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□ Faith Today

A place at the table

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

Christmas Day usually dawns bright and sunny in West Texas. At least that's how I remember it. And I remember well the annual rituals of that day.

After sleeping a little later than usual — midnight Mass being at midnight and all — the whole family would pile into the car for the short drive across the Colorado River to my grandparents' house. There, cousins, aunts, uncles — people of all shapes and sizes — would eat, talk, eat, compare gifts and eat. The menu never varied: turkey and dressing, sausage and my grandmother's poppy-seed kolaches, the sweet Czech pastries that make the dinner complete.

That tradition still continues, so much so that neither I nor my children have ever done anything else on Christmas Day.

Such customs endure, I think, because they are in a sense "institutionalized."

Though we might not always think of it this way, the family is a type of institution. So is the church.

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There are many similarities between the church and the family in this regard, not the least of which is the high esteem they reserve for history and tradition.

A pride in family accomplishments is never more evident than at reunions. It is a time for older generations to marvel at how advanced and skilled the youngsters are. It is a time for children to be exposed to "how it used to be" and "when I was a child" stories.

I find a certain comfort in the customs of my family. Only from vibrant people, I like to think, could such traditions spring. And only by knowing and appreciating our past can we know how far we've come and how far we can go.

The church, too, takes great care in tracing its origins. Much attention is paid to tradition, which is told and retold as a rich and treasured chronicle.

And there are other similarities between the family and the church. One is the sense of identity inherent in each. Who the church's people are and what the church is can readily be identified. Much like a family, too, the church's members fulfill differing roles.

During our family gatherings, we identify ourselves in terms of a common name and a common heritage. Around my grandparents' table on Christmas Day are family members, or perhaps someone about to join the family through marriage.

And while we share a sense of belonging in this family, we all have different roles. My grandfather always sits in a place of honor. My grandmother always is the last to sit down. Older children help take care of the babies.

All institutions must cope with change, new needs and new situations. In its infancy, the church had to develop a system of government, plan liturgical celebrations, clarify teachings. Vatican Council II is proof that a similar process of coping continues today.

It is the same with a family. At our Christmas dinners, the children of 30 years ago have taken on new roles as adults. Grandchildren have given way to great-grandchildren. Some members have died.

A certain tension in an institution is not at all unusual, either. This does not mean fighting or hostility. It does mean the normal strains of growth and interaction.

Families are constantly searching for a proper balance between the needs of individual



The family and the church have much in common as institutions, writes Joe Michael Feist. Both take pride in tradition. Both provide members with a sense of belonging. And both are guided by an ever-present spirit.

members and the whole unit. Always the goal is to promote everyone's growth. And so it is with the church.

There is one further element abundantly clear in the institution of the family: an ever-present spirit. That hard-to-define spirit draws together individuals who

remember, who listen and who belong.

And a Spirit, to be sure, is alive within the church drawing people together around a special family table.

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)