

Custom altering

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

As families often do, mine added its own customs to Christmas. Over the years, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day assumed certain rubrics. Small details changed. After all, children do grow up. But I think all of us felt that the basic rhythms of these days were forever fixed.

Then some major changes occurred in our family. Two grandmothers died. A family we shared Christmas Eves with — the Timpanes — moved to another state. My husband and I celebrated the birth of our first grandchild, then learned his family would be far away this Christmas.

As I ponder Christmas 1984, I pray for the grace to let go and not cling to what was. I know life's shifting events can be viewed as an invitation from God. But what kind of invitation?

On Christmas Eves past, we traditionally joined the Timpanes and the Wholeys for a festive dinner. Our numbers grew over the years as children acquired special friends or got married. Visiting grandparents were always included.

Indeed, in a vivid memory my mother-in-law, Mollie, presides at the after-dinner Irish-coffee ritual, a prelude to entertainment prepared for the adults by younger family members.

We sang carols and exchanged humorous Kris Kringle gifts until the magic hour of 11. Then everyone past the age of 10 prepared for midnight Mass.

Christmas breakfast was an especially important tradition. With our Christmas tree in the dining room and a Christmas wreath in the spot occupied these recent weeks by Advent candles, we gathered to open gifts and pray Christmas Lauds, the church's morning prayer:

"You came into the world heralding the new age foretold by the prophets; give your holy people the gift of renewal in every generation."

This is our time to linger and talk. Dinner will be scheduled for late afternoon or early evening. Usually, there are dinner guests: foreign students, friends or colleagues alone for the holiday.

Somehow, I believed these rituals were immutable.

The Wholeys and the Leckey still gather for Christmas Eve. But now we settle for tea, eggnog and visiting.

When our first grandson was born this autumn, I quickly envisioned a Dickens-like Christmas future. But the vision needed adjusting. For Samuel and his parents will be across the continent this Christmas, settling into a new home.

The changes are greater than I anticipated.

How can I interpret this whittling away of my traditional Christmas customs and people?

Perhaps I should regard the changes as an invitation from God to allow new possibilities to enter my life. The Christ child brings new life, after all.

I see more clearly now that we have little control over the future. If I keep this in mind, it may cause me to focus better on the present — on the gift of Christmas now!

My husband and I now have the opportunity for a quiet, contemplative Christmas, one when we participate as fully as possible in the church's liturgy — something I used to long for when my household was overflowing.

I think we could serve a Christmas meal in a local house of hospitality. Of course, we love music. So there are Bach chorales to listen to, as well as Christmas poems to read, friends to visit, strangers to welcome.

As I ponder the matter at hand, more possibilities surely will arise. For Christmas now, as in the past, is full of creative opportunities and not a few surprises.

(Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Laity.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Can you put your creative instincts to work on Christmas?

It seems that this holiday, more than others, is infused by us with expectations. People hope they can make Christmas a great day for each other.

But if that is to happen, are there special steps to take — and pitfalls to avoid? Here is a list of suggestions on planning Christmas Day. Add your own suggestions to the list — your own ways of sprinkling fresh spirit into this holiday celebration.

—Try to plan a good day. But don't try to plan "the perfect day." Don't set yourself up for disappointment.

—Take whatever action you can to free Dec. 24 from shopping expeditions. Otherwise, you may find yourself too fatigued to enjoy Christmas Day.

—Don't plan out every moment of Christmas Day in advance. Allow some time for visiting and for the unexpected.

—Introduce an activity into your Christmas celebration that is new or different for you. Perhaps you'll want to wrap up some fun games and put them under the tree. Then set up a card table and spend time with family or friends playing games

on Christmas afternoon.

—Go for a walk alone or with others on Christmas Day. Lack of fresh air and exercise can sap the spirit as this great day wears on.

—Plan ways to introduce your faith into Christmas observances at home. A measure of frustration can result for many people if Christmas at home is celebrated almost as though it were not a holy day. You may want to plan a special prayer to begin your Christmas dinner, or a special reading from a favorite book or from Scripture to precede the opening of gifts.

—Consider aspects of past Christmas Days that you found disappointing. Is cooking all day the last thing you want to do on Christmas? Could you simplify Christmas dinner? Are all the gifts opened up in five minutes, leaving you feeling that all the gift preparation was much ado about nothing? Could you consider a way of opening gifts in turns, allowing time to savor each other's gifts?

—Finally, ponder some good things in your life. The birth of Jesus as one of us indicates that the world is meant to be filled up with goodness. The goodness around us is cause for celebration.

...for discussion

1. Does anything need to be changed in your customary observance of Christmas?

2. Do you think people sometimes try to make Christmas Day a perfect day and therefore set themselves up for disappointment? What would you do differently if instead of trying to create a perfect day, you just tried to plan for a good day?

3. How and at what points might faith enter into your celebration of Christmas at home?

4. Why do people exchange gifts at Christmas? Can you find any special Christian reasons for gift giving?

5. Do you have an old Christmas custom that you still treasure? What is it?

SECOND HELPINGS

"The Story of the Other Wise Man" by Henry Van Dyke. Originally published in 1895, this imaginative account tells of Artaban the Median. He sells all his possessions to buy three jewels as gifts for a new king about to be born. On his way to join three wise men seeking the king, Artaban comes across a sick man lying on the road. If he stops, the wise men will leave without him. But Artaban can't ignore the sick man. For 33 years Artaban searches for the new king, pausing whenever he finds a person in great need. Artaban's pilgrimage ends when Jesus is crucified. Then this fourth wise man meets the king he was seeking. Artaban's story resembles the journey each person makes in life: A search for the king of kings while involved with the needs of people met along the way. (Harper and Row, 10 East 53rd, New York, N.Y. 10022. Hardback. \$7.95.)