

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Evergreen

As I write, there is a Christmas tree in our bath tub. It is a small tree, about two feet high, ordered from a catalog. You need to keep it saturated in water for a few days before putting it out. Hence, the tub. Periodically, I ask my wife how the tree is doing. She looks at me and sighs and rolls her eyes.

This isn't really her thing. But love compels you to do odd things. In this case, it prompted my wife to surprise me by ordering a little fir tree, which has taken up residence in our bathroom — and which, it turns out, is a pretty demanding and needy sort of tree. My wife has spent an inordinate amount of time pouring water on it. That's love for you.

The fact is: I'm a Christmas tree person. When I was growing up, my parents often got live trees, complete with roots, that they later planted in our yard. Most of them didn't make it to the spring, and we had to dig up and throw out these sad, spindly things with brown needles. But we'd try again the next year, and the year after that, and every Christmas the house ended up beautifully and naturally perfumed with pine. It was unmistakable: that was Christmas, and it was simply wonderful.

Years later, after I'd married and moved to New York, we resorted to artificial trees. (This year, as in years past, there's one in a big plastic bag in a closet, on standby, if the one in the tub doesn't pan out. It's a kind of Christmas tree understudy.) But there is nothing like an honest-to-God evergreen.

It's engrained in our culture, and in our faith. History records that the first Christmas tree was put up in Latvia in the sixteenth century. Back then, they'd decorate a tree with artificial roses, and men danced around it in the town square and then set it on fire.

Later, the Germans got into the act, and decorated trees with apples. It wasn't until the 1800s that the custom took root (so to speak) in the United States.

We're told that this tradition, like so many, really began with the pagans, and that Christians adopted it and reinvented it to make it our own. (That may be one reason why a Christmas tree didn't pop up in St. Peter's Square until the papacy of John Paul II, who started that tradition from one he knew in his native Poland.) But wherever it came from, however it started, the Christmas tree, complete with decorations and ornaments and lights, brings this season tangibly—and fragrantly—into our living room.

Who wouldn't want one? That tree with its perpetual greenery reminds us of resilience. It defies winter and insists on spring. It speaks to the persistence of hope. It calls to mind so many things that have endured: Mary and Joseph, journeying to Bethlehem and then to Egypt; Wise Men traveling from Asia in search of a star; shepherds watching their flock at night; angels singing glory across a silent night.

The tree holds in its arms all manner of memories, too: decorations that go back decades, marking the years with paper or ceramic or plastic or tin. My wife and I have several ornaments commemorating "Our First Christmas Together" in 1986.

Time flies. But on a Christmas tree, it hangs by a wire, frozen forever. Our faith, too, should be, like the Christmas tree, ever green: continually fresh, constantly replenishing itself, defying the seasons.

I have no idea if we'll ever get another mail order tree that has to sit in the tub. I sort of doubt it. But the heart yearns for what that tree represents. I don't doubt that we will always have a Christmas tree in our home, even if it's an artificial one.

It may not smell quite the same. But then, that's why God made pine-scented air freshener.

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