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## Faith Today

### Advent figures: St. Joseph and the Grinch?

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

Neil Parent finds Advent a particularly good time to reflect on St. Joseph and how he handled himself during the difficult series of events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

"As a man and a father, my thoughts go to St. Joseph because he had to face a lot then," Parent added. "He had to cope with events in a small village where everything seemed to go wrong. And I wonder, did his family ostracize him for his marriage to Mary, who was already pregnant?"

Parent is representative for adult education with the U.S. Catholic Conference education department. During an interview, Parent explained how he, his wife, Lynn, and their 5- and 8-year-old daughters "focus in on our family" during Advent.

Since Advent coincides with cool days along the eastern seaboard where they live, the family often sets the stage for its reflections by lighting a fire and dimming the lights, Parent said. Then over hot chocolate they talk about the meaning of Christmas.

They use Advent and Christmas stories. And their special Advent prayers are taken from the psalms and the prophets. The children often add their own spontaneous prayers.

Parent commented that he and his wife use certain TV programs as a means of teaching their daughters about Christmas. "Some shows are commercialized," he admitted, "but some have significant religious underpinnings."

A favorite for the Parents is "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas," taken from a book by Dr. Seuss. In it, the Grinch steals all the presents and the Christmas decorations, expecting to destroy the villagers' joy in Christmas. Instead, the Grinch is astounded to discover that the villagers can still be happy as they gather together simply because it is Christmas.

Parent explained that watching

the Seuss tale together is a family event. Often he and his wife talk with their daughters about the show. He said his daughters get the message easily.

It comes through clearly that the real spirit of Christmas is not restricted to the presents, Parent said. It is "about the joyful coming together of people."

Last year the Parent family prepared for Advent in a special way by participating in a pilot program with several other families. It was sponsored by Blessed Sacrament Parish in Alexandria, Va.

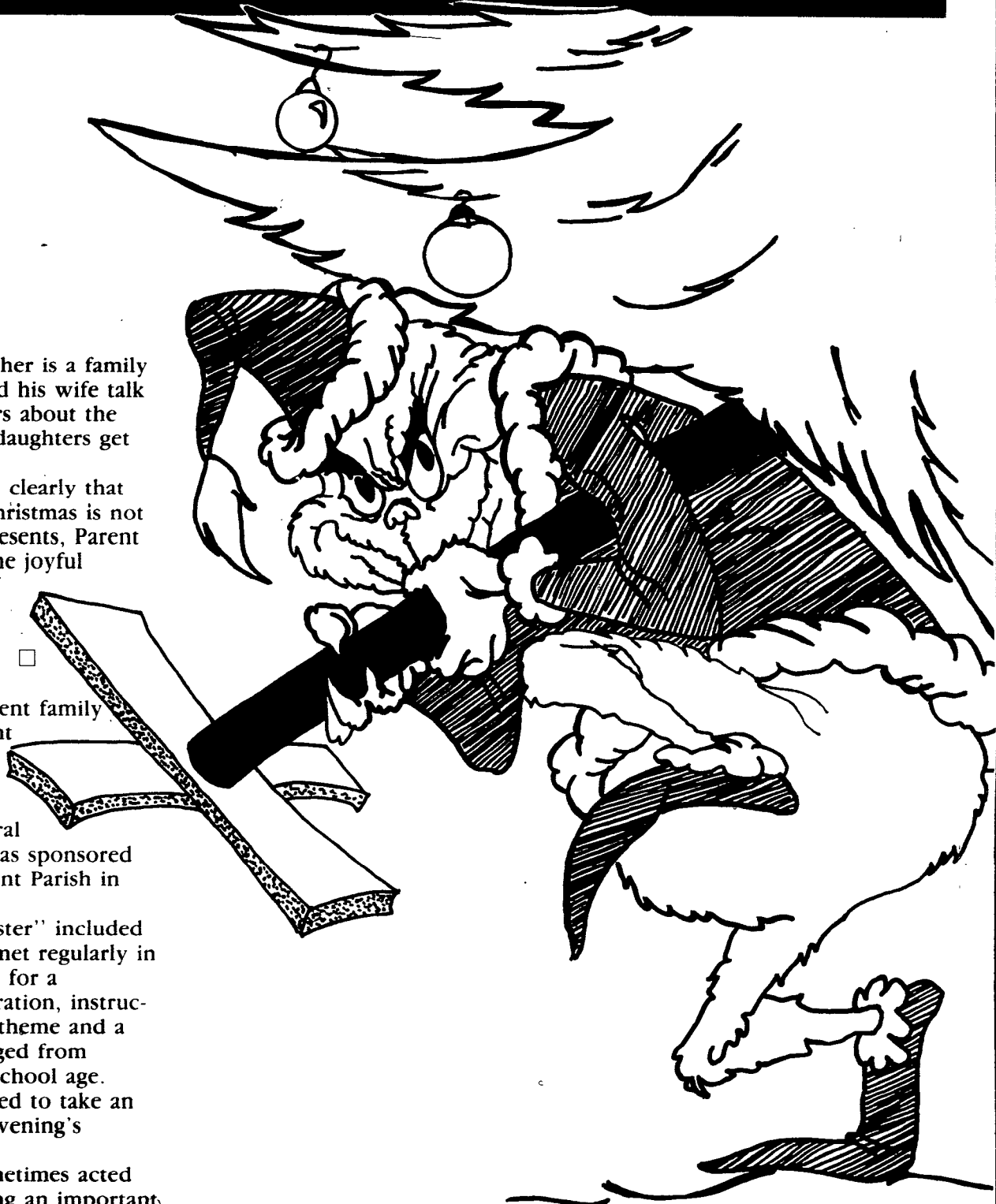
Each "family cluster" included four families who met regularly in each others' homes for a paraliturgical celebration, instruction on an Advent theme and a meal. Children ranged from preschool to high school age. Everyone was invited to take an active part in the evening's activities.

The children sometimes acted out a scene featuring an important, biblical figure or a particular theme from Advent. This gave them a "definite impression of the message since they were in it body and soul," Parent said.

Families also shared their ideas on how to celebrate Advent. Parent said he finds this sort of sharing especially helpful in keeping Advent celebrations fresh from year to year. "It makes for a lot of cross fertilization," he added. "We can take an idea used by someone else, add a new wrinkle and then make it part of our celebration."

In his cluster, one family told about pooling their resources to buy a winter coat for a parish youngster.

Parent told how that happened. On the first Sunday of Advent the parish had set up two Christmas trees decorated with tags. On each tag a specific need was cited like



For educator Neil Parent and his family, Advent begins at home. In an interview with Katharine Bird, Parent tells how Advent preparation can turn into Advent animation. And he's not just talking cartoons.

this: "A boy needs a size 10 jacket." Parish families were invited to take a tag. If a large gift was needed, several families were asked to join forces.

On the last Sunday of Advent, Parent said, hundreds of gifts were brought up to the altar by parishioners. Later the gifts were distributed to the individuals in need.

"The family cluster was a tremendous experience for us last year," Parent volunteered. "Our

children saw adults working together and became aware of the wider extended parish family preparing to celebrate the Lord's birth."

The cluster experience reinforced Parent's conviction that an Advent celebration has several dimensions. "Advent calls for prayer, for sacrifice in serving others, and for joy."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)