



## The First Coming: The True Meaning of Christmas

Just behind *The Night before Christmas* in popularity is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Its seasonal message of charity and good will towards all people still strikes a powerful chord, not only in England but also in the United States. Dickens' morality tale greatly contributed to an evolving Christmas celebration that eclectically emerged from America's many ethnic and religious traditions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a secular motif gradually enveloped these traditions, obscuring the true meaning.

### Christmas Atheists

Most American families have adopted the evolving Christmas traditions without question. What they have failed to understand over the years is that America's cultural custodians have virtually reinvented a religious holiday. While the decline of the religious nature of Christmas started to subtly change in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century its demise had rapidly accelerated. As a religious commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ, Christmas has become buried under an avalanche of shiny gifts, sumptuous meals, festive music, decorative displays, including Christmas trees, lights, garlands, mistletoe, and holly.

Many Catholics have bifurcated their celebration with a Christmas evening Mass, and perhaps a nativity arrangement, just before they assume the same material characteristics and festivities as their secular counterparts. The spiritual and religious features of Christmas have become so separated from the real meaning that millions of non-believers, what author Shannon Bell called *Christmas atheists*, enthusiastically celebrate Christmas for giving and receiving of the presents and the good cheer.

The Christmas buying season has become vitally important to retailers over the past several decades. Because gift giving and the other aspects of Christmas involve heightened economic activity among both Christians and non-Christians, the holiday has become a significant event and a key sales period for retailers and businesses. This flurry of spending has also contributed to dissipation of the spiritual and religious traditions of Christmas. Christmas' main reason for existing seems to be for the satisfaction of the materialistic needs of believers and unbelievers alike to the near exclusion of Christ.

### Christmas Controversies

The Christmas season has never been without controversy. Over the centuries, some Protestant groups have faulted the Church for what they claim is an elevation of a pagan feast that had no Biblical authority. History seems to see the situation differently. The word *Christmas* is an old English word that means *Christ's Mass* or, as it came to be shortened, *Christ-Mass*. It refers to the celebration of the *Lord's Supper* that is the *Mass*. The earliest recorded mention of the word dates back to 1038 A.D. Christians at that time considered the *Lord's Supper* to be the most important part of the celebration of Christ's birth, hence it came to be called *Christmas*.

Christians have celebrated the December 25<sup>th</sup> date since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, scholars began proposing alternative explanations. Sir Isaac Newton argued that the date of Christmas was selected to correspond with the winter solstice, which the Romans called *bruma* and celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

According to Judeo-Christian tradition, creation as described in the Book of Genesis occurred on the date of the spring equinox, i.e. March 25<sup>th</sup> on the Roman calendar. Early Christians believed that Jesus had been born in the early spring. This date is now celebrated as the anniversary of both the Annunciation and the Incarnation. In 1889, Louis Duchesne suggested that the date of Christmas was calculated as nine months after Annunciation, the accepted date of Jesus' conception.

### The Evolution of St. Nicholas

In Christian antiquity, Christmas was central to the holiday season. It marked the beginning of the larger season of *Christmastide*, which lasts twelve days. In the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, the emperor Diocletian wanted Christians to start worshiping the Roman gods. They refused his blasphemous demands as they only worshiped the God of their faith. Angered by their refusal, he unleashed a wave of bloody persecutions.

Amid the turmoil, Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra was imprisoned for more than five years. Though he suffered severe physical and mental deprivations, he never wavered from his faith. In 313 when Diocletian resigned and Constantine came to power, Nicholas was released and returned to his post at Myra. There he continued his good

works and became even wiser and more understanding by the time of his death on December 6, 343.

Because of his generosity, St. Nicholas' popularity grew. By 450 A. D. churches in Asia Minor and Greece were being named in his honor. By 800, he was officially recognized as a saint by the Eastern Catholic Church. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, December 6th began to be celebrated as *Bishop Nicholas Day* in France. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, St Nicholas was the third most beloved religious figure, after Jesus and Mary, with 2000 chapels and monasteries named after him.

Attendant to his popularity, many people told stories that showed his concern for children. The name *Santa Claus* was derived from the Dutch *Sinter Klass* pronunciation of St. Nicholas. Early Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam, later New York, brought their traditions of St Nicholas to the new world. Eventually the old bishop's cloak with miter, jeweled gloves and crozier were soon replaced with his red suit and more secular attire.

The figure of Santa Claus was popularized in America by a number of different literary figures. It was Catharine Sedgwick, the author of *Hope Leslie*, who realized America was in dire need of its own traditions. She introduced the German custom of the Christmas tree, while Washington Irving with his *Knickerbocker History* in 1809 and Clement Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, published anonymously in 1823, transformed the growing legend of St. Nicholas, now *the patron saint of children*, into *Santa Claus*, a fairy tale character for children.

## The War on Christmas

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century some people found that all references to Christmas, even the most benign, were offensive. Despite its overt secular aspects, America's celebration of Christmas has inadvertently become a battleground in the culture war. Over the last several years, there has been a *war on Christmas, and fairly overwhelming attempts to strip Christ from Christmas and strip the religious foundation from the holiday*, said Wendy Wright, president of the organization [Concerned Women for America](#).

While the *true meaning of Christmas* may not have the cultural, moral and emotional impact of abortion, it does strike at the very fiber of man's rejection of God, which is central to the cultural battle. According to [Fox News](#) host Bill O'Reilly *it's all part of the secular progressive agenda ... to get Christianity... out of the public square*. O'Reilly correctly believes that using Western Europe and Canada as a guide it is clear that if the left can remove the obstacle of religion from the public marketplace, it would ease the advancement of their modernist agenda, which includes the legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion and gay marriage.

John Gibson, the author of *The War on Christmas: How the Liberals Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse than You Thought* realizes the conundrum most retailers face with regard to their seasonal advertising. Many large retailers are under serious pressure from leftist boycotts and threats. He is trying to educate the public as to which

retailers were not afraid to declare *Merry Christmas* in their advertising.

Gibson also points out that the war on Christmas gravitated toward the public school systems all over America. Many school districts have changed their annual celebrations from *Christmas* to the *winter break*, or *winter solstice*, a reversion to a pre-Christian past.

## The Hound of Heaven

In his short book, *The True Meaning of Christmas*, (1955) the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen wrote that there are only two philosophies of life—the pagan one and the Judeo-Christian creed. In the pagan philosophy man finds his *gods* in the powers and uncertainties of nature, his passions, or lust for power. In the Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, man seeks to find God in his own consciousness.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God's approach is more reminiscent of *The Hound of Heaven*, a Francis Thompson poem about an alcoholic and drug-addicted sinner who tried to hide from God in all the pleasures and haunts of the world. More the seeker than the sought, God comes to man in the Old Testament through the prophets and in the flesh for the Christians in the Incarnate person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

There is also juxtaposition evident in Bishop Sheen's narrative. God is the center of both pagan and Judeo-Christian. In the pagan one, they look for God in all the wrong places. In the Judea-Christian creed, God comes into their hearts. It is this spiritual division that has contributed to the Augustinian war between the *City of God* and the *City of Man*, and not surprisingly, today's war on Christmas.

Christmas is intimately and historically linked with Good Friday and Easter in a way no other feast days or celebrations can even imagine. Therefore keeping *Christ* in Christmas is pursuant to a Christian belief.

## A Third Option

If Bishop Sheen were alive today, he would be compelled to add a third approach and that is the post-modern interpretation in which humanistic man embraces himself as a *god* by eliminating any reference to the true God of religious faith. These neo-pagans, unlike their forbears, seek, not a god outside of himself but their own narcissistic image. God cannot inhabit a man's soul if his ego is already there.

For God to complete the purpose of Christmas, man must die to his lower instincts, just as plants and lower animals die to their former existence to become something higher. By dying to his willful pride, man can be raised to eternal life. To become a Christian does not mean reading the Bible, singing religious hymns or just being kind to one's neighbor. Just as the modern world is bathed in radio and TV waves, only those who are tuned in to His station or the *Logos*, receive the knowledge and enjoyment of His promise of eternal life. It means sharing the Divinity that came to man in Bethlehem.

Christmas is not an isolated historical event like the Battle

of Waterloo or the assassination of a president. It is a veritable historical watershed that has separated mankind from his pagan ways. From that point it would be impossible for man to divinize himself and ignore God's sacrificial love without serious human consequences.

This process is not easy because God came, not to make humans *nice* people but to radically change them into *new creatures*. God's abundant grace is there to inspire humans to *put on the new man* if they are willing to pay the price of having their moral worthlessness burned in the flames of love. When the life of Christ gets in human beings they can never be the same. Their human intellect becomes powerless as their wills overflow with a grace for pursuing good and avoiding evil.

God's salvation is open to everyone. No one is too unworthy not to heed the *Hound of Heaven*. His love can make even the lowliest of humans blaze with an iridescence that serves as a mirror of His never-ending love for His creation. His salvific love for the least of His brethren was the reason that Jesus was born in a stable on His first night on earth and was surrounded by animals.

### A Higher Calling

The only two classes of people who heard the cry that night were *the simple shepherds, who knew they knew nothing and the wise men, who knew they do not know everything*. Only the very simple and the very learned discovered God that night in the austere confines of a cave. It is not surprising then that most sophisticated people since then have missed or forgotten the salvific nature of Christmas.

If human life is ever to be incorporated into the Divine, God must in some way come down to humans. Christ's birth is that human nature was taken up and elevated into a unity with the Person of God. But Jesus had not made Himself a God, nor was he an ethicist like Confucius, a teacher like Socrates, nor a prophet like Ezekiel, but rather He was True God and true man for He did not cease being God when he assumed a human nature. God will not consume men without their permission. When humans agree to die to the world, the flesh and the devil, they are open to God's cleansing love.

### The Restoration of a Bond

Most of the world does not fully recognize or understand Mary's vital role in the birth of Jesus. At the inauguration of human salvation, the divine plan involves the Virgin Mary. God's plan for human partnership began when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and asked her to serve as a human vessel for the Son of God. Since God would not violate man's free will, without

her human consent, the plan of salvation may very well have been stifled. Mary's simple acquiesce in surrendering herself to the Divine scheme of things, initiated the *greatest story ever told*. The Incarnation would not have happened without a human participation. God would not redeem man by taking away his free will.

In one of his talks on the Holy Mother, Pope John Paul II clarified the role of Mary in the Christmas message: *The fiat of the Annunciation inaugurates the New Covenant between God and the creature*. Thanks to Mary, the bond between God and humankind that was broken by sin is now happily restored. Because of her simple assent, Mary became a flesh and blood ciborium for the Son of God.

The name *Jesus* means *Savior*. And for mankind His name meant everything. The real meaning of Christmas then, concerns an all-loving God, who so loved His creatures that He sent His only Son to free them from the bondage of their sins through His death and Resurrection so that mankind would have life through Him. For without this first coming of Christ, men could never see the face of God. This truly is the real meaning of Christmas.



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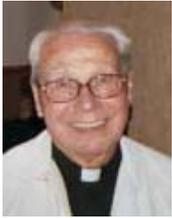
The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by the  
 Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation,  
 7800 Bonhomme Ave.  
 P. O. Box 11321  
 St. Louis, MO 63105  
 Phone 314-727-6279 Fax 314-727-5897  
 Subscription rate: \$20.00/year, \$36.00/two years.  
 Outside the U.S.A. \$28.00

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The Mindszenty Report is not copyrighted, and subscribers are invited to have it printed in their local newspapers.  
 Contributions to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation are tax deductible as allowed by law.  
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 web site: [www.mindszenty.org](http://www.mindszenty.org)

## CMF Council Members

The Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation Council Members advise CMF on its work, as each has lived and suffered under Communism in various countries of the world, often persecuted. We honor and respect the following five council members today.



**Most Rev. John Bukovsky, S.V.D.** is a naturalized U.S. citizen, a member of the worldwide Society of the Divine Word. Archbishop Bukovsky served in the Vatican Secretariat of States for 18 years, including six years as Papal Nuncio to Federated Russia in Moscow.



within five years the Communists had taken over Nicaragua, exiled Fr. Repole and destroyed all religious chapels.

**Rev. Charles Repole, OFM Cap** served as a devoted missionary for 20 years to the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua sharing with them many hardships and deprivations of the poor Indian population. He laboriously and brilliantly prepared a trilingual dictionary in English, Spanish, and Miskito for their advancement. But,



**Fr. Julius Leloczky, O. CIST.** came to the priesthood while under brutal suppression by the Communists in his native Hungary. He daringly escaped, reached Rome and received 8 years of excellent training/education for the priesthood. In 1964 he immigrated to the U.S., was ordained a priest in Dallas and joined the Cistercian Abbey.



**Fr. Kevin Rettig**, as a young teenager, accompanied his teacher Sister Mary James, to the annual CMF Conferences on militant atheism. He listened and learned, so at school in Communist Hungary, Fr. Rettig discerned the propaganda, ridicule, godlessness and threat of Communism in society.



and settled in Miami. In recognition of his lifetime contribution to the community, the Board of County Commissioners designated a street named in his honor in Oct. 2009.

**Fr. Juan Manual Dorta Duque, S.J.** was born in Havana, Cuba, on Sept. 23, 1922, graduated from the Belen School and studied with the Society of Jesus for the priesthood, ordained in 1941, becoming a teacher at Delores Santiago de Cuba and Belen School in Havana. In 1961, he was expelled from Cuba by the Communists

## Christmas Blessings

Dear CMF Friend,

When CMF was founded in 1958, a huge portion of the world was enslaved and terrorized by Communist thugs. Hungary's long-imprisoned Primate, Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty, had taken refuge in the U.S. Embassy after defeat of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. He became a symbol of resistance to tyranny, and he inspired us to bring hope to the captive peoples. However, Communist persecution remains for Cubans, Chinese, North Koreans, Vietnamese and others.

**That's why I ask you to support the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation with a Gift at Christmas!**

Thanks be to God, a portion of the enslaved world is free. For this, the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation and our prayerful and dedicated leaders and supporters can take credit. CMF's Conferences, educational programs, information on the atheist/Marxist enemies and fulfilling Our Lady of Fatima's request for Rosaries, have aided thousands of people to live in freedom.

**Yet, we continue to need your help in the never-ending struggle for peace, life and liberty.**

**So, this Christmas I urge you to remember the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation with a generous gift so that it may continue its enduring apostolate for Faith, Family, and Freedom.**

At this blessed season of *Christmas*, be assured that I and the other CMF Council Members will offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for you and your intentions during *Christmas* week.

May the Christ Child shower His blessing upon you and your families!

Reverend Kevin E. Rettig  
CMF Council Member  
St. Joseph the Worker, Pastor  
Winnetka, CA