

Commentary: Straw for the manger

By Christopher Gunty

What if you were responsible for how soft a bed the baby Jesus had when he arrived on Christmas night? That's pretty weighty, especially for a kid.

But that's how my brothers and sisters felt growing up.

My parents developed Advent rituals for our family to help us understand that Christmas was not about the toys we wanted from the Sears catalog but about the birth of the Savior. Sure, we looked through the catalog, and made wish lists, but even that blue Tonka truck I got one year didn't last as long as the enduring memories of our preparations for Christmas.

We lit the Advent wreath each night at dinner, and one of my older sisters recalls that by the fourth week, we couldn't leave it lit all through dinner because the first week's candle was too short.

Then, just before bed, we would go to a bundle of straw - often on top of the television, high enough to not get knocked over by rambunctious children - and each child who had been good that day could place one straw in the empty manger. Obeying our parents, helping others and doing chores without grumbling, for example, qualified as "being good." If we went above and beyond that day, we might be allowed to place two pieces of straw in the manger. One brother recalls that Mom was often pretty lenient about what was considered "above and beyond," figuring that might help protect the Baby's backside to cover the days we didn't qualify.

We had not only the admonition "Santa's watching" to keep us in line, we knew that good behavior made a soft bed for the Lord.

On Christmas Eve, we reenacted the Christmas pageant, with Luke's Gospel providing the "script." We had cranky innkeepers, cherubic angels, scared shepherds, and Mary and Joseph, of course. We often did a Gospel mash-up, adding the three kings from Matthew's account. With 10 kids, we usually had an infant to play Jesus; when those ran out, we used my sister's dolls.

After the Christmas play, we would take the statue of the Baby Jesus to the manger, which we had prepared with our straw, and place him in it.

Lumen Gentium, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, said, "The family is, so to speak, the domestic church." A life of prayer and devotion was woven through our ordinary time. Advent and Christmas were seasons in which my parents enhanced that.

As another brother mentioned when recalling these rituals, if he couldn't put in a piece of straw on a given day because his behavior wasn't up to snuff, it bothered him. We were all convinced that Jesus needed our straws.

"Clearly there was a sense of devotion and dedication in Mom and Dad's modeling that was totally believable," my brother said.

Our focus was not so much on giving up being bad - sure, we made mistakes and drove our parents a little crazy, but generally were pretty good kids - but to emphasize doing good. It's a lesson we all learned from Harold and Therese Gunty, whom my siblings and I consider our personal saints.

The lesson from those early days stuck with me through the years. As Advent rolls around again, I wonder if what I'm doing each day of the season is helpful to prepare me for the Lord's coming. Can I add straw to the manger today?

Gunty is associate publisher and editor of the Catholic Review. He grew up in Hometown, Ill., as one of 10 children in the family.

See how Blogger Rita and her family set up straw for the manger in her post about Christmas.

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