

# Celebrating Christmas in Rome: a time for praying and eating

**V**atican City (NC) — When Pope John Paul II laid flowers beneath a statue of the crowned Madonna on December 8, he sent a ceremonial signal to Rome's tradition-minded population: The Christmas season was officially underway.

Rome's yuletide begins with a day off — the feast of the Immaculate Conception — and ends with the kind of meal that takes all day to eat. Praying and eating are the common denominators for much of what goes on in between as well.

'Tis the season of "panettone," an Italian Christmas cake, and "torrone," a nougat bar full of almonds and pistachios; of duck-in visits to elaborate church nativity scenes and pilgrimages to Piazza Navona, where the crib figurines are sold by the thousands; of baked fish, midnight Mass, the papal "Urbi et Orbi" blessing and deep-fried artichokes — in that order.

The pope and the Vatican have always been the main actors in this pageant, but not the only ones. St. Peter's has the biggest Christmas tree, the biggest "presepio," or nativity scene, and the biggest midnight Mass. But in the narrow streets across the Tiber River, traditions — albeit of less grandeur — thrive.

The "presepio" ties much of the Roman Christmas together. Taking the kids to see miniature cribs and mangers in local churches is an Italian equivalent of seeing Santa at the shopping mall. Here Santa still plays second fiddle to "Bambino Gesu," the baby Jesus.

The "presepio" tour is usually made in the evening, when the flashing lights, running water and other special effects are best viewed in the darkened chapels. In the Jesuit Church of the Gesu, a tiny brook meanders past the stable, while angels fly overhead and an imitation fire burns alongside the manger.

But churches are not the only places that recreate Christ's birth. A bakery not far from where St. Peter was martyred exhibits a manger scene made entirely of bread, baked to a golden brown and dusted lightly with powdered sugar for a snow-like effect. A few fruit stores come up with similar eye-

stopping creations for hurried shoppers.

Recently, Rome added a variable to its Christmas equation when it legalized store openings on Sunday. You can buy anything from silk ties to corkscrews — but not religious vestments, because the city's many ecclesiastical clothing shops have resisted the trend.

Rome's bishops have not criticized Sunday opening, perhaps because they know shoppers cannot stroll a single block without passing a church, chapel or oratory. Sunday or any day, passers-by frequently stop in for a moment, if only to light a candle. Some take a longer break and listen to weekday Advent talks at downtown churches.

Piazza Navona, where many Americans gather weekly at the Church of St. Agnes, is the place to sample "pangiallo," the sweet bread crammed with dried fruit and nuts. An historic debate still rages over whether or not figs should be used in the recipe.

In the oval-shaped square, once the site of an ancient Roman racetrack, the modern toy-run takes two laps: at Christmas and later at the feast of the Epiphany, when the "Befana" or gift-bearing witch can be seen walking among the stalls.

She should not be confused with another woman in rags, who carries her sack through Roman neighborhoods in search of old metal objects and household junk. A rare figure today, she's one of the collection ladies for the annual St. Rita Christmas charity, whose proceeds go to the needy.

Other seasonal street-wanderers include the "zampognari," poor shepherds from the Abruzzi Mountains east of Rome who play their bagpipes beneath street shrines to the Madonna. Unlike the original shepherds drawn to Bethlehem, they accept tips from passers-by. On Christmas Eve, dressed in sandals and sheepskin chaps, they serenade churchgoers on the steep steps of the Basilica of Santa Maria d'Aracoli.

The fourth-century church, built on the ruins of a pagan temple to a mother-goddess, holds one of the most unusual statuettes of the Holy Child. Bedecked in jewels and

# PEACE

... is your reward when you understand why he came.



## School marks saint's feast with collection for rural poor

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Traditionally, St. Nicholas is said to fill the children's shoes with holiday treats. In this instance, however, students themselves filled their shoes with "treats" for the poor — namely jars of peanut butter and jelly, and financial contributions.

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