

Makings of Christmas

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in the hearts of men, the third the bodily birth of the Son of Mary."

Miles theorizes that the three Christmas Masses may have evolved out of successive services or "stations" held at least since the fourth century in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In the *Peregrinatio Silviae*, a late fourth-century document chronicling the pilgrimage to the Holy Land by a noblewoman from southern Gaul, mention is made of two services held on Epiphany — one at Bethlehem on the evening before the feast, followed by a procession arriving at Jerusalem around daylight.

At that early hour, just before daybreak — as Miles describes it, "about the hour when one man begins to recognize another" — who is to say who the traveler in the *Peregrinatio Silviae* really was? Perhaps she could have been the Italian Befana, wandering from house to house on her never-ending pilgrimage to look upon the face of the Christ Child — and leaving gifts for children in her wake.

Within the same century that this mystery woman made her pilgrimage and Midnight Mass became a part of the liturgical celebration of Christmas, an obscure figure, the bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, lived and died, leaving behind him various legends of infant piety and miracles performed for the benefit of children. St. Nicholas, who was later named patron saint of boys and the saint of seafaring men, is best known to the Christian world as Santa Claus, the symbol of Christmas giving.

St. Nicholas' role as a bearer of gifts can be traced to 12th-century France, where nuns from the convents of the central provinces initiated the practice of venturing out on December 5 (St. Nicholas Eve) to leave anonymous gifts of holiday foods at the homes of poor families with children. This custom, which spread quickly throughout Europe, was soon observed in more affluent homes as well.

Elements of Norse mythology have undoubtedly contributed to the legend of Santa Claus. The German Santa Klaus is believed to have been patterned in part on the Norse god Odin, who drove his team of reindeer through the midwinter darkness, delivering gifts of spring, new corn and fruit. In Russia, Saint

Nicholas is said to borrow Odin's reindeer on the night of December 6 and visit every house in which children, good and bad, have left their shoes on the hearth.

In modern-day America, the shoes have been replaced by stockings, and the appointed eve for Santa's rounds falls several weeks later, to coincide with the Nativity. Now, of course, children's behavior has little to do with whether or not they find their stockings and indeed their entire living rooms filled with the spoils of a commercial Christmas in an affluent land.

Is it coincidence that the letter "X" replaces "Christ" in holiday advertising? And, if so, is poor maligned Saint Nicholas really to blame?

"It is not the giving that has almost driven Christ from Christmas; after all, He taught us endlessly that it is blessed to give," states a passage in *The Book of Christmas*, a publication of *The Reader's Digest*. "Isn't it rather the quenching of His dayspring, the loss of innocence in greed and grab?"

Perhaps in the hours between Santa's visit and what children's author Beatrix Potter termed "Christmas Day in the morning," we can stay awake long enough to recapture that "dayspring" — or at the very least, make it to church at dawn, in the event we put together too many model train sets and slept through Midnight Mass.

Other holiday traditions

Christmas, indeed, regarded in all its aspects, is a microcosm of European religion," concluded Clement Miles in his history and analysis of Christmas rituals and traditions. "It reflects almost every phase of thought and feeling from crude magic and superstition . . . to the exquisite spirituality and tenderness of St. Francis."

Not only have nations in other parts of the world — the Middle East, Africa, Asia, South and Central America — contributed a pinch of this and a dash of that to the melting pot of Christmas tradition, but other belief systems

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Bishop's Office

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER
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My dear people:

Christmas seems to hold us in timeless wonder. Cease-fires are declared in wars. Conflicts are temporarily halted. Families seek ways of joining together. Churches are filled with spirited people. The whole world gives the impression of being at peace!

We know, however, that this peaceful atmosphere cannot be sustained. It seems that the rush of human life ushers the world back into its conflicts and exchanges as soon as Christmas is ended. The challenge for a Christian is to continue the wonder and awe of Christmas in the normal flow of human life.

As we approach the Feast of the Birth of our Savior, my wish for you is that you will appreciate the wonder contained in this love of God, made flesh in the Christmas mystery. St. John tells us: "Of his fullness we have all had a share — love following upon love" (John 1:17). To translate this love into the ebb and flow of our human endeavors helps all to realize the true meaning of Christmas.

When you gather with your families and when you assemble in your churches, please remember those who have needs other than your own. Please pray that the wonder of this season will overwhelm the pettiness of human conflicts. Please pray that our hearts will realize the beauty of God's love and more deeply reflect that love in the human condition. And please pray for me, that I may serve the Church of Rochester and continue to be a sign of the enduring love of Jesus.

May this Christmas Season bring the richest of God's blessings upon you and yours.

Your brother in Christ,

Matthew H. Clark

+ Matthew H. Clark
Bishop of Rochester

MHC: adj

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WE PRAY THAT CHRIST WILL BE THE REAL LIGHT, JOY AND PEACE OF YOUR LIFE NOW AND THROUGHOUT THE NEW YEAR!

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