

LeRoy, Merry Christmas!

My first Christmas away from home came at age 15, in 1949. In August I had entered the Christian Brothers Junior Novitiate at Mont La Salle to begin a monastic religious high school training period that would eventually lead me to become a professed member of the Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious teaching order.

One of the purposes of the Juniorate was to wean teen-agers away from parents, relatives, friends, and other worldly connections for the sake of devoting one's entire life to a religious vocation, which included living in poverty, celibacy, and obedience. Among the methods used to create this separation was the rule that parents were permitted to visit only once a month on a designated Sunday afternoon. Another rule required that all mail, incoming and outgoing, was to be screened by the religious superior in charge of the Juniorate, and that Juniors were allowed to visit home only once a year during the first three weeks of August. Furthermore, religious trainees were not permitted to receive gifts from home, and of course this meant no Christmas presents.

The season of Christmas was celebrated at Mont La Salle with elaborate liturgy, including chapel decorations of fragrant evergreen boughs, full-sized trees, and 36-inch wreaths punctuated by bright red bows. Several dozen large flaming-red poinsettias were arranged at various heights to create color accents on all sides of the altar, and midget-sized statues were used to create the traditional nativity scene built just beyond the altar rail and in front of the altar itself. The entire monastery chapel seemed to be transformed into a winter wonderland of greenery, decoration, music, and expectation. I had never experienced anything so colorful, dramatic, or exciting.

Certainly, I had celebrated Christmas with my parents and relatives, but with far less pageantry and decoration. I recall a small decorated Christmas tree, a few wrapped gifts on Christmas Eve, the Midnight Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes church, and then on Christmas Day the annual dinner/family reunion held at the home ranch of my grandparents. Whatever else Christmas was, it was first and foremost about family gatherings.

The religious family at Mont La Salle was composed of three groups, the largest made up of approximately 50 high school teen-agers and four faculty members, the next composed of a couple of dozen post-high school religious trainees called Novices, and lastly, a small community of retired Christian Brothers whom we called Ancients. All lived and operated their programs in separate sections of the same monastery complex, but all shared the church-sized centrally located monastery chapel.

Christmas Eve arrived at Mont La Salle. The Midnight Mass was celebrated with traditional Christmas hymns, Palestrina, Gregorian chant, colored spotlights focused on the crèche. Candles and votive lights flickered everywhere, and the liturgy of the High Mass was sung by the celebrant. The entire chapel was filled with the fragrance of the fresh evergreen trees and the clouds of liturgical incense, which floated up to the vaults of the high ceilings. It was such a festive and religious experience that visitors from the surrounding area of Napa filled up the usually vacant pews at the rear of the church. The monastery celebration of the annual Christmas Midnight Mass was an unpublicized Renaissance event reserved for those who care about such pageantry.

After the celebration of the High Mass, the Juniors assembled in their recreation room; by this time it was almost 2 a.m. Pitchers of hot chocolate were brought from the kitchen, poured into cups, and distributed. Drinking the chocolate, we stood around chatting in informal groups, waiting to be told to go to our dormitory beds to get some sleep before the Christmas morning liturgy the next day.

There was a stir in the room, but before I could figure out what had happened, the director, generally aloof and unapproachable, came right up and stood in front of me, and with a sort of smile said, "LeRoy, Merry Christmas!" and he handed me an unwrapped gift. Half-dazed and drowsy from lack of sleep, and a little intimidated, I said thank you as he moved on to the next person. I looked at my present; it was a Pendleton shirt. For my first Christmas away from home, this was the Christmas present from my newly adopted monastic religious family.

More than any other event, I think, this Christmas gift of a Pendleton shirt severed forever my family ties to childhood. Never again would I spend

Christmas Eve with them or open their few presents, nor would I be present at the family reunion Christmas Day dinner at the ranch. In fact, I believe the Pendleton shirt colored any future celebration of a family Christmas Eve I might ever enjoy.