

Christmas Rules

With three little boys in the house my parents felt it best to have a few rules on Christmas morning. The first rule stipulated that everyone must be up and out of bed before Christmas presents were opened. It was nearly 7 a.m. when that magic moment usually occurred each Christmas. That's when a blizzard of wrapping paper and ribbon would be unleashed in our living room. Except for the year we got bicycles, our few modest presents were stacked under the tree. Often there was something we had asked for if it was reasonable, and at least one piece of clothing we needed. But I would have been thrilled with only a piece of coal on Christmas morning, so much was I a slave to the holiday's spirit.

I must have been about 8 years old the year I decided I didn't like opening my presents and then leaving for the 9:00 Children's Mass at Blessed Sacrament Church in Cornhill. It would be more fun if Church were out of the way early so I could spend the entire morning sitting next to the Christmas tree, smelling that great balsam sap, playing with new toys the entire morning and listening to my favorite sound of food being prepared in the kitchen. Nothing smells better than food cooked by someone else.

I got up early that Christmas and with parental permission went to the 7:00 a.m. early Mass, trudging through the dark at 6:30 over frozen snow on invisible sidewalks in what I remember was a frigid temperature 7 degrees Fahrenheit I

discovered, when I had access to such records a number of years ago. I went alone because my brothers thought I was crazy ... they were right ... Dad always went to the 5:30 a.m. Mass at St. Peter's on his way home from the newspaper, and Mom, though a stellar Catholic Woman, always skipped church on Christmas, no matter how often I reminded her that such was a mortal sin for which she'd burn in hell for all eternity. She often told me to lighten up. So did everyone else. But I would continue to worry about these things until I reached puberty when I gave up worrying and started chasing girls. Pretty much.

And there were other Christmas morning rules. For example, if you insisted on going to Mass early and arriving home at 8:15 when your brothers were just getting off to the 9 o'clock children's Mass, when Grandma was still snoozing and Dad was just going to bed after a night at the newspaper, while Mom began her sacred first cup of morning coffee, you were ordered to act like Helen Keller and not make a sound. Not even a peep.

"So much for 'Tis The Season To Be Jolly,' I said to Grandma after she woke up.

"Just be happy you're not a Merry Gentleman like your uncle," she replied.

Oh, I forgot about a later rule, which no one thought of until we were teenagers. No pretty girls invited to Christmas breakfast. I don't know who came up with this rule. Certainly not me. Probably Mom. Just as well. You should be able to play with your toys the way you want.

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