

Last time I was home, our kids were still on summer vacation; I drove away from here with the top down on my convertible; President Clinton was denying that he had any improper relationship with a White House intern; my big sister was 49 years old; the Kansas City Chiefs under the leadership of Marty Schottenheimer had never lost more than three games in a row; and in major league baseball the single season home run record was in the hands of a man named Roger, Roger, Roger somebody or other.

I had some marvelous experiences. I finished the book I went off to write, a history of the catechumenate. I had a couple days early on at the coast of Maine -- a beautiful, beautiful place. I binged on the baseball playoffs and the world series. I spent a remarkable day with the manager for one of the farm clubs for the Kansas City Royals; he taught me as much about kindness as he did about baseball. I attended every home football game at Notre Dame; we won every game I attended. I know what you're thinking; I should spend more time at Arrowhead. While doing my research I discovered in the Hesburgh library a copy of all the reports after Vatican II that led to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. What an exciting time in history that was. I even spoke over the phone with the priest in Germany who was in charge of those reports. He's 86 years old now; he was very pleased someone was working on this book. Then on my last day at Notre Dame I asked to see Fr. Theodore Hesburgh. Fr. Hesburgh was the president of the university for 35 years. He chaired the United States civil rights commission for 15 years; he received the President's Medal of Freedom; he gives advice to Ann Landers; and has served most recently on a federal commission for the implementation of the Wye River accords in the mideast. They named the library after him -- the building with Touchdown Jesus on the front. When I saw Fr. Hesburgh I had three items on my agenda. I wanted to tell him what a nice library he has. I also wanted him to know a little about the project I had been working on. And then I asked if he'd autograph a copy of his biography for the spring auction at St. Regis. He did.

As wonderful as all that was, I was never far away from sobering thoughts. Those Wye River accords are not going very well. The president of our country has been impeached, because he behaved in a way that has brought shame to himself and his office. Our congress remains bitterly divided along party lines, making it difficult to discern the motives behind the positions of our leaders. Our country has fired weapons of mass destruction in order to stop the development of weapons of mass destruction.

Here at the parish, our children have been threatened, our staff has worked long and hard while our pastor was away, our finances have become gravely unstable, our boiler broke on Monday, and many people here have recently suffered the death of a family member; they approach this joyful season with a heavy heart. So, I'm elated with my sabbatical but I am sobered by events at home and abroad. There's a lot to catch up on.

Christmas is a homecoming, a time of reacquaintance. It's a time when we get reacquainted with the people we love and reacquainted with

God. But Christmas is also a different kind of homecoming. It's a time when God comes home to us. Mary gave birth to a son not just so we could get to know God, but so that God could get to know us. God came seeking a home, friends, and a family here; and God found the likes of us on that first Christmas Day -- people who were joyful, weary, saddened by loss, but grateful for life. What we celebrate tonight strengthens us in joy and in sorrow: God comes again this year to meet us in our Christmas home. So let this be a night of thanksgiving for our homes, for the people we love, for someone to share our sorrows, for the faces we see, for the faces now hidden, and a night of thanksgiving for God who came once and comes again to make himself at home.

Merry Christmas, everybody! It's great to see you again. I've enjoyed seeing so many familiar faces & meeting some new ones.

I even got a Christmas card at the rectory from someone I don't know addressed to Darla and Paul Turner. I've been trying to find out from Msgr. Comiskey just who Darla is and what she's doing at the rectory, but he's not talking. I expected a few things to change while I was away, but not that much.

One thing we do want to change is our hearts. . . .