

Parish celebrations

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praying together. The colder climate in Newark keeps the celebration confined to the church, but the same joyful atmosphere prevails.

For the nine days between Dec. 15 and 24, Hispanic people in Newark observe another custom, which is Mexican in origin. Each night, people gather and go house to house, singing carols, praying and reading from the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus.

A Polish tradition often observed during midnight Mass is the blessing of the straw. At St. Hyacinth Church in Auburn, small packages of straw are placed around the church's nativity scene. During the Mass, Father David Stopyra places the Christmas wafer on the straw to bless it. After Mass, each family takes a package of straw home for their own creches.

Santa Claus makes an appearance at most parishes in the diocese at one time or another. But at St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Lucy's in Leicester, he doesn't show up in the usual place. Each year for the past five, parishioners have gone on a Christmas tree hunt together. Families select their own trees as well as a tree and greens to decorate the church. It's while they're out in the woods that Santa appears — jumping out from behind a tree to startle, if not surprise everyone and help the children select a tree.

After the party returns to the church, they enjoy dinner together and Father Edward Zenkel, the pastor, blesses the trees.

Santa visits Transfiguration Parish in Pittsford on the feast of St. Nicholas, Dec. 6. The young children leave their shoes on the church's lower level before going in to Mass. During the service, St. Nick, assisted by some of the older children, stuffs the shoes with goodies.

Although it's only two years old, the parish community at Transfiguration has big plans for Christmas traditions. In fact, they plan to promote the spirit of the season all year long with a "chrismon tree."

Placed in the church alcove, the tree is decorated with gold and white "chrismons" or Christ's monograms — symbols such as a star, a key, tablets and a fish. On the back of



each chrismon is a description of a gift for a needy family or child.

The chrismon tree, more commonly known as a giving tree, is one of the most

widespread Christmas traditions in the diocese. Each parishioner takes a chrismon or paper ornament and purchases the gift it describes. After wrapping the gift, they

return it to the church for distribution to families.

But at Transfiguration, the chrismon tree will remain in the church all year long according to Mary Presutti, the parish's minister of Christian Formation and coordinator of education ministries. That way, parishioners are not only reminded, but given the opportunity to help others in the spirit of Christmas.

Whatever the type or number of gifts collected, a giving tree's success is measured by the parish's enthusiasm for the project. At Holy Angels in Nunda, the project is known as the "mitten tree" because of the mitten-shaped paper ornaments hung on the tree. Introduced for the first time this year, the project drew zealous participation from 50 parishioners according to Father Joseph Sasso. "The elderly people in particular seemed hungry to do something like this," he noted.

St. Rita's in West Webster also has a mitten tree. But unlike other parishes, they actually decorate a tree with mittens. During a special children's liturgy on the fourth Sunday of Advent, children bring pairs of mittens to place over the branches of several trees on the altar. The mittens are then distributed to people who need them.

There are any number of ways parishes reach out to people for whom the holidays are a lonely time. St. Januarius Church hall in Naples is the site of a Christmas dinner party each year for residents of Willard Psychiatric Center, the Canandaigua Veterans Administration Hospital and private care facilities in the area. The party has been organized by the Naples Activities Center, part of the area's council of churches, for at least the past ten years according to Father Charles McCarthy, St. Januarius' pastor.

At this year's party, 250 guests socialized around a bowl of red Christmas punch and later enjoyed a stuffed breast of chicken dinner with ice cream and homemade cookies for dessert. After dinner, a 7-piece band provided music for dancing and foot-tapping. One guest was even persuaded to sing. Father McCarthy's description of the party's evolution could apply to almost every parish Christmas tradition.

"It started out small and has just grown," he said.

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