

Priest recalls peaceful midnight Mass in a war zone

For the past 51 years as a priest, Father John Bauer, C.Ss.R., has looked forward to celebrating Midnight Mass on Christmas, and the most peaceful one for this Highlandtown native was in the middle of a war zone.

The associate pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus, Highlandtown, was a U.S. Army chaplain serving in Vietnam on Christmas Eve, 1970 and, at the stroke of midnight, Mass began in a rickety old chapel built on stilts.

“This chapel always felt like it was going to collapse,” Father Bauer said. “But, in the people came. The American soldiers, the Vietnamese nuns and the children from the orphanage, and they were all so grateful to be there - in that rickety old chapel - at that moment.”

In a war zone that was often filled with noise, chaos, bloodshed and fear, there was an aura of sanity, joyfulness and hope in that ramshackle chapel, he said.

“The nuns were anxious to attend Christmas Mass with us and to expose the children to the beauty of the service,” Father Bauer said. “When the nuns began to sing, the whole chapel just came to life. After Mass, everyone just gently went home. In my memory, it was the most peaceful Midnight Mass I’ve ever celebrated.”

Midnight Mass has become a tradition for many Catholics to mark the beginning of Christmas Day.

In recent years, some churches have started their “Midnight” Mass as early as 7 p.m. - some with dramatizations of the Nativity - but churches like Sacred Heart of Jesus actually begin their service at the stroke of 12 - with caroling beginning at 11:30 p.m. Christmas Eve.

“It’s just a beautiful way to celebrate Christmas,” Father Bauer said. “I look forward to it every year.”