

Christmas – December 24/25, 2020 – Reflection

For many of us, Christmas, more than any other holyday in the Church year, is about traditions: traditional foods eaten with family and friends; traditional gatherings over the river and through the woods to be with work colleagues and loved ones; traditional carols sung by a choir; midnight Masses and children's Nativity pageants ... all these traditions and so many more in this year will be celebrated in our memories as we try to stay safe and keep distance because of the virus, and for me, because it will also be the first Christmas in my life when both of my parents are gone.

So in this Christmas that is played on the stage of memory, I'd like to share some of my fondest memories of Christmases past and hope that they might help you remember the people and customs that made your Christmases lovely and warm and bright.

My Mom grew up on a farm in western Pennsylvania and would tell us that each year her Dad and her older brothers would go out in their woods to find a tree for the house. Once inside, the fresh tree, fragrant with the piney scent of the outdoors, would be simply decorated with homemade ornaments and real candles. The whole family would sit around the tree watching the candlelit branches as they filled the house with warm light as the family sang Christmas carols from the old country of Slovakia.

I remember Christmas in Virginia when I was three. We had a beautiful tree in the living room which my Dad wanted to show off to our next

door neighbors. He invited the family in, and with them came their cat who proceeded to run like a maniac around and around the beautiful Christmas tree followed closely by my Mom bearing broom for the chase. Our neighbors moved away shortly after that!

I remember the Christmas we spent at my Dad's parents' house in Springfield and how my Grandpa, who was a wonderful storyteller, sat me on his lap and told me the story of the time he shot the elephant in his pajamas. I was never quite sure who was wearing the PJ's - the hunted pachyderm or my Grandpa or if Grandpa really had an elephant in his night clothes! Anyway, that Christmas certainly had an animal theme to it ... Santa brought me my very own record player to play my new record of Alvin and the Chipmunks singing their Christmas hit.

I remember singing in the boy's choir with my two little brothers at our church on Long Island all dressed up in red cassocks and white surplices with stiff Buster Brown collars and red silk bows tied at the neck which didn't make it any easier to hit the high notes in O Holy Night! Afterward, we would come home and have hot chocolate and leave a note with cookies for Santa and carrots for the reindeer before we trundled off to bed for a nearly sleepless night of anticipation of what the morning might bring.

I remember the Christmas when my Dad's business was bad and we made a resolution that no gift could cost more than \$5. It was so much fun picking out the perfect thing for everybody and watching them open the gifts laughing all the way!

I remember the Christmas when my Dad's business was still bad when there was one gift that was by the tree that was even bigger than the tree itself and it was for my Mom from all of us. She opened the

refrigerator box and there was another box inside. She opened that and there was another box; on and on she opened only to find another box smaller than the last. She, and all of us were crying from laughing so hard! At last she came to one last tiny box which she opened to find a mother's ring inside with the birthstones of her four kids. She cried ... and wore that ring till the day she died.

At Christmas, we never had exactly the same thing for dinner year after year. One year it might be a roast, another year turkey, another time it was Beef Wellington but I'll never forget the year we had the traditional Christmas goose, which none of us had ever cooked before. I remember being so careful with preparing and dressing the bird imagining it would be something out of a Dickens' Christmas Carol. I was standing right next to my Mom when she pulled the goose out of the oven only to see instead of a plump juicy Christmas feast a couple sticks and some skin clinging to bones and hardly any meat. We looked at that sad excuse for a bird and at each other and just exploded in laughter. That Christmas the family left the table a little less stuffed than was the custom!

All those Christmases ... all the laughter ... all the tears ... all the love ... all the songs ... all the family ... all the friends ... all the presents and the foods ... all the good years and the bad ones too ... all the years of plenty and the years when belts were tight too ... I'm grateful to have such wonderful memories.

At this Christmas which will be dark and sad and a little lonely in so many ways for so many, I'm still grateful that God so loved the world so much that He spoke into the night and His Word in a Baby's cry split

the darkness, became flesh, and moved right next door ... and that's the best memory of all!

This year, I wish for you all blessed memories, peace in your homes and in your hearts, and the hope that Jesus, the Light of the World, still shines on in the darkness and dawns in your hearts with His love.

Merry Christmas and God Bless us one and all.