He also pointed to new polls that indicate a turning of the tide in public sentiment with a reported 62% of Americans seeing abortion as “morally wrong” and 84% supporting restrictions on abortion on demand.
The march began up Constitution Avenue toward the U.S. Supreme Court with young people chanting pro-life slogans and Catholic groups singing the Divine Mercy Chaplet and praying the rosary. Not only were most of the marchers very young, but most of the clergy were also very young. Very young priests and very young nuns accompanied and led groups of youth in the march, indicating that our current young Catholic leadership is doing a very effective job in communicating the importance of the right to life for the unborn to the young generation. And they are taking that message and running with it.

The March for Life concluded at the U.S. Supreme Court. It was a somber moment as marchers stopped and paused in front of the Court, looking up the marble stairs, as if waiting for someone to emerge and give an accounting for their ruling that legalized abortion, but no one did. Still the marchers waited and lingered, waiting for some justification for the deaths of those tens of millions aborted who would be our brothers and sisters, neighbors and fellow-citizens who were painfully missing from the crowd. As some of the protest signs read, “1/3 of My Generation is Missing”. You could almost feel the sadness of God hovering over the Court.

In the end, the right to life is not a religious issue, although religious people tend to make up a large portion of the marchers, but it is a moral issue and arguably the greatest civil rights issue of our time. We as Americans acknowledge that the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” comes from our Creator, but even Dr. Seuss has the common sense to know that “a person’s a person, no matter how small.”

In December, Emmet Casey, who has administered the Lector Ministry for 20 years, asked to be relieved of his responsibilities. According to Fr. Schreck, "Emmet has been such a wonderful Lector for many years. God blessed him with a clear, rich voice and he has used it well, to proclaim God’s holy word at Mass. People who have come to Mass at the Cathedral over the years have been enriched and nourished by God’s word, clearly and insightfully proclaimed by Emmet. He has also been dedicated to instructing, and scheduling, and recruiting talented Lectors for the Cathedral. On behalf of all of us I want to say “thank you Emmet, and God bless you.”

Please welcome ten new lectors who have joined our ministry as a result of the November Ministry Fair — Brittany Alvarez, Kate and Tom Haase, Heather Marie Smith, Carol Howard, Ted Kleisner, Michael Moore, AnaLisa Marcantonio, Peter Paolucci and Andy Wallington. Their presence will facilitate the introduction of the two-lector system for the 10AM and 11:30AM Masses beginning March 2, 2014. If you have an interest in becoming a lector, please contact Roger Haneline, 912-233-1890, rogerdhaneline@comcast.net.

A big “Thank You” to the Christian Service Committee for organizing the Fair which produced these new lectors.
Headless Saint, Source of Inspiration
By Peter Paolucci

When school groups tour the Cathedral, the children invariably ask the docents to point out the Saint with no head, St. Denis, the Patron Saint of France.

At last year’s Columbus Day Mass, Italian Society member, A. J. Balbo, his wife Christy and sons A.J. and Patrick brought up the gifts. Subsequently, I gave the family a Cathedral tour and pointed out the Five Apostles to the Nations mural. The central figure in that mural is the headless St. Denis, the patron Saint of France. The image made such an impression on young A. J. that when he was required to choose a saint for a project at St. Frances Cabrini School, he was inspired to select the decapitated St. Denis. Legend states that St. Denis was such a great orator, that after his head was severed, he picked it up and continued walking a few miles still preaching.

The project at Cabrini involved the 4th grade students participating in a “living museum” by coming to school dressed as the saints they had researched. The students would stand motionless like wax statues until their classmates would tap their hands, making the statues come alive and answer questions about their respective saints. With a little help from his mother Christy, A. J. was able to create a very convincing St. Denis costume, complete with a detached head.

A. J. chose St. Denis because he thought the legend was unique and inspiring. “I thought it was really cool how St. Denis picked up his head and walked down the mountain,” said A. J. “All of the students were shocked and amazed!”

Even centuries later, St. Denis continues to be an inspiration to yet another generation.
The entrance procession at the 10:00 am Mass on Sunday is often led by three tall servers, carrying the cross and candles up the center aisle. It may not be obvious to all the attendees but this group consists of Doug Willett and his two teenage sons, Jeremiah and Isaiah.

Born and raised in Pikeville, a small town in the Appalachian Mountains in Eastern Kentucky, made famous by the Hatfield & McCoy feud, Doug and his family lived all over the country before moving to Savannah to be closer to his ailing father. They actually had to decide between Columbia, SC and Savannah, but after visiting both cities, fell in love with the beautiful, historic city of Savannah. And Savannah has the beach too!

What motivated you all to start serving? I asked Doug.

“Jeremiah and Isaiah started serving as soon as they were confirmed, which in turn got me interested. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ demonstrated a life of service and then gave His life for us. Serving Mass is just one of the many things we can do, as Christians, to demonstrate a life of service,” Doug replied.

Even though Doug leads a very busy life as a teacher, basketball and golf coach at Benedictine, he somehow finds time to get himself and the boys to the 10:00 am Mass almost every Sunday to serve on the altar.

How do you do it? I asked Doug.

“It’s very simple! We find a way! We just get up and go!” Doug said.

Do the boys ever try to get out of serving by claiming they have homework or a headache?

“This doesn’t happen very often, but when it does my wife and I use selective hearing and everyone goes to Mass anyway.”

How does your wife feel about you and the boys serving at Mass?

“My wife loves seeing us serve at Mass, but she does get lonely sitting by herself every Sunday.”

What do you and the boys get out of serving at Mass?

“A great seat!” he jokingly replied.

“Very simply put, a sense of service. Also, we enjoy being behind the scenes with all the people involved. Getting to know the priests and seeing their preparation as well as everyone else’s is very interesting. I think if we pay attention in our lives we all experience moments that seem insignificant when in actuality they are moments that will stay with us for a lifetime. Not too long ago, at the start of Mass when the boys and I were walking in with the cross and candles, we paused behind the altar for the priest to surround the altar with incense. At that moment I said to the boys ‘What a view!’ It was amazing to see the priest performing his duties with all the people standing and singing along with the choir. Not everyone gets that view and although it lasted only a brief moment, it will be etched in my mind, and I hope my sons’ minds forever,” Doug concluded.

“I enjoy serving at Mass because it makes me feel like I’m doing my part as a young Catholic,” said Isaiah. “It has strengthened my relationship with God.”

“Being an Altar Server at Mass gives me a point of view that most people don’t get. It helps me understand the inner workings of the church and makes clearer our beliefs as Catholics.” Jeremiah added.

Serving the Lord can be very rewarding. If you have any interest in becoming an altar server, please contact Brother Robert at the Parish Office.
Our tour guides are regularly asked by visitors, “What is that large glassed-in enclosure in the corner of the north transept, under the mural of the prodigal son?” The question is often asked more pointedly by the many school children who visit the Cathedral, “Where is confessional box and what happens in there?” Many people have the impression, formed by popular culture, of a person parting a velvet curtain and going into a dark cubicle, where a priest opens a slide to speak to them through a screen or grate, that assures anonymity, but is also somewhat frightening. The sacrament is often trivialized when the person portrayed is not Catholic or even a believing Christian and it is merely a dramatic or comedic device, to reveal some information or further develop the plot.

I usually tell them, that none of us are perfect. Our Catholic faith tradition affords us the opportunity to “get right with the Lord’ through Confession, now called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In the confessional, we sit with a priest, discuss our shortcomings or “sins” and assuming a willingness to do better (or as I was taught in Sunday school, have a firm purpose of amendment), receive forgiveness for our sins and our slate or soul is wiped clean.

You have a great feeling as you exit the confessional knowing that you are once again “right with the Lord.” That usually sounds OK to them and there are usually approving nods from the teachers who accompany these groups, reinforcing the reasonableness of the reply.

I recently came across the Benefits of Confession which was excerpted from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Blog. Here are 10 for your consideration:

1. **Confidentiality guaranteed.** There’s nothing like confessing your sins to someone guaranteed not to tell anyone else.

2. **Housekeeping for the soul.** It feels good to be able to start a clean life all over again.

3. **A balm for the desire for revenge.** When you have been forgiven you can forgive others.

4. **Low cost therapy.** It’s free, which makes it cheaper than a psychiatrist for dealing with guilt.

5. **Forced time to think.** To examine our lives and acknowledge failings marks the first step of making things right with God, others and ourselves.

6. **Contribution toward world peace.** Peace of soul leads to peace of heart leads to peace beyond oneself.

7. **A better neighborhood.** With the grace of the sacrament you’re energized to, as Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, “go and sin no more.”

8. **Realistic self-perception.** Confession helps overcome arrogance when you have to admit you’re as much of a sinner as anyone else.

9. **One more benefit of being Catholic.** The sacrament that leads us to inner peace is among the greatest boons.

10. **Closeness to God.** Confession helps you realize that you have a close connection to God and receive His grace through the sacraments. What can be better than knowing God’s on your team, or, to be less arrogant about it, that you are on God’s?

Sounds like a good deal and as John Pryor mentioned in the recent Tour Guide article, “Going to confession is the cheapest shrink I can visit”.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist every Saturday, from 11:00 to 11:45AM and from 4:15 to 5:00 PM and also by request at other times.

The Lenten season is a good time stop by soon and get right with the Lord before Easter.
A Lenten Parish Mission “The Way of the Cross as Presented in the Gospels” will be conducted at 7:00 PM in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Tuesday through Thursday, March 11–13, 2014, by Father Eugene Hensell, OSB.

Each night the mission will consist of a brief prayer service with an opening hymn, followed by a prayer, then an inspirational Lenten talk and closing with a final hymn; each session should run about an hour and 15 minutes.

Father Hensell, a Benedictine monk from the Archabbey of Saint Meinrad, is currently an Associate Professor of Scripture at St. Meinrad School of Theology, specializing in creating and teaching online graduate biblical courses for the lay ministry program.

Since 1997 he has been engaged in full-time retreat work, conducting biblical retreats and workshops for priests, religious, and laity throughout the country and in several foreign countries. He brings to this work over 30 years of teaching experience, as well as a strong sense of the church's pastoral needs. With his wide contacts among clergy, religious and laity, Fr. Eugene brings to his work a deep and sympathetic understanding of the challenges facing many facets of life in the contemporary Church. For the past twenty years Fr. Eugene has been a contributing writer for Weekday and Sunday Homily Hints, a service published by St. Anthony Messenger Press. He also contributes biblical reflections to Give Us This Day, published by Liturgical Press.

Please join us for this moving spiritual experience during the Lenten season to prepare yourself for the passion of Jesus Christ and the miracle of Easter.

A Glimpse into the Soul of Flannery O’Connor

In recognition of her lasting legacy on her home state and in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of her death, the Georgia Historical Society chose Flannery O’Connor, regarded as one of the great Southern writers of the 20th Century, as the 2014 Featured Historical Figure. One of the first events of this year’s Festival was the presentation of A Beautiful Prayer: The Savannah debut of A Prayer Journal by Flannery O’Connor, on February 4th in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist.

This event was very special to our parish because Flannery was baptized, received her First Holy Communion and was confirmed in the Cathedral. Growing up across Lafayette Square at 207 East Charlton Street, she attended Mass regularly with her cousin Kate Flannery Semmes. Sitting in the front row Pew #12, on the right side aisle, center section, rented by Kate for many years, Flannery was imbued with a great sense of spirituality and faith.

Dr. William Sessions, a friend of Flannery O’Connor and scholar of her work, brought to life this deeply moving and spiritual journal, only recently discovered among her papers. The selected readings from the journal, chosen by Dr. Sessions, were beautifully read by Mary Lawrence Kennickell, a Cathedral parishioner. Ms. Kennickell, a Milledgeville native, had a personal relationship during her childhood with Flannery O’Connor.

They brought her personal prayer journal to life, in the place that had so much meaning for her during her formative years, thus offering the audience an intimate glimpse into the soul of Flannery O’Connor.
The 13th Annual Cathedral Heritage Gala was a big success primarily due to the funds we raised at the exciting Live Auction. As a result, Chairman Gretchen Reese was able to present a check in the amount of $118,000 to Fr. Gerry Schreck for the Cathedral Heritage Fund. This represents a near record amount raised to benefit the restoration and preservation of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist for generations to come. A special thanks to Gretchen and the entire Gala Committee for a job well done!