

Don't take it down

Seven months ago I was in Guadalajara, Mexico, packing my personal belongings on route to my new destination: Baltimore. For almost 10 years I had called Mexico my home, and now it was time to leave. Like the title song from U2 reads, a most difficult realization was to accept, "All that I couldn't leave behind!"

At the top of the list were my friends and the great moments we shared together. And since I couldn't pack my entire experience in a suitcase to bring with me, St. Paul's words rang a bell when he stated "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (1 Th: 5, 21). The more I reflected on this passage, the easier it was to take inventory and give thanks. Furthermore, the process of shedding I needed to go through made a lot more sense.

Two nights ago I arrived home late following a meeting. It was afterhours and it was "lights-out" all around the house. Yet a dim set of rays reached me at the entrance from floor level: the heartwarming Nativity scene. I glanced at it possessed by my own momentum on route to the next room to check messages. Once there, a note on the bulletin board said it all, "Armando: please take down the Nativity scene."

The season had come to pass, and now it was time to box everything up. A sense of nostalgia and longing overcame me. Once again I found myself wondering, "Don't take it down!" "Why did this have to end?" I found myself clinging to the "tail end" of Christmas.

I went back to the manger scene and sat down in front of it for the last time. It seemed like yesterday I had set it up with enthusiasm. I glanced at the ceramic figures of the three wise men. I tried to imagine to myself what their level of desire, sincerity and expectation must have been like to embark on such treacherous journeys from far away lands in order to pay homage to the Christ-child. And most of all, I was awe-struck by the universal significance of the star through which they came to understand the grandeur and solemnity of Jesus' birth. I glanced up at the star perched above the stable symbolizing the Epiphany. I remembered the joyful annual tradition tied to the Epiphany and in which I had taken part several times called *Rosca de Reyes* (King's cake). It has to do with a pastry cake that includes a

miniature plastic doll inside representing Baby Jesus and shared amongst family and friends. The person who gets the slice of bread with the Baby inside must be the Godparent of Baby Jesus on the Feast of the Presentation (*La Candelaria*). This includes hosting a dinner for the others with the traditional *tamales* meal. One more reason to keep the tradition alive, and one more excuse to get family and friends together.

Through my moment at the manger, I realized that my longing for Christmas and my unwillingness to “take it down” is really about the cultural and community traditions that strengthen family and friends. It also has to do with a deeper connection to the characters and symbols that make up the Nativity scene and that to this day speak in the language of faith. The star that led the three wise men speaks of the universality that brings each one of us together. And Christ’s shedding of his royalty to speak to us in down-to-earth terms.

And so it is that just as that day in Mexico in which I packed my things and wondered what to bring back with me, in today’s ordinary time, I sense a call to rekindle my faith in harmony with the cultural traditions of my past and “un-box” the treasures they have to offer.

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