

December 22, 2005

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A few days ago I was in Beverly to take my aunt out to lunch so on the way home I drove through Danvers where I grew up. I passed St. Mary's where I received the Eucharist for the first time and where I was confirmed. I drove through Danvers center and noticed that the block on which my father and uncle ran a small part-time mail-order business is now a rather impressive office building. The Penny Pincher, a hole in the wall toy store my sister and I frequented is now a coffee shop (The Custom Cup). The Maple Street School where I began my education is now housing for the elderly. But the Corner Grocery is still the Corner Grocery on the block where I grew up and Betty Ann's Sub Shop hasn't changed its name or business either. From Danvers Center I headed to the Highlands where we moved when I was in the 6th grade. I drove by the Great Oak School and was amazed that the great oak which marked the geographical center of Essex County and after which the school was named is no longer there!

Closer to the Highlands I passed the cemetery where my parents are buried. I'm not a "cemetery person" so I prayed as I drove by but did not stop. I was headed to the house in the highlands which was our second home in Danvers. I like to stop there to remember my parents and family because that's where we did our living. The family living there now has painted the green shutters black and has built a large two-car garage next to the side porch. I prayed again, let the peace and sadness settle in, and headed for Route 1 and back to Concord.

It's because it's Christmas time that I made this little tour of my youth, remembering the streets I walked and the places I called home until I graduated from high school and entered the seminary. Some of the places are the same, some have changed and some are gone. What are most important to me, of course, are the memories that such a tour stirs in my soul. There may come a day when all of those places are changed, rebuilt or gone but no one can take from me the memories of a childhood and the love I learned from those around me. I wonder... what do you miss this Christmas? what places? what people? what stories come to mind? what sadness? what peace?

Christmas is a time when we revisit not only the stable in Bethlehem, but many other places in the heart where God has been weaving the story of his love for each of us and for all of us as his people. What God has woven has grown threadbare in some places with patches holding together what we have torn. In some places, someone or some circumstance has ripped the fabric of the Lord's weaving and there we may need him to be the tailor to mend what is beyond our own efforts. The places in the heart we visit each Christmas are doors to our past, our pain and the peace we hope for.

For us Catholics, Christmas is a time when to visit memories of Christmases past and the places where we celebrated and the people with us in those days. I pray that your visiting those memories will bring you as much peace in the remembering as any sadness it may stir awake in your hearts.

For us Concord Catholics, many changes have taken place in the last few years and Christmas is a time when we will remember what used to be. As I drove through the streets of my childhood this past week and saw how many buildings and places had changed I was keenly aware that the heart of my memories, the people of my life's story, had survived those changes even if, like my parents and that great oak tree, they had not survived to this day.

I write this letter on December 22 but I know that when I hear Silent Night at the Christmas Masses this weekend, my heart will remember my mother teaching me that song as we assembled our family's simple Nativity scene. My mother is gone, that Nativity set is gone and I haven't been inside the house we lived in then for over 40 years. And oh how I wish my mother and father could be in the congregation with the people of Holy Family Parish this weekend when we sing Silent Night! I trust that they sing now with a choir even greater than our own! I hope that a song, a memory, a story will touch your heart in that way, too, no matter how many changes have taken place. It's what's in our hearts that matters and that's all we will take with us to the Lord's kingdom. May we learn to treasure what we have by remembering what has filled our hearts for so long.

Merry Christmas!
Fr. Fleming