Life is Changed, but Never Ends

Every year right around daylight savings time ending, I put up my Christmas decorations at the rectory. As I write this, pretty much everything is up with lights around the house, a couple of trees, and a gradually growing Christmas village from Kohl's.

So much of what I have reminds me of home and Christmases past. The tree on the porch is from the 1980s and has held up quite well, and was the main tree we put up at our home when we went from real trees to the artificial one. The smaller tree in the living room by the fireplace was one I had in my room when I lived at my parents house.

The nativity scene was from Woolworth's and dates to the early 1950s; it was purchased by my Godmother and aunt Gen, whom I was privileged to often see growing up.

Then there are the many ornaments. Some are recent gifts from my parents, such as my favorite comedian Fozzie Bear, the muppet that mom got at Hallmark one year during the post-Christmas close out. Some were knitted by my grandmother Pat. Others go back to the 1960s and were part of the collection put up by my grandmother and grandfather Evelyn and Henry.

In Christmases past, as a child I'd go with my dad to get the tree. We'd visit my grandparents home and share a meal and go to Mass and open presents together. And so much of what I put up reminds me of those times. Of those great people.

Unfortunately, I won't be able to share turkey with my grandparents again, or see my Godmother Gen drive over in her 1970s Dodge Dart (lime green!), or open gifts with them. And while there is always a bit of pain in that, for the pain of our losses never goes away, what I also remind myself of often are the words said in a preface to the Eucharistic Prayer said at a funeral, namely that for those who die who love God, life is changed, not ended.

For we truly are so much more than a collection of photos, or mementos, or memories. The Christmas decorations I'll put up for the rest of my life carry with them so many great memories, as does the family photo album. I'll always cherish them. But the people who've given me these things and created those memories also help me to look forward, and while we won't be sharing turkey or watching football again, I know that these people journey with me and help me to keep my eyes fixed on heaven.

Each November, as the liturgical season ends and the landscape turns more barren, the Church looks at our our mortality. We mark All Saints and All Soul's Day; the readings begin to speak of the final judgment we all face and the end times. But we also must remember that death, while painful, is a doorway, and that with us is God each and every step, and He will help us cross over, but so too will our loved ones, both living and dead.

Through the death and Resurrection, we, too, rise with Jesus. And the beautiful thing with God's love is after we die, even if there were some things that we still struggled with, God's love helps us overcome them once and for all.

But our loved ones also journey with us too. They no doubt continue to pray for us. But we can also look at how they led their lives, and be inspired to become better people. I think of how my grandfather would pray every day; or how my grandmother Pat, no matter what kind of day she was having, was always full of love and joy. I'm blessed to still have my parents with me on this earth, and I continually look to them too and am reminded of how important family is, and how important it is to be close to God but let your faith inform all that you do as they have done so much for our family and have such big hearts.

And so, as you prepare too to unwrap the Christmas decorations soon and, perhaps like me, take out again treasures made by people who were close to you, never forget that all of the people who you have lost are not just memories, but are truly alive in God's love. Pray for them as they pray for you. Visit a cemetery. Take out the family album and talk about the people in the pictures to one another and especially your children who may not have met them. Think of them and what you can continually learn from them.

We carry the pain of loss with us throughout our lives, and sometimes we as a society put death out of sight, out of mind. Rather than doing that, may we look at death in the Christian way, aspiring daily to be with Jesus in heaven knowing that there, every tear will be wiped away and there will be no more goodbyes, but just perfect love with our Lord and all of our loved ones, and remember that while we say goodbye here on earth, the connection to those who have gone on before us never ends as we help one another continue on that road to heaven.

In a favorite Gospel used often at funeral Masses, Jesus says in John 14: 2-3, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be." Jesus then says to Thomas, "where I am going, you know the way," meaning the way to heaven is known because Jesus showed it to him and the others; the way of love, of mercy, of being connected to God and one another. Thats something my loved ones both living and dead continue to do for me, and yours continue to do for you. So by all means, look to the past, but also look to the future knowing God and those people in your life whom you cherish will truly be with you each and every step of the way, both at Christmas and every day of the year until you meet again in the heavenly kingdom.

God's blessings to you and your loved ones,

Fr. Paul