Don't Throw the Tree Out on the 26th

I was pretty surprised when I found out that one of the busiest shopping days of the year was December 26th, but I guess it makes sense. While people return items that day at malls, the retailers go into after-Christmas mode. Christmas decorations can be found for rock-bottom prices, and many deals are offered as people are in the store to return, and, they hope, also buy items. And while most people are still in good spirits, I do think that after Christmas by in large we go into a post-Christmas mode. Santa has come and gone and is on some Florida beach. The decorations are still up, but many will be tossed out right after New Year's Day.

Here's the thing though. We as Catholics don't just have Christmas for one day. In fact, Christmas is a season. From December 25th through New Year's Day, we celebrate the "Octave" of Christmas, meaning we extend the day out (doing the same at Easter) for 8 days as the event is so significant. Coupled with that, we have the Christmas Season, which lasts through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, usually the Sunday after Epiphany. Then begins "Ordinary Time." Liturgically, Christmas is a short season – much shorter than Easter – but it's a significant one. With that in mind, I'd invite you to truly celebrate it by keeping in mind the various feasts we have throughout this time of year.

The feast the weekend after Christmas is that of the Holy Family. It's a beautiful feast that reminds us of the sacredness of the family as a place for love. Much art, including a window at Saint Peter's depicts the home life of the Holy Family, and this reminds us how we should truly love our families and have them be places where the faith is nurtured as is our love for one another. Take time to re-connect this season, and throughout the year never take family for granted.

December 26th, Boxing Day if you are a Canadian or Englishman, is Saint Stephen's Day. Stephen was one of the first martyrs of the faith. The question for us to think about is as we welcome God on Christmas, how do we do that through the year when that can be tough? Do we stand up for the faith when people insult it, and do the right thing when others pressure us not to? Living out the faith is tough business.

December 28th is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, those children the brutal tyrant Herod had killed in an attempt to kill Jesus. This feast reminds us of the preciousness of children. Home for the Christmas break, the Christmas Season gives many the chance to spend more time with kids. In some cases that may cause parents to lose some hair as there's the inevitable sibling squabbles, but this feast also reminds us that childhood, while ideally a perfect time of our lives, can have many challenges and even pain as kids deal with stress, bullies, and, sadly, in some cases, neglect. With that in mind, may we renew our efforts to love our kids, giving them patience, love and care, and also our commitment to defending the unborn.

January 1st is the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. This is a Holy Day of Obligation. We have 2 Masses for this day; a 6 p.m. on New Year's Eve and an 8:30 a.m. Mass on New Year's Day. Mary gives us the example of how the faith is lived out, as she had such trust in God's plan, and stood by her Son. The feast invites us to reflect on our level of trust in God's plans for us, and in our loved ones as Mary trusted in her Son. Are we able to trust and let go, realizing that we do not have full control of everything?

January 5th we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. The Magi from the East symbolize how God came not just for some, but for all peoples. How tolerant are we of other people? Do we try to help others grow in their faith? Do we see some people as "more important" based on where they are from or how much they earn? Do we shut people out at work or school because they are not in our clique? Are we compassionate towards the poor, the marginalized and the immigrants?

January 12th will end the Christmas Season with the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. Jesus is Baptized as an adult by John in the Jordan, and after this He begins His ministry. The feast reminds us we are called to live out our faith in daily actions.

This week we do indeed celebrate a wonderful feast, among the most important on our Liturgical Calendar. But Christmas is truly not just a day, but a season. My hope is you celebrate with family and enjoy the dinners and presents, also remember that the season continues for several weeks. And if you were at Christmas Mass but maybe have not have been to Mass in a little while, what a great time to come back to regular Mass attendance to be reminded of how much God loves you. There are so many beautiful feasts tucked within the Christmas Season, and my hope is you find a little something to think about after all of our Masses, truly celebrating Christmas not as a day, but as it is truly meant to be celebrated, a season.

God bless and Merry Christmas,

Fr. Paul