

# First Person

## The clergy wife before Christmas

By Polly Ingraham

**A**t certain seasons – Christmas and Easter, to be precise – a clergy spouse has to accept that church can have a swallowing-up quality to it. There are, of course, more services, and what's a service without a good sermon? Think, write, deliver; think, write, deliver. In these days leading up to Christmas, in particular, in addition to the bazaars and the pageants and the special outreach efforts, there is also all the "regular" stuff. People in crisis, sickness, even death – these things don't stop at this season; indeed, they seem to intensify. Any way you look at it, there is a lot to handle.

**I could not just "convert" because I'd married into the church. As one of my brothers had said, you can't take on a religion the way you put on a coat.**

When I married Rob 14 years ago, I had little idea what I was getting into. He had enrolled in divinity school after a stint as a banker. Having helped his sister through a heart transplant – thereby looking death straight in the eye before appreciating a kind of miracle – he was ready for this path. I, on the other hand, had grown up in a non-churchgoing family.

My brothers and I had full lives centered around friends, animals, sports, books and music. We just didn't go down to Main Street for church as many of our friends did. Once in a while I attended Quaker meeting with my grandmother and liked that peaceful experience, but Sunday mornings were generally for outdoor activities or reading. If there was a spiritual void, we weren't aware of it.

In the beginning (wait – can I say that?) Rob and I had some serious talks, which mostly consisted of me asking him to explain his beliefs. This took some doing, as I'd barely even heard the word "theology." I remember coming back to our apartment in New Haven and seeing Rob in his desk chair, looking up at the ceiling. When I asked what he was doing, he said, "Waiting for the Eschaton." Talk about a communication gap. Not

surprisingly, we had our difficulties. When he told me that he believed God was somehow involved in our falling in love, I couldn't go along with that. And, likewise, when he detected a whiff of "How can you possibly think that?" in my voice, he bristled.

Although it might have been helpful, I could not just "convert" because I'd married into the church. As one of my brothers had said, you can't take on a religion the way you put on a coat.

Fortunately, we had other things going for us. I'll be the first to say that my husband showed great tolerance. For instance, when he returned home after a long, somber day of Good Friday services and heard me blaring Springsteen's

"Thunder Road," he grimaced but bore it. In those days, I just had no idea. Now I would at least have the sense to put on some mellow Diana Krall.

Once we had children old enough to partake in church activities, I started going more often. Now two of them are often

acolytes – I actually know what that means – and the youngest is an eager participant in any theatrical performances ("Mom, I'm so glad that I'm a serpent and not a bug this time!"). I am proud to hear my husband preach because I know the effort he puts into his work. He serves people of all ages, he sees the big picture of joys as well as sorrows, he strives to make his church a spiritual center, and he is always on call.

So, for this clergy wife anyway, pre-Christmas resolutions are more important than New Year's ones. Here goes:

1) I resolve NOT to feel lonely when I'm still wrapping after the kids go to bed on Christmas Eve and instead think about all those glowing faces – many in church for the first time – drinking in the spirit of the season.

2) I resolve that we will appreciate a simple Christmas Day together. Last year, after the gifts were opened, Rob contentedly played a new card game with our oldest son by the fire. That was exactly what he needed.

3) I resolve to let him know more often how I admire what he does, even if I'm still trying to figure out a few things about it along the way. □

Polly Ingraham lives in Shutesbury.

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