



A Christmas gift

What do you give a priest who has all he needs for Christmas? Obviously, the best gift is one you cannot wrap. Well, this Christmas, I received a gift that puts me in a quandary. The gift came from some family friends. Let me try and explain.

First of all, it is white and is an unusual size – not rectangular, square or even round. Being rather slender in depth, it has eight compartments of varying sizes and has a large logo in the centre. Have you guessed what it might be yet?

Well, it is a multi-sized picture frame and the large logo in the centre, spells “Family.” That logo has gotten me mystified. It has led me to having more questions than answers.

My big question is: how do I define my “family?” Because, what I place in any and all of the eight compartments, depend on that answer.

So, how do I define “family?” Do I resurrect some old photos of my father, mother, brother and sisters, in whatever combination thereof, and include them? Yet, my brother and sisters have their own families so they probably think of their immediate family – parents and children, and not necessarily extended family. Do I expand the notion of “family” to include “friends” who adopted me as a “family” member during my sojourns in Mississippi? I know that one particular family adopted me as their “uncle” - not relationally but through friendship.

So how does one define “family” in today’s society? Some years ago, Ireland accepted same sex marriages. So, now, does “family” include father, mother, children, partner, significant other, soulmate, live in companion and or any combination thereof?

Do Christmas gatherings, celebrations and meals, give us a better perspective on “family?” Is Christmas a “family” celebration of all those who gather in a central place, most notably a “home,” to partake of a meal, share gifts and memories?

Is it not ironic that the church inserts a special Sunday during the Christmas season to celebrate a “holy” family? Does not such a celebration include a recognition of the various forms of “family” whether they be natural, blended, adopted, accepted.

Alex Haley, author of the blockbuster, “Roots,” said “In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future.” I am conscious of my links to the past as I have done some research on my “family” tree but I often wonder about the tenuous nature of the bridge structure to the future as there is no wife or children to cross the bridge from the present to the future.

Someone else said that a family is what you make it. It is made strong, not by number of heads counted at the dinner table, but by the rituals we help family members create, by the memories we share, by the commitment of time, caring, and love we show to one another, and by the hopes for the future we have as individuals and as a unit.

Another person said that family means no one gets left behind or forgotten. So, I have eight slots to fill but who gets left behind and is not included. Who is really included in my family portrait? I can always drop by my brother’s house and visit with his family any time of the day, but I always come home alone. Even when in Mississippi, I would share Christmas and holidays with a “family,” yet, like now, after all the food, gifts and sharing, I still came home alone. I still cannot decide who should be included in the eight slots of my picture frame that reflects its title, “family.”

As I look around my home, I see a few pictures of brother and sisters over the years, one or two pictures of my godchildren but the pictures that command the most presence and status are larger scenery pictures. Maybe, the person who gave me the multiple picture “family” frame for Christmas, saw that I needed a collection of “family” pictures to grace my home.

In the meantime, the unusual, multi picture frame sits empty in one of my closets. Will it become a gift, like many Christmas gifts, that is put away and forgotten about or will it challenge me to define who are my “family?”