

# The Joy of Christmas

Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm



Welcome to the Hutmacher's Christmas in 1955. From left to right: Bob, Mike, Joe and Pat – two years before Kathy was born. It looks like I'm not sure what I have, Mike just woke up and Joey and Pat are simply happy to be under the tree. (Notice the requisite 1950's tinsel?) When I watch the film *The Christmas Story* my mind goes right back to this picture and I relive that innocence, the sheer delight of sparkles, snickerdoodles, icing and surprises. To this day I still believe I heard hooves on our roof and jingles in the living room one year. My brothers and I would squish under the tree on the floor, gaze up through it and squint at the lights – magic! I didn't get Ralphie Parker's Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model air rifle but I remember being happy, simply happy.

I recently joined a young family with two little boys to visit "Christmas Around the World" at Chicago's Museum of Science & Industry. The faces of children before umpteen trees with thousands of lights, ornaments as diverse as there are people on Mother Earth, and music to guide us all into fantasies of years

past – joy! That kind of experience happens countless times during the days of Christmas through myriad sources.

We all have memories of childhood and favorite family stories, our own keepsake ornaments, certain tableware used only for holidays and other personal treasures. I'd like to explore with you my own mental meanderings as to why these are so very important to us and why we cling to them for years, even if they might fade faster than dated photographs.

There is a primordial principle that is operant in human nature: remembering or memorializing. I reach into my hopper of years of working in liturgy and the Greek work *anamnesis* immediately comes to the surface. I don't want to stray too far from Christmas joy but this dynamic is important for our understanding of not only liturgy but many very important parts of our lives. Bear with me.

Robert Taft, SJ, writes in his significant study *Beyond East and West, Problems in Liturgical Understanding*: "The present encounter is the point of it all. In memorial we do not take a mythic trip into the past, nor do we drag the past into the present by repeating the primordial event in mythic drama...The past event is the efficacious sign of God's eternal saving activity, and as past it is contingent. The reality it initiates and signifies, however, is neither past nor contingent but ever present in God, and through faith to us, at every moment of our lives...The ritual moment is a synthesis of past, present and future, as is always true to God's time."

Taft is, of course, speaking of the Eucharist. However, even a cursory look at any ritual in our lives bears this truth of behavior and human psychology. For example, why does this family photo strike such a chord in my heart? I see and remember an event I cannot recreate, but I obviously remember something about that Christmas that evokes a warmth, a belief that family unity is real. I cannot return to that tiny house in Flora, IL but a memory in the present fills me with the

knowledge that our family is richly blessed with the love and life of God. It takes faith to see and act on that dynamic, but that is the very heart of every single sacramental celebration, in particular the Eucharist. We remember the Passover of the Lord 2,000 years ago in 2014 and are joined with Christ as we walk into the future. And it is the power of that *anamnesis* that has kept the Church together two millennia because it is the living God, not humans, who give her life.

Back to Christmas. Through the years this holiday has been stuffed, no, over-stuffed like St. Nick himself, with romantic and nostalgic dreams of an idealized celebration of Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* is a major theatre production every year and countless renderings of Clement C. Moore's 1823 *A Visit from St. Nicholas* perpetuate those dreams of a peaceful celebration complete with "sugar plums dancing in their heads" Bob Cratchit's goose dinner. Prince Albert brought the German custom of trees to his Queen, Victoria in 1841 and the exchange of cards began in 1843. The world was swept away in romantic memories of "Christmases long, long ago." Ever since, we delight in and long for that simple, child-like joy Tiny Tim gave to Ebenezer Scrooge.

Francis of Assisi reveled in the joy of Christmas simply by going to its source: the Incarnation of Christ Jesus. God made a loving choice to consider the human body a worthy dwelling for his Son. And Francis was overwhelmed with that fact, with the overabundance of God's love for humanity and the humility of Jesus to accept such a dwelling. Last year I sketched out the story of Greccio and we read that and remember it every year at our Franciscan Christmas at Chiesa Nuova in



Chicago. Francis' love for the Christ Child is really nothing new, except that he acted it out with people and animals to help others come to a clearer understanding of the memory. It was not a recreation of the Incarnation, simply a memorial to the event. Remembering that event in Bethlehem was and is a powerful collective memory that pulls the reality of God's unlimited love into our 2014 celebration of the Festival of Light. When we display our own crèches or view others that collective memory pulls us into the Mystery of Love that is God. When I see almost any Nativity scene my heart remembers the past and consequently knows the embrace of God's love in the present.

The joy of Christmas doesn't mean the thrill of opening a new mixer or a dress or more toys or another electronic gizmo. The joy of Christmas for believers comes when we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed like a child is with the brightness of God's presence, even in the darkness and violence of our world. For many, many people the holidays are a source of pain because of illness, death, ugly associations and inner strife. However, I believe we can help one another experience joy at Christmas and all year long by bringing the goodness of God to others. Not in shiny presents but in the ways we can patiently assist others, respect the water and air of Mother Earth, listening to ideas that are very different than our own, accepting the fact that God created human beings in endless varieties and acknowledging we are all God's children. Even those who suffer the darkness of chronic depression can be offered a little hope by simply being there with them, even without words.

We all know what it's like when someone loves us as we are without words. That's the power of memories. Look at those four little boys in our photo and you see many things that are simply human. It was that very humanness that Jesus, out of love for the Father, embraced and identified himself with out of obedience. Even if we are alone for the holidays the knowledge that God loves us as we are can be more efficacious than a new

bottle of Bailey's, another pair of sox or tickets to a ball game. Those things are fleeting and the human heart longs for an embrace that is given freely. We all yearn to be accepted and told we are loved. That is the true gift of Christmas and why I've often invited people to greet everyone at the Sign of Peace because for many, the Eucharist IS their Christmas and none of us should be alone.

That is exactly what happens every time you and I gather at a Table anywhere in the world and remember "Do this in memory of me." There has never, ever been a command so well obeyed as that one from the heart of Jesus. And you see the wisdom of God in that command – knowing how much we yearn for goodness and truth and love and joy, the Lord himself gifted us with the everlasting *anamnesis* of the Eucharist. As Fr. Taft wrote, the Eucharist brings together the past, the present and the future into one cosmic moment



of praise in the very presence of God among us.

I visit the Art Institute of Chicago often and try my best to see *The Adoration of the Christ Child* by Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, 1515, Netherlands. I'm hesitant to print it here because so much detail may be lost, but hopefully you can see a few things that absolutely delight me. Mary, Joseph and shepherds adore. But notice how the artist rendered angels. The small ones around the manger are blowing horns and singing; the larger ones are playing a lute and a recorder. A celestial orchestra playing with joy!

When I encountered this masterpiece years ago it was the angels in the background that drew me into the painting and helped me experience the joy of the Incarnation. Look closely and you'll see them playing Renaissance instruments like rebecs, lutes, harps and even a hurdy-gurdy. There are two I just love because they seem to be skydiving into the stable, completely thrilled to witness the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. These two putti (Italian for tiny angels) mirror the sheer delight we humans find in life when we drop pretenses and allow the goodness, beauty and truth of God's love to permeate our hearts. These two tiny creatures cannonball into human existence out of sheer happiness, not unlike what a little child expresses in screeches of happiness on Christmas morning. That joy is genuine, rooted in life experience and is a spontaneous expression of something new and wonderful. That was and is the Incarnation.

We can dive into the ocean of God's love every day, regardless of how we feel or our situation in life. Just as Jesus surrendered his life into his Father's will and human life, so we surrender our selves into God's will by opening our hearts and saying, as did Mary, Joseph and countless others: "Yes, Lord. I graciously accept what today brings and once again choose to live in your love."

Joy is defined as "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." Christmas morning of 1956 the three of us oldest boys received bikes, which was the ultimate thrill for little boys. And yes, they were Schwinn's with horns! I

know from my brothers and sisters talking about gifting their children that the joy of Christmas gifts is remembering how significant they were for themselves in childhood and watching their kids' faces explode with happiness when opening presents. Memories drive us, especially when it comes to seeking happiness in life.

The major liturgical season of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany offers us plenty of memories to bring us closer to the Mystery of God. It begins with the end, that great moment of completion of salvation history, then zooms across the ages in reverse to that tender moment when the Divine Being comingled with human existence. In the Scriptures we see the breadth of God's care for us and simple women and men of faith who changed history forever. The sounds and décor of our churches help us escape the commercial holiday and enter into the divine milieu to be transported and transformed. Once again the memories of salvation history are triggered by paeans of "O Come, o Come, Emmanuel" and "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." The Nativity scenes in church and at home help us bring the past into the present so that our faith takes us forward till that great Day of Completion when God will be all in all and those words of Jesus at the Last Supper will be a reality: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete." (John 15:11)

Please know that the friars of St. Peter's and the Province of the Sacred Heart pray for you every day. Remember, the power of memory pulls us into the Mystery of God and that is why we bring you with us – your kindness allows us to continue serving the world with Franciscan joy. Thank you for your support of Franciscan presence in the Loop and for loving us as Christ loves all of us. If you don't get a new Schwinn from St. Nick, don't be disappointed. Just go to Mass and be overwhelmed with the humility of Christ. That's all you need to be filled with joy! Merry Christmas from your brothers.

*Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*