

Christmas rectory-style: a season of demands

By Teresa A. Parsons



For most of us, Christmas brings its share of less than idyllic moments, from last-minute shopping in holiday traffic to traveling across the state with a car full of cranky children.

Priests, by contrast, appear fortunate. They're supposed to be poor, so no one expects them to buy much of anything. They have plenty of time to spend in prayer, reflecting on the real meaning of Christmas, before they drop in somewhere for dinner.

Of course, everyone knows they are busy. But in case you haven't noticed, pastors nowadays are almost as busy at Christmas as Santa Claus.

Consider that for most parish priests, this year's mid-week Christmas and New Year's (the feast of the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God) means celebrating the equivalent of five weekend Mass schedules in just over two weeks.

Aside from liturgies and the routine business of the parish, there are extra planning meetings and all sorts of holiday events to attend, from the parish pageant to the staff Christmas party. Usually, Father leaves early — no doubt to visit someone who is sick or lonely.

Requests for visits and counseling are heavier than ever during the Christmas season.

"Around the holidays, many people are very depressed. I get a lot of calls, day and night," said Father Paul I. Cloonan, pastor at St. Mary of the Assumption, Scottsville. "We're speaking of the whole season of Advent. Your daily, routine requests for time just about triple. Sometimes it's hard to listen well because you're giving out a lot of psychic energy."

Compounding this "Christmas effect" is the fact that a growing number of priests serve alone in parishes.

"Christmas is fairly overwhelming — especially if you're stationed alone," said Father Anthony F. Calimeri, pastor of St. Francis Church in Phelps. "People don't realize what a strain it is to be on call, to be celebrating all the time. If you're doing it right, and making it rewarding for people and spiritually uplifting, then it's no small effort you're making."

By its very nature, Christmas is a difficult time for people who are celibate, according to Father James Schwartz, director of the diocesan Ministry to Priests program.

"It's a very relational time, a family time," he said. "I think it's true with everyone that the loneliness of your life are accentuated at holidays, as well as the joys. Everything is kind of heightened."



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

The Christmas season is probably more demanding for pastors than any other time of year. Yet Father Robert Gaudio, pastor at St. Monica's Church, still finds time for a personal tradition. Blinking nose and all, he ventures out on Christmas Eve to visit children.

So when does the priest's holiday hard work pay off? He heartily shakes your hand as he wishes you Merry Christmas after Mass, but what then?

Because their parish families come first, it's easy to forget that many priests have families of their own for whom they try to find time.

Since his mother and most of his relatives live nearby, Father James Marvin, pastor of St. Ambrose Church, is usually able to spend Christmas afternoon with his family once the last Mass is over and he has caught up on

sleep with a short nap. "Every single one of my brothers and sisters is there. Along with all the nieces and nephews, there are about 70 of us," he said. "I'm usually exhausted, but being surrounded with family somehow energizes me."

Father Marvin also considers the members of his priests' support group a family. Each year, they gather at his cottage on Honeoye Lake for a Christmas party, complete with gifts, a turkey dinner and decorations. They usually plan the event at least 10 days before the actual holiday, while they can still relax.

"We've been doing it for years — I don't know how many," Father Marvin said. "It's a little schmaltzy, but we are family to one another, and we just thought it would be nice to do this."

Aside from seven or eight "regulars" who gather every week throughout the year, the party usually includes several other priests who might not celebrate with anyone, either because they have no families or live no one within visiting distance.

"A lot of priests get in a rut and they sit in their rooms and drink their soup — that's for the birds," Father Marvin said. "We don't let Christmas be depressing or just another chore while other people are celebrating. Christmas is people. It's a time to enjoy and be thankful for one another."

Some priests depend on parishioners for a family-style celebration. Because he lives too far from his own relatives to be with them for the holidays, Father James Boyle of St. Mary's in Elmira enjoys spending time with parish families who are also friends.

Others develop individual traditions that somehow come to epitomize Christmas.

For the past five or six years, Father Robert Gaudio has gone visiting on Christmas dressed as Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Currently the pastor at St. Monica's in Rochester, he began by stopping with a friend at the homes of several children who suffered from cancer. Earlier this year, the last of those children died, so now he's considering new ways to carry on his tradition.

"The kids really enjoy it," he said. "The costume has a red nose that lights up, but it's one of those things that's not frightening to the younger ones."

Setting up trains in the rectory used to be Father William Trott's way of marking the season. Nowadays, the pastor of St. Augustine's saves the Christmas cards he receives and opens them all at once on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

As their numbers diminish and their average age climbs into the late 50s, more and more priests are realizing that they need to devote what free time they can find during the Christmas season to rest and relaxation.

"When I was younger, I'd go to all the parties right along with the best of them, but now we're becoming an endangered species," said Father Cloonan. "The older we get, the more we have to pace ourselves."

Both he and Father Trott agree that along with age comes a greater appreciation of the spiritual values of Christmas.

"If there is a lot of ourselves demanded, sure it's exhausting, but we have a great model," Father Cloonan said. "From the inside out, we gear ourselves spiritually for it. It's the spiritual aspect that recharges our batteries."

Making Poor Happy at Christmas

I'm going to buy poor children a gift for Christmas to make them so happy. And I'm going to buy my Mom, and Dad a Christmas gift.

Tommy Bell
St. Patrick, Seneca Falls
Grade 3

How to decorate a Christmas tree

We got icicles on it and Christmas ornaments. We got a big pointy thing on the top.

Jennifer Weis
St. John, Humboldt
Kindergarten

Santamas Eve

We get ready for Santa's visit on Santamas Eve. Just before bed we set out milk and cookies for Santa, and carrots for this reindeer. And then we always remember to hang up our stocking by the chimney. Next, off to bed, and off to dreamland! As we dream of everything that Santa might bring us, we look at the clock and say "oops time for bed!"

"Good Night!"

Kristin Furano
St. Patrick, Seneca Falls
Grade 3

The Santa Claus Dog

My dog Dee-Dee makes people laugh. She is very loving. At Christmas we put a collar on my dog that lights up. When people see her they start to smile and I know it makes them feel good. That is why I say she is my special Santa Claus Dog.

Jennifer Fiorelli
St. Patrick, Seneca Falls
Grade 3

My Dog Scamp

On Christmas day when O wake up I see what I got and then I see what my dog got. We give my dog a cooky bone. We bring the dog out and he gets snugg on his nose. Later after we eat dinner with the family. We bring the dog in and he eats lasagna. We have dessert then we play games. Finally we all go to bed.

Annjeannette Clark
St. Patrick, Seneca Falls
Grade 3

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