

Who isn't included in this year's nativity scene?

THE MISSING MAN

"The gospel according to our Lord, Jesus Christ."

"Thanks be to God," comes the response from the congregation

Having finished the gospel reading, Father Bob proceeds to the center aisle to begin his Christmas homily as a quiet shuffling is heard as people sit back to hear his words.

"First off, Father John and I, wish all of you a blessed and joyful Christmas. We pray you find the peace of the season, now, and throughout the new year ...

..."As many of you know, my assistant, Father O'Malley was married before entering the priesthood. And from that union came two wonderful children, Matt and Stephanie. Hearing John tell how his kids loved Christmas and the traditions they celebrated, opened a window allowing me to see Christmas from a broader perspective. Given that expanded perception, there is one person I want to talk about tonight ...

..."someone who isn't included in the manger scene and doesn't receive enough recognition this time of year ...

..."at least at Christmas Masses."

Hi, Tony here. It's a little after midnight. St. Katherine's is one of only two Churches here in the city celebrating a traditional midnight Mass.

To the right of the main altar sits a glorious nativity scene. A magnificent tree lighted in all white towers behind the main altar and ropes of garland and red ribbons and bows frame the arches of the church's interior. Adding to the beauty is an hour of Christmas music preceding the Mass; all consistent with the nature of this holy day's celebration. Sorry, no Frosty the Snowman will be heard this evening.

Tonight's congregation is distinct from the usual weekly masses. People from all over the city, and beyond, attend; not to mention many who grew up here and have come home to celebrate the season with family. The pews are filled with those who love the tradition of Midnight Mass, and unlike the usual masses, there are almost no children here, especially none under ten.

Expectant and curious looks abound in the pews. Who is this mystery figure to whom the pastor refers?

Knowing the pastor's penchant for finding meaning in unusual places, this should prove interesting ...

So, let's sit back and listen.

Arrayed in a white chasuble; a beautiful image of the Holy Family embroidered in gold adorning it; the pastor looks out over his flock.

"So, who is that figure?" he asks. "Well, here in our Christmas creche, we see Mary, Joseph, the Christ Child, the shepherds and animals, the Magi and their attendants. And let's not forget the angels on high. But one very important person is missing. And no, it's not the little drummer boy."

Soft chuckles roll through the pews.

"No, I'm talking about the man of the hour; at least for the little ones, home snug in their beds, waiting for him and his eight tiny reindeer."

The volume of the laughter intensifies as a crafty smile lights up the priest's face.

"Not exactly who you were expecting, huh?"

The laughter continues. Nodding, Father Bob continues.

"As I have gotten older in my ministry, I've grown more tolerant of the commercial aspect of Christmas; and less of those who grumble and complain about it. I disagree with them. Christmas is a birthday party; there should be candy canes and presents. Christmas is about gifts. From the Magi, to St. Nicholas, to Father Christmas, Kris Kringle and our own Santa Claus, gifts are the currency of Christmas. We give to each other; to celebrate the magnificent gift our Heavenly Father gives to us. ...

..."Now, there are those who say the legend of Santa Claus is detrimental to a child's development. Me; I think the opposite is true ...

..."You see, for children asleep with visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads, the arrival of Santa is the beginning of embracing both mystery, and reality. To a child, Santa is the initial embodiment of the presence of an overarching being of absolute goodness."

Pausing, another impish smile ambles across the pastor's face.

"By the way, if anyone knows what a sugarplum is, or tastes like, please see me after Mass. I've wondered about that for more than fifty years now."

More laughter.

"Okay, back to Saint Nick. If guided well by his or her first teachers, the child's parents, the little tyke, excited at the arrival of the jolly ole Elf is taking the first step to embracing a more profound reality ... the wonder of finding a God of eternal love and care watching over all of us."

Pausing, Father Bob takes a sip from a glass of water sitting on a table in front of the first row of pews, then continues.

"Now, it's true, ole Kris Kringle doesn't appear anywhere in the gospels, or in the manger. Nope, just cattle and sheep; not a reindeer in sight."

Again, the pastor pauses and smiles.

"After all, I don't want anyone calling the bishop tomorrow and saying St. Kate's pastor has taken a long walk off a short pier."

More quiet laughter courses through the congregation.

"But Santa was there; or maybe I should say, is here, and his presence is important, not only for children, but for everyone, really. ...

..."You see, like Santa, the nativity is a yearly one-time event. But to really understand, or maybe better celebrate, Christmas is to graduate to the understanding joy comes not once a year, but every day. A gift from above, from a heavenly Father; the bread of life come down from heaven. Not in a manger, but on an altar every day. ...

..."And when we give a small child a cup of water, when we do unto others, we do it to Him as He told us; that's the gift that keeps on giving. ...

..."Is Santa Claus real; we all know the answer. But don't tell that to a five-year-old in the morning. In the child's eyes is a great gift for you, if you see and accept it ...

..."What gift you ask ... the gift of anticipation. ...

..."As the child reaches that age, the age of reason, where the question of the reality of Santa begins to creep into his or her consciousness, that enhanced human understanding we call growth, occurs. And here it is important to not only not bury Santa but to present and encourage a child's progression of belief from a merry old elf who brings toys and presents, to the very real savior; neither legend nor myth, who brings the joy of life eternal in a realm of peace, love, and joy together with Him, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, for all time."

Again, pausing, another impish smile light up the pastor's face.

"A place a lot warmer than the North Pole."

Pausing to let the soft laughter dissipate, he continues.

"And especially better than an eternal lump of coal in your stocking."

And again, another undercurrent of laughter ripples through the congregation.

"I remember John telling me Stephanie was crushed when learning of the reality of the jolly ole Elf. But what John said that struck me most was, in time, the legend of Santa Claus, gave him a foundation to build on and thus help her build a belief in the great gift of God to mankind in His Son. That early legend of goodness and generosity eventually helped her to come to believe in the presence of a greater power of love, generosity, and joy."

"I wish for all of you that the greatest gift you receive this Christmas is a gift given by a small child ... that simple gift of anticipation. Let that wonderful vision in their eyes, light up your soul. Let a child's vision of goodness and generosity in a red suit, stocking cap, long white beard and shiny black boots with his sack full of toys, become your vision of He who said 'I've come to give you life and life more abundantly' ... the treasure of eternal life and never-ending joy."

Again sipping from the glass of water, Father Bob pauses, then continues.

... ““unless you become as one of these little ones ...you shall not see God.' Our Lord's words. I pray this season, through the eyes of a child, you embrace that wonderful anticipation of not only this day ... but also another day ... that day we meet the Christ Child, not in a manger as a helpless infant, but as the God of creation, of power and might, on His throne of glory."

"Again, Merry Christmas ...

... "and Peace."

Oh, you better not shout, you better not cry, you better not pout I'm telling you why ...

Because...

... He sees you when you're sleeping, He knows when you're awake

He knows if you've been bad or good ...

so be good for goodness' sake.

A thought only for Christmas?

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.

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