

View From the Pew

By Meredith Mackin Rilley

The first time I came home to the Catholic Church, after some post-childhood-independence, was as a young married woman. My husband Bill and I accompanied my parents each weekend for two years to our childhood church in New York. My stay there was nice the way that chocolate chip cookies are nice, but not the inspiring praline-glazed gourmet delicacy I had hoped to taste. After two pleasant years as parishioners there, we moved to New Fairfield and, for the first 3 1/2 years, we never bothered to look for a replacement church. Life was easy on Sundays. Sleep in. Relax all day. Our lives were full. Or so we thought. So, 3 1/2 years later, when our then two year-old daughter asked why we never went to church, Bill and I looked at each other and knew it was time to seek a new church. After all, we had wanted our children to have the same faith-filled, religious-educated childhood we had had. Our search was more of a well-lit path than the long, arduous trek I had anticipated. After one awkward square-peg-in-a-round-hole attempt at another denomination, we quickly realized where we belonged. I'll never forget sitting in St. Edward's that first Mass; the moment the choir started to sing, Bill and I snuck a look at each other and smiled. We knew we were home and I knew that this home would bring us so much more than we had sought. Within a month I had joined the choir and my family and I were embraced as if we were long lost cousins. I'll always believe that my daughter's voice was God speaking to us, calling us home.

This home was so comforting that I wonder now, when I see the church full at Palm Sunday, Ash Wednesday, Christmas and Easter (PACE Catholic time), what draws people to the church four times a year, yet keeps them away the other 49 Sundays. At these times, do they feel the safety of the numbers of like-minded people? Do they fear judgment from the congregation? Is it that *they* are simply not ready? Our ears can be so deafened with the white noise that is our lives that we often can't hear God inviting us to a warm place to sit and be still.

Shouldn't it be upon the fellow seekers who have already reached their destination, to light the way, showing them more reasons to come home with a safe arrival? And what better time to come home, than Christmas, the celebration of Christ's birth, in its own right a home-coming. The Catholic Church opens its arms to the pilgrim at all times of the year, but now, more than any other season, it is most comforting to find a home in St. Edward's.

"Even the choir doubles in size this time of year," Dan Kean, St. Edward's Director of Music and Liturgy, said. "Christmas brings people who have been less than consistent in attendance back to both the Children's and the Adult Choirs. I'm always amazed that [in the case of the Adult Choir] people come out in weather that is not very pleasant, put in extra practice, which requires a heavy commitment, and are willing to give up half their night's sleep to sing at Midnight Mass, many of them coming back in the morning for the 11:00 Mass. The attendance at Mass is triple or more at Christmas and the choirs get very excited. It's partly tradition, but there is definitely something special and spiritually

wonderful about Christmas Masses. But it's not just the choir. It's the whole congregation."

Dan and his staff are also responsible for the Christmas Concert, which opens with a performance by accomplished musicians, followed by a sing-a-long of religious and secular seasonal songs led by the children's choirs, and finally, Santa himself arrives to share refreshments with all of the children who come. Santa isn't a Christian's focus in church, but it's a clever way to bring two worlds together. "The kids are crazy about Santa showing up. It's a blend of the religious and secular sides of Christmas."

Starting with an Advent Wreath Workshop on Thanksgiving weekend, there is a festive anticipation throughout the season, including a Holy Hour on the first Wednesday of Advent and a Men's Holy Hour. There are also Christmas parties in many of the ministries, including MOMS and Toddler Tea (with an appearance from Santa!), bake sales and poinsettia sales, and the annual offering of the prayer shawls. There is enough additionally to fill the calendar each hour of the day with spiritually and traditionally rich events for the entire Advent season. One staff member joked that the lights never turn off during Advent, as a beacon, but also because the church and church hall are so busy! Advent concludes with the first Christmas Mass at 4:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve; The Mass starts with a Children's Choir concert and includes a pageant with an actual baby from the parish playing the part of Jesus.

Although Christmas is the most joyful time of year to come home for Catholics, every season is a welcoming season. Anna Marotta, a parishioner at St. Edward's, has been home for two years. She was left the Catholic Church as an adult when a family member spoke enthusiastically about a non-denominational church he attended. "There was singing and dancing and so much excitement that we were caught up in its energy. There was also a tremendous amount of teaching while we were at that church, which was good, but the teaching was confusing and contradictory. At one point in our years there, my husband mentioned that he missed the holiness and peace of the Catholic Church. I tried to talk him out of it, but eventually I felt the same way."

The Church's reverence called to them, but it was the Eucharist that she missed the most. "I felt there was something very much missing in the progression of things. I came to realize that, of all the things it says to do in the Bible, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' is so clear. But, [that church] was only doing it once a month. I couldn't understand why they were putting Communion at the bottom of the list!"

"After trying many different types of churches after that, my husband said to me, 'I want to go home.' The first time we went home to a Catholic Church was to St. Edward's. Everything was alive and leapt out and was light and I knew I was home. The liturgy really spoke to me that day, so much so that tears ran down my cheeks. I came to realize that I could be myself and not a cookie cutter in the Catholic Church, which is how I once felt. Now I don't go to worship a God who is in a church, I go to worship the God who is in my heart, who I understand. He is a living God."

Anna's story is her own, but she joins countless Catholics who find their way back for countless reasons.

Here are the **Top 10 Reasons Catholics Come Home**

Borrowed from www.catholicscomehome.org

10. Because we want meaning in life.
9. Because childhood memories surface. ("Is it possible to recapture that simplicity of faith?")
8. Because we made mistakes
7. Because we need to forgive others.
6. Because we want to be healed.
5. Because the Catholic Church has the fullness of truth and grace.
4. Because we want our children to have a faith foundation.
3. Because we want to be part of a faith community.
2. Because we want to help other people.
1. Because we hunger for the Eucharist.

It is the hope of not only the priests of St. Edwards, but also the entire active parish that Catholics will be called and will see the lights on and doors open and will come home. Simply by embracing their faith together, they become family.