

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS REMEMBERED: HOPE HAS ENTERED OUR MIDST

For more than fifty years, my parents have lived in the same house in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood in the western edge of Saint Paul. All of my Christmas memories are in that house, as I was only three years old when we moved there. Whether waiting impatiently at the top of the stairs to be able to go downstairs early on Christmas morning, being overjoyed to have “found” baby Jesus while we were unwrapping the Nativity Crèche figures, or performing in our annual Christmas pageants orchestrated by my great Aunt Mary, these are just a few reasons why this is my favorite season. To be brutally honest, liturgists are quick to remind us that according to the Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year (Table of Liturgical Days), **Easter ranks ahead Christmas** in its liturgical importance.

My response is a very respectful “Bah, humbug!” I’m just not quite there yet! Obviously, the reality that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead trumps his birth, but I believe a strong case could be made that the two are inseparable. That God became Man is a miracle of inestimable value and absolutely unique among all world religions. The **General Norms of the Liturgical Calendar** (#11) state, “The celebration of Easter and Christmas, the two greatest solemnities, continues for eight days, with each octave governed by its own rules.” In the revised post-Vatican II liturgy, only Christmas and Easter maintain proper Octaves. The Octave refers to an eight-day celebration, effectively signaling the prolongation of a feast to the eighth day (*dies octava*) inclusive. The custom of liturgical Octaves treats the entire week following a Solemnity as like the celebration itself. Still, if they ever revise the liturgical norms again, I’d campaign for equal billing!

Increasingly, I have seen Christmas trees out in the alley for pick up prior to New Year’s Day and it is like a dagger to the heart. Have we already given up in less than a week? When I speak with seniors who recall pre-Vatican II Christmases, they often mention the custom of fish stew for Christmas Eve dinner. Fish stew? Hey, I love seafood, but I’m trying to get the visual. Recall, in those days there were no anticipatory Masses and Christmas Eve was a day of complete fasting and abstinence. The Church law in force at the time stipulated: “The law of abstinence and fast together is to be observed on Ash Wednesday, the Fridays and Saturdays of Lent, the Ember days [all day], and on the **Vigils of Pentecost, the Assumption, All Saints, and the Nativity.**” Of course, with the popularity of Midnight Mass, the fasting could potentially end at about 1:00 a.m. This was especially the case in the USA and Canada, where the fast was not so much a penitential fast, as it was a preparation fast.

Other customs vary from country to country. In Italy, the crèche is kept up for forty days until the Feast of the Presentation on February 2, but by then Christmas is a distant, distant memory for Americans. On the other hand, we put up our crèche (absent baby Jesus) sometime during Advent, whereas in Italy they are not revealed until Christmas Eve. So, what are your Christmas customs? Are you instilling them in your families? The Christmas pageants to which I referred are lasting memories of mine, truly a Ubel family staple for many years. One year, we performed the Little Drummer Boy– and guess who was the star? We would practice for hours in our living room for the pageant, meticulously prepared by my great-Aunt Mary Downey, herself a Church organist and composer. Our audience was our parents, aunts and uncles and grandparents. No matter how much we confused our lines, or even if tensions were heightened during rehearsals, somehow it always seemed that the performance in our living room theatre played to rave reviews. In the midst of everything, I still never recall a Christmas without joy triumphing over sadness.

The heart of the Christmas message is summed up beautifully in one simple phrase by the 2nd-century Saint Irenaeus, “the first great theologian of the Church” as called by Pope Benedict XVI: “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine Sonship, might become a son of God.” (*Adv. haeres. ‘Against Heresies’ 3, 19, 1*) Hope has entered into our world, and we need to take these precious days to proclaim this to any and all who will listen. A truly Blessed Christmas to all! I take this opportunity to extend to all of you my promise of prayers for a beautiful Christmas season. I am so deeply grateful for your support of our Cathedral and thank you for attending today. Hope has entered once for all in our midst. Felix Dies Nativitatis, Joyeux Noël, Feliz Navidad, Buon Natale, Merry Christmas to all.

- Ask a silly question... “Archbishop Pierre, is this the coldest temperature you have ever experienced in your life?” Considering that he was previously posted as Nuncio to Haiti, Uganda and then Mexico, I should have known better than to ask. His facial expression while walking from the sacristy to the garage answered for him! The lowest ever recorded temperature in his hometown of Rennes, France was **-5 Celsius (°C)**, or **23 Fahrenheit (°F)** in 2007. As a remembrance of his first visit to Minnesota, I presented him with our new crystal of the Cathedral Dome. As much as he seemed to appreciate it, I think the **-20 (°F)** might just be his enduring memory.
- Christmas is simply not the day to comment on the **Gopher Football** scandal, but as I have previously written, I most definitely have some thoughts about the state of collegiate athletics. Suffice it to say, I am pretty sure I’ll be busy during the telecast of Tuesday’s Holiday Bowl in San Diego. Sorry, Gophers, but you see there is laundry to fold, dusting to do, and the dishwasher needs emptying.
- My parents celebrate their **60th wedding anniversary** this Friday. They were married at St. Luke’s, just down the street. President Eisenhower was in the Oval Office, IBM released its first ever commercial computer with a hard drive, **Cecil B. DeMille’s** “The Ten Commandments” debuted earlier that fall and a new car cost about \$2000. I offer my profound gratitude for their selfless example and observant parenting, not letting us get away with too much! I’ll never, ever be able to repay them for all that they have done for me.
- If you happen to see a maintenance staff member around, please offer a word of thanks. They have worked exceedingly hard to prepare the Church and do extra cleaning, especially after the storm and cold necessitated we postpone this year’s parish wide pre-Christmas cleaning. They are a dedicated group. And to all our volunteers— choir members, sacristans, flower decorators, ushers, liturgical volunteers— to all of you, I am so deeply grateful.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector

SPECIAL SCHEDULE TOMORROW...

So that our dedicated employees may enjoy some time with family, the Cathedral will not open until 10:00 a.m. on Monday, December 26. Afternoon confessions and the 5:15 p.m. daily Mass will take place as usual. Thank you for your understanding.