

## **Why I Am Catholic ...** St. Clement's Catholic Church.

Last Sunday was my second anniversary as pastor of this parish. Each day I thank Our Lord for the privilege and blessing of being pastor here at this special place in Calhoun, Ga.

St. Clement's is a community and family of prayer. We pray together on Sundays, and during the week we pray for each other, extended family, and for the needs of the world. This faith community prayed with me and for me during my cancer battle two years ago and helped pray me through that difficult time. That time of prayer was my first experience and encounter with St. Clement's and it has left a lasting impression.

Our prayer has borne fruit: health and healing for many, strength and a sense of peace for those going through hard times, countless blessings, and the constant awareness that we never have to go through anything alone. This community has cried and smiled, we have laughed and loved, and we have been instruments of healing, of hope, and a hand up when someone has fallen. Christ has been seen in us, through us, and by each one of us.

We recognize his closeness and his constant presence. When we walk into the church, we sense his comforting and welcoming love. We are surrounded by friends and neighbors who by God's grace become our brothers and sisters: familiar faces. A reunion of longtime family members, new members, and visitors who are invited to join us any time they wish.

We relax in this place that helps us experience the intimate nearness of Christ. His Spirit enlivens us and invites us to come and stay and be restored. We settle in and the pews become like the family room sofa. We encounter heaven in a way that causes the world outside these walls to become insignificant. In very few places have I felt this close to God every time I come.

We are a diverse community in search of deeper unity and connection—in Christ and through Christ. We have members from a few days old to 100 years young. We have members who are immigrants from many different nations and others who have always called Calhoun home. We are a collection of people God has chosen and brought together in a unique place at a significant moment for a special purpose. I have rarely seen such a rich collection of wisdom and experience, talents and abilities, and faith journeys that point to perseverance and great potential.

We, like other families, have our faults and weaknesses, our fights and our frustrations—We even fight over the bathroom! But we strive to get along, to support, to encourage, to even laugh at ourselves. I enjoy being pastor of a church of real people who are authentic and honest and largely unpretentious. We struggle with pride, just like everyone else, but we value being humble and not being afraid to depend on God.

We are a parish of service and charity. Of study and reflection. Of celebration and remembrance. A people open to growing, stretching, being challenged, and being called to new things. From our Food Pantry to our Angel Tree, to our teens doing Catholic Heart Work Camp (CHWC)—to so many other things—we continue the mission of Christ.

From faith formation for our children to RCIA to Vacation Bible School (VBS), we pass on our faith. From Wednesday Rosary to Lenten Stations to ongoing personal devotions, study, and prayer, we continue to grow in and live out our faith. From Baptisms to Weddings, Quinceañeras to Graduations, we celebrate the sacraments and key moments of life. From Mardi Gras to Christmas parties to Parish Picnics, we simply celebrate and continue to be a social people. St. Clement's has always known how to party! We also know how to say goodbye and to remember—especially through our presence at funerals, the thoughtfulness of our Bereavement Community, and anniversaries that allow us to recall our history and those who have contributed so much in faith and thanksgiving. Yes. St. Clement's has helped me to become a better Catholic and a better priest. And for that I am forever grateful. I offer Christ all the glory and ask through the intercession of St. Clement that we continue to be the parish Christ has made us and called us to be.