

## FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners:

These days before Christmas always bring back memories of the celebrations that occurred when I was growing up. It seemed like there were certain things we could count on happening year after year. My parents always waited to get our tree until the third week of Advent in order that it would last until the Feast of the Epiphany. Decorating the tree was a collective effort with Mom supervising. I'm old enough to remember the light sets where if one light burned out they all went off. This could be a real test of patience particularly when putting the lights up outside. The bulbs for our Christmas tree were always a mix of old and new. The old ones took on a certain sentimental value if for no other reason than that they had survived intact year after year in a house full of eight kids. The crèche set depicting the Bethlehem scene was always placed on the mantle piece above the fireplace. Mary and Joseph, the animals and shepherds always went up right away. the Baby Jesus would not be placed in the manger until Christmas Eve. The wise men could be placed on the distant end of the mantle but had to wait until Epiphany before arriving at the stable. The whole scene was surrounded by evergreen trees and fake snow. It was years later before I realized that Bethlehem really doesn't look much like the Alps.

Attached to the mantle at the bottom were the Christmas stockings. They were those big red furry ones with each of our names on a white band that went around the top. I don't know who made the things but it seemed that every family had the same style with only the names changed. The stockings of course were really only a diversion. The really good stuff we were hoping to see delivered could never fit in them.

After dinner on Christmas Eve we would have egg nog while Christmas records played on the "hi-fi." My folks allowed us to open one of our presents from among those which were given to us by people other than Santa. This would usually pacify us for the evening while the hours slowly passed. It was the one night if the year we didn't mind going to bed as long as it meant that Santa would soon come.

**Christmas morning always began very early, too early for my parents.** After a few hours of enjoying our gifts it would be time to get ready for Mass. We always wore our best clothes to church and on Christmas there might be some new item added to our attire that Santa knew we needed. Our parish church in Silver Spring was built largely of wood and the interior leant itself to being dressed up with evergreens and red bows. Our choir, like all choirs worked hard in preparation for Christmas and everyone it seemed joined in singing the carols at Mass.

When we returned from Mass we would have a hurried breakfast before changing our clothes and running off to compare notes on Santa's generosity with our friends. Meanwhile, Mom & Dad and my older siblings would begin preparing the Christmas Dinner which was always roast beef, mashed potatoes & gravy, Yorkshire pudding, brussel sprouts and Waldorf salad. I don't know how this particular menu came together. My family seems to have been eating it before I arrived on the scene and as the sixth out of eight children, who was I to argue with the tradition? Actually, I assumed that this is what everyone ate on Christmas and except for the brussel sprouts (which are like miniature cabbages but smell just as bad as the full size ones) I always liked these dishes. The day usually concluded watching an old movie on TV. before an early departure for bed.

Every family I'm sure has its own Christmas traditions. The fact that we do the same things year after year rather than being boring allows us to relax and enjoy the day without worrying about re-designing it each time. The rituals we share as a family become part of our collective memories. Years later, when we look back on them we realize how much they formed our understanding of what Christmas means.

The same is true of the event that gives the day its name, the Christ-Mass. The Mass at which we celebrate the Incarnation, God made man, is essentially the same every year. Indeed, all Masses follow the same basic form. To some it may seem repetitive but it keeps the basic form that Christ gave it at the Last Supper. That way rather than worrying about changing the rituals in order to impress or entertain, we as the Lord's family simply gather and follow His command: "*do this in remembrance of Me.*" At some point we may even discover how much our understanding of Christ Himself has been formed by the grace-filled rituals He has given us in the Mass.

With my prayers,  
Fr. Conley