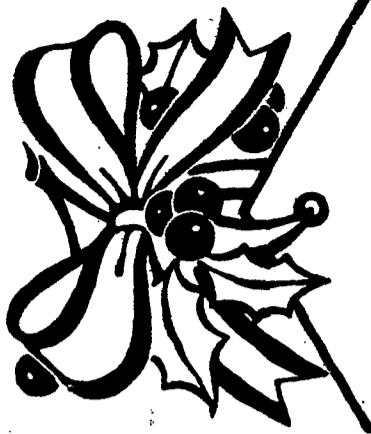


ing Christmas rituality



"Christmas opens up your heart and brings Jesus into your life."
- Kevin Brady

For Paul and his brother Kevin, their insight into Christmas began taking shape several years ago.
"My parents helped us to understand that Christmas wasn't always about presents," Paul said.
"They always taught us that it was

about Jesus — loving him and reaching out to others," added Kevin, 15.
This focus on reaching out has been used by Paul and Kevin with another family member. A few years back, they spent two Christmases visiting their sister, Renee, at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital. Renee, now 24, nearly died due to a battle with Crohn's disease, a chronic inflammation of the digestive tract.

"I didn't feel I really needed presents during that time. I felt like giving all my love to (Renee)," Kevin said.

Paul said he hurt not only for his sister, but for all the other children who spent their Christmases in the hospital.

"I felt bad because they couldn't celebrate Christmas the way they wanted to," Paul remarked.

Paul added that his faith was permanently changed by this sobering experience.

"After that, I felt closer to God," Paul said.

The experience also helped him gain new-found appreciation for family unity, he said.

"Deep down inside, I was just glad we were all together," Paul said. He contrasted his own family's closeness to friends whose parents are divorced, saying those adults attempt to make up for family strife by "buying tons and tons of gifts" for their children.

The holiday season, Kevin concluded, is a time to cherish the kind of presents that money just can't buy.

"Christmas opens up your heart and brings Jesus into your life," Kevin stated.

that involved a close friend. That person remains in a coma.

Dianna added that her participation in a parish charity project also reminds her to count her blessings. For the past two years, she has helped deliver Christmas gifts to families who are struggling financially.

"They ask for clothing and food; simple things. And you wonder if the kids in the family even think there's a Santa Claus," Dianna said.

She added that even these small gifts are considered a big deal by the families. "They act so surprised," Dianna remarked.

Dianna noted that her understanding of Jesus has also deepened as she's grown older. She now remembers Christmas not only for Christ's birth, but also for his life on earth and his death on the cross.

"You think more about what Jesus did for us. Someone died so we could have life," Dianna said.

For Chuck Johnson, it was two years ago — as he was gathered around the tree with family members — that he noticed how much his perspective on Christmas had changed.

"I was cheerful, not that I was opening presents but because I was with my family — watching my little brothers and sisters, having fun watching them open their presents," said Chuck, 16, from St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Hamlin.

Paul Brady pointed out that children are more likely to grasp the true meaning of Christmas if their gift-opening rituals are also accompanied by frequent exposure to the story of Christ's birth, such as Christmas pageants.

"They explain a lot, and little kids always like visual learning because it's not as boring," said Paul, 16, from St. Catherine of Siena Church in Mendon. He recommends these activities over watching Christmas specials on television because pageants are "not as commercialized."

When she was 9 years old, Dianna Ball made a "shocking" discovery that caused her to view Christmas a bit differently.

Seems that Dianna wandered into the garage on Christmas morning, and came across some empty boxes and unused wrapping paper resting in a garbage container. For the first time, it occurred to her that the source for her Christmas presents may have nothing to do with sleighs and reindeer.

When a child learns the real story of Santa, "that's when the true meaning of Christmas starts to come through," remarked Dianna, 18, a parishioner in the Catholic Communities of St. Anne and St. Gregory in Palmyra and Marion.

These days, Dianna still enjoys opening gifts with her family — but her approach, she said, is comparatively laid-back.

"There used to be a lot more excitement; you'd want to charge out to the tree. Now we take it a little slower," Dianna remarked.

Beth Griffiths recalls similar eagerness on Christmas when she was younger.

"We'd wake up at midnight, 1 o'clock, or 2 o'clock and wait to open gifts," said Beth, 17, from St. Helen's Church in Gates.

However, Beth — unlike many of her peers — was never on the lookout for a

jolly man in a red-and-white outfit.

"My parents never really told us there was a Santa Claus. They said the gifts were from them, because my mom never wanted to have to lie to us," Beth explained.

This year, Beth is looking forward to experiencing Christmas with her family in a new way. The change was proposed by her brother Dave, 19, prior to last Christmas.

"He brought up the point about how Christmas should be for Jesus," Beth recalled. "We talked a lot about what it should be for, and what the emphasis should be on. It's really different now; I like it this way."

Beth noted that she, her parents and three siblings now open their gifts the day after Christmas. They spend the actual holiday concentrating on the birth of Jesus, beginning with their attendance at midnight Mass.

Beth added that this focus on spirituality has also led her to reevaluate her approach toward gift-giving.

"You don't just do it to get it done. You do it because you want to," Beth remarked. She said she now attempts to give meaningful presents, such as handwritten letters.

Due to two recent tragedies, Dianna is another teen who finds deeper meaning in this Christmas season. She's especially thankful for her immediate family's good health following the murder of her uncle in California last spring, and a car accident last month

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