**The Paradox of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Every year, as Advent and Christmas approach, I seem to have the same conversation with one of my students. When I ask how the semester is wrapping up, invariably one of my students will tell me how busy they are preparing for final exams, writing course papers, and putting the finishing touches on a semester long project. Just as invariably, the student will lament that the semester is at its busiest when they most want to enjoy the celebrations of the season.

Yes, I know that the Christmas season does not really start until Christmas Day. By then, my students are all finished with their exams and enjoying several weeks of vacation. So, in that technical sense, their busy-ness does not interfere with Christmas.

But, I understand their complaint and I commiserate. So often, this season of excitement, anticipation, gatherings with loved ones, and cherished traditions is, for so many, the season when “ordinary life” is at its busiest.

My own life follows the rhythm of the academic year. Thus, like my students, I find December to be one of the most exhausting times of year. Students must take exams – but their teachers must write them and grade them! Like my students, I can grumble about this unwelcome intrusion of the stressful into the realm of the joyful.

Those who work in retail, travel, food service or hospitality also know that their most hectic days are the ones that are also filled with anticipation of Christmas.

In the financial sector as well, year end reports, budget reconciliations and reporting deadlines loom large as December dawns.

As the first snows come and cold weather returns, plumbers, snow removal crews and roofers see a wave of new need.

Parents, too, are caught in the flurry of the activities that engulf their children, while those who handle the mail and package delivery have long days and long nights.

In a particular way, priests, deacons, sisters and brothers empty themselves out with full schedules packed with activity, responsibility, and service.

I share some of students’ wish that life would slow down during this season so that we could relish the joys of Advent and Christmas without being weighed down by the extra activity that fills everyday life – when the ordinary intrudes on the extraordinary.

Yet, the mundane busy-ness of the day-to-day lives we lead is always interwoven with the most extraordinary and sacred seasons of our lives. This can be a distracting obstacle in our appreciation of the sacred. But in another light, if we find our lives are at their busiest when we most want a break from our obligations, it can be a time to be grateful for lives that are full, for people to serve, for work to be accomplished. Maybe it is a time to embrace more fully the burdens of being human as we prepare to welcome the way in which God took on those burdens when He took on our humanity.

Perhaps it is a time to reflect on the way in which, on this side of eternity, celebration and labor, joy and stress, energy and fatigue, and the hopes and the woes of human life will always be inextricably and blessedly intertwined. This is, perhaps, the paradox of ordinary time.

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