

PARENTING

Christmas morning service a blessing for children

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant editor

On Christmas morning, Taylor Kolmer will take the first toy he opens to the 9 a.m. Mass at St. Vincent de Paul Church in Churchville. There, Father Ted Auble, sacramental minister, will bless it.

Taylor, who is 9, has this to say to listeners about the parish's Christmas Day Mass: "They should go to it if they go to St. Vincent de Paul."

This has become a tradition for Taylor, since Father William F. Laird started it a few years ago when he was pastor at St. Vincent. Children of all ages were called up to the altar, where they sat while Father Laird sprinkled holy water and blessed their toys.

"It's kind of nice, because we get to sit around and listen to all the other kids and see what cool things they got," said Taylor, who remembers taking a guitar one year. "It makes me feel good about the toy, now that I know it's, like, holy."

It's also nice because it brings in families for what otherwise has become a poorly attended Mass, noted Father Laird, who now is pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Auburn and St. Ann in Owasco.

"I don't have friends who enjoy celebrating their birthday on another day and who on their birthday are alone," he said. To have people imply, "I don't want to have to spend part of the day with Jesus on Christmas," he said "bothers me immensely."

Last year a diocesan Office of Liturgy



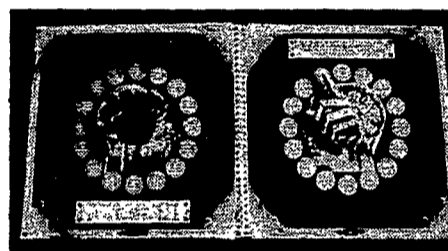
Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer
Candace Schneggenburger of St. John of Rochester Parish, Fairport, rattles a ball for her son Trevor, 8 months, at a "Discovery Toy Party" Nov. 8 at Karen DeFord's home in Rochester. The hostess is a member of St. James Parish, Irondequoit.

newsletter included the suggestion of blessing gifts on Christmas Day.

"Many people have become quite concerned about the fact almost all the church-going around Christmas usually occurs on Christmas Eve, most of it at earlier vigil Masses," said Joan Workmaster, director of liturgy. Often those vigil Masses have focused on children. Workmaster had heard of the Christmas gift blessing about 10 years ago and noted that in some places the Christmas morning Mass incorporates bringing a gift for someone less fortunate.

Father Laird noted that the actual readings for the vigil Masses feature Matthew's genealogy, which is said to indicate God's saving activity in every generation. But after all the emphasis, "some of it horribly misplaced, on family Masses and children's Masses, not paying attention to those vigil Masses happened in a lot of places," he said. The readings for the vigil Mass "really are very sober readings. They clearly stay away from the infancy story as Luke presents it."

Father Laird was raised in a day when there were no Masses of anticipation; the



The Amazing Magic Fact Machine is a popular Discovery toy.

first Christmas Mass prior to 1970 was the Midnight Mass. "And I think I had a reasonably decent childhood," he noted, but adding that he is not suggesting a return to those days.

If a children's liturgy is appropriate anywhere, Father Laird said, it is the Mass of dawn on Christmas Day, when the shepherds come and recognize the Christ child.

As sacramental minister at St. Vincent's last year, Father Gerard Hafner also blessed toys on Christmas Day. "We were surprised (that) he sat right down on the floor" with the children, said Pat VerWeire, a faith formation coordinator at the parish. Valerie Barnard of St. Vincent remem-

bers the fun Father Laird had one year when he blessed a Tickle Me Elmo doll that shook and giggled.

Taylor remembers, too. "He laughed a lot when we were up there," he said. "I think he enjoyed it. I know he enjoyed it."

Blessing the toys is "a neat moment," Father Laird said, adding that the children will "just tell me about what they got and what it means to them."

"It really made the kids feel like they were a part of the service," Barnard said of the blessings. "Father invited them right up on the altar, I think for the readings, and they sat up there. He always does a wonderful homily, tying everything together."

This year Father Laird will continue the practice at Sacred Heart Church in Auburn. He suggested that children bring nonviolent toys for the blessing. Yet, he said he would not embarrass a child who brought a more violent toy, saying: "We could use that to talk about how there are different ways to accomplish the peace Christ came to bring us. We could work around those things."

While she hasn't noticed restrictions on toys elsewhere, Workmaster said, "It would seem this particular period of time, with all the things that have gone on since September 11, to look at bringing toys that are nonviolent in their nature would be a good thing to do."

As for Taylor, he's hoping for a Harry Potter Play Station game.

"I went to see the movie, it was really cool," he said.

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The Catholic Courier
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Family Events

• **SAT, DEC. 15 - Concert:** "Doug & Gary Reunion", Eisenhart Auditorium, Rochester Museum & Science Center, 657 East Ave., Rochester, 2:30 p.m. free with toy donation for Pirate Toy Fund; drop off toys at RMSC or Chase Pitkin for concert tickets, 585/271-4552

• **DEC. 15, 16 - Family Weekend:** "Holiday Cheer", learn about Hanukkah, Christmas and Kwanzaa; make holiday gift tags and "stained glass" pictures; visit Santa and the Holiday KidShop, Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester, Dec. 15: 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Dec. 16: noon-5 p.m.; \$6 adults, \$5 seniors & students, \$4 children 3-17; 585/263-2700

• **DEC. 15, 16 - Musical:** "Winnie-the-Pooh", Rochester Children's Theatre, Arts Center, Nazareth College, 4245 East Ave., Rochester, 2 p.m.; \$9; 585/389-2170

• **SUN, DEC. 30 - Fun Family Flicks:** "The Phantom Tollbooth", animated story of a bored little boy who enters a world where letters and numbers are at war; ages 5 and up; Dryden Theatre, George Eastman House, 900 East Ave., Rochester, 2 p.m.; \$5 adults, \$2 children, \$8 families (one adult and up to four children); 585/271-3361, ext. 218

• **THRU JAN. 1 - Family Laser Show:** "Holiday Laser 2001", Strasenburgh Planetarium, 657 East Ave., Rochester, Dec. 14, 23, Jan. 2, 10 p.m.; \$10 adults, \$5 children, \$20 families; 585/271-1880

• **WED, JAN. 2 - Application deadline:** learn to ice skate classes, Genesee Valley Park Ice Arena, Elmwood Ave., Rochester; six week series begins Jan. 6; Sundays 5-5 p.m.; \$80; 585/235-3290