



Reigning monarchs

Mercy's girls' basketball is ready to defend its sectional crown, but Bishop Kearney has the players to give the Monarchs a rough time in league play. Page 15.



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Meaning of Christmas lost in rush

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Long before the Thanksgiving turkey had even thawed, red and green began to proliferate in advertisements.

The windows and interiors of stores had been transformed into winter wonderlands of garland, wreaths, and signs promoting sales.

Mailboxes were stuffed chock-full of catalogs promising to make shopping more convenient.

And contrary to the song's warning, Santa Claus had already come to town, appearing in malls, stores, and periodicals — hyping everything from credit cards to power tools.

Yes, Virginia, as a humorist once quipped, "Christmas is at our throats again."

Christmas, a holy day intended to commemorate the birth of Christ, has in recent years been increasingly turned instead into a commercial celebration, according to Jo Robinson, author of *Unplug the Christmas Machine*.

Robinson said Christmas has become a "national neurosis." She noted that people put themselves into debt to buy gifts, and that the constant racing about to buy and prepare for the holiday reduces the amount of time and energy people have to spend with their families.

In her book, Robinson declared that "commercialism has eaten away at the vitality of the celebration" of Christmas. In 1982, the year her book was published, American consumers spent approximately \$20 billion at Christmas. This year, Robinson said in a recent telephone interview, the figure will be approximately \$42 billion.

But Robinson sees an alternative.

"When you have the religious/spiritual focus on Christmas, that helps," said Robinson, a resident of Portland, Ore. "I think it's important for families to take an affirmative stand with their families of the religious significance."

Rochesterian Carolyn Dehority, for one, has taken such a stand, having long been troubled by the focus on commercialism as opposed to religious and family values.

"I think that Christmas has become primarily a time to purchase things for people we know rather than a celebration of the event of Christ's birthday," Dehority said.

Dehority, a member of Downtown United Presbyterian Church, urged her church's religious-education classes Nov. 19 to de-emphasize the commercial aspect of Christmas and promote instead the idea of "purchasing/making/giving gifts that were more compatible with the Christmas spirit."



Babette Augustin

All too often in recent years, Christmas has become a season not for remembering the birth of Christ, but for depression, debt and a furious scramble to purchase the latest 'hot' items. Consumers this year will spend an estimated \$42 billion dollars.

Downtown United Presbyterian is among a number of churches that regularly offer alternative celebrations to encourage more responsible gift giving and promoting family togetherness.

Sister Marie Clare Stoe, SSND, religious-education director at St. Joseph's, Rush, organized one such alternative Christmas fair on Sunday, Dec. 10. The fair included a prayer service and family activities as well as tables displaying goods and gifts made by such groups as Melita House, the Heifer Project and Habitat for Humanity.

One emphasis of the fair was on giving gifts that help others, Sister Stoe observed.

"What we're celebrating is a contemporary way of attracting attention to carrying out the work of Christ," Sister Stoe said. "We're called to be givers rather than receivers, than the exchangers of what department stores tell us we need."

The variety of organizations represented at St. Joseph's fair gave those attending a chance to learn about and support groups that help people. The fair recognized people who are "making a difference in the world by caring enough to do something," Sister Stoe said.

The fair also included projects that families could do together. "I guess what I would hope is that there (was) affirming of people who do take time out to prepare with their families for Christmas," Sister Stoe said.

St. Mary's in downtown Rochester staged an alternative celebration on Tuesday, Dec. 12. As at St. Joseph's, the evening began with a prayer service, and included projects for families to work on together.

The St. Mary's celebration also included a skit in which Santa Claus, loaded down with catalogs and wrong ideas about Christmas, encounters St. John the Baptist.

Hilary Gutman, the parish's religious-education coordinator, noted that society tells children that they should want things just for themselves instead of wanting to do things for others. To emphasize the importance of doing for others, the Santa in the skit is gradually convinced to give up his commercial ideas about Christmas, and the children are invited to decorate a Christmas tree with mittens to be donated to the poor.

Among the family activities offered at St. Mary's was the making of squares for quilts to be donated to shelters for the homeless. Families also made Christmas cards and calendars, and played games together.

The number of parishes and organizations offering such alternative celebrations has grown in recent years, which suggests that people are looking for better ways to celebrate Christmas, noted Robinson, whose book is in its sixth printing. She and her co-author, Jean Staeheli, have been in con-

stant demand as speakers and to run workshops.

But even in the midst of this, Robinson sees some dangers in fairs that sell alternative gifts. "I see that as a step in the right direction," she said, but "that can feed into the materialistic emphasis."

Sweet Grass, who organized possibly the largest local alternative celebration, held Dec. 2 at Asbury First Methodist Church in Rochester, acknowledged that the danger exists of feeding back into U.S. commercialism. Yet the idea behind her fair and many of the others is to raise people's consciousness and to encourage people to spend their money in a socially responsible way, she said.

"We promote commercial that supports rather than commercial that exploits," Grass observed. "The focus is less towards the gifts than what we can do."



Babette Augustin

Almost lost amid the lights and glitter of the holiday season is the celebration that lies at the root of it all: the coming of Christ.

The fair, she continued, encourages families to give services instead of purchasing items. Last year, for example, Grass said that one family chose to serve a meal at a soup kitchen on Christmas.

Remembering the less fortunate at Christmas is a concern at many churches, even those that don't offer alternative celebrations. Many parishes throughout the diocese have giving trees or distribute Christmas baskets.

Sister Stoe noted that fairs and other church activities centered on giving to the poor encourage people "to care so much about the gift of Christ that they become it for someone else."

"The alternative way doesn't say that you can't give gifts," she concluded, "but you should take a look at your gift giving."



Judy Sanchez

Potter Lyn Parsons tends her booth at the Alternative Celebration Fair held at Asbury First Methodist Church on Saturday, Dec. 2. A number of local churches and parishes have staged such celebrations to help counter commercialism during the Christmas season.