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Life is Worth Giving

JOHNNY LABUNDY'S ONLY CHRISTMAS

by Fr. Kevin O'Neill Shanley

Johnny Labundy was a foster child taken in by my Aunt Mary and Uncle Tom. He was from a "broken home" and needed some loving care and a foster home. He arrived at their home in the Greenville section of our city looking somewhat forlorn in his somewhat oversized clothing, and wanting desperately to be loved and accepted.

Aunt Mary and Uncle Tom were really my Father's aunt and uncle who were immigrants from Co. Meath in Ireland. For my three brothers and myself, they really were much like grandparents. Since our parents were immigrants, too, we didn't really know our own grandparents except through occasional letters from Ireland.

Over the years, this childless couple had taken in a number of foster children as their own, and provided a good but strict home with loving care, abundant food, and a strong religious atmosphere. One boy, who came during the Great Depression of the 1930s, was Jimmy Foley who was about my age. We grew up as cousins, if not brothers, in spite of their being only a foster relationship between us. But children don't often bother about such things as relationships.

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We played and laughed together, and went on great adventures on the sand dunes overlooking Newark Bay. Summer time also found us swimming in the bay and enjoying the freedom of large open spaces in contrast to the four-room, cold-water flat in which my family lived in the city.

On many Sundays, our parents took us on the Public Service trolley to Greenville where Aunt Mary and Uncle Tom had their home and several acres of land. They had a large garden and a big apple tree which provided cool shelter on large benches in the summer, along with delicious apples in the fall.

My aunt and uncle, to help stretch income during the lean years of the Depression, raised rabbits and chickens, along with various vegetables in the garden. We enjoyed feeding the rabbits and chickens, and then collected the eggs from the hen house. One day, to my great chagrin, I collected the imitation eggs that were placed in the straw to encourage the laying hens!

These joyful Sunday excursions with my parents and brothers remain more than fond memories to this day, especially for a time when I was "fostered" there when our family moved to a new flat in the city. It was difficult to find good rental space in those days, especially ~~for~~ for families with children. If owners found out that my parents had four boys, close in age, it would be almost impossible to rent a flat.

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To counteract the situation, my parents told a rental agent of the existence of only three sons, not four, in the family. And when moving day came, I was shipped off to Aunt Mary and Uncle Tom's home for a while. I enjoyed the visit, especially being the focus of attention since I was a favorite of Uncle Tom.

Later, I was smuggled back into the family, and we tried to make sure that all four of us did not appear in public at the same time. When the ruse was later discovered, the kindly Irish family who were the superintendents of our flat building simply looked the other way when all four of us came down the stairs from our flat.

Our Sunday and sometimes weekday visits to Greenville continued to be a joy. My aunt and uncle were also my godparents, and Uncle Tom delighted in doing anything I asked, even reading the Sunday comics in the newspaper for me. It was only years later that I discovered that he was illiterate and had concocted the story lines for Dick Tracy, Moon Mullins, Smokey Stover, and my other favorite comics.

During those years, too, Jimmy Foley and I became close friends, almost brothers, and I was permitted to visit the home in Greenville on my own, sometimes even walking the three-mile journey by myself.

Into our happy relationship one day came chubby Johnny Labundy from a broken home and the Childrens' Welfare Society.

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He was a bit younger than ourselves, stocky and somewhat athletic, but with the cautious look of a child who has been shifted from place to place with little or no sense of really belonging anywhere.

Jimmy and I really didn't feel the need of another companion, but Johnny got on well enough with my younger brother, Mike. But Johnny wanted very much to be a part of the relationship that Jimmy and I had. With the somewhat stern admonition from Aunt Mary, we reluctantly let Johnny tag along on our outdoor adventures.

But whenever the opportunity arose, we quickly ditched him as soon as possible. This made Johnny exceedingly angry and often led to tears on his part. He wanted to be with us but we really didn't want him around. Over several months, we agreed reluctantly to let him tag along and participate in our games and other activities. Probably from lack of experience, Johnny, though somewhat naturally <sup>(b)</sup>athletic, didn't do well playing ball or participating in any of the other games we played.

This often brought more teasing and tears. In our youthful ignorance, we didn't realize how much Johnny was really hurting inwardly.

As the fall turned to Thanksgiving, and then winter to sledding and snowball fights, Johnny made his way into our group.

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But this happened only with reluctant acceptance. We accepted him with some reservations.

In the weeks before Christmas, we often sat and poured over the gift section of the "Jersey Journal," our local newspaper, and thought of all the toys we might like to receive for Christmas. I had pretty well settled on a set of trains, and Jimmy wanted a baseball glove. But Johnny seemed less interested in material things. What he really wanted, we later discovered, was a real home where he would be loved and cherished, to end the painful cycle of his being shunted from one foster home to another.

Even as young boys, Jimmy and I sensed this, but didn't quite know how to bring it about. As our Advent spiritual effort, encouraged by the Sisters of Charity at St. Aloysius School, we tried to include Johnny in more of our games and other activities. But there remained a certain look of sadness in his eyes.

When Christmas came, there were the gifts of toys that we had requested, and even a bat and ball for Johnny — even though he had not really requested any toys. We thanked our aunt and uncle for their gifts, and then realized that we were at that age of getting clothing gifts rather than toys. We were simply growing up into adolescence.

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The Family went to Christmas Mass and then gathered for dinner. Johnny participated to some extent but we felt that he must have missed his own mother and father and siblings — wherever they might be. Of course, we really didn't even know if they were actually alive or where they were. And we were afraid to ask Johnny about them.

We enjoyed that great week between Christmas and New Year with no school and plenty of time to play and enjoy our new toys. Everything seemed peaceful and secure.

It was not until the middle of January when my Mother and Father took us to Greenville for a visit. There was a strangeness to the home of my aunt and uncle. Suddenly it dawned on me that Johnny Labundy was no longer there!

When we asked where Johnny was, we were told that the Welfare people, a caseworker, thought that Johnny might do better in another foster home. According to her, he just didn't seem to be doing well in Greenville.

I was struck by feelings of guilt and remorse, as was Jimmy Foley. Could we have done more to make Johnny feel wanted, to include him in our friendship, our games, or just to make him feel more loved and cherished? His somewhat sudden departure left an emptiness in my young life.

It has been years since I've seen or talked with Jimmy Foley. Our parents and aunt and uncle have long since died.

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The old house in Greenville has been demolished to make room for new housing.

And it is even longer since I've had any contact with Johnny Labundy. How has he done in life? Was his next foster home a more joyful and accepting place for him?

Memories such as the only Christmas we shared with Johnny sometimes come unbidden to memory. They bring a sense of joy, tinged with sadness of what might have been. But they remind us that Christmas, and always, is a time to reach out to those who seek to be loved and cherished, and to find a home in our hearts *FOR THEM.*