CHRISTMAS 2016

Christmas Means Thinking of others

My Mom used to say at some point during Christmas dinner: “I wish there was a poor family we could share this meal with.” I remember feeling a little uncomfortable in the years when she first began to mention this wish. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to have anyone else intrude into our cozy little Christmas. We had it pretty good from time immemorial. When I was young, we went to our grandparents on my Mother’s side. But later we had decades of Holidays with Mom and Dad and us kids and our special uncle and aunt, Pat and Maxine. We had plenty of presents and food and drink and we played cards (Euchre mostly) and enjoyed each other’s company no end. This continued well after some of my siblings got married and grandsons began to be born.

We never did have a poor family in our home at Christmas, but Mom had the right idea. Her heart was in the right place. And she gave us a constant example of service since she seemed to be involved in all kinds of such stuff from the Martha Shop (where they sold second-hand clothes) to visiting the old State Hospital on West Broad street in Columbus to volunteering for a local Special Olympics and on and on. She was always in motion reaching out. Mom also was somewhat of a social activist. I remember she once told the family during the 1970s that we would have to do without lettuce for a while. We were doing this, she said, to support the United Farm Workers out west, led by Cesar Chavez who had organized poor agricultural workers back then. I was wondering what my Dad would say about that, but he didn’t object.

Christmas is certainly the time to think of others. On the first Christmas God was definitely thinking about us. He made a tremendous Sacrifice in giving us the gift of his Son – which is really the gift of himself. He truly gave himself completely to us on Christmas. There was no holding back, no hint of selfishness. (Selfishness is impossible for God, you know.) The mystery of Christmas is sometimes described as the wedding of heaven and earth; and this is an apt description because the union of God and humankind in Christ is precisely like the total mutual giving of husband and wife in marriage. As St. Paul says in his Letter to the Philippians (2:7), God made the Sacrifice of Christmas by emptying himself of his divinity to become one of us. And he became human to make it possible for us to share in his life – to share in his divinity (to become, in fact, divine).

Of course, thinking of others begins at home. It begins with parents thinking of kids and kids thinking of parents. It begins with siblings being selfless toward one another. All family members are called to treat each other with respect and love. The extended family also gets in on this act. Grandparents are especially good at modeling generous and compassionate behavior – sometimes called spoiling their grandchildren. Family life is always a challenge. But even the failure to think of others first can be an occasion of growth because it provides opportunities for apologizing and for forgiveness. God’s grace is always at work in families. When things don’t always go so well, he is still there with his help. Families that experience sorrow or even tragedy and those with special needs children often become closer and holier through the sacrifices they are called to make. Parents and grandparents of special needs kids all seem to me to be saints. A couple I knew in Minnesota had a baby boy with Downs Syndrome. One time soon after the birth, someone asked the Mom when they were going to put him in a home. She responded indignantly that he had a home. This family visited
me here a few years ago. Their son, Wade, is now in his early forties, and he still has a home – a home with a family he has made better just because they accepted him.

So thinking of others begins at home, but it does not end at home. For Christians and all people of good will, being sacrificial extends to others in the parish and local community and even around the world. Tomorrow many in our parish community will do something close to what my Mom suggested at those Christmas dinners of long ago. They will go out someplace and feed the hungry at meals organized for the poor. Or they may have already done this good deed before Christmas. In either case, they will be doing what I felt uncomfortable thinking about when I was younger – they will share part or all of their Christmas with strangers.

Some folks will visit the sick tomorrow or during the Christmas Season and just talk and pray with them – and maybe they will have the privilege of giving them Holy Communion. Some may be daring and perhaps a little risky on Christmas. Many of you will remember the very sad death of our St. Paul Eighth Grader Joey Castrodale at the end of last summer (a great kid). During his funeral Mass in this church, we heard that Joey had badgered his family a couple of years before to go into Columbus to help some of the homeless who are on the streets there (including tonight, by the way). And the family did go out into the cold. Joey had heard in his sixth grade Religion class about such people and, with the immediacy and energy of youth, rallied his closest loved ones to act like Christ. Who says there is not good in the world?

Like my Mom, some in our parish and Catholic community will also stick up for people who are victims of injustice or oppression in our country and in our world. In the United States, we have by far a larger percentage of our population in prisons than any other country in the world. And a disproportionate number of those incarcerated are African Americans and Latinos who often have committed nonviolent offenses involving illegal drugs. Tragically our American culture teaches us to be afraid of men of color, whether they are really dangerous or not. This racist approach is not only unjust, it also hardens those imprisoned and makes them worse and not better citizens – and worst of all, it destroys their lives for no reason. Now in our time the wise among our leaders in both political parties are ready to end this monumental injustice. Let's help them get it done.

Some will have compassion on migrants and especially refugees from war-torn and oppressive regions and advocate that we welcome them as if they were Christ. Parishioners here at St. Paul will be offered the opportunity early in the New Year to be a part of this great act of kindness in a modest way by providing welcome kits for newcomers to central Ohio from abroad – always keeping in mind that we Catholics or our ancestors were almost all migrants or refugees to America. In this connection, it is well to remember that God was a migrant on Christmas. He migrated from heaven to earth, which is one huge and awesome migration! Jesus Christ the Son of God entered a strange world where he was often rejected, but he accepted everyone who crossed his path. We Catholics across the globe have a history of migrating because sometimes we like many others are the victims of discrimination to the extent that a move becomes necessary – perhaps a big move. Today on Christmas we are called, in the spirit of those like Joey Castrodale and my Mother, to migrate from our comfort zone to reach out to those in need.
So if we are not able to help someone beyond our family circle in a direct way on Christmas Day, that's ok – as long as this Celebration of the Nativity moves us to reflect about how we might be of service in the near future or even daily for the rest of our lives. Remember that Christmas began when God thought of us and not of Himself!