

Christmastime exodus brings some silent nights to nation's capital

WASHINGTON – Christmas is a time of year filled with references and allusions to things and times past, regardless of where it is celebrated.

In the nation's capital, one might think the Dec. 19 snowstorm that dumped a record 16.4 inches of snow on Washington would have made for some silent nights, the occasional spinning of tires on icy pavement excepted.

Usually during the Christmas season in the Capitol building, not a creature is stirring, not even a mouse. However, with the Senate taking a series of votes on health care reform legislation right up to and on Christmas Eve before recessing, the place was buzzing.

Washington is a mecca that draws people from all over the country who want to try to make their mark, most often in public policy but also the media, the arts, or a range of other endeavors.

But they're not necessarily here to stay and many keep strong ties to their home states. Most Christmases there's an exodus to rival the one in the Old Testament – though this year's snowstorm initially thwarted their efforts to get home, with airports shut down and roads blanketed with snow.

Does the annual emptying-out of Washington translate into emptier pews for churches in the area compared to the rest of the country? One is likely to find as many answers as there are pastors.

"Surprisingly, when I first got here (in 2002), that was the case," said Monsignor Charles Antonicelli, pastor of St. Joseph Parish on Capitol Hill in Washington, just a few blocks from the Capitol. "Now, more and more, there are families with young children."

"When I got here," Monsignor Antonicelli said, "that 5:30 Mass on Christmas Eve was half full." He made an appeal to members of a parish straddling the District of

Columbia-Maryland border where he had previously ministered that “they come here because they can get a seat. Now, they find that my place is crowding up.”

St. Joseph is part of a growing number of parishes that no longer celebrate midnight Mass. It has a 9:30 p.m. Mass instead.

“Since the pope moved his to 10 o’clock, we feel vindicated,” Monsignor Antonicelli said. But he said several parishes still celebrate Mass at midnight, so “people have the availability to go to a real midnight Mass.”

The Vatican announced in late November that the pope would begin his “midnight” Mass at 10 p.m. Rome time.

Jesuit Father Mark Horak, pastor of Holy Trinity Parish in Washington’s Georgetown neighborhood, said attendance doubles for Christmas liturgies, so the parish added two Masses for a total of 10 – seven on Christmas Eve and just three on Christmas Day.

“I think families want to have Christmas Day to themselves without too much rushing around,” Father Horak said.

At St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Silver Spring, which borders the District of Columbia, Monsignor Eddie Tolentino, pastor, said that “not a great number” of his parishioners travel. He said the parish counts members who hail from 112 different countries, and an effort is made to make them all feel at home. Two of the five Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Masses were to be celebrated in Spanish.

Asked if he planned a special message for congregants he might not have seen since, say, last Easter, Monsignor Tolentino laughed and replied, “You already know the answer to your question!”

“Before it’s said in the homily, there will be an invitation in the Scriptures themselves. In the Scriptures is an invitation to come to God and to stay always. It might be reiterated (in the homily). The story itself is one of invitation,” he said.

In the Diocese of Arlington, Va., Father Jerry Pokorsky, the new pastor of St. Michael Parish in Annandale, another Washington suburb, said “the Christmas-

Easter Christians are dropping off considerably. Our churches are not as full as they used to be for Easter and Christmas.”

“We’re kind of losing the young folk,” he continued. More young people cohabitate, Father Pokorsky said, and when they do marry, “the parents don’t care if they get married in the church. ... We’re losing even this periodic sense of ‘I’m a Catholic and I need to go to a church.’”