

# Find the True Christmas Spirit

## The Catholic Review

In this Christmas Eve edition of The Catholic Review—the last of the year—I offer these Christmas-related “Thoughts on our Church,” with sincere gratitude to you, good readers, for tending this weekly column and for your faithful witness and dedicated service to our Church.

### Holy Spirit, Indeed

Perhaps no church in this Archdiocese is more aptly named than Church of the Holy Spirit in Joppatowne. The faith of this small but vibrant Harford County congregation was tested last week when a fire broke out during a Christmas luncheon for the parish’s “Golden-agers,” a group of retirement-age women of the parish.

Because it was a windy day, the fire spread rapidly and it took three alarms’ worth of generous and able volunteer firefighters to get it under control. When the fire was finally doused, the building was destroyed, but thankfully—and perhaps miraculously—no one was injured.

It was a shocking event for the parish, especially for those present, yet their faith showed no signs of buckling when I met many of them in the moments immediately following the fire. This is in large part I have no doubt, due to the leadership of their beloved pastor of nearly 30 years, Fr. Joe Simmons.

I was also impressed to see, typically, that several pastors of nearby churches instinctively came out to comfort Fr. Simmons and his flock.

I hope to celebrate Mass for the parishioners next Sunday and I suspect that I will find that the Holy Spirit is alive and well at the parish dedicated to this fiery Spirit of God’s love.

### Christ in Christmas

We often hear from parents of children in our Catholic schools how grateful they are that their children can learn about Jesus and God in school. Indeed, it's one of the most oft-cited reasons for why parents send their children to a Catholic school. They tell us they are especially grateful this time of year. School concerts and plays feature songs and depictions of the birth of Jesus and parents can even get into the act, freely bidding teachers and others—not “Happy Holidays” but indeed “Merry Christmas”—without wondering whom they might be offending.

Every year at Christmas time we hear stories about how public schools and government entities seem to go too far in taking Christ out of Christmas in the name of political correctness. This year is no exception.

Last week, the Associated Press reported that “An 8-year-old Massachusetts boy was sent home from school and ordered to undergo a psychological evaluation after he was asked to make a Christmas drawing and sketched what appeared to be a stick figure of Jesus on a cross.” Youthful insight! How often spiritual writers link the wood of the manger with the wood of the cross.

As offensive as this may seem to many—especially in a Country founded on religious freedom—the situation is even worse in other countries, so I learned some time ago in a conversation with a former editor of a London-based Catholic weekly.

“In the United States this week, Christmas is on the cover of U.S. News & World Report, TIME and Newsweek...you would never find that in England,” he said.

Yes, the religious vestiges that inseparably cling to the secular celebrations of Christmas, suggest that all is not lost.

### **More than a Song**

Another such example are the Christmas carols that invite every listener to a richer faith. Do not many of these carols, so rich theologically and so spiritually prayerful, tell the true meaning of Christmas, six weeks a year, better than many preachers could? This dawned on me at the recent Catholic Charities Christmas concert at our Basilica, featuring the Peabody Chorus, a splendid, joyful and faith-filled invitation to prepare for the Lord's arrival.

If you haven't paid attention to such lyrics, pause and judge for yourself the next time you hear a Christmas carol in an often too-secular context. What a blessing it is that these songs have become valued and cherished traditions for audiences, sacred and secular. Unbeknownst to many listeners, the pleasant tunes carry with them rich scriptural and theological meditations for all who would humbly bend to worship the infant in the manger.

May the true meaning of Christmas be in your minds as you celebrate the birth of Jesus this week, and may all the blessings promised by His birth be upon you and those you love.