**Beauty Comes to Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

It happens every year.

I am an overly avid collector of Christmas tree ornaments. All year, they stay stashed away on shelves in the closet, crammed in storage boxes in the garage, and tucked away in places I forget until I rediscover them when I am seeking my summer clothes at the end of April. But, as December unfolds, they leave their boxes, bags and wrappers for their turn in the spotlight.

To be honest, the spotlight is not all that magnificent. I have a fake Christmas tree of such poor quality that it drops needles almost as much as a real tree would shed. The fake needles are also flocked with fake snow that also sheds, adding to the messy drama in my living room window. Every year I plan to replace it – and every year I never get around to it.

As I unwrap the ornaments and find places for them on my increasingly crowded tree, I see snapshots of my life. There are the amateurish ornaments my siblings and I created in school. Although they are not things of beauty, my parents cherished them – and I keep them in all their felt and glitter glory. There are ornaments that are souvenirs from events long passed that bring back annual memories. Many ornaments I have brought home from travels, and in so many different ways they reflect Christmas joy from many corners of the world.

There are some that are fragile pieces of art, depicting holiness in beautiful ways. Then, there are others that are worn out and cracked treasures from the five-and-dime that are far past their prime. Yet, they too come out every year.

There are so many that were gifts to me from loved ones – some who are still with me, and many who are not. There are those that were sent to me by charities seeking donations, from local businesses seeking publicity, and from institutions sacred and profane seeking connections. All of them find a place on the spindly branches of my tree. There are so many that are cat-themed, and the feline vibe competes with fake icicles, glass donuts and coffee cups (my friends know me well!), cloth animals, and Disney characters.

There is an angel made of cardboard and tinsel that my parents gave me when I had my first tree in my first dormitory. From the top branch, she still presides over this spectacle every year.

I look at pictures of Christmas trees in home design magazines that encourage readers to select a color motif, to pick an ornament theme, and to carefully “curate” the décor on the tree. That clearly does not happen in my home, where ornaments are “curated” only on the basis of what I can find in any given year. When all the ornaments have landed on the tree, the result is charitably described as eclectic.

Yet, every year, when I turn on the lights and illuminate this cacophony for the very first time, and it stands in its messy glory with my grandparents’ crèche nestled beneath its branches, my heart says once again, *“It is beautiful.”*

Like life itself, it is messy. The tree holds that which is beautiful, fragile, expensive and reverent. And, it holds what is indescribably tacky. It holds that which is childish and that which is faded. It holds memories that bring joy and those that bring wistful yearning. It holds those things that make me laugh, and those things that make me shake my head and wonder how I could *ever* have seen beauty in them. It holds those things brought home from around the world, and those things made at the kitchen table, the center of my world. Yet, as messy as this is, when it is wrapped in the light of Christmas and embraces a cherished crèche, it is beautiful.

This year – perhaps more so than ever – we bring to Christmastime the joys, sorrows, happy memories, sad memories, fragile dreams, crushed plans, new loves, old loves, lost loves, hopes, griefs, laughter and tears of our lives. We bring those things that have strengthened our souls and strained our spirits. Like the ornaments on my tree, they are not organized, themed, curated or planned. They are simply the pieces of life itself. My prayer is that at Christmas, when all of these pieces of our lives are wrapped in the light of Christmas and embrace a cherished crèche – not of plaster, but the real thing – we can whisper, with hope, *“It is beautiful.”*

*May you be blessed with joy, hope and peace at Christmas – when sacred beauty comes to ordinary times. Merry Christmas!*

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