

# DOMINICANA

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## THE FESTIVAL OF CHRISTMAS

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"Hark! the bells ring Christmas Day!  
Come to Bethlehem away;  
To the manger come and see  
Who was born for you and me."

Ever since the angelic choir first sang of the coming of Emmanuel to the shepherds who tended their flocks on the Judean hillsides, there has been an instinctive longing to heed the angels' invitation to "go over to Bethlehem."<sup>1</sup> This desire to see the "Word that is come to pass"<sup>2</sup> has not been rendered less intense with the years. Every Christian nation gladly hails the blessed Christmastide and prepares for the joyous festival. The Church, the Spouse of the "Word made Flesh,"<sup>3</sup> clothed with snow-white garments, impatiently awaits the coming of the Lamb of God. With joy she ushers in the happy feast and cries aloud to her children: "The nuptials of the Lamb are come, and His Spouse hath prepared herself."<sup>4</sup>

From the earliest times can be traced the growth of the pious usages which make for the spiritual gladness of Christmas. These practices grew apace with the years until, in the course of time, they obtained universal recognition.

Intimately bound up with the idea of Christmas is the miniature manger of Bethlehem, the candle which lights the Christ Child on His way, the melodious carols and the Christmas-tree.

In the year 722, an English monk named Winifred, otherwise known as St. Boniface, the Apostle of Germany, while travelling in quest of souls came upon a large gathering of people who were celebrating before a huge oak in honor of the god Thor. Beside a fire, stood a young child who, as the Druid announced, was to be sacrificed to propitiate the god of thunder. Boniface stayed

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<sup>1</sup> Luke II, 15.

<sup>2</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> John I, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Apoc. XIX, 7.

the hand of the sacrificing priest and, seizing an axe, proceeded to chop down the tree, crying: "Tree god, art thou angry? Thus we smite thee." And as the oak crashed to earth, he told the assembly about the Christ-Child. Turning to a young fir tree, he bade them carry it to the chieftain's great hall, commanding them at the same time to leave the dark forest and the darker shades of paganism, to celebrate at home, with joy and merriment, the birth of the Redeemer.

The origin of the Christmas carol is unknown. When St. Augustine came to England he found it impossible to do away with the mid-winter feast in honor of Thor, the English god of battles. So the pious Benedictine purified the festival of all pagan significance and dedicated it to the commemoration of Christ's birth. In place of the pagan Saxon songs, Christian carols hailing the coming of the Infant King were substituted. The oldest Christmas carol still extant was composed by King Canute. Then, too, in the mediæval miracle plays songsters appeared between the scenes to tell of the mysteries of man's redemption. The townsfolk, hearing the Nativity songs at the miracle play, repeated them at Christmastide. What was more delightful to the man of the Middle Ages than to listen to the village carollers as they sang of the Redeemer's coming on that first Christmas night? His deeply religious nature made him feel as if he were among the lowly shepherds of Judea listening to the glad tidings of the angelic host. Thus the caroller would sing:

"Noel! Noel! Quick, I say,  
Open wide your hearts this day,  
For the Christ would make of them  
Sacramental Bethlehem."

It is to the Poor Man of Assisi that we owe that most touching of all Christmas usages—the Crib. St. Francis lived at a time in which an intense personal devotion was paid to the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord. In this lay the dominant note of mediæval piety. The mediæval mind loved to dwell on one mystery—the Incarnation. Christmas was held by the plain folk as the feast of feasts. If Christmas means so much to us to-day, we can trace our predilection for the festival to mediæval love of the Incarnation and the Nativity. The Blessed Christ was near to the folk of mediæval times. Believing Him to be God, they knew He was Almighty; but it was not the thought of His awful majesty that impressed them, it was His condescension. This

thought possessed the soul of the lowly Francis. Poverty charmed him. And here was the Blessed Master "emptying Himself, taking the form of a servant."<sup>5</sup> He would perpetuate the love-illuminated poverty of the Christ-Child. So he said to his friar-companion, Giovanni: "I would make a memorial of that Child Who was born in Bethlehem and in some sort behold with bodily eyes the hardships of His Infant state, how He lay in a manger on the hay, with the ox and ass standing by. If you will, we shall celebrate this festival at Greccio and do you go before and prepare as I tell you."<sup>6</sup> Giovanni built a rude stable at Greccio, and constructed a manger and near it an altar. Francis invited his brethren and the people living in the valley of Rieti to celebrate Christmas with him at Greccio.

At the midnight Mass Francis was the deacon. After the Gospel he preached. He spoke to them of Bethlehem, of the poverty of the Christ-Child, of the solicitude of Mary and Joseph for the helpless Babe. In very truth, so thought the people of Greccio, they had seen Bethlehem as had the shepherds of old.

Many other immemorial customs still linger. The lighting of a candle in the home to guide the Christ-Child recalls another practice which obtains in the little Irish fishing village of Claddagh, Galway. All during Christmas week, the cottage-door is left open throughout the night. Inside a member of the family watches in prayer. This pious act is founded on the belief that the Holy Family, fleeing from Bethlehem for fear of Herod's threatenings, wandered without shelter for fourteen days and nights. Should they come to Claddagh, no door would be closed, no shelter refused, as at Bethlehem.

All Christmastide usages, however beautiful and symbolic, are meaningless unless the reason of their existence is known. All practices belonging to that hallowed festival take their origin from the birthday of the Blessed Jesus—the Source of all joy and good-will in the world to-day.

Christmas is immortal. It is for men, yet not made by them. It is of God Who gives the blessed feast its immortality. They who have caught the true spirit of the day will bring to the Infant King four offerings: adoration, joy, gratitude, and love. The Christ-Child will receive our tributes with much delight, whether we come clothed in the humble garb of a poor shepherd or ap-

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<sup>5</sup> Philippians II, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Life of St. Francis, Fr. Cuthbert, London, 1912, p. 330.

pared in the jewel-decked raiments of the Magi. Christ in return will give us Himself—Emmanuel. At His coming into our hearts at Communion-time Mary, His Mother, and St. Joseph will be present to give Him right royal reception. "Lo! this is our God, we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the Lord, we have patiently waited for Him, we shall rejoice and be joyful in his salvation."<sup>7</sup>

—Ferrer Kienberger, O. P.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaias XXV, 9.

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### STARS

Fixed stars: fiery sun—  
 God Eternal, Three in One,  
 Eternal Splendor, (else all night)  
 "Light of Light."

Planet stars: silvery moon—  
 Mother Mary, Starry Boon,  
 Hailed of all the human race,  
 "Full of grace."

Meteor stars: falling-star—  
 Gates of Heaven thrust ajar;  
 Infant Jesus, Starry Gem  
 In Bethlehem.

Galaxy, star on star—  
 Angel faces from afar;  
 Heaven gates with clang of bar  
 Broken are.

Constellation: Southern Cross—  
 Jesus born to die for us.  
 Comets soaring 'round the dome  
 Of Heaven, their Home.

—Gabriel Knauff, O. P.