

APOLOGY FOR TINSEL

REGINALD PETERSON, O.P.



THE BIRTHDAY BALLAD of the Saviour was a message put to music. The melody was heavenly and the lyrics were divine. It chanted the praises of the incarnate Redeemer. It unfolded the mystery of the pauper King, awaited for centuries, yet finally unwelcomed; scoffed at as worthless, yet paying the price of man's peace with his God. It told the true story of Christmas. For many, however, time has changed the Christmas song. They might make its modern refrain to ring,

"T's the night before Christmas
And all over town,
From holly decked houses
Gay greetings resound.
The Christmas trees glisten
The candlelight gleams
Kris Kringle's the hero of all
So it seems.
Laughter reechoes
From Yule fires bright,
So what need have we
For the Christ Child tonight?"

It certainly seems as if men have crowded Christ from His place in Christmas. They herald each other with the pagan sounding, "Have a merry Christmas." They take great care to decorate their homes with Christmas trees adorned with shining ornaments. Almost everyone puts candles in his windows and few forget to place a bit of mistletoe over a conspicuous door. The apex of the day seems to be the sumptuous dinner with its merry-making and mince pie. Children are not told the stories of the Christ Child, but are promised and threatened with wondrous tales of the unseen Santa Claus. A quick review of the happenings of a modern December 25th seems to prove that the world has succeeded in making Christ a holiday stranger. Men often seem to have forgotten the message of the Saviour's birth and to have become preoccupied with the meaningless customs, the glittering ornaments, the unimportant *tinsel of Christmas*. It has often

happened that the fascination for this tinsel has monopolized the interest of too many people and produced the modern monstrosity branded with the title of "Christless Christmas."

Yet in reality, tinsel need not be the cause of crowding Christ out of Christmas. Many of the decorations and customs of the holiday season have a beautiful symbolism which stresses rather than destroys the true meaning of the advent of the Infant Saviour. How many use this Christmas tinsel, yet how few know its meaning! Many people in their celebration of the Nativity are much like the people of Bethlehem on the first Christmas night. They have Christ in their midst, but they do not recognize Him. The more pagan of the moderns, like the pagans of old, heap ridicule on the celebration of Christ's birth, but even these, like their ancient counterparts, defeat their own purpose.

The Romans were so fired with malice toward the Christians that they desecrated the place of the Nativity by degrading it into a shrine of their god, Adonis,* and they made it a practice to point out in mockery that "there stands the first haven of the great Christian God." As a result, the spot which welcomed the joyous birth of the Man of sorrow, became famous. When the Christian emperor Constantine came to power, he put an end to the blasphemous conduct of the pagans and ordered that a magnificent basilica should be built over the cave of Bethlehem. Today the church bears the title of "St. Mary's of the Nativity." The pagans, without realizing it, preserved the place of Christ's birth and the Christians restored it to its true meaning.

Each year at Christmas time many modern pagans use and encourage the symbols of Christ and His work of Redemption. Our task is to restore these potential sacramentals to their true meaning.

AT HOME IN BETHLEHEM

In order to appreciate the significance of these symbols, it might be well to trace their origin and development and show how, like the star of Bethlehem, they will lead us to the Christ Child if we are wise enough to follow their meaning. To start with the simplest and most obvious, we might begin with the Christmas Crib. The practice of portraying with statues the entire scene of the first Christmas, was introduced in the year 1223

* The major part of the historical material used in this article has been adapted from Father Francis X. Weiser's excellent treatise on the meaning and customs of Christmas, *The Christmas Book*; Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1952.

by St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis had a very tender devotion to the Babe of Bethlehem and he wished to see reenacted the tableau of the birth of the Divine Infant. He spoke of his desire to a nobleman of Greccio in Italy and asked that he prepare a manger and a statue of the Infant, and provide animals, so that on the feast all might gather together at a "new Bethlehem" and celebrate a truly realistic remembrance of the first Holy Night. By Christmas Eve all was in readiness. Shortly before midnight an ass and an ox were led to their places and a statue of the Infant was reverently laid in the manger. The town folk from all the neighboring villages made a torchlight procession to the spot so that they might assist in the celebration. When St. Francis arrived he was overjoyed with what he saw. A Solemn High Mass was celebrated at the manger and the poor man of Assisi preached a sermon on the "Poor King of Bethlehem."

The custom of building the Christmas Crib became endeared to the people and soon miniature replicas of St. Francis' "new Bethlehem" enhanced the homes of humble folk all over the world. The practice continues to the present day, though sad to say, for many moderns the manger is all but meaningless. Even for many Christians, the crib (if they have place for it at all) is just another ornament of the holiday home. Like a multicolored soap bubble, it looks nice, but means nothing and draws attention only for a moment. Yet, if there is one symbol that should constantly remind us that Christmas is Christ's, it is the crib. The father who makes the manger the focal point of Christmas decoration and cherishes it for its meaning, ceases to be the keeper of a holiday inn in which there is no room for Christ, and makes of his home another "new Bethlehem" in which he and his family will find, "Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in the manger," and they, like the shepherds of old, will understand what has been told to them concerning the Child. "There has been born to you today . . . a Saviour Who is Christ the Lord."

MAKE "MERRY" THE CHRISTMAS PRAYER

Less obvious in its rôle of reminding us what part Christ plays in Christmas is the season greeting, "Merry Christmas." The meaning of this greeting has become well disguised and often seems to masquerade as a fine-sounding equivalent for the pagan's prayer, "Let us eat, drink, rejoice, and sing, for who knows what next year will bring." Such an interpretation does injustice to the true, beautiful, but little known meaning of

"Merry Christmas." The significance of the word "Christmas" takes us back many centuries in the history of the Church when the great feast days took their names from the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which formed the essential and primary part of the celebration of those days. And so it was that there was "Candlemas Day" or the day on which the Mass of the blessing of candles was celebrated, and "Michaelmas Day" or the day on which the Mass of St. Michael was celebrated. Following this pattern, the people eventually called the birthday of Our Lord "Christmas Day" or the day on which the Mass of Christ the Saviour is celebrated. When the word "merry" was first added to "Christmas" to form the official holiday greeting, it did not mean cheerful, but rather it meant blessed or peaceful and when spoken of in reference to Christmas it connoted that peace which the world cannot give. Now if we put the two words together we discover that "Merry Christmas" actually means, "May the Mass of Christ grant you peace." If we attach this meaning to our greeting, it ceases to be a hollow-sounding pleasantry and becomes in reality a prayer by which we wish upon our friends the joys of the peace of Christ.

A TREE GROWS IN PARADISE

Popular indeed is the Christmas greeting during the holiday season, but it shares its popularity with such things as the Christmas dinner and the traditional ornaments. One of the most famous of the latter is the Christmas tree. Strange to say, this decoration, thought by many to be so pagan, is cloaked in a forest of meaning as Christian as the crib itself. The majority of us do not see the forest for the trees. The Christmas tree, as we now know it, has its origin in the Mystery plays of the Middle Ages. These were plays of religious significance and were originally performed in church. One great success was the "Paradise Play" which was usually held during Advent. It reenacted the story of the creation of man and the sin of Adam and Eve, and usually ended with scenes leading to the drama of Bethlehem. Even though the plays were performed in church, it was agreed that the productions required some scenery. A fir tree whose branches were laden with apples, represented the tree of Good and Evil and consequently, the Garden of Eden. Christ was sometimes symbolized by lighted candles placed upon a wooden pyramid. In time, abuses crept into the Mystery plays and their performance in the House of God was forbidden. The "Paradise

tree," symbolic of the fall of man, found its way into the homes of the people where the plays continued to be performed. The pyramid of candles representing the Redemption by Christ also remained. As the years went on, the apples of the Paradise tree were replaced by glittering ornaments, usually round in shape, and the candles were transferred from the pyramid to the tree itself. The lighted tree thus became a striking representation of man's fall and Redemption by Christ. Just as shadow is destroyed by light, so the shadow cast on humanity by the tree of Good and Evil was destroyed by the coming of Christ, the Light of the world. This is the true meaning of our Christmas tree.

CHRISTMAS IN KILARNEY

Although the Irish were not the first to use the Christmas tree, they did invent and hand down to us another well known bit of tinsel, the practice of placing wreathed candles in the windows during the holiday season. This custom has its origin in the hectic days of the persecution in Ireland. Erin's sons and daughters might have sung then as they do in the modern Christmas ditty that, "Father John, before he's gone, will bless the house and all," but the old Erinites would have had to add, "If he's not caught and dragged off as a traitor." During the time of the English persecution throughout Ireland, the churches were closed, the practice of the Catholic religion was forbidden, and the priests were stalked and hunted as criminals. Imprisonment or death was their reward if they were discovered in the exercise of their ministry. Though the green of the Emerald Isle was oft times reddened with the blood of its martyrs, the faith of the Irish could not be crushed. The priests hid in the forests and awaited only the shelter of darkness. At night they would steal out to the various houses where they would gather the faithful together and administer the Sacraments. To have a priest on any day was a blessing, but it was the wish and prayer of every Irish family that God might allow a priest to visit them on Christmas Eve and offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, so that on the Holy Night their home might become the lodging of the Lord.

It thus came about that on the night before Christmas the people left their doors unlocked and placed lighted candles in their windows, so that if any priest happened by he might be guided and welcomed to their home. The English officials soon noticed the candles and demanded to know their meaning. They

were told that there was an Irish tradition that on every Christmas Eve Our Lord again tested the charity of the world. The people said that they unlocked their doors and put lighted candles in their windows as a sign that in their home the Christ Child and His Blessed Mother and foster father would always be received in welcome. The reply was a true one, although its full significance was not realized by the questioners. Christ had indeed tried the charity of the Irish people by persecution and had found that it enkindled in their hearts only a greater love for Him. In opening their homes to priests, the people were also welcoming the Divine Saviour Who would be brought into their midst through the words of Consecration. The candles in the windows welcomed both Our Lord and His ministers. The English thought the candles to be nothing more than a ridiculous superstition and never bothered to suppress them. As a result, many a priest was guided to a home where the persecuted once more welcomed Christ into their Christmas.

Even after the tidal wave of persecution had spent itself, the Irish continued to put candles in their windows on Christmas Eve. Through the years the significance of the candles as beacons of safety to persecuted priests was often forgotten, but they continued to be remembered as signs of welcome to Our Divine Lord. The people often decorated the candles with wreaths and they carried this, their symbol of Christmas, to the lands to which they migrated. The custom of lighting windows with holiday candles became contagious and it soon became a favorite part of America's Christmas. The practice continues to the present day, but unfortunately, it has become quite meaningless. If all the people who put candles in their windows at Christmas time, knew the true significance of the act they were performing, Our Lord would certainly receive the world's warmest welcome.

PEACE OF MISTLETOE

Long before the Christmas candle began brightening the lives of the Irish, a plant which in time would become a shining example of Christmas tinsel, was blooming in the forests of Britain. This plant, the mistletoe, was at first a pagan symbol; later it was baptized; and in the modern era it has become an apostate. Mistletoe was thought to be sacred by the Druids, the early pagan priests of England. They believed that it was endowed with great healing power and that many blessings were wrought upon those who came in contact with it. When passing

through the woods, if bitter rivals encountered each other under a mistletoe, they would stop and chat together like old friends and forget their quarrel until the following day. The mistletoe became a sign of friendship and love and peace, and held an honored spot in every home. After the conversion of England, the Christians were forbidden to deck their rooms with mistletoe, since it was thought to be a representation of paganism. It was not too long, however, before the pagan mistletoe had its Christening. Holy Mother Church was not to deny her children the use of their old and favorite decorations provided there could be attached to them a new and Christian meaning. The mistletoe was purged of its paganism and eventually found its way even into the House of God. Before the Reformation, a large bundle of mistletoe was placed on the altar of the Cathedral of York at Christmas time. Here it became the symbol of Christ the Divine Healer, the Prince of Peace Who gives all blessings.

In our day we continue to adorn the Christmas home with mistletoe, but the plant has given up much of its Christian significance. True, it continues to mean friendship, as is seen from the practice of "kissing under the mistletoe," but the friendship it symbolizes is all too often pagan, and frivolous and hollow. Mistletoe is in dire need of reconversion, so that it may again take on its sacred meaning as a symbol which reminds all that the home in which it is displayed should be ruled by the Prince of Peace, that a truce must be called to petty disputes, that all who enter this home will be welcomed as friends.

DOINGS DURING DINNER

Decorations are but one aspect of the holiday season. Something which perhaps means even more to us is the traditional Christmas dinner. The question is, does it mean all that it should? History helps clarify this meaning. By the sixth century, Christmas had risen to the honored status of a feast high in rank among the great days of the Liturgical Year. All work and business transactions were set aside and the day finally became a civic holiday. In 563 fasting on Christmas Day was forbidden by the Council of Braga. The people joyfully celebrated the Nativity of Our Lord and undoubtedly, the main meal of the day was soon suited to a celebration befitting the birthday of a King. The Christmas dinner has as many variations as the countries and ages in which it has been enjoyed. One of the essential parts of its modern version in the United States is the mince pie. This

familiar dessert traces its origin to the days of the Crusades. When the Christian armies returned from the Holy Land they brought with them as one of the souvenirs of the journeyings, quantities of Oriental spices. It soon became a necessity to celebrate the Lord's birthday with a pie made from the spices grown in the lands that He made holy. The pie was originally oblong in shape and was made to resemble a manger. It had such a religious significance and was considered such a sign of Catholicism, that when the Puritans came to power in England, they called the eating of mince pie idolatry and condemned it as an act of high treason. Although mince pie was forbidden by law, the attempts at its suppression failed and it has remained as a prized part of the holiday dinner. This festive banquet is as filled with meaning as it is with good cheer. Many spend hours in its observance, yet do not take the time to realize that their feast is a "birthday party." They do well to wine and dine the birth of their King, but why forget the cause of the celebration?

CHILDRENS' JOHN THE BAPTIST

Both young and old join in the celebration of Christmas, yet it is a special day of delight for the little folk. The children are often too busy to pay much attention to the decorations, and they are usually too excited to eat, but they are always ready to be charmed with the wondrous tales of Santa Claus. It is he who brings them toys and candy and all good things. It is he who *should* bring the Christ Child into their Christmas. Some of the youngsters, attempting to prove themselves old beyond their years, show forth their foolish wisdom with such boasts as, "I know. There was never any Santa Claus." How wrong they are! Santa Claus, whom the Church prefers to call St. Nicholas, is a definite reality and his true story should be well known by those over whom he is patron, the children. It differs a bit from that of the legendary elf made immortal by Clement Moore. St. Nicholas was an orphan who in time was to dedicate his life wholly to God as Bishop of the town of Myra. His favorites were always the children. At Christmas time he would laden them with candy and gifts, but more important, he told them the story of the Christ Child and exhorted them to make ready for the coming of the Divine Infant on the day of His Nativity. In our day, when we speak of Santa, we split his personality. We make him an irreligious philanthropist. The children are told that St. Nick will bring them gifts, but they are not reminded that he is very

much interested in how much they know and love the Model of Children. When the true story of Santa Claus is told to the youngsters, he might well become the voice of one telling children to make straight the way of their Infant Lord.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

The sages tell us that all that glitters is not gold. But some of it is. An example is the tinsel of Christmas. Behind these trivial, unimportant things there is a golden meaning if only we make an effort to discover it. Our Lord used very simple things to remind Himself of us. He likened His Church to a sheepfold and His successor, St. Peter, to a rock. Why then cannot trivial things remind us of Christ? A look about us shows us that they do. Doesn't a little wax candle remind us that He is present in our Churches?

In a sense, we might call the holiday tinsel the "sanctuary lamps of Christmas." When the significance of the sanctuary lamp is unknown, it appears to be nothing more than a little red light, but as soon as the meaning is realized it becomes a magnificent symbol which points out, "Christ is here, come and adore Him." So it is with the tinsel of Christmas. When the meaning is unknown, these unimportant things appear to be nothing more than a lighted tree, a candle in the window, a piece of mistletoe, another sumptuous dinner, a legend of a mysterious elf; but when their significance is realized they become a symbol of the victory of the Light of the World over the shadow of sin, a symbol of welcome to Our Blessed Lord, a symbol of Christ the Divine Healer and Giver of all benefits, a banquet celebrating the birth of a King, a herald of the Infant Saviour. To sacramentalize rather than criticize the "tinsel" of the holiday season would be for many a means to discover more fully the meaning of the angels' Christmas hymn. They would once more see Christ in Christmas; the feast of the Saviour's birth would be for them a day which gives Glory to God in the highest; and by their good will they would merit the blessing of the Infant Prince of Peace.