

Hey, where did the manger go?
Did you hear?
The Vatican didn't put up a Christmas Crèche this year, but Joseph and Mary's home in Nazareth instead.
What's going on?
I thought this Pope was conservative?
Well, partly it's to celebrate Matthew's gospel,
since we are reading that gospel this year.
And Matthew's gospel focuses on Joseph's response to Jesus' birth.
What does Joseph, as a father do?
Joseph builds the foundation of the home,
not just the furniture!
And in Matthew's gospel,
Joseph takes responsibility
for getting Mary and Jesus where they're supposed to be – Bethlehem.
Then there's no room.
I hope he didn't spend too much time beating himself up about it.
They were in the right place,
at the right time.
He wasn't lost or late –
he was a faithful servant of God,
husband, father and citizen.
Responsible for his own actions,
but not necessarily the reactions of others.

Fr. John Foley tells the story of a tribal custom in South Africa.
Visiting families were to bring the host a favored and valuable gift.
His friend went to a great deal of trouble, including walking a great distance to bring his father-in-law a choice roast beef,
he knew to be his in-law's favorite.
When presented with the gift,
the father-in-law said,
"No thank you. I do not like that anymore."
If we can fulfill our responsibilities in love,
and get over ourselves,
we won't be derailed by unexpected results.
We have not one word from Joseph in the gospels.
Not many from Mary, but not one from Joseph.
How many martyrs have we created to our opinions?
Joseph surely wasn't a doormat,
nor likely a pushover – look at his son.
But he probably didn't convene many meetings, lead brainstorming sessions,
or spend a lot of time complaining to anyone who would listen.
But neither was he hard-hearted or thick headed.

This practical, hard-working husband and father, used to working with his hands,

holding and shaping what he crafted,

trusted God to create his future and

trusted Mary, for the second time

to create a Holy Family.

There is so much more to Joseph

than a forgotten figure in the manger

or an upside down totem

to help sell a house!

So the Vatican Nazareth village

invites us to consider Joseph this Christmas.

But not only Joseph, I think,

but to consider the importance of home,

family – our parents, extended family,

and influences on us as we grow

in wisdom, age and grace.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem

to fulfill a prophecy,

but he wasn't raised there.

And it is well for us to consider home,

family this Christmas.

For it is in our homes,

that we first experience God's love,

and through grace

are welcomed into a family

and a faith community.

Not perfect homes, but hopefully holy homes.

Homes were, just as in Nazareth,

Jesus dwells and disciples are formed

and given hope.

Homes where, given the frailty

of our human bodies,

and the imperfections of our dispositions,

God's presence quietly indwells,

and from time to time even breaks through in amazing ways.

Last week I read a newly published book,

"The Day Donnie Herbert Woke Up," a true story about a firefighter who was injured by lack of oxygen to his brain during a fire.

After the initial injury, he regained partial consciousness, but eventually lapsed into a state of minimal consciousness: blind, mute, unaware as far as anyone could tell, of his surroundings.

The family, his wife and four sons, the youngest of whom was 3 years old at the time of the injury coped as best they could, always trying new therapies and treatments for the brain injured. Keeping him nearby when it became impossible to care for him at home, but visiting and occasionally arranging trips home.

Not a perfect family. The marriage was under stress before his accident, then his wife battled anxiety, depression and weight gain, his oldest sons had their troubles; her in-laws sued for custody of their son.

One morning, while she was shopping at a mall, her Donnie, who had sitting near a window in the nursing home, suddenly said to an aide, "Where's Linda?"

So began a frantic 16 hour period of non-stop talking and catching up with his family

in an experience like Lazarus, or Rip Van Winkle. For Donnie, time had stopped 10 years ago. He couldn't believe his youngest son, with whom he had never had a real conversation, was a teenager.

He was never as good again as that 16 hours, but his sons, his wife, his family and friends

are grateful they had that time with him,

to let him know they were OK,

that they hadn't abandoned him,

and most importantly as his oldest son said

for his father to know that he had given them

a good foundation.

Last week we had an open house for our Pre-K,

which, happily was very well attended.

One of the parents seemed curious about

the Catholic activities the children

engaged in, particularly around Christmas.

Is there much of this year-round?

Oh yes, was the proud answer.

Hmm. The mother replied, well I wouldn't want too much. We're

raising our children to keep open minds about religion.

Where's the foundation?

We're the foundation builders.

If not us, now, then never!

Nazareth, Joseph/Mary were Jesus' foundations.

He wound up starting another religion,

but not without his foundation.

Our Catholic school, our Catholic liturgies, prayers and customs.

Our weekly Eucharist – the body and blood of Christ – precious, year-round gift to sustain us.

Emmanuel, God is with us,

not only in a Christmas Card Manger,

but in ordinary, sometimes struggling families, in real lives that neither begin nor end

like fairy tales.

Real lives that begin, are sustained,

and end in God's love.

In Bethlehem, in Nazareth,

at home, at Eucharist,

...Emmanuel, God is with us always.

Let us rejoice and be glad!