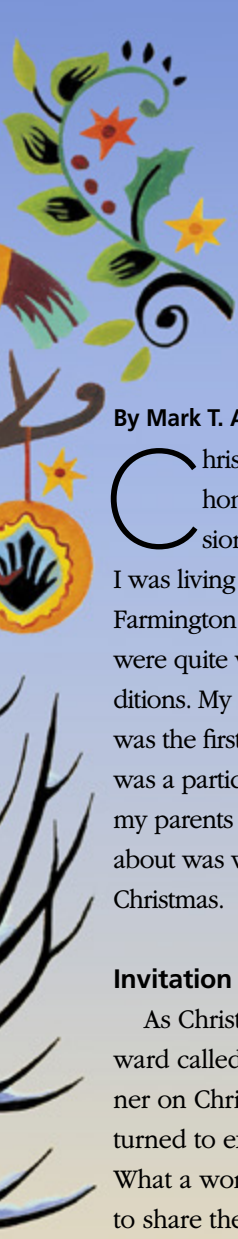




CHRISTMAS WITH THE
DOMBROWSKIS



I wasn't prepared for the lesson a poor widow would teach me.

By Mark T. Anderson

Christmas 1981 was my first Christmas away from home. Six months earlier I'd left Utah to serve a mission in Detroit, Michigan, USA, and by Christmastime I was living in a city called Farmington Hills. At that time Farmington Hills had great economic diversity. While many were quite well off, others lived in extremely meager conditions. My companion and I were a bit downhearted, as it was the first Christmas away from home for both of us. It was a particularly cold winter, and my only hope was that my parents would send me a warmer coat. All I could think about was what my family would be doing to prepare for Christmas.

Invitation to Dinner

As Christmas Day approached, a prominent family in the ward called to invite us to their home for a turkey dinner on Christmas Eve. Suddenly my feelings of loneliness turned to excitement. This was a family much like mine. What a wonderful invitation! I hung up the phone, excited to share the good news with my companion. As I began to explain to him what had just happened, he told me that while I was in another room earlier that day, he had received a phone call from another member of our ward, Sister Dombrowski. She had also invited us to her home for Christmas Eve dinner.

We were faced with a difficult decision (or so it seemed at the time). I felt that we should call Sister Dombrowski, apologize, and kindly tell her that we would not be able to accept her invitation. The family I had talked with was well off. They would treat us well. On the other hand, Sister

Dombrowski was a poor widow living in a rough part of town. She cared for her mentally challenged adult child in very humble circumstances.

My companion said he felt that he just couldn't call Sister Dombrowski back and cancel; she was so excited for us to spend Christmas Eve with her. After a long discussion, we decided that we would arrive early to the Dombrowski home, eat quickly, and then slip away to enjoy a delicious dinner with the other family.

A Humble Home

Christmas Eve came quickly. Instead of arriving early at Sister Dombrowski's home, we got there almost half an hour late. We knew we didn't have much time and reluctantly rang the doorbell. In an instant she was at the door.

We had never really been in her home, which was filled with old, broken-down furniture. In the corner was a branch that had apparently broken off a large tree after a recent ice storm. It was decorated with a strand of popcorn, and silver ice had been carefully placed on each of its dull brown twigs. A few broken ornaments adorned the tree's front.

We apologized for our tardiness, and Sister Dombrowski shrugged it off. She told us she had prayed that nothing had happened to us, and then she ushered us into the kitchen, where she sat us down. The aroma of dinner—a Spam casserole—was unfamiliar to me. After offering a beautiful prayer, Sister Dombrowski served my companion and me an ample portion of her culinary delight. I almost felt like crying. We were giving up our Christmas Eve for this!



*Each Christmas, as I reflect on the humble setting of Christ's birth,
I remember the sacrifice and humility of Sister Dombrowski.*

After dinner, we sat on folding chairs in the living room while Sister Dombrowski and her daughter sang us Christmas carols, accompanied by an old, out-of-tune player piano. As they sang, my thoughts turned to my family and how they were participating in a similar activity. I would have given anything to be home at that moment.

A Plea for Us to Stay

After only a few minutes, I expressed to Sister Dombrowski that we would soon need to be leaving, for another family had invited us to their home as well. I still remember the look on her face. She asked if we could stay for just a few more minutes. We reluctantly said yes. She then rushed out of the room and was gone for what seemed to be a silent eternity.

A few moments later, we heard the doorbell ring. Sister Dombrowski did not come out to answer it. I looked at her daughter, who simply sat on the piano bench and grinned. My companion got up to answer the door. As he did so, the sound of Santa's "Ho, ho, ho!" permeated the air. Into the house walked a five-foot-tall elderly Santa Claus who looked and sounded much like Sister Dombrowski. Seeing her in costume with a pillowcase slung over her shoulder gave me a chuckle, but I was still anxious to leave.

Santa had us both sit down, opened her sack, and handed each of us a small bag with about ten tiny wrapped gifts inside. We began to open them up one by one—a small black comb, a can of creamed corn, a bar of soap.

I was not prepared for what I saw next. As I peered up to see Santa standing above us, I saw tears streaming down her cheeks. Only at that time did I realize the sacrifice Sister Dombrowski had made to make our first Christmas away from those we loved dearly a wonderful one. As we finished opening those small but meaningful gifts, we asked if we might stay and sing a few more carols with the two of them.

We never did make it to the other home that Christmas Eve. We stayed at the Dombrowskis' as long as we could before we had to return to our own apartment. I remember quickly going to bed, only to place my face deep in my pillow and weep. My tears were not tears of loneliness—they were tears of gratitude as I contemplated the love that accompanied the wonderful gifts we had just received. I had been so selfish. I had almost ruined a precious experience not only for myself but also for someone who had much less than I.

All these years later, each Christmas brings with it memories of and appreciation for Sister Dombrowski's expression of love and sacrifice. As I have reflected upon this experience, I have often recalled the story of another Christmas Eve, in even more meager surroundings, over 2,000 years ago. While I cannot compare the two events, I know that similar sacrifice and humility were present at both. Though Sister Dombrowski has long since passed away and was likely never aware of the life lessons she passed on to me, I will never forget her or that magical Michigan evening. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.