

**This Lent, we are supporting ministries in the Diocese of Helena, MT. Your efforts will assist and sustain these ministries so that they can continue their spiritual works of mercy and serve the families in this rural area.**

**Catholic Extension** works in solidarity with people in America’s poorest regions to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities. They seek to deepen and expand our commitment to Catholic faith communities by providing resources to develop leaders, ministries, and facilities, while inviting more people across our country to invest in this work.

**Catholic Extension** has been supporting the Diocese of Helena, which was established in 1884 and originally encompassed the whole state, since its first church building grant there in 1911. The diocese now covers more than 50,000 square miles, which is almost double the size of Ireland.

There are 1.1 million people and 2 million cattle in Montana. The Helena diocese covers 50,000 square miles. There are 46,000 Catholics in the state.

There are 65 priests in Montana – one for every 17,000 Catholics. So, roughly speaking, there are 2 cows for every Catholic, one priest for every 17,000 Catholics, and lots and lots of wide-open spaces under some serious big sky.

In July 2023, **Paul and Adrienne Kalmes** joined **Catholic Extension** on a meaningful immersion trip to rural Montana, where they met numerous leaders of the Catholic Church.

**“Say YES to the Lord and see where God takes you”**  
**Dan Theis – Executive Director, Foundation for the Diocese of Helena**



**Paul and Adrienne at St. John Berchmans Mission Church in Arlee, MT.**



Dan Theis sees nothing but possibility in this space. He sees it as the perfect setting to discern where God can take you. Dan is a Carroll College graduate, a Catholic College in Helena, MT, where he majored in Civil Engineering and Theology. It is a safe bet to assume there has never been another double major like that in Carroll College’s history. After college Dan became a youth minister for 4 parishes covering 80 rural Montana square miles. His ministry to the “faith for the future” changed him. Kids will do that. Dan organized, junior high school rallies, Bible study groups and

ski retreats to connect with the kids. They were drawn to his high energy, dry humor, and his abiding belief in them and the Lord. He was drawn to their perpetual YES!

He invited the young people to discover where God wanted to take them. He believed that young people were looking for the love of the Lord even if they didn't know they were looking. Turns out, lots of young people were looking for that Love. Aren't we all. The face of the Lord was most present in the downtrodden. The heart of Dan's ministry was to fall in love with the face of Jesus in the poor. And he was in the perfect community in which to do this. Browning Montana is a very, very poor place. It is the 2<sup>nd</sup> poorest county in the United States. The average life expectancy of Browning residents is the same as that of Afghanistan.

More crazy metrics. 1 out of every 2 residents are born chemically addicted. But these are the metrics of despair. And this is where Dan pitched his tent. He felt that in the life of faith, one should never be careful. Dan is a former recipient of Catholic Extension's Young Adult Leadership Initiative scholarship where he earned his master's degree in pastoral ministry at Boston College.

Browning is also the setting for what Dan calls his constant conversion. He does not back away from the history of awful things that have been done to Native Americans by the Catholic church. Young Blackfeet were faced with the choice of either getting a Catholic education and be labeled an "apple" (red on the outside but white on the inside – a traitor) or remain on the reservation and be labeled a "loser."

And his ministry comes down to falling in love with the face of Jesus in the poor. This is as real as it gets.

When asked, how does one fall in love with the face of Jesus in the poor, Dan pauses for a moment, and says, "First you have to have intentional prayer time. First thing in the morning, get some quiet time away from screens, alone with Jesus in silence." He says not to worry if you don't hear Jesus in the morning. You will hear Him the rest of the day. "And then, you have to serve," he adds. Your quiet prayer time will express itself as service to the suffering the rest of the day. Just consuming the Lord, without any expression in service will atrophy the heart.



### **St. John Berchmans Mission, Sacred Heart Mission and St. Ignatius Parish**

Megan serves as the Director over the parish's religious education program for kindergarten through 12th grade. Many of her students depend on this program for meals and don't have the slightest clue who Jesus is. "Who is the guy on the cross?" they ask. She has to break down the faith to its most basic level. Evangelization starts from scratch. She begins with God the Creator, the Father. The gorgeous Montana

mountains that surround them are a fine starting point. Megan runs a horse ranch by day, but she has also embraced a new vocation as a foster parent.

Mayra has recently arrived from California where she was a youth minister and will continue to serve in that capacity in Montana. Her first pastoral test was the mice who kept raiding the unconsecrated hosts and tipping over the altar wine. A little refrigerator fixed that issue.





Chelsea is a Native Salish woman who works in suicide prevention programs among young people on the reservation. Montana has one of the highest per capita death by suicide rates—more than double the national average—and Native American youth represent more than a third of the state’s total suicides, according to Montana’s government statistics. This reservation has seen its share of tragedy. From late 2016 to mid-2017, 20 lives were lost in a devastating suicide cluster—an astounding number for a reservation with slightly more than 7,500 enrolled members. Very few families have gone untouched by this epidemic. Arlee

knows, however, that with God there are no such things as hopeless causes. She is not giving up any time soon.

Her husband Travis helped her understand the Native American culture and its tribal traditions

and to weave them together with the Catholic faith. A small tepee covers the tabernacle. The presence of God the Father, permeates the natural surroundings. Tribal sweathouses are places for cleansing and adoration. The Blackfeet see the bison, who have given up their lives for their food, as a beautiful metaphor for Christ. The Passover themes of the Exodus and the Native American’s Trail of Tears powerfully intertwine. Chelsea stresses the resilience of the native people and everything they have overcome. She says her people call on God the Creator to help them get through their Dark Nights of the Soul. Her father-in-law is a Blackfeet medicine man who prays over people, laying on his hands and smudging them with the ashes of the sage and sweet grass. She could be describing a bishop presiding at a Confirmation ceremony. The tribal traditions of the Blackfeet and rituals of the Catholic faith are that close.



It is no accident that St. John Berchmans Mission’s bell tower looks like a lighthouse. The people of the Jocko Valley, like all of us, need the light of Christ. Megan, Myra and Chelsea are just a couple of those light bearers.

Fr. Victor is the pastor of the three parishes. He says that the work of healing, reconciliation, and trust are the only way forward for the Catholic church. Fr. Victor’s voice breaks when he talks about the latest Trail of Tears. A four-day march was recently organized to remember the many missing and murdered Indigenous women who lived in reservation lands. This happens shockingly often and no perpetrators have been found. Investigations have been half-hearted if they happen at all.

Fr. Victor says that hopelessness and despair almost make people want to give up. Behind all this heartache, he finds tremendous beauty and resilience. His job is to walk with them, through whatever Trail of Tears they may be experiencing, helping them to find God wherever and however they need. It is truly, all holy here.



**Brother Dale Mooney, a De La Salle Christian Brother, has specialized all his life in helping educate young people in extremely difficult circumstances. For the past 11 years, he has served as president of the De La Salle Blackfeet School for fourth through eighth graders, like the student he is pictured with below, on the Blackfeet Nation reservation in Browning, Montana.**



The school is associated with Little Flower Parish. Catholic Extension has supported this faith community serving the Blackfeet people for more than five decades.

Brother Dale is a lantern lit by kindness. And he is just not a kind guy. He is an accomplished educator having been awarded the Distinguished La Sallian Educator in 2017. And, as one of his teachers says, "Brother Dales does everything!! Scrubbing, sweeping, lugging, fixing stuff, picking up litter in a 30mph wind. We have to tell him to STOP!" But

there is no stop in Brother Dale.

The De La Salle Blackfeet school is a marvel. It serves 80 students, 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades. There is a 12 : 1 student to teacher ratio. There are three teachers in each class. Most of the 4<sup>th</sup> graders who transfer to De La Salle do not even know their letters. They sure know them when they graduate. When Brother Dale first arrived on the Blackfeet Nation reservation, he encountered families that were impacted by historical trauma and struggling with substance abuse, unemployment and suicides.



Brother Dale said the weight of these hardships can be overwhelming. Only 60 percent of Native students enrolled in the reservation's public schools graduate high school. **Yet De La Salle Blackfeet School has nearly a 100 percent graduation rate for its students.** This kind of academic growth in five years is off the charts. Brother Dale and his devoted team do this by earning the respect of the community and parents. They are attentive to what is happening in students' personal lives outside the classroom. They have morning check-ins with students where they assess how they are feeling. They are trained to hold talking circles in the classroom when conflicts arise.

The school opens at 7am and runs an extended day program until 4:30pm. The school has a thriving athletics program. 70 of its 80 students run cross country. The school recently won the regions' basketball championship.



Like all great leaders, Brother Dale recruits and utilizes outstanding volunteers. There is Deacon John and his wife Patty who are volunteer tutors. There is Martha, a De La Salle graduate who just earned her Bachelors in Religious Studies from the University of Dayton. She volunteered as a coach and tutor and joined the De La Salle faculty this school year. Volunteers supplement the 8 full time teachers, one counselor, and 4 part time staff. One year's tuition is \$600. Tuition covers only 4% of the school's budget, so everyone has to pitch in.

Every day, Brother Dale models to the children what it means to serve. The students adore him, as can be seen in this heartfelt letter from an eighth grader:

**Brother Dale Mooney is a great role model for all people of our school. He is our school president, but you always find him helping serve our lunch and picking up around our school. Every morning he greets us at the door, it makes my day! He makes sure people get what they need. If we need a bus driver for our school field trips, he's there for all of us.**

Many alumni have gone into wonderful and fulfilling professions. One of his past students is starting a doctorate degree in Indigenous health. Another has even joined his teaching staff. Witnessing these outcomes is what keeps Brother Dale going. He said, **"To see a student coming into fourth grade and staying with us and working through everything, and then seeing them move on and be successful in high school—as a teacher, there is nothing that gives greater pleasure than that."**





Little Flower Parish in Browning, MT

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**Thank you for your support and generosity!**



# Saint Anne 2024 Lenten Almsgiving

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The following list provides a general summary of the supplies and programs that the Saint Anne Catholic Community can fund during our Lenten Almsgiving. 100% of the funds will go to help ministries at the parishes and school in the Diocese of Helena, MT.

## Wish List

Support the Religious Education program at the parishes in Arlee, MT for a year	\$ 2,000
Dinner for the 15 Religious Education students for a year	\$ 1,500
Vestments and linens for Mass	\$ 800
One year tuition for a student at De La Salle Blackfeet School	\$ 600
Various snacks and drinks for Religious Education students	\$ 400
Catechism materials	\$ 200
Faith formation classes for adults	\$ 100
Gas expense for Sr. Edith to visit the sick and homebound	\$ 80
Gas expense for Fr. Victor to travel the 40 miles between parishes	\$ 60
Supplies for craft workshops for children	\$ 50
Toys, puzzles and games for children	\$ 45
Spiral notebooks (Wide and College ruled)	\$ 35
Crayons and coloring books	\$ 30
Devotional kits to hand out to families	\$ 20
Basketball	\$ 15