

THE CHRIST-CHILD VERSUS SANTA CLAUS

Christmas with its solemnity and rejoicing needs no defence or apology; even though an English Parliament once struck it from the calendar. It was denounced as mere "popery," and—magnificent paradox!—as antichristian. But Parliaments do many things that the people refuse to ratify. They may enact, decree and promulgate without consulting the wishes of the nation, but sooner or later the vox populi will make itself heard. And thus, though the Roundheads banished Christmas, it was brought back by popular acclaim at the Restoration; what had been ostracized by statute, had been cherished in the hearts of the people.

It is, and always has been a sacred season to all Christian peoples. They love it for what it recalls; they celebrate it with all manner of rejoicing and merrymaking; they throw around it a rich profusion of beautiful customs and quaint traditions, all with a view to understanding its meaning and entering into its spirit. They have learned it from their Mother, the Church. She, the only Church which can claim and can prove her claim to be Christ's, has always been at great pains fittingly to celebrate His Birthday. She has embellished it with some of the richest treasures of her liturgy, and has fostered every one of the many old traditional customs and bits of folk-lore with which the different nations keep the holy feast of Christmas. And the beautiful thing about them is that all these antique rites and observances have reference to and breathe the spirit of the scriptural accounts of the scenes around the Crib at Bethlehem. And as long as this remains so, all's well with our Christmas merry-making.

The very atmosphere of the time is redolent of a holy peace and a quiet joy. We notice it more and more as we grow older. Nature herself has something to do with this. The youth and beauty of her spring are now long past; she has put off the glittering finery of summer; has gently laid away the glorious robes of her mature loveliness; and now, out of sympathy for her Lord the King, she wears the plain, unassuming garb of reverence and humility. Even her songs are hushed in awe of the "Gloria" of the Heavenly Host. The poets are more keenly alive to this atmosphere than the rest of us; and the Prince of them all has

somehow or other been able to catch its tender, sacred, unearthly beauty and imprison it in a matchless form:

Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm:
So hallowed and so gracious is the time. (Hamlet. I, 1.)

Surely, when the stage has been thus beautifully set, when everything that adorns it has been chosen and placed to the best advantage, and with the one purpose of enhancing but always subserving the drama to be presented thereon, we naturally expect that no character who is in any way unworthy or out of harmony with the setting shall be allowed to occupy it. But, lo! and behold!—who makes his entrance: a jolly, albeit a harmless old fellow, with highly colored features and snowy beard, “in fair round belly with good capon lined,” attired in a polar costume of red trimmed with white fur. He carries a huge, bulging bag of Christmas presents, and wears what is supposed to be a good specimen of the genuine Christmas smile. They call him “Santa Claus” and he is considered the very personification of kindness and jovial good-fellowship. This genial ancient claims descent from the great Saint Nicholas, the protector and patron of children.

Let us see if we can in any way help the gentleman to establish the validity of his claim to such illustrious ancestry. It is urged that “Santa Claus” means “Saint Nicholas.” Now even the ordinary man, the man without any pretensions to philological science, is quite trustworthy when he tells you that the word “santa” is the Italian, Spanish and Portuguese equivalent of the feminine form of the Latin word “sanctus.” Hence the case of Santa Claus is anomalous. Nobody seems able to give a satisfactory reason for his having a feminine prefix. But the fact of his having such an incongruous “handle” to his name can be explained, and is significant of something which we will take up presently.

In regard to “Claus,” the first thing to be said is that, as a name, it is a very poor specimen. At best it is a criminal mutilation of its supposed original. Neither is it valid as a short form for “Nicholas”; whose nickname, firmly established by

ancient usage, is as obvious and natural as anything can be. But it is often true that, "Familiarity breeds contempt"; especially certain kinds of it, chief among them being that flippant form of it which often usurps the place of reverence and veneration. And when we have to do with a Saint, one of God's noblemen, nicknames are evidently out of place.

Saint Nicholas, the supposed prototype of our extremely modern Santa Claus, was Archbishop of Myra in Asia, during the first half of the fourth century. He was a man of eminent holiness, and his chief characteristic was charity in protecting, comforting and relieving the distressed. He was particularly kind-hearted toward children. Among the countless examples of this, two instances stand out very prominently. Three young girls were exposed through poverty to the danger of falling into evil ways. As soon as the good man discovered this he determined upon their rescue. On each of three successive nights he conveyed to them through a window a sum of money sufficient as a dowry for one of them. Thus provided for, they were later all happily married. The other anecdote shows how the Saint could rise to heroism. As he was one day walking along the seashore he saw a group of little children struggling for their lives in deep water. The Saint had never learned to swim, but now, trusting absolutely in the help of God, he bravely plunged into the breakers and succeeded in bringing the little ones safely ashore.

Because during life he so faithfully modelled himself after the Divine Friend of children, Saint Nicholas has ever since his death been venerated as the special patron of the little ones. In medieval Germany this veneration gave rise to a beautiful custom which rapidly spread into France, Switzerland and the Low Countries. On his feast, the sixth of December, Saint Nicholas comes to every house, where by his kind words and gifts he gladdens the hearts of the children. He comes robed in his pontifical vestments, and is accompanied by his faithful servant Black Rupert, a Benedictine monk, who carries on his shoulder a huge, inexhaustible sack, stuffed with all sorts of good and wonderful things. These are for the good children. But for those who, upon parental testimony have not tried to be good, he produces a birch rod, which may be applied on the spot or at some future time, as papa and mamma may decree.

In most countries this yearly coming of Saint Nicholas has been modified, in some cases beyond recognition. The first and almost universal change made, was one of dates. Probably because Saint Nicholas is the patron of little tots, and because it is highly fitting that they be made happy on the Birthday of the Divine Child, the Saint's annual visit was transferred from the night of the sixth to Christmas Eve. This innovation has its redeeming features; the good man is still himself, a Saint and a Bishop; and—thank heaven—still goes by his real name. But it is the beginning of the end. Things went from bad to worse adown the centuries. Sainthood and episcopate went by the board; romance and magic took the place of the supernatural; he lost his charm and he lost his dignity; and today Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Bonhomme Noel, Knecht Clobes and all their bloodless tribe, are no more than burlesques of the Saint with whom they are supposed to be closely related. But after such a complete metamorphosis, after such a radical and fundamental transformation, why pretend to recognize the great Saint Nicholas in our denatured Santa Claus?

He is an interloper, a mere substitute who has been insinuated into the Christ-Child's Birthday-festival by the ignorance of those who do not know and do not care for the worthy customs and traditions of those times which, until quite recently, it was so fashionable to speak of as the "Dark Ages." He is decidedly of modern manufacture and bears the marks of it thick upon him. The fact that his sponsors gave him such a queer, paradoxical name shows clearly enough that in their minds his supposed lineage was, to say the least, rather indefinite. And thus it is that he has neither the lofty character nor the noble escutcheon of his supposed ancestor. It is certainly a far cry from the great Bishop of Myra, with his flowing priestly vestments, his mitre and pastoral staff, to the well fed, jolly old fellow in the violent red smock, who during December beams good-naturedly upon you from the shop-windows, signboards and advertisements of those who have something to sell at Christmas and find him so useful as a stalking-horse. The magical powers with which he is endowed, his roofclimbing reindeers and sleigh, his marvellous agility in easing his portly frame down through the narrowest of chimneys without soiling the fine bravery of his crimson uniform, are but poor reliques of the

gift of miracles with which Heaven attested and still attests the holiness of Saint Nicholas. The Saint was not a Cardinal, nor was he a martyr, though he suffered much for the Christian faith. And yet Santa Claus persists in wearing flaming scarlet. Of course, he must please the children, whose unformed taste naturally revels in primary colors.

"The fun of Christmas is founded on the seriousness of Christmas"; says the amiable Mr. Chesterton, "and to pull away the latter support even from under a Christmas clown is to let him down through a trap-door." Not only are clowning, buffoonery, boisterous rout and revel aside from the spirit of Christmas which contains its great joy quietly, but even such sedate entertainers as our trumped-up Santa Claus have no natural, but only a much stressed fictitious reference to the King's Birthday. Christmas is not All Fools Day; it has a definite and most sublime meaning. Hence in our manner of celebrating it we ought to show that we understand it for what it is, as the day upon which in the Cave at Bethlehem there took place the human birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. This is the last scene in the unfathomable mystery of the Incarnation, which in turn is the first act of the sublime tragedy of the Redemption. Who in his right senses would dare to affirm with his hand on his heart that Santa Claus is a worthy and an adequate embodiment of the heavenly spirit of Christmas?

Our forefathers who lived during the Middle Ages knew well how to celebrate the Nativity of Christ in a becoming fashion. They had the faith, they had the liturgical spirit and loved to be in harmony with the mind of the Church. They had, of course, never dreamed of such a masquerading nonentity as our modern Santa Claus. Saint Nicholas always came upon the evening of his own proper feast. But at Christmas Eve the Christ-Child Himself came to distribute His gifts to the children large and small, young and old. He did not always appear visibly, but when He did, He generally came in the guise of a boy of from ten to about fifteen years. He was awaited with far more anxious eagerness, and at His coming spread about Him far more lasting happiness than our modern Santa Claus. He to whom everything belongs came every year upon His Birthday to gladden all hearts by His blessing and His bounty, to remind them

of His great "desire to be with the children of men," and to unite them to Himself by the bonds of the closet and most intimate love. How beautiful! Yes. And yet how obvious! Certainly. Some of the grandest things in heaven and earth are very simple. And it really seems that God in His Providence has watched over this beautiful custom, so full of a high mystical meaning, liturgically so appropriate and therefore so dear to the hearts of our forefathers who lived in the ages of faith. It has been jealously guarded from the touch of unholy hands and preserved intact to the present day by the Catholic people of Germany and Austria. It has everything to recommend itself to all, not merely because it is medieval, or because of, or in spite of its being German, but because it is preeminently Christian.

The children come soon enough to disbelieve in Santa Claus; his little comedy is too broad, too obvious to hold their credulity very long; and there is such a plenty of ways in which they can find out the truth about the matter. And when their faith is gone, when they have recovered from the exhilaration that generally goes with a great discovery, they find with a pang of regret that their sparkling, gay colored fairy world lies about them shattered into a thousand shivers. The end has come; it is all over. But if they have once seen the Christ-Child they can never really come to disbelieve in Him. Their simple, childish faith is not utterly destroyed. Their concept of His coming is raised from the literal to the spiritual plane; they learn to see in it a new and higher meaning which will grow on them from year to year. They are satisfied, and so are we, because the Divine Child is, and must always be, the centre of the Christmas festival.

In himself Santa Claus is quite innocent, but he is symbolic of something by no means so harmless as himself. He represents the spirit of the world which gives itself up to the pleasures of boisterous merriment and genial good-fellowship without a high motive and for no definite good reason. It reacts unconsciously and mechanically to the general atmosphere of benevolence, and rests satisfied with the merely natural results of generosity. It is a flighty thing and cannot penetrate the surface of the meaning of Christmas. The worldly spirit is at variance with Christ; it forgets that Christmas is, as Washington Irving so deftly puts it, "the season of regenerated feeling, the season for

kindling, not merely the fire of hospitality in the hall, but the genial flame of charity in the heart." The brotherhood of man without the Fatherhood of God is but a vain chimera and an empty dream. Purely natural kindness and generosity are poor substitutes for that true Christian charity, which is so intimately connected with the spirit of that day upon which Our Heavenly Father gave as His Gift His Only Son to be the Little Brother of all the world.

—Bro. Nicholas J. Ehrenfried, O. P.

TO A ROSE

Thou sweetest bloom! thou cloistered rose
Washed red by Love's sad weeping
O'er faded friends thy tears rain fast
To calm their troubled sleeping.

Thou emblem of the Heart of Love!
Enclosed in cloister bower—
Teach me to watch when eyelids droop—
At sunset's lonely hour.

How can I leave you dreaming here—
To crush thy life in sorrow—
To fade alone 'mid sobbing winds
And die ere dawns the morrow!

O treasured bud—at Mary's feet
I'll gently leave thee sleeping
That dying there—thy breath—thy life
Will rest in Heaven's keeping.

O would that I like thee could die,
No grief—no tear—no sighing
Could be my lot if Mary's smile
Would beam upon me—dying.

—Bro. Maurice O'Moore, O. P.