

'Follow the Year': An odyssey of religious celebration

The First Christmas Eve

On this holiest night of the year, come and let's join in a special journey. Our space-and-time ship is our God-gift of imagination, taking us back nearly two thousand years to stand just inside the gate of Bethlehem. The narrow streets are nearly deserted, for it is well past midnight. But look! Before us, just entering the city, is a group of shepherds. How excited they seem — how full of wonder! They hurry along as if led by some invisible guide, and we join them, sharing in their sense of awe. Now we stop at the small entrance of a grotto cave set in a steep hillside. It is a stable!

A man comes quietly forth from the cave and greets the shepherds. The man is Joseph and with a smile he bids the shepherds enter. Humbly we follow. How lovely, how soft and glowing is Mary's face. She beckons to the shepherds and, with them, we crowd around the manger. There, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying on the straw, is a new-born baby — Jesus! Like no other baby, He is surrounded by a radiance of light in which Angels seem to weave!

The shepherds kneel in rapture. With a rush of feeling, we, too, fall to our knees; for in that moment, light from around the Child enters our hearts. Love flames up within us — Love for the Child, Love for Mary and Joseph, for the shepherds — and for all the earth! The great joyous peace of heaven enfolds us and we hear the sound of Angel voices singing, "Glory to God in the Highest and to men on earth, peace. Peace! For Christ is Born, Christ is Born!"

By Karen M. Franz

Ofentimes, the meaning behind religious holidays can be lost in the hectic preparations they entail and in the distractions of everyday life. Though they travel along the familiar cycle of religious holidays, children, in particular, may come to see Christmas primarily in the form of secular celebration and hold only vague understandings of the lesser religious holidays. For young sojourners through the lands of faith, history and tradition, a guided tour of Church feasts can provide a basis for a fuller understanding of the mysteries of our faith.

Winding its way about the liturgical year, through centuries of Judeo-Christian tradition and various countries of the world, "Follow the Year," source of the above

quotation, offers that guidance along a fantastic voyage of religious discovery.

Though the children's book by Mala Powers chronicles all the major events throughout Church year, the Advent/Christmas season is — fittingly — a dominant portion of this delightful collection of legends, folk tales, and ancient and modern stories.

With a special story for each of the days in the Advent calendar, the odyssey begins with

The Twelve Days of Christmastide

The Advent waiting now is done
 And Mary has her little son:
 For him our hearts are open wide —
 And so begins the Christmastide!
 For twelve more days — each Holy Night —
 His star and Angels bring us light.

Now Gifts and Treasures they'll reveal
 If in some quiet times we kneel.
 Remembering — 'mid season's joy —
 Why Wise Men sought that Holy Boy.
 Then blessed will be our Christmastide
 Through which the Wise Three Kings still ride.

From 'Follow the Year'

the events leading up to the birth of Christ. In simplified adaptations of gospel passages — such as the one above — the author retells the events of the Christmas season. Interspersed throughout the Christmas section of the book are poems, adaptations of the Genesis stories, the story of Hanukkah, and an assortment of charming Christmas legends, including "The Glastonbury Thorn," a poetic rendition of French and

English legends about the walking staff of Joseph of Arimathea:

*At Glastonbury it is told,
 By bard and pilgrim songs of old,
 Each Christmas Eve at midnight hour
 Good Joseph's hawthorn staff does*

flower —

*Acclaiming that all things of earth
 This night shall honor our Lord's birth.*

The book also recounts the origins of various staples in American Christmas celebrations — from the introduction of the Christmas tree to the composition of Franz Gruber's carol, "Silent Night." Children and parents will enjoy the tale of "The Crib of Bo'Bossu," a story of a deformed boy touched by the Christ Child's love; and the amusing story, "Watch Out for That Donkey!" about the "conversion" of an ornery donkey in the Nativity stable.

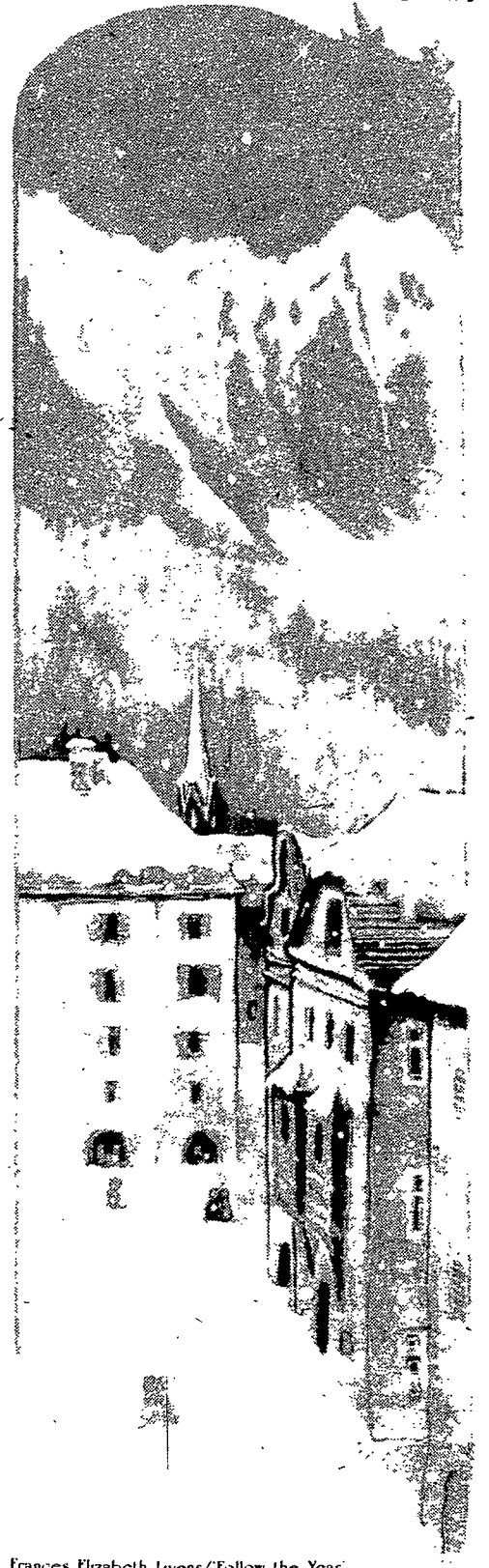
Readers of this spiritual calendar, subtitled "A Family Celebration of Christmas Stories," will be enchanted with a multitude of whimsical illustrations by Frances Elizabeth Livens. Each page is adorned with two realistic yet fanciful illustrations, adding special meaning to related stories. The drawings vary from pastel renditions of solemn religious events (as seen in the reprints that accompany this article) to bright and exuberant illustrations of folklore. Of particular note are Livens' drawings of St. Nicholas, Father Christmas and Santa Claus, which complement Powers' history of the evolution of the most popular Christmas elf.

But "Follow the Year" does not end with Christmas. Pressing on with our journey, we enter the new year, and find ourselves in the year 469 A.D., on the first St. Valentine's Day. Powers relates the story of the "kind-hearted young priest" who, while awaiting his own execution, restored the sight of his jailer's blind daughter. Just before his death, Powers tells us, St. Valentine sent the girl a farewell message signed, "From your Valentine" and started the tradition of loving messages.

Soon it is Eastertime, and we listen as the author simply recounts the miracle of the Last Supper and the Passion of Christ. "My soul is filled with sorrow for what is to come," He told the disciples. "Stay, watch with me while I pray." But the disciples soon fell asleep. Jesus, alone in the world, prayed

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Frances Elizabeth Livens/Follow the Year



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