

Priests find extra sense of joy in Christmas

The weeks leading up to Christmas are among the busiest of the year for parish priests. There are Masses to celebrate, reconciliation services to hold, missions to give, decorations to coordinate, homilies to prepare and countless other duties to attend.

That's why many clergymen find an extra sense of joy in the Christmas liturgies that culminate a frantic season of business.

"We are really rushed with preparing parish Christmas baskets and all kinds of things," said Monsignor Damien Nalepa, pastor of St. Gregory the Great in West Baltimore, "but I always find a great sense of peace when we celebrate the Incarnation at Christmas midnight Mass."

One of the highlights of the midnight Mass is hearing the choir sing "Go Tell it on the Mountain," Monsignor Nalepa said.

"It speaks to what our ministry is about all through the year," he explained. "That's our whole thrust of evangelization - to spread the good news that Christ is among us."

Monsignor Nalepa is always struck that the often-mean streets of West Baltimore seem a little calmer on Christmas.

"Hopefully that will last," he said.

Midnight Mass is also special to Father John B. Ward, pastor of Our Lady of Hope in Dundalk.

"It's always nice to see all the poinsettias around the altar and pulpit and the Christmas trees," he said.

Our Lady of Hope has a tradition of placing the figures of the magi far away from the Nativity scene on Christmas Eve. As the Christmas season progresses, the figures

are slowly moved closer to the crib until the magi make their arrival on the feast of the Epiphany.

Father Ward said he has traditionally also celebrated the Christmas children's Mass. Santa Claus always makes an appearance at Christ's crib, he said.

"It's exciting to see the kids excited about Christmas," he said. "You can see the happiness in their eyes."

Celebrating the children's Mass is a highlight for Father Steven Hook, pastor of St. Augustine in Williamsport and St. James in Boonsboro. The pastor encourages the children to come to the front of the church while he delivers the homily - often asking them questions about the meaning of Christmas.

"Some of the things they say are hysterical," he said.

Father Hook said Christmas is a special time for priests because it's an opportunity to invite people back into the church.

"I try to make them feel welcome," he said.