

Ecumenical spirit provides Christmas perspective

By Rev. Larry Witmer
Guest contributor

Christmas for me is like a many faceted gem. If I were to rotate a gemstone between my fingers, allowing light to reflect off one facet and then another, I would discover that no two images look exactly the same.

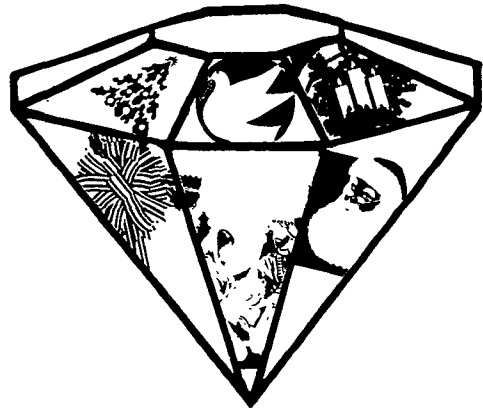
So it is with Christmas. What I bring to it determines what I see and what comes back to me in experience. What I bring in the way of expectations shapes the meaning and character of the Christmas observance for me.

In our society it is difficult to miss Christmas. The season's symbols are everywhere. From decorated store windows to newspaper ads, from carols on the radio to the old "Grinch" on television, for weeks each year we are inundated with signs that Christmas is coming.

But how we observe Christmas, how we bring the event into our homes and into our personal lives is quite another matter. If we follow the expectations extolled by commercial advertisers, Christmas will be a time of frantic shopping, lavish gift-giving, a time for special meals and house decorations.

However, Christians know there is more to Christmas. Central to our thoughtful observance is the celebration of God's gift of new life as expressed in the baby born in that Bethlehem stable.

Our faith journey does not begin with Christmas. It begins somewhere across the landscape of our lives when we recognize God's Spirit "leaning" on



us, perhaps touching us deeply with the scene of awesome beauty, perhaps calling us to moral accountability or leading us to express caring for others, or perhaps liberating us from some form of personal bondage.

Only then can we look at the story of the Bethlehem manger and see in the Christ Child a wondrous gift from God, an expression of God's unspeakable love for us as individuals.

While my own spiritual journey prepares me for Christmas and provides the lenses that put the many facets of Christmas in appropriate perspective, what I find is a surprise. I hear of an angel proclaiming, "Behold! I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people!"

I approach Christmas in gratitude for the ways God touches my life, and I discover the same wondrous gift of God's presence is available to everyone. The good news proclaimed by God's messenger angel is intended for everyone. No matter what a person's station in life, what race or clan what

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nationality or political party, what denomination or social club, what age or gender — no matter what the variations in human form — there is only the one message, one Gospel: "There is born today in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

The good news heralded by the Christmas angel provides a symbolic foundation for the ecumenical spirit growing in the churches today. Since God's love is for each and all of us, we are indeed one in Christ's Spirit. We are empowered and enlivened by the same Spirit. We are truly brothers and sisters.

One Christmas prayer I offer is for the continued strides of the ecumenical movement to overcome barriers between churches.

Another prayer I offer for each of us is that the ecumenical spirit might take root in our lives.

This personal embodiment of the ecumenical spirit leads us from preoccupation with self to solidarity with others. This spirit leads us to honest

and open sharing of what we hold dear to our personal faith, and to openness to receive such sharing from others. The same spirit connects us with victims of oppression and poverty, those who suffer illness and emotional distress, and those who are lonely and fearful. This ecumenical spirit emboldens us to take risks for the sake of healing, community and justice.

As you hear the Christmas story retold this season, listen for the voice of the angel. Hear again the good news that God's love is present for all — for you — and for the whole human family. Rejoice in God's wonderful gift, and embrace as family people near at hand, and in far distant places.

May the joy of Christmas be yours.

The Rev. Witmer is executive director of the Greater Rochester Community of Churches, an ecumenical organization fostering cooperation among Christian denominations and individual congregations.

Hostage reunions bespeak call to family holiness

By Father David J. Faraone
Guest contributor

The most powerful Advent-Christmas-Epiphany image characterizing my prayer this season is the moment when Terry Anderson embraced his sister Peggy Say following his release from Beirut. Their joy, mingled with six and a half years of pain; their laughter, interspersed with tears of healing; and their hugging like they'd never let go of each other symbolized for me the unity of two family members who truly loved one another.

I could never understand when the media would criticize or attack Say for her efforts to secure her brother's release. Even Terry commented that during much of his captivity, he was sustained by the knowledge "that my big sister was ... someone I could rely on."

On Sunday, our church celebrates liturgically the holiness of another family. Throughout the world, we will recall the memory of Mary, Joseph and Jesus as they related to one another in a family unit.

Our own families, our parish communities are called to be holy families,

also. Yet we cannot equate holiness with perfection. The Gospel story of Mary and Joseph finding Jesus in the Temple after leaving Jerusalem without him is a clear sign that their communication with each other was not perfect in this instance.

Even their understanding of one another is murky. How many mothers and fathers can hear the pain in Mary's voice as she speaks those age-old words: "Son, why have you done this to us?" How many sons and daughters can find their struggle for independence in the words of Jesus: "Why did you search for me?"

How fascinating it is that the only account of family life in Nazareth is a Gospel filled with poor communication, searching and difficulty in understanding one another's identities and roles!

The story of Jesus in the Temple is not an artificial construct designed to illustrate his intelligence among teachers. It is a real story of a boy in his early adolescence. It is the real story of a man and woman raising that boy. It is the real story of holiness that comes from the Spirit of God dwelling in each person, an authentic holiness whose

foundation is grounded in love.

That love calls the members of a family to relate to each other with honesty and respect. In the 1960s Hollywood brought us Ward and June, Wally and the Beaver, and we balked at the plastic picture of family life. In the 1990s, Geraldo and Donahue offer us bizarre portraits of families at the other end of the spectrum, and we cringe at the level to which some can sink.

A true holy family is one in which members are allowed to grow and develop as human persons who are unconditionally loved and respected. Even the members of a dysfunctional family have the potential to grow in holiness if the grace of God is allowed to bring peace where there was tension, honesty where there was manipulation, and gentleness where there was abuse.

As the hostages and their families reconnect after years of being apart, may all of our families be strengthened and united. "Clothe yourselves with mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness and patience ... forgive as the Lord has forgiven you... over all these virtues, put on love" (Colossians 3:12-14).



Vatican II calls the family "the future kingdom of God." May each of us recognize that we are no longer held hostage by sin, and may the holiness of Jesus, Mary and Joseph inspire our own.

The author is vice chairman of the Diocesan Liturgical Commission.

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