



Christmas: A Celebration of Giving Americans Are a Uniquely Charitable People

Americans celebrate the joy of Christmas and the birth of our Savior through giving. Gifts to our families express our belief that the world was saved with the birth of Jesus Christ. Our giving extends beyond our families. Our appreciation is shared through gifts to our colleagues at work, neighbors, our priests and pastors, the newspaper carrier and others who help us throughout the year. Giving allows us to share our happiness as Christians. Saying “Merry Christmas” is more than just saying, “Hope you have a good day on December 25 and that all is well with your life.” When Christians say “Merry Christmas” they communicate that the world has been redeemed and that all people from whatever position in life can be saved.

Jesus’ Revolutionary Message

The message that Christ brought to the world is revolutionary. Born in an age when war, famine, disease and class distinctions were commonplace, Jesus brought a message of salvation, peace and the promise of life after death. So powerful was this message that it spread far beyond the confines of a small region in Palestine to Rome and Northern Africa. Jesus’ disciples brought his good news to the entire world. The effects of the gospel transformed history. The promise of entering into the heavenly kingdom after life on this earth reverberated in recognition of human dignity, charity and the conduct of nations.

First as an English settlement and later as a nation, America was founded on Christian principles. Our Judeo-Christian heritage provided the means to reach for our highest ideals in our Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Although the Declaration was written by Thomas Jefferson, a deist, the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence and in Christianity itself inspired reformers to abolish slavery, give women equal voting rights, end racial segregation, and struggle for human rights.

The Generosity of Americans

The Christian ethos of Americans continues to manifest itself in our people’s generosity. This Christian ethos is expressed at Christmas through giving and throughout the year in voluntarism and charitable gifts. America as a nation has become more secularized in recent decades, but its Christian origins continue to echo in our generosity. The figures on American generosity are astounding.

As the nation has become more prosperous, Americans have been more willing to share the fruits of our wealth with our fellow citizens and the Western world. Indeed, non-profit charitable giving as a proportion of our total annual income (GDP) is about 2 percent.¹ The result is that Americans are the most charitable people in the world. Americans give more than any other people in the Western world, outdistancing the British, the Canadians, the Italians and the Germans—all historically Christian nations, but with strong centralized governments.²

In 2016, Americans gave \$389.05 billion, a 4.2 percent increase from 2015. Corporate giving increased to \$18.55 billion, a 3.5 percent increase from the previous year. Foundation giving increased to over \$58 billion, a 3.5 percent increase from 2015. The largest source of giving came from individuals. Individuals account for 72 percent of total giving, amounting to \$281.86 billion. This is followed by philanthropic foundations, bequests and corporations.³

The largest share of American giving goes to religious efforts. Donations to religious causes constitute 39 percent of all charitable gifts. Religious causes include funds to support houses of worship, clergy and missionary activities, but the bulk of religious giving is to relief of the poor, medical care and victims of disaster.

The next largest target of giving is education (19 percent), followed by human services (15 percent), health (11 percent), nature (4 percent) and the arts (6 percent). Giving for overseas causes stands at 7 percent.

Two percent of the economy for charitable giving might seem small. It is not, given the size of the U.S. economy. Moreover, this figure ignores that much of charitable giving occurs in the form of voluntary, unpaid labor. It's just not that Americans give cash; they give time and labor for the betterment of society. Furthermore, the sources of funds for public charities are revealing. Government grants to private charities account for only 8 percent of all their revenues. Private contributions are more than double at 15 percent.

Volunteering for Charity

Americans are volunteers. More than 45 percent of the U.S. population say they have volunteered at least some of their time for charitable causes within the last year.⁴ The estimated dollar value of this voluntarism is more than \$179 billion. Those who volunteer also tend to give more money—about 11 times more on average than those who don't volunteer. The two thirds of households who give money on average give 4 percent of their incomes to charity.

Although we hear a lot of class-warfare rhetoric these days, the biggest givers of time and money are those who have the highest incomes. It stands to reason that wealthier people, who have more discretionary income and can usually deduct donations from their taxable income, would give more as a percent of their incomes to charity. Lower-income Americans give less as a percentage of their incomes, with one important exception: those who are religious. Religious people give generously even when they have modest incomes. These religious, lower-income givers to charity—givers of cash and time—might be called sacrificial givers. They are motivated by their faith to give back.

Operation Christmas Child

Stories of Americans' giving are inspiring. Operation Christmas Child is one example. It is the world's largest Christmas project of its kind. Its goal is to send Christmas gifts to children throughout the world.⁵ Operation Christmas Child is a project of Samaritan's Purse, an international Christian relief and evangelical organization established by Franklin Graham, the son of the late Billy Graham. The project sends shoeboxes filled with toys, sports, gear, school supplies and hygiene items.

Throughout America, local churches participate in the program by setting up drop-off locations and then packing shoeboxes with gifts. Children receiving these shoeboxes receive not only a toy but useful items such as socks, toothbrushes, soap and school supplies. The boxes might include letters and pictures from the giver. Donors are able to track their boxes to specific children by going online.

Samaritan's Purse provides local churches with labels and shoeboxes. Packing the boxes can be a family affair at local churches. At the Golden Hills Community Church in the East Bay area of San Francisco, Julie Andereggen, the Children's Ministry Secretary, noted that "A lot of times the kids themselves have packed these boxes and drawn pictures to put inside. They're getting to write something to another kid and it's just wonderful hearing all these kids get excited about what they got to pick out for the box."⁶

These charitable efforts are replicated in churches and religious societies across America. In Omaha, Nebraska the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, sponsored by the St. Peter parish, recently gave away 4,000 coats to men, women and children to keep them warm during the Christmas season.⁷ Such events—food, clothes and medical supply drives—occur in Catholic parishes across the country. It's just not at Christmas time, either. One can find Catholic volunteers in every American city gathering together in harsh winters to distribute blankets, coats, shoes and other clothing to the homeless on the streets. In the summer, these same groups will distribute water and direct the homeless to shelters out of the sweltering heat.

Feed My Starving Children, a Christian non-profit organization, provides nutritionally complete meals specifically formulated for malnourished children.

This organization packs boxes that are sent to starving children in places like Haiti and the Dominican Republic. At the Marist High School in Chicago, 3,000 to 4,000 volunteers gather each week to pack food boxes.⁸ As John Schmelzel, site supervisor for the Chicago-based Feed My Starving Children, declared, “Last year, we had over one million volunteers who packed 284 million meals. That’s enough to feed almost 780,000 children a meal a day for an entire year. Also, half our volunteers are under the age of 18, so we offer an opportunity for children to feed less fortunate children—kids feeding kids.” The organization does little advertising to recruit volunteers. It’s word of mouth, parishioners talking to other parishioners, school kids to school kids.

Christians and Disaster Relief

Faith groups constitute a major source for disaster relief. This was evident in the terrible hurricanes in Texas and Florida earlier in 2017. For example, the Seventh Day Adventists over the last several decades established a well-developed warehousing system for collecting and distributing relief supplies for disaster victims. Partnering with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Adventists provide bottles of water, diapers and other necessities to disaster victims.⁹

Following a disaster, the United Methodist Committee on Relief provides expertise in case management. Methodists send work crews to clear mud out of houses and send trained volunteers to help disaster victims work with FEMA assistance, state aid programs and private insurers to rebuild their lives. The United Methodists have 20,000 trained volunteers around the country who can be called upon for early response teams. In addition, the United Methodists train other non-profits on relief case management.

These organizations are joined by other faith-based organizations that mobilize to aid disaster victims. For example, the Convoy of Hope, a non-denominational Christian organization, specializes in feeding people during a disaster. Before Hurricane Irma made land-fall, the Springfield, Missouri-based Convoy of Hope had prepared three trailer trucks stocked with food, water and sanitary supplies ready to deploy to areas that would be hit by the hurricane. The organization set up feeding stations, often at FEMA’s request.

Faith-based relief organizations such as the Adventists, United Methodists and Convoy of Hope work closely with FEMA and state aid agencies. While Hurricane Harvey was soaking Texas and Louisiana, FEMA administrator Brock Long asked concerned citizens to go to NVOAD.org to make donations. NVOAD stands for National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. It is an alliance of volunteer organizations that help FEMA channel disaster assistance into an affected area. Approximately 75 percent of the organizations are faith-based. NVOAD has been involved in 20 disaster relief efforts just this year.

Critics of organized religion should bear in mind the critical role faith-based organizations play in providing real social justice in the day-to-day lives of the poor, the homeless, the ill, returning veterans and disaster victims. These organizations work with federal, state and local governments to fill needs that would be left unmet without them. The faithful who donate money and volunteer their time do so because they are driven by a generosity of spirit that flows directly from their faith as Christians.

A Boomer and the Joy of Giving

Faith-based charitable organizations do not get the media’s attention the way a church scandal will. These faith-based organizations are not publicity hounds. The volunteers involved work quietly, often not even telling neighbors or work colleagues of what they do to make a better community. Any citation of the billions of dollars given and the man-hours volunteered does not fully capture the Christian spirit that drives this work.

The Christian soldiers involved in giving to help the needy in our nation and our world are driven by faith in Christ’s message of charity. The act of giving—not just at Christmas time, but year-round—brings salvific blessings in a world of travail, suffering and hardship.

Donald Critchlow in his book about Republican politics, *Future Right*, describes William B., a Christian who discovered the spiritual rewards of a life of giving. William and his wife are devout Christians who established an after-school program in their local community in Arizona. William came to the Christian faith as a young teenager when he was invited to join a Christian youth group. He said that he accepted the

invitation in order to meet girls. He found much more: a faith that changed his life. As an older teenager he experimented with drugs, as did a lot of his friends in the late 1960s. But he felt he was living a double life. He decided that there was only one life to lead—that of a Christian. He got married, raised a family and began devoting himself to his church and the community. He and his wife became involved in the local school and then in the larger community.

By the late 1990s, they saw their community changing. Their own children were grown with children of their own, but William and his wife noticed many children living in dysfunctional families. After school, many of these kids were being left on their own. Bill and his wife got together with neighbors to start an after-school program. They rented a facility for kids to go to after school. More was needed. They raised funds to provide sports activities after school. Realizing many of the kids lacked transportation to get to the facility after school, Bill and his wife, joined by other members of the community, raised funds to buy their own bus that picks the kids up at their schools to take them to a place where they can play, eat some snacks and study.

William and his wife have not attracted the attention of the media. This was not their purpose. Instead, they were motivated as Christians to give something back to their community. They sought to make a better world for children in their area—a small gesture to help where they could. As a young man William saw

two paths before him: one of self-indulgence through drugs and narcissistic hedonism, and the other of Christian faith. He decided to take the Christian path. He discovered that in giving to others, he received his own gift—one of spiritual contentment.

The Meaning of ‘Merry Christmas’

William’s experience as a Christian is shared by others of faith: giving brings its own gift to the giver. During the holiday season, when Christians say “Merry Christmas” to clerks in stores, neighbors and colleagues, they want to share the spirit of giving. For Christians this spirit does not die after the holiday season, but lives on throughout the year in acts of charity.

We at the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation wish our readers and those who contribute to our efforts throughout the year a Merry, Merry Christmas filled with tradition and deep spiritual meaning.

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- 1 Philanthropy Roundtable, “Statistics,” <http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/statistics/>.
 - 2 “Americans are World’s Most Charitable, Top 1% Provide 1/3rd of All Donations,” *Washington Examiner*, January 19, 2016.
 - 3 Philanthropy Roundtable, “Statistics,” <http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/statistics/>.
 - 4 <http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/statistics/>.
 - 5 Martha Yamamoto, “Operation Christmas Child Brings Holiday Spirit to Kids Across the World,” *East Bay Times*, October 30, 2017.
 - 6 Quoted in Marta Yamamoto, “Operation Christmas Child Brings Holiday Spirit to Kids Across the World,” *East Bay Times*, October 30, 2017.
 - 7 Ken Malot, “Society of St. Vincent de Paul Gives Away More than 4,000 Coats; Other Charitable Events Planned,” *Omaha News*, November 2017.
 - 8 Susan Durbin, “Feed My Starving Children Leaves Volunteers Fulfilled,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 2017.
 - 9 Paul Singer, “Faith Groups Provide the Bulk of Disaster Recovery in Coordination with FEMA,” *USA Today*, September 13, 2017.
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