

Celebrating Christmas

By Fr. Fred Guthrie

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Keep it simple! Is it possible to celebrate Christmas in a meaningful way that is chock full of simplicity? Is it too late to return to what was common practice only thirty years ago?

For the past several years I have been privileged to return to my first parish on the occasion of Christmas and Holy Week. I would like to take these few lines to describe my experience, the experience of the parish and the overall attitude that now permeates Saint Susanna Parish.

During Advent, the children in the parish are alerted to the fact that they are preparing to celebrate Jesus' birthday. (There is a subtle distinction between celebrating His day of birth and birthday; the one connotes a static event, the other, a living reality!) Initiated by the children's CCD classes, the families are involved in the making of birthday cards, ornaments for the trees and story telling. On the Sunday before Christmas the four to eight year olds decorate the tree in the Sanctuary of the Church with their home-made ornaments, each with a personal petition or thanksgiving duly inscribed. On that same Sunday each child is given an invitation to a Birthday Mass, to be celebrated on Christmas Eve at seven o'clock in the evening. Before the Christmas Eve celebration the children present their home made birthday cards, with appropriate messages, (Jesus, you have lived a long life . . . Happy Birthday!) which are placed on a string that runs down both sides of the church.

The celebration, itself, begins with the procession of the figures for the Christmas crib, the shepherds, sheep, goats, Mary, Joseph, etc., each figure being carried by a child. The Word is proclaimed by appropriate readings from a Children's Bible and the homily is a film strip followed by a discussion with the children, led by the priest. The Prayer of the Faithful is spontaneous, initiated by the celebrant, who then proceeds down the aisle with a cordless microphone in order for those children with special intentions to be heard. The children then gather around the Table of the Lord for the proclamation of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Birthday story, and at the Exchange of Peace they return to their parents and family with their own Kiss of Peace. Following Communion there is another procession, this one with a large birthday cake, provided by one of the families. There is the customary blowing out of the candles, "Happy Birthday" song, and an invitation to share the cake at a later date. (I guess it is too messy as well as too late now.) Christmas carols are sung and then the recessional concludes the celebration.

In experiencing this celebration myself, several things struck me. First of all, those children know what Christmas is truly about. After all is said and done, it is Jesus' birthday. Rather than a child going to bed on Christmas Eve with all kinds of longing for Santa Claus, those children have memories of a Birthday party. For me

personally, the celebration places me on focus; just chatting with the small children before and after the celebration points me to the simplicity of the day. My parents have told me that it was customary when they were children for each child to receive one gift. In our age of consumerism, this form of celebration is a rejection of what we have become with a change of direction to who we are. Just reading the birthday cards which have been created by the children brings this point home very acutely.

By experiencing these children last Christmas I could not help but think of the family who gave their two year old a stuffed animal on Christmas; wrapped in a large box. After the child opened it, they began to play with the box!