

Our Christmas challenge

Several years ago, I was celebrating Christmas Eve Mass in a far-off land, one which I can't remember. As usual, for Christmas, the chapel was full. I welcomed those in attendance for the celebration, and made a point to especially acknowledge the presence of our non-Catholic friends who were joining us, as well as our Catholic sisters and brothers who might not have been to church in some time. Pointing to the center of the sanctuary, I said, "For your benefit, this is an altar."

My attempt at humor fell flat.

Our churches will be full once again this Christmas and we must not be cynical or judgmental in any way toward those who have drifted and come back to the Church for this singular feast. Some will return because of tradition, others will do so because they were invited by a friend or family member or for other reasons. But they have returned!

Here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we air a special message encouraging people to celebrate Christmas at one of our Catholic churches and some dioceses run advertisements as part of a campaign that asks non-practicing Catholics to "Come Home for Christmas." This has been a successful initiative but the name, I would argue, should be changed to Come Home at Christmas - for the Church hopes their return will be a permanent one and not just for one day.

Welcoming back those who have been away from the Church is not the obligation of just the priest, but that of the entire parish. From greeting newcomers as they enter and leave the church, to finding out the names of unfamiliar faces, to making the liturgy attractive enough to make people want to return again, great effort must be made in every community throughout our Archdiocese to make such celebrations truly welcoming.

Do we really want to attract to our faith not just Catholics but all our neighbors who might be searching for a home for worship? We shouldn't take lightly the power of grace that is working at those moments, the Lord anxious to touch souls we don't even know about. The whole parish should be praying for a spiritual experience not

just for themselves, but for all who are present, as well as for those who are not present at feasts such as that of Christmas.

Certainly there will be moments of inconvenience that will tempt our scorn and test our patience. Parking spots will be scarce, seats in pews scarcer. The Mass will be prolonged by a longer Communion distribution, and fidgety youngsters not used to sitting still and quiet at Mass will challenge the patience of faithful Massgoers.

How will you respond?

I challenge you to model your behavior after the Christ whose birth we will celebrate. Give Christ a special gift this Christmas: give to His returning children the gift of your kindness, your welcoming spirit, and your generous heart.

Whether you offer up your seat, help someone locate the restroom, or introduce yourself and your family, use your actions to welcome those you meet this Christmas to return to your parish more regularly. For many of these individuals, you are the Church and your actions will help them to determine whether they want to be a larger part of this family of faith.

Let this Christmas put to the test our true evangelizing spirit. Are you up for the challenge?