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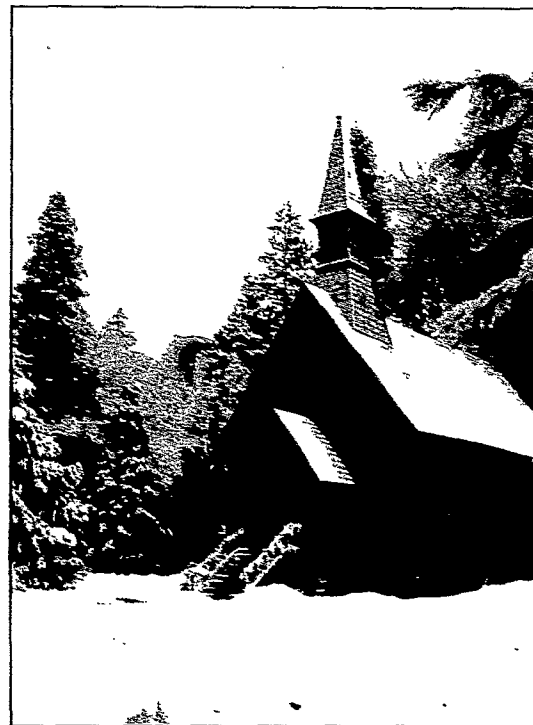
Faith: Personal loss brings sensitivity to others' grief, hardship

My childhood Christmas memories flood my consciousness: warmth, hot cocoa, morning Mass, stockings stuffed to overflowing with treats and wrapped surprises, family, Christmas vacation, special meals, presents, new things and new opportunities.

Yet this year seems so different, following the death of my young father just three months ago. There is a part of me wants to avoid honestly acknowledging this tremendous loss as Christmas approaches. Rather, a part of me wants to brandish the polite smile and "surprised" eyes of a child as another unwanted pair of socks is unwrapped at Christmas.

How do those with strained relationships — family or otherwise — celebrate the Festival of Christmas? After a loved one dies, where is the seemingly steadfast meaning of this season of past joy? How do those in fear of what the next year will bring in light of job loss, layoffs, economic downturn and financial concerns hear the message of peace from the angels as they say, "Do not be afraid for tonight a Savior has been born for you?" I mean, can't you almost feel the bitter, hand-cracking cold and frigid darkness of the night on which Jesus was born? There can be no argument that those "birthing" conditions were far from ideal to receive the creator of the world.

Yet God did not delay or pull back to land safely elsewhere. Does not



the very Feast of Christmas cry out to and plead its cause with us that God is the light in the darkness? Actually, the original Christmas was the first of many personal embraces by our creator, in Jesus Christ, of our imperfect and struggling human condition. The Light embraced the darkness! How awesome! How beautiful! How raw! How messy!

Right in the middle of the dark crèche scene, I am reminded that the one I so love and admire — actually adore — wrestled with the darkness and the shadows of human existence. I honestly do believe — even though I don't feel it this year — that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"

(John 1:5). I try and keep my eyes open to see God-with-us, Emmanuel. I try not to wrap up and FedEx into oblivion my difficult emotions of loss, sadness and pain; rather, I try to recall and experience the truth of God revealed that "upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone" (Isaiah 9:1b).

Finally, and maybe most importantly, the death of my father has woken me up to the experiences of grief, loss and hardship in so many others around me. Somehow, I know by my own experience what is experienced in the lives of other people of faith. And, isn't that the Christmas reality and meaning? Jesus Christ knows our experience by experiencing all of it himself, and he, who has risen

from and conquered death, transforms darkness into a light that will not be overcome!

Father Doug Della Pietra is pastor of Church of the Good Shepherd, Henrietta.

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