



Once Upon A Smile

(Advent memories)

In my semi-retirement years, I find myself enjoying the luxury of quiet moments when my mind revisits those wild and wonderful events that caused such great hilarity at the time. The memories are as much fun now as the events were then and always bring a smile to my heart.

As I once again set up my Advent wreath and assembled the candles and Bible that have been on our dining table for the past thirty years plus, I debated if this is the year to get a new wreath and Bible. After all, I have new candles each year. But then I began thinking of the progress of prayer shared by the children and me over the years.

When they were all very young we had a short, repetitive, litany type of prayer, always led by myself as of course, at that time, I was the only one who could read. But the children could all handle the litany response of "Come Lord Jesus". As they became older, they would take turns reading the three-line prayer before the litany. We used the same prayer for so many years that the paper it was on became worn and the text food-splattered and hard to read in spots. It just never seemed right to retype it.

Then one year I noticed that there always seemed to be a body or two missing at suppertime. And the prayer seemed a little too sing-songey. So I hunted up a new Advent prayer booklet that had text a little more appropriate to the children's age range, and we began using it. I also changed our prayer time from just before supper to bedtime. We were all together again. Instead of sharing a meal, I would prepare a bedtime snack. We used the good china and crystal glasses and shared the happenings of our day all by candle light, making for a very peaceful time that all of us enjoyed for a few more years.

Then one year I got smart. These kids were not really kids anymore. Time to make them responsible for some of this Advent celebrating and time to update our prayer as well. Again we had outgrown the text. I found a booklet that had a contemporary reading for each day. And out of the reading we took turns to pose a question to share on how the story related in each of our lives. It blew my mind to hear what came out of my children. Most of it good!!! And we all took turns being responsible for the snack. That blew my mind also right along with my budget. I told the kids they had to plan, shop, bake, whatever, and I would give them the money to get what they needed. Big mistake!!

Michael was in high school by then and had to take cooking class. He really liked hot pretzels that he learned to make at school so we could always count on his pretzels on his night. They truly were wonderful.

Ross surprised us each night. He was working part time in a restaurant while attending Algonquin, and would get tips from the chef and produce very interesting stuff. Finger foods, desserts, something with a neat dip. The kitchen would look as though a bomb had exploded in it and the next morning I would spend extra time scraping stuff from here and there.

Scott produced very simple foods. Ready made from the grocery store. No cooking for him. But he had expensive taste. Smoked oysters on fancy crackers, wonderful cheeses, six or seven kinds at a time!! Unusual smoked fish stuff, shrimp and dip. Egg nog and interesting drink mixes. He always came home with two bags of groceries. It was wonderful but I nearly went broke!!

Kristen, to this day, would rather be shovelling the driveway than partake of kitchen duties. She would produce an unpeeled orange on a china plate or a chocolate chip cookie from the bag in the kitchen.

After that Advent, I went back to producing the snacks myself.

One year, our prayer time ended up as the Advent fight night! I have no idea what happened. The children were all teenagers with very definite views and opinions. We were all ornery throughout Advent and our discussions would invariably end up with someone storming from the table up to their room to slam the door. I even did it myself one night swearing that: “we will never pray together again in this house!!!”

Then they were all gone. Homes of their own. And I would light my Advent candles, in the old tattered wreath, with the now duct taped little Bible propped up against it. And I would read my daily reflections and say a prayer for each of them. Time for a reunion!!

I called each of the kids and invited them to an Advent prayer dessert party. Bring the spouses, kids, significant others and Grannie. They all showed up. I was a little surprised and a whole lot pleased. I prepared a special prayer and allowed time for sharing if anyone wanted to do so. It was wonderful. We all agreed to try to meet once a week throughout Advent. And we did.

But the biggest surprise of all was that Ross asked if I still had the first Advent prayer we ever used and could we use it again. We did one night and he remembered the entire litany - this from the kid who, we thought, never paid attention, hummed, and fiddled with his food, all through the prayer year after year.

My table is all set to go for Advent again this year with nice new candles. However, I now know that there is no way on earth that I could possibly replace that old wreath and Bible.

Peggy Gallivan-Ballotta

Peggy, a long-time active member of Holy Redeemer Parish and a happy grandmother, wrote this for our diocesan newspaper when the first grandchildren were very young. Ross continues the tradition with his own distracted children, confident that the memories will become as important to them as they have been to him.

I thank the family for giving us permission to share this with you. - Fr. Frank

