

Reflections on Christmas in Church

(Joe Sittler 12/74)

When an event is exploited everywhere/even for a long time before its proper day, the point of it, and excitement about it get diluted. In our time Christmas anticipation begins about November 15; the stores go into high gear in advertising, the t.v. starts to spread reindeer and general jollification around; the distilling industry has its 1974 packaging well established; the Home and Garden section of the newspaper is already telling us how to remember the birth of Jesus with tricky buffet suggestions for already over-fed guests; in Radio City the Rockettes are already practicing for their special nativity Revue.

In an older day it was not so; Christmas came with a special splash of wonder. About December 15 there arrived at the Church/wooden buckets of teeth-rotting candies. The Ladies Aide secretly packed dozens of little gaily colored boxes /with white string handles. These at the inevitable and memorable "Children's Program" were distributed/(on the Sunday afternoon before Christmas) to the children. The excitement of that little box is impossible to recapture in our year-around candy culture.

At the “program” each child had a “piece” to say. For some it was a grand moment; For some it was a terror; mother had to sit in the front row and be ready to supply in a whisper that reached the farthest corner, the forgotten line.

The high point, of course, was the angels! Cheese-cloth clad and tinsel-haloed little angels all a-giggle, were all over the place. What actual angels wear we do not know; in the “Christmas Program” they always wore white cotton stockings (which tended to bunch at the knees and had regularly to be hitched up). Boys seldom made the angel ranks. Boys were reserved for wise men (in costumes borrowed from the local Elks, Masons, Moose, Knights of Pythos, or some other brotherhood). The shepherds presented no such problem; beat-up bathrobes were always available; scotch-plaid patterns (which surely would have been astonishing to first century sheep herders) were especial favorites. I remember one mad moment when I was a shepherd in the Christmas pageant when I forgot to take the cigars out of my uncle’s borrowed bathrobe. Father saw these brightly banded cigars sticking out of the breast pocket and snatched them just before our entrance to keep “watch over the flocks by night.”

Many families, at Christmas time, were hosts to a once-a-year visit of an old uncle or grandfather. He too, came to the program, and was sometimes a lurid character. I remember one of mine. He was always in sober broadcloth, white vest, an Elk's tooth suspended from a gold chain across the imposing frontal expanse, Christmas cigars lined up in his coat pocket, and exuding a most un-Christian aroma of 100 proof Old Grandad over the entire congregation. He gave us each a polished half-dollar. But he, too, stood with the others. And he, too, perhaps remembering more innocent days and ways, sang out with all of us,

“How silently, how silently,
The wondrous Gift is given.”

How blended, in Christian faith, is the simple and the sublime; how strangely is the profound transmitted by the everyday ordinary; how quickly crumples the pompous pretense of our lives before the primal pure; how powerful is the clear, bright blade of amazing grace as it flashes again amidst all forgettings, denials, sheer clutterings!

[Let us pray.] O God, who hast made this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light; Grant, we beseech thee, that as we have known on earth the mysteries of that Light, we may also come

to the fullness of his joys in heaven; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.