



FROM THE HEART OF THE STATE the Governorate tells its story

Year I

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THE ROOTS OF THE SOLEMNITY

Christmas: a universal celebration observed in more than 160 countries in the world, more than 80 percent of the world's population, considering that there are more than 193 States that are members of the United Nations, in addition to the Holy See which is a Permanent Observer. Such widespread celebration makes one wonder: which Christmas, or rather who or what is being celebrated?

There is no doubt that the 25th of December, or the 7th of January for those who follow the Julian calendar, is much-anticipated both by adults and children. Cities are filled with decorations, colours and music, and the atmosphere is different from that of other times in the year. Even more than one month earlier, people begin to decorate their homes and shops with wreaths, fir trees or synthetic reproductions of them, with flashing colourful lights. If one were to ask around, what is the reason for the presence of so much anxiousness around Christmas, the answers would vary, but they would often have to do with presents, exchanging holiday greetings, big dinners, gathering together as a family and also a bonus from work, depending on one's contract.

Many people start to think about presents and what to buy, weeks before Christmas, but how many prepare themselves with the celebrations of the Time of Advent which the Church carries out each year? Few, nowadays, stop to reflect upon the reason we celebrate Christmas. This is why we have decided to dedicate this issue of the Newsletter, From the heart of the State – The governorate tells its story, to the solemnity of the birth of Jesus. We have done so with from two perspectives: how it is celebrated in Vatican City State and in some European and North American countries, providing an overview of different traditions, with special attention to some contemplative communities, who shared how they live Christmas. In countries that for various reasons do not have contemplative communities, we have reports from some religious men and women, and in one case, the rector of a Marian shrine.

Accompanied also by the Petrine Magisterium, by the example



of the Saints and by some literary masterpieces.

The goal is to help return to the roots of this Christian feast, to the essential: the birth of Jesus. Christmas, the way we understand it, would have never have existed if Jesus hadn't been born. Perhaps consumerism with its sparkle and hedonism have made this celebration a lay event, a civil rite, distorting its nature and overturning its value.

On the contrary, Christmas celebrates "God's Gift" to humankind. Jesus Christ, Son of the Father. The consumerist mindset instead, has turned into a commercial opportunity in which all kinds of presents are exchanged. as if people were subjected to a collective mania. Indeed, it sometimes gets to the point that one is ashamed to not be able to afford presents.

And yet, the meaning of Christmas is something else. The atmosphere of joy, of sharing, of peace that distinguishes it is



derived precisely from Jesus, He who made himself flesh and came to live in our midst to save humanity, as John wrote in the Prologue to his Gospel (1:14).

Unfortunately, we have gone from the celebration of the historical event that was fundamental to humanity, that is the Saviour's birth, to the folkloristic character of Santa Claus, who brings children presents. It is none other than consumerism's accelerated evolution of Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra.

In fact, if one thinks about it, 25 December is the celebration of a "birthday", but all too often, without remembering the person being celebrated, indeed, regardless of the anniversary. Basically the accessory aspect, that is, the exterior, without the need to remember what happened on that night in Bethlehem, 2,000 years ago.

Why then not try to overturn our way of thinking, and instead of giving importance to money, let us consider it as a means and not a destination or a reason for living? Why not take on an attitude marked by helping the "rejected", as Pope Francis asks us to do continually? This Christmas, we could give a present to those who are victims of the throw-away culture, the least ones in all senses, whether the poverty is material or existential.

Making a present that does not necessarily have to entail money or an object, but rather time, a hug, a smile, and above all, proclaiming that since the birth of Jesus, the world is no longer the same. It has changed. This clear evolution was possible only thanks to the coming of the Son of God among humanity. It is a Gift that no man or woman can ever repay, that teaches us that God rejects no one.

Nicola Gori



WELCOMING THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Cardinal Fernando Vérgez Alzaga

President of the Governorate of Vatican City State

More than 2,000 years have passed since the Son of God was born in a stable. His birth went largely unnoticed, in hiddenness and silence. The birth engaged both heaven and earth, with angels giving glory to God and shepherds giving thanks to the Lord for having seen that Child, wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger, between Mary and Joseph. Many centuries have passed since the time of that event, which interrupted the history of humanity like a decisive and unique mystery, but its relevance will never fade.

The beginning of redemption, starting with the Incarnation of the Word of God in the womb of the Virgin Mary, is fulfilled in the birth of the Child, as the prophet Isaiah wrote (9:6): "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". Among the many names with which the prophet calls Moses, there is that of Prince of Peace. Never more than like at this moment in history, is it timely to recall that Jesus comes to bring peace, true peace that only comes from God.

Peace, which is increasingly under threat, and often disrupted by the wars that arise from the many hotspots of death on our planet. Pope Francis has made his voice heard on many occasions, calling for peace and an end to hostilities and a stop to arms sales. At the end of the General Audience on 16 October, he said, "Let us not forget the countries at war, let us not forget martyred Ukraine, Palestine, Myanmar. Brothers and sisters, let us not forget that war is always, always a defeat. Let us not forget this and let us pray for peace and fight for peace". It is obvious that international disputes cannot be solved by war, but man's instinct, inspired by the prince of this world, has a tendency to engage in clashes, subjugation, to impose its own power by force and through violence. It is the mystery of sin and death, which Christ defeated. "We have already won", is the motto of Christians who believe in the Resurrection of Jesus. There is no desperation in those who trust God, only hope, even

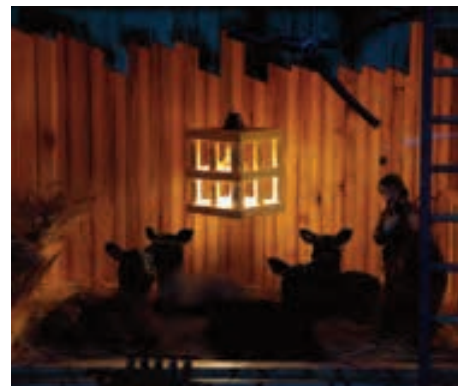
though the trials will continue until the end of time.

May this Holy Year, which starts on Christmas Eve, be an opportunity for humanity to be reconciled with God and with the brothers and sisters we meet along life's journey. This is why it is crucial to invoke the Prince of Peace, without whom, we can do nothing. The Psalms called for peace in Jerusalem: "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May they prosper who love you! Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers! For my brethren and companions' sake I will say, 'Peace be within you!' For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good" (Ps 122 6:9).

Let us also pray for peace in Bethlehem, from where this year's nativity scene in the Paul VI Hall, hails. It is the homeland of Jesus, martyred as many other parts of the Holy Land. May it find the peace it lost.

In this issue, we have collected some articles from contemplative communities, who invoke the Prince of Peace, and who share how they celebrate the birth of Jesus. It is a way to make their voices heard, they who often live in hiddenness with Christ in God.

After all, Christmas is both a personal and a community experience, which is lived by the peoples of the world in different ways, according to one's culture, language and local traditions. We thus wanted to offer an overview of how this solemnity is celebrated in various places, starting with Vatican City, so that everyone can experience the joy of salvation and repeat with the Prophet Isaiah (9:1-2): "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy. they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil".



THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN CONTEMPLATIVE COMMUNITIES

Christmas brings the extraordinary news of a marvellous event: God who comes to meet humanity. Jesus is born out of love; He humbles himself to the level of humanity and becomes one of us. He is revealed in the fragility of a Child, who depends on his mother's care. Through the vulnerability of a newborn, he expresses the immeasurable value of each human life, regardless of its condition.

Christmas invites us to recognize and defend the dignity of the most vulnerable: the unborn, the disabled, the elderly and the terminally ill. Unfortunately, some societies no longer respect human dignity and refuse to accompany the vulnerable. A society that does not protect the lives of the weakest is at risk of falling into inhumanity.

This is why we wish to dedicate this Christmas to all wounded humanity, especially to those who have no voice, those who are forgotten and those who are alone. In this spirit, the Governorate has chosen to dedicate this special issue of the quarterly Newsletter, "From the heart of the State – The Governorate tells its story", to Christmas, to prevent this solemnity from being reduced to a commercial celebration focused solely on shopping and exchanging expensive gifts.

The purpose of this issue is to rediscover the mystery of the birth of the Son of God, the foundation of our faith, which marked a decisive turning point in the destiny of humanity.

We keep our brothers and sisters who suffer from conflict and violence, in our hearts. Sadly, today's headlines are filled with news of death, destruction, and devastation, which reduce human dignity to ashes and create only bitterness and disorder, that will take years to overcome.

Our thoughts go to the Holy Land, to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, and to the many other wars scattered throughout the world. Jesus comes to bring peace, but humanity often refuses to welcome it.

In this issue, we have included the testimonies of some contemplative communities in the Holy Land, to give voice precisely to people living in situations of war and all that it entails.



Contemplative men and women are the hidden part of the Church, who offer their prayers for the world. The articles you will read are a tribute to the many people who, through consecration, intercede on behalf of all of us.

We have also gathered testimonies from contemplative communities across Europe, North America, and Argentina, to show how the birth of Jesus is celebrated in different cultures and how deeply it remains rooted in societies, despite the consumerist, denialist, and ideological trends surrounding it.

On the other hand, it is evident that modern societies, so filled with brilliant inventions and scientific and technological discoveries that provide all necessary material goods, have an emptiness to be filled: humanity is no longer at the centre; it has become an accessory, only useful for achieving greater power and wealth. Not only are the vulnerable discarded because they are unproductive, but legislative and legal measures are being introduced to promote eugenics and euthanasia.

In contrast, the powerful message of Christianity is that God is made flesh and is present in humanity's daily journey. He made his home among us. He highlights the priceless value of each human life, even lives that appear insignificant in the eyes of the world. This is the message we wish to convey with this Newsletter. The Governorate would like to remind everyone that Christmas is inseparably linked to one Person: Jesus, whose birthday we celebrate. Everything else is secondary.

Let us exchange gifts, celebrate with joy, but let us not forget the poor and the sick who are excluded from our society. I wish you a blessed Holy Year, a gift of God's mercy to each of us.

Happy Christmas to everyone!

Sister Raffaella Petrini

Secretary General of the Governorate of Vatican City State



THE ORIGIN OF THE SOLEMNITY OF CHRISTMAS

CHRIST'S LIGHT SHINES UPON EVERY CREATURE

Since when has the birth of Jesus been celebrated? It is necessary to make a brief reference to the historical origin of this solemnity. In fact, the liturgical year of the Church starts with Christ's Resurrection, not from the commemoration of his birth. Therefore, the oldest feast is not Christmas, but Easter. The Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith, which gives birth to the Church. It is the basis of the announcement of the Gospel. For Christians, the resurrection is a way of life and the foundation of their entire faith.

Since when has 25 December become the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus? The first one to clearly state that Jesus was born on 25 December was Hippolytus of Rome, in his commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel, written around 204 A.D. Hippolytus, a prominent Christian writer, was originally from Asia Minor and lived in Rome during the late second and early third centuries. There is not much reliable information on him. He arrived in Rome during the papacy of Pope Zephyrinus (199-217) and opposed his successor, Pope Callistus, to the point of becoming the first antipope. However, he later reconciled with Pope Pontian, and both were exiled to Sardinia by Emperor Maximinus the Thracian. They were martyred together around 235 AD.

December 25th was also the date of the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple of Jerusalem, established by Judas Maccabeus in 164 BC. The coincidence of dates signifies that with Jesus, who appeared as the light of God in the night, the consecration of the Temple is fulfilled, that is, the coming of our Saviour into the world.

The solemnity of Christmas assumed its defined form in the fourth century when it replaced the Roman festival of Sol Invictus. This highlighted that only Christ triumphs over the darkness of evil and sin, with his Light. On the other hand, the festival of Sol Invictus was celebrated in the Empire, to honour the Unconquered Sun. Emperor Aurelian made the celebration of the Festival of the Unconquered Sun an official holiday and wanted it to be celebrated throughout the Empire: the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, set for 25 December, which at that time was considered to be the day of the winter solstice. In his honour, in 274 AD, he had a temple built in the *Campus Agrippae*, now known as *Piazza San Silvestro* in Rome.

The date of 25 December as the day of Christ's birth can be found in the oldest Roman liturgical calendar dating back to 354 A.D.: the *Chronograph* (*Chronographus anni CCCLIII. Feriale Ecclesiae Romanae*), which states: "VIII Kal. Ian. (Die Octavo ante Kalendas Ianuarias) natus Christus in Betleem Iudae", that is, 25 December. The date that was chosen by the Church of Rome, also spread to other dioceses, such as Milan, thanks to Saint Ambrose. However, the work of Saint Leo the Great (440-461) was significant in contributing to its widespread acceptance.

It should be noted, however, that it was in the Middle Ages, thanks to Saint Francis of Assisi, a great lover of the Humanity

of Jesus, the Emmanuel, that the Christmas atmosphere we know, developed. With the nativity scene created for the first time in Greccio in 1223, Saint Francis wanted to emphasize the humility, poverty, and love of God manifested in the Incarnation. In the nativity scene in Greccio, the manger became an altar where the Mass of the Nativity was celebrated, the only liturgy in which the birth of Jesus, his death, and resurrection come together. In that celebration, Saint Francis perceived the connection between the Eucharist and the Incarnation and announced its significance to his contemporaries.

In the General Norms for the Ordering of the Liturgical Year and Calendar, at numbers 32-34, related to the Christmas Season, it states: "After the annual celebration of the paschal mystery, the Church has nothing more sacred than the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord and its first manifestations: this is what she accomplishes during the Christmas Season". The same Norms also emphasize that: "The Christmas Season begins with the First Vespers of the Nativity of the Lord and ends on the Sunday after the Epiphany, that is, the Sunday that falls after January 6th". Furthermore: "The Vigil Mass of Christmas is celebrated on the evening of December 24th, either before or after the First Vespers. On Christmas Day, according to ancient Roman tradition, three Masses may be celebrated: at night, at dawn, and during the day".

Christmas and Epiphany are two aspects of one mystery: the former has Western origins, while the latter comes from the East. Together, they highlight and complete the richness of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word and celebrate the mystery of Christ, true God and true man, who came to save all humanity. In the East, in fact, 6 January was chosen to commemorate the birth of the Saviour, which is the day of Epiphany, which celebrates the manifestation of the Lord to all peoples, represented by the Magi. These two dates have remained the same to this day.

Christmas celebrates the historical event of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and contemplates the fact that the Son of God became man, as the Apostle Paul states in his Letter to the Hebrews: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses; we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin". At Christmas, the prophecies made to the Fathers throughout the centuries and God's fidelity to his Word of redemption and salvation, are fulfilled. In fact, Christ came primarily for his people, for the rest of Israel who awaited the Messiah. Those people are represented by Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of God, who reveals himself in time and enters history. It highlights the divine nature of "God made man", who destroys the darkness of the world, with his light. It announces that the Messiah and his salvation are meant for all peoples, of whom the Magi are the first expression.

NATIVITY SCENES AND CHRISTMAS TREES IN SAINT PETER'S SQUARE

The first time a Christmas tree was set up below the obelisk in Saint Peter's Square was in 1982. It was brought to Rome from Poland by a farmer who wanted to give it to John Paul II as a gift. He drove it all the way from Poland in his truck. A nativity scene was set up on the tree's left, under the direction of the Directorate of Technical Services, now called the Directorate for Infrastructure and Services of the Governorate of Vatican City State, which was also responsible for the decorations and the lighting.

Since then, at the request of John Paul II, a nativity scene has been set up next to the Christmas tree below the obelisk every year. It has become a tradition that has never been interrupted. It is still the responsibility of the Governorate.

It is not by chance that the first fir tree came from Poland, not only because the farmer shared the same nationality as the Pope, but also because it seems that Christmas tree traditions have their Christian roots in northern European countries. It is a tradition that may be linked to Adam and Eve Day, celebrated in Germany on 24 December, in which the trees symbolized the tree of Paradise, and symbolic fruit was hung from its branches. A star was placed at the top of the tree.

Since that time in 1982, because there are many offers to donate a Christmas tree to the Pope to brighten Christmas, a decision was made to alternate the donors. Starting with Poland, each year a mountainous area in Europe gives the Pope a fir tree to place in Saint Peter's Square. Lights, ornaments, colourful baubles and festoons have always decorated the branches of the tree, which is lit at dusk, delighting children and adults who visit the Square with a spectacular and unforgettable display. In accordance with tradition, a bright star is placed at the top of

the tree, announcing the birth of the Saviour to the world, even to those who are far away, - "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel" (Lk 2:32).

There is no doubt that the stars on the tops of fir trees can be seen from afar, since some of them reach a height of 30 metres. This means that the majestic trees are more than 100 years old. However, the protection of our common home is guaranteed, because the trees are authorized by the forestry department upon certification of their environmental sustainability. Usually the trees that are donated come from nurseries or have grown on plains. They have "health issues" or they are older trees that are naturally replaced.

Moreover, once the tree is taken down, nothing is thrown away. Wood from the tree is used to make toys for children or stools, that will be distributed by Caritas or other charity organizations.

During the Pontificate of John Paul II, the nativity scenes in Saint Peter's Square were planned and made by qualified personnel of the Governorate, and constructed around a classic tent with pitched roof. Characters came from nativity scenes used in 1842 by Saint Vincenzo Pallott in Rome's Sant'Andrea della Valle Church. Up until Christmas 2011, they were still being used for the nativity scene in Saint Peter's Square. In 2012, there was a change. A nativity scene from Basilicata that had been given to Benedict XVI as a gift, was put on display in the Square, and since then, nativity scenes come from different places every year.

Trees have been donated from Italian regions 19 times, from Austria 8 times, from Germany 5 times, from Poland 3 times, from Slovenia 2 times, and one each from the Czech Republic, Belgium,

Slovakia, Romania, Croatia and Ukraine. Meanwhile, with regards to nativity scenes: they have been donated by Italy 11 times, and once each by Malta and Peru.

The lighting of the tree and the inauguration of the nativity scene take place after the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, during an evocative ceremony, presided by the Cardinal President of the Governorate, in the presence of the Secretary General.

Official Delegations from the countries of origin of the tree and the nativity scene, also participate in the ceremony, including Bishops from the respective dioceses, regional presidents and mayors of the donors, accompanied by bands and choirs. The Musical Band of the Gendarmerie Corps also participates in the ceremony, playing the anthem of Vatican City State and of the Republic of Italy, concluding with Christmas music.

On the same day, in the morning, the Delegations are received in audience by Pope Francis for the official presentation of the gifts.

The Governorate's Directorate for Infrastructure and Services and Events Planning Office are responsible for the set up and lighting of the Christmas tree and nativity scene.

Currently, the tree and nativity scenes are on display until the end of the Christmas season, which coincides with the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, whereas in the past, they would remain on display until 2 February, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

The following table shows the origins of the 43 fir trees that have been displayed in Saint Peter's Square, and of the 13 nativity scenes that have been displayed from 2012 up to now.

Year	Donors	Nation	Number
1982	A Christmas tree was set up in Saint Peter's Square for the first time. It was donated by Poland.		1
1983	Innsbruck – Federal State of Tyrol	Austria	2
1984	Bavaria	Germany	3
1985	Serra San Bruno, Calabria	Italy	4
1986	Dobbiaco, Val Pusteria	Italy	5
1987	Federal Region of Carinthia	Austria	6
1988	Magnifica Comunità del Cadore, Belluno	Italy	7
1989	Federal Region of Upper Austria	Austria	8
1990	Val Camonica, Lombardy	Italy	9
1991	Federal Region of Vorarlberg	Austria	10
1992	Alto Adige, Val Passiria	Italy	11
1993	Federal Region of Styria	Austria	12
1994	Zazriva, Montagne della Zilina	Slovakia	13
1995	Oberhinkofen - Regensburg, Baviera	Germany	14
1996	Ko evje	Slovenia	15
1997	Zakopane, Monti Tatra	Poland	16
1998	Bad Säckingen, Baden-Württemberg	Germany	17
1999	Beskydy, Moravka	Czech Republic	18
2000	Federal Region of Carinthia	Austria	19
2001	Province of Harghita, Transylvania	Romania	20
2002	Gorski kotar/Delnice	Croatia	21
2003	Valle d'Aosta	Italy	22
2004	Val Rendena, Trentino	Italy	23
2005	Federal Region of Upper Austria, Municipality of Eferding	Austria	24
2006	Piccola Sila della Regione Calabria	Italy	25
2007	San Martino in Badia (Bolzano)	Italy	26
2008	Niederösterreich (Lower Austria)	Austria	27
2009	Vallone Region	Belgium	28
2010	Bolzano Region	Italy	29



2011	Ukrainian Bishops	Ukraine	30
2012	Municipality of Pescopennataro (Isernia)	Italy	31
2013	Municipality of Waldmünchen	Germany	32
2014	Provincial Council of Catanzaro	Italy	33
2015	Municipality of Hirschau	Germany	34
2016	Municipality of Scurelle – Foreste del Lagorai Association (Trent)	Italy	35
2017	Archdiocese of Elk	Poland	36
2018	Province of Pordenone	Italy	37
2019	Demanio civico di Rotzo – Pedescala and San Pietro (Vicenza)	Italy	38
2020	Municipality of Ko evje	Slovenia	39
2021	Municipality of Andalo (Trento)	Italy	40
2022	Municipality of Rosello (Chieti)	Italy	41
2023	Municipality of Macra (Cuneo)	Italy	42
2024	Municipality of Ledro (Trento)	Italy	43

NATIVITY SCENES IN SAINT PETER'S SQUARE

Year	Donors	Nation	Number
2012	Basilicata Region	Italy	1
2013	Archdiocese of Naples	Italy	2
2014	Diocese of Verona-Fondazione Verona per l'Arena and Fondazione Arena di Verona	Italy	3
2015	Archdiocese of Trent and Province of Trent in cooperation with the Amici del presepio di Tesero Association	Italy	4
2016	Archdiocese of Malta	Malta	5
2017	Abbey of Montevergine (Avellino)	Italy	6
2018	Municipality of Jesolo (Venice)	Italy	7
2019	Municipality of Scurelle (Trent)	Italy	8
2020	Castelli in Abruzzo (Teramo)	Italy	9
2021	Huancavelica Region	Peru	10
2022	Municipality of Sutrio (Udine)	Italy	11
2023	Valle Reatina- Diocese of Rieti	Italy	12
2024	Municipality of Grado (Gorizia)	Italy	13

NATIVITY SCENE IN PAUL VI HALL FROM BETHLEHEM, FROM THE TORMENTED HOLY LAND

This year's nativity scene in the Paul VI Hall is set in the Holy Land, where destruction, massacres and horror take place on a daily basis. The message of the nativity scene is even more important this year: the birth of Jesus, Prince of Peace, He who came to save humanity from evil. It is not just one nativity scene, but several representations of the Nativity, produced in Bethlehem by local artisans, The artistic installation is called, "The Nativity of Bethlehem 2024", and was designed by two artists from Bethlehem: Johnny Andonia and Faten Nastas Mitwasi.

Its main structure is three metres tall and has a circular base with several levels depicting several nativity scenes. The last level has the famous star of Bethlehem.

From a distance, a scene from a cave shaped like a landscape, reveals the figures of the Holy Family on the lower level. The background of the upper level recalls the hills of Bethlehem. "The Nativity of Bethlehem 2024" is a combination of the centuries-old traditions of local artisans and contemporary elements. Its main structure is made of iron, while the statues of the Holy Family and the ones depicting other characters are made of olive wood, nacre, ceramic, glass, felt and fabric.

During the preparation, collection and construction of the work of art, the artists collaborated with some local Christian institutions: the University of Dar al-Kalima; the Piccirillo Artisanal Centre, a joint project of the John Paul II Foundation and the Custody of the Holy Land created in 2014 to respond to the financial and social needs of the people of the city, in particular those with special needs and disabilities; Ma'an lil-Hayat, (Together for Life), the only community-based project in Palestine that involves people with and without intellectual disabilities working in creative textile activities and sharing daily life in a protected workshop—it was founded in August 2009, and is a member of the International Federation of Arche communities; Dar at-Majus (Home of the Magi) located near the Basilica of the Nativity, which was founded by Pro Terra Sancta. Dar at-Majus community centre is divided into three sections: listening and support in which doctors and social workers provide practical psychological assistance, especially to young people; professional formation to face the endemic plight of unemployment and encourage young entrepreneurs; a cultural section that provides training courses.

The Star of Bethlehem at the top level of the nativity scene is rich with symbolism. The silver star has 14 points and is a

replica of the one on the marble pavement below the "Altar of the Nativity", inside the Basilica of Bethlehem. It marks the precise spot in which Jesus Christ was born. The star bears the words: Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est (Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary in this spot).

The star's 14 points represent the generations of Jesus, from Abraham to David, from David to the evil of Babylon and from there to Jesus Christ (Matt 1:17). Some say that the 14 points represent the 14 station of the Via Crucis.

The practice of installing nativity scenes in the Paul VI Hall is relatively new. In the past, it was the task of the Directorate for Infrastructure and Services. When Mexico promoted an initiative at the Vatican Museums, called "Mexican Christmas in the Vatican", in 2010, which displayed a nativity scene and Christmas tree with traditional decorations and artisanship from one State in Mexico, accompanied by a photographic exhibition, the idea arose to display a Mexican nativity scene and Christmas tree also in the Paul VI Hall. Until 2018, a Mexican State has displayed a tree and nativity scene, not only in the Vatican Museums, but also in the Paul VI Hall.

In 2019, for the first time, the display of the nativity scene was entrusted to an Italian association, the Artistic Nativity Scene Group from Parè di Conegliano. The nativity scene was set in the cottages of the 1800s of Fittanze di Erbezzo. Its structure was built in the shape of a shed with an old arch. At the time, these constructions were used in Veneto Region as stables for animals. The statues were around 1.30 metres tall and wore traditional Venetian costumes. They were hand carved in wood by artisans from Ortisei in Val Gardena, Bolzano. The following years the nativity scenes were set up by different artists and associations, who offered their representations inspired by their local cultural traditions.



Year	Region Country	Number
2019	Artistic Nativity Scene Group, Parè di Conegliano (Treviso) Italy	1
2020	No one	2
2021	Saint Bartholomew Parish in Gallo (Vicenza) Italy	3
2022	Guatemala Italy	4
2023	Valle Reatina-Diocese of Rieti Malta	5
2024	Palestine Italy	6

THE NATIVITY SCENE FROM GRADO IN SAINT PETER'S SQUARE JESUS IS BORN IN A LAGOON

Picture yourself on a batela, a small flat-bottomed boat, rowing along the canals of Grado Lagoon, where the water is only a few centimetres deep.

The only noises that can be heard comes are the lapping of the oars that move the water, birds flapping their wings, and sometimes, the rustle of the wind that blows cross the vegetation.

The lagoon is brimming with the silence of poetry, even more filled with pathos during certain times of the year, like when fog envelopes the canals, the mud, and the islands where the casoni are located.

To admire the nativity scene in Saint Peter's Square, this year, means to feel at least some of these sensations.

Grado Lagoon is a unique environment characterized by mud, where vegetation is rife and varied, and includes the fiuri de tapo, the limonium flowers, beloved by the people of Grado and by tourists for their purple hues.

In addition to the Nativity and the statues, what is striking on first sight is that a small portion of the Grado Lagoon was recreated as faithfully as possible, with its water, vegetation and birds. Also impressive is the faithful replica of a big casone, made of swamp reeds, which hosts the Nativity.

The eye is first drawn to this and to other numerous statues, some 20 in total, all made of "fango nuo", that is, mud enriched with special "ingredients" that also largely make up the clothing.

Yes, because to live in a lagoon, as a few hundred fishermen from Grado did, means working almost all of the time in the sea and the mud of the lagoon.

Too bad we cannot smell the smells (but the environment surely calls them to mind) and not even replicate the colours, which change from one minute to the next over the seasons.



To bring this great work, great also because of its size, to Saint Peter's Square was undoubtedly a great feat for the Community of Grado.

It all began with the idea of one person, and then grew into a work that involved some 40 people, who represent a big part of the city.

The nativity scene set in a unique environment, which became and is the nativity scene of the Community of Grado, was supported by the Region and the Municipality.

It is the spirit that brought together so many people, who worked assiduously for a long period of time. The nativity scene was in fact made piece by piece. Most of the materials used were recycled or recovered from the lagoon's islands, like for example dry pine needles found on the ground.

Let us look at the nativity scene in greater detail.

The first impression is that the nativity scene is living, almost in movement, like the water that gently rocks the batela, thanks to a contraption that simulates the movement of waves.

Then one notes the real life of the casoneri, the inhabitants of the casoni, the huts made from swamp reeds which were built to withstand water and wind.

It was a life based on fishing activities. Another important value that is highlighted in the nativity scene is the family, including a grandmother who looks after her grandchildren on a small beach created for the occasion.

One of the nativity's scenes unique characteristics is that the Magi travel to the Nativity on a batela, where the rower is not a fisherman, but the wife of a fisherman, whose husband is busy at work.

In the lagoon, all the members of families work.

This is how the nativity scene becomes a representation of the





family, love, labour and the natural beauty that must be preserved.

It is a unique and unusual nativity scene that differs from the real story, and is wonderfully described in a booklet printed by the Community of Grado (there are QR codes on the barriers outside the nativity scene, through which the booklet can be accessed).

The story of the birth of Jesus is set in a lagoon, and is enriched with geographical and historical notations, including the words of Archbishop Carlo Maria Redaelli of Gorizia:

“To represent the birth of Jesus in a casóne in Grado Lagoon does not mean to deny the historical truth of the event, but rather to affirm that He was incarnated also for the people, who through the centuries, lived on the islands of the lagoon, and were perhaps in a worse state of poverty than the shepherds in Bethlehem, but who maintained and transmitted the faith from one generations to the next, celebrating Christmas over the centuries as a celebration of that God who never forgot about them, because he made himself the brother, friend and saviour of every man and every woman”.

Lastly, some technical details.

A project designed by the architect, Andrea de Walderstein, the nativity scene measures 14 x 30 metre, and like in real life, it has a body of water with two batele (one of them has a lugsail with the symbol of Elias, who had the large Basilica of Saint Euphemia built. It was consecrated in 579).

The nativity scene also includes briccole, which indicate the canals that lead to Aquileia, Venice, Trieste and the small island-sanctuary of Our Lady of Barbana, which was built in 582, after a storm uncovered a statue of Our Lady among the branches of a large elm tree.



The casone made of reeds and clay sits atop mud, and consists of 102 pieces of polystyrene worked by hand. The nativity scene depicts birds, including seagulls, terns, curlews, cormorants, herons, stilts, mallards, wild geese and common teals, as well as vegetation, including local shrubs and trees, such as the pino da leppo, field maple, tamerisk, Indian shot, Phillyrea and horn-beam.

And lastly, the artistic lighting that highlights all the details of the nativity scene, including the greenish grey seabed.

Antonio Boemo



The majestic fir tree that will illuminate Saint Peter's Square on Christmas 2024 comes from Valle di Ledro (Trento Region)

From the heart of Trento Region, the valley suspended between the green peaks of the Prealps and the emerald water of the lake that gives the name to the territory, in which it is nestled, the small community of Ledro distinguished itself in these last months with an initiative of great importance to Christmas. A majestic 29-metre tall red fir tree from the forests around the lake, was selected and generously donated by Valle di Ledro, to the Holy See, to decorate Saint Peter's Square, during the 2024 Christmas season. It is not only a symbol of tradition and celebration, but also an example of sustainability and respect for the environment.

The selection process of the specimen destined for Saint Peter's Square was made with attentiveness by the head of the Garden and Environment Services of the Governorate of Vatican City State, in cooperation with the forest authorities of the Municipality of Ledro. During an inspection at the end of August, a mature tree measuring 29 metres with a well-developed crown, was identified in an area that was accessible, and in compliance with the demands of the Vatican. The choice of the specimen was not only made on the basis of aesthetic reasons, but also with ecological responsibility, considering that the removal of the tree will ensure the natural exchange of the forest over the next decades, as explained by the forest authorities of the Municipality of Ledro. "The forests of our territory are PEFC-certified. A PEFC forest is a forest that is managed according to the strictest environmental, social and financial criteria. The annual regrowth of Ledro forests is certified for 8,260 cubic metres, and



the fir tree that was removed is part of one of the batches that will have to be cut for the correct cultivation of the forest".

"Identifying a tree in line with the precise demands of the Governorate was not simple: on every outing to the territory, for vigilance, inspections or other reasons, our eyes were ever vigilant, with the intention of finding a "palpable" specimen. Equipped with a hypsometer and a tree calliper, we estimated the height and weight, and considered the position of each exemplary that we considered interesting. In the end, we found several in the areas of Molina, Concei and Tiarno di Sopra, but the removal of the selected tree and its transportation to Rome were not simple: taking into account that it was a plant that had to arrive in one piece, 700 kilometres away from where it was cut with great attention, and had to be packed without damage to its crown".

Renato Girardi, Mayor of Ledro, underlined the importance of this gesture for the local community: "It is a privilege to represent our Valley in such a prestigious context as Saint Peter's Square, the heart of a message of hope and joy for all humanity. This event not only celebrates Christmas traditions, but it also further strengthens, the bonds of friendship that exist between the Municipality of Ledro, the neighbouring municipalities of Alto Garda, the twin cities of the Czech Republic and other for-





Marisa Dubini, President of Apsp "Giacomo Cis" of Ledro (local retirement home) highlighted the kindness of involving the guests of the retirement home in the project: "Assisted by social workers, our elderly residents, immediately put themselves to work, preparing the decorations, participating enthusiastically in an initiative, that not only made them feel alive, useful and active, but also made them feel proud of their contribution in such a significant and unique event as this".

Chiara Fedrigotti, ecologist at the MUSE-Museum of Science of Trento, mentioned the impact of the removal of the majestic fir tree on the hills of Valle di Ledro: "The fir tree has left room for new life in the forest from where it was removed: the undergrowth will soon grow small plants that will face the sunlight, while the local fauna will find a regenerated natural habitat".

"The red fir tree from Ledro, destined to stand in Saint Peter's Square, beside the nativity scene, represents the magic of Holy Christmas and our Municipality's commitment to constantly protect the environment and preserve local traditions. This special gift from Valle di Ledro to the Holy See", Mayor Renato Girardi concluded, "thus promises to illuminate the heart of Rome and all of humanity, with its beauty and its profound significance".

The lighting ceremony will take place in the evening of 7 December, in the presence of Cardinal Fernando Vérgez Alzaga, and other representatives of the Church, marking the official beginning of Christmas celebrations in the Vatican. Visitors and the faithful from the whole world will be able to admire the magical atmosphere of the Christmas tree and the nativity scene in Saint Peter's Square, until the end of the Christmas season on 12 January 2024.

eign friends".

The Christmas gift from Ledro to Pope Francis was not limited to the main fir tree: associations, institutions, bodies, and individual citizens dedicated themselves to the decoration of an additional 39 trees of various smaller dimensions, bought from dedicated nurseries, that will be set up in offices, public places and buildings of the Holy See. "This active participation by the community," the Mayor highlighted, "is the tangible sign of how the values of sharing and solidarity, are deeply embedded in the people of Ledro, who, with this initiative filled with feeling and Christian faith, also gathered together to foster moments of reflection on the fundamental principles of living in peace, love and friendship among peoples".





POPE FRANCIS' URBI ET ORBI MESSAGE

Appeal for peace in Israel, Palestine and Lebanon

"To say 'yes' to the Prince of Peace, then, means saying 'no' to war, to every war and to do so with courage, to the very mindset of war, an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly", Pope Francis said from the Central Loggia of the Basilica of Saint Peter, during last year's Urbi et Orbi message.

The Pope's message continued by highlighting that saying "no" to war also means saying "no" to weapons, warning that the "human heart is weak and impulsive; if we find instruments of death in our hands, sooner or later we will use them".

He then condemned the use and sales of arms: "And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise? Today, as at the time of Herod, the evil that opposes God's light hatches its plots in the shadows of hypocrisy and concealment. How much violence and killing takes place amid deafening silence, unbeknownst to many"! After all, the Pope added, people, "who desire not weapons but bread, who struggle to make ends meet and desire only peace, have no idea how many public funds are being spent on arms. Yet that is something they ought to know! It should be talked about and written about, so as to bring to light the interests and the profits that move the puppet-strings of war".

The Holy Father then expressed his hope that the prophecy of Isaiah would soon be fulfilled, when men "will not learn war any more", but instead, "beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (2:4).

He called for an end to hostilities in the Holy Land, where the situation has worsened in the last year. He invoked the Prince of Peace, especially for Israel and Palestine, "where war is devastating the lives of those peoples. I embrace them all, particu-

larly the Christian communities of Gaza, the parish of Gaza, and the entire Holy Land. My heart grieves for the victims of the abominable attack of 7 October last, and I reiterate my urgent appeal for the liberation of those still being held hostage".

Pope Francis appealed for an end to all military operations, "with their appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims, and call[ed] for a solution to the desperate humanitarian situation by an opening to the provision of humanitarian aid". He called for an end to fuelling violence and hatred, and the start of efforts to solve the Palestinian question, "through sincere and persevering dialogue between the parties, sustained by strong political will and the support of the international community. Brothers and sisters, let us pray for peace in Palestine and in Israel".

The Pontiff also turned his thoughts to the people of tormented Syria and Yemen, who are still suffering. Almost prophetically, his thoughts also turned to "the beloved Lebanese people, and I pray that political and social stability will soon be attained" And lastly, he added: "Contemplating the Baby Jesus, I implore peace for Ukraine. Let us renew our spiritual and human closeness to its embattled people, so that through the support of each of us, they may feel the concrete reality of God's love".

Pope Francis concluded by reminding the faithful that the time of grace and hope of the Jubilee was approaching, and that this time of preparation was an opportunity for conversion of hearts, in order to say "no" to war and "yes" to peace. He then invited them to welcome the Saviour, and to open up our hearts to the Prince of Peace.

THE POPES AND CHRISTMAS TREES

A sign of the dazzling divine light

In order to understand the meaning and value of Christmas trees, we have chosen three excerpts from discourses made by Francis, Benedict XVI and Saint John Paul II. They are reflections on a symbol that has now entered the homes of most families and has become a part of Christmas traditions.

“Also today Jesus continues to dispel the darkness of error and sin, in order to bring mankind the joy of the divine resplendent light of which the Christmas tree is a symbol and reminder. Let us allow ourselves to be enfolded by the light of its truth, so that ‘the joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus’. (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelium Gaudium*, n. 1)”. (Pope Francis, Address to pilgrims from Bavaria for the presentation of the gift of the Christmas tree, Friday, 13 December 2013).

“It is an important symbol of the light which Christ, with his birth, gave to humanity. He, the Messiah, was made man and came to us to dispel the darkness of error and sin; this ‘condescension of God is accomplished surpassingly’ (Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, n. 11) Having faith in him means welcoming within ourselves the light that is Jesus Christ.

The Christmas tree enriches the symbolic value of the crib, which is a message of brotherhood and of friendship; an invitation to unity and peace; an invitation to make room in our lives and in society for God who offers us his omnipotent love through the frail figure of a baby, because he wants us to respond freely to his love with our love. The crib and the tree therefore bring a message of hope and love and help to create a climate conducive to living in the right spiritual and religious dimension, the mystery of the Redeemer’s birth”. (Benedict XVI, Address to a Delegation from South Tyrol, for the donation of the Christmas tree in Saint Peter’s Square, Clementine Hall, Friday, 17 November 2010).

“Next to the crib, as in St Peter’s Square, we find the traditional ‘Christmas tree’. This too is an ancient tradition that exalts the value of life, for in the winter season the evergreen fir becomes a sign of undying life. Christmas gifts are usually placed on the tree or arranged at its base. The symbol thus also becomes elo-

quent in a typically Christian sense: it calls to mind the ‘tree of life’ (cf. Gen 2: 9), a figure of Christ, God’s supreme gift to humanity.

The message of the Christmas tree is consequently that life stays ‘evergreen’ if we make a gift of it: not so much of material things, but of life itself: in friendship and sincere affection, in fraternal help and forgiveness, in time shared and reciprocal listening.

May Mary help us to live Christmas as an occasion to savour the joy of giving ourselves to our brothers and sisters, especially the neediest”. (John Paul II, *Angelus*, fourth Sunday of Advent, 19 December 2004).



THE DRAMATIC CHRISTMAS OF 1938 IN THE WORDS OF PIUS XI

It was the eve of the great war that would begin on 1 September 1939. One could see its first signs in the political, social and institutional climate. One could perceive the tension that targeted the Church, who spoke out in defence of peace and of people, people who would undergo untold suffering and tragic events. One must remember that 1938 was the year of the consolidation of the power of dictators. Between 11 and 12 March, German troops crossed into Austria, which was annexed by the Reich in what is known as the Anschluss. Between 3 and 9 May, Hitler went on an official visit to Italy. During his stay in Rome, Pius XI left the Vatican and retreated to Castel Gandolfo. He had the shutters of the window of the Apostolic Palace closed, as well as the Vatican Museums. He prohibited the Apostolic Nuncio in Italy and the Bishops from participating in receptions. On 22 August, there was a census of Jewish citizens, which became the basis for drafting the shameful racial laws.

All of Europe was in turmoil and unrest. Germany, Italy, Great Britain and France signed the Munich Agreement, with which Czechoslovakia was forced to surrender The Sudetenland to the Nazis. German troops occupied The Sudetenland between the first and the tenth of October. On the night between 9 and 10 November, members of the Nazi party and other groups burned synagogues and looted Jewish shops in Kristallnacht. Some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and transferred to concentration camps in Dachau, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald.

Faced with such a difficult situation, in his discourse to Cardinals for the exchange of Christmas and New Year's Greetings, Pius XI said he had offered his life in exchange for the peace and prosperity of the peoples, and that he wanted to renew this offer for internal peace, the peace of souls and consciences and for the good of Italy, the people who were "dearest" to him. We wished to repropose the words of Pius XI, as the Pope of the foundation of Vatican City State, and so that in the current international context of war and tensions that threaten peace, history's lessons may not be forgotten.

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS PIUS XI
TO CARDINALS OF THE HOLY ROMAN CHURCH
IN RESPONSE TO THEIR CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS

To the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church
In response to Christmas and New Year's Greetings

Con grande, profonda commozione del cuore abbiamo udito, raccolto e gustato le belle, buone e affettuose cose che l'Eminentissimo Decano del Sacro Collegio è venuto dicendo Ci a nome non soltanto suo, ma anche dell'intero Sacro Collegio e

di tutta la Prelatura Romana, secondo il rito così domestico e semplice ed insieme così solenne e magnifico di questa santa Vigilia del Natale del Signore.

Tutto è così buono e filialmente pio e posto in così calda luce di filiale pietà, anche se richiama ed accenna a tristi e dolorose cose, che non Ci resta se non ringraziare di tutto cuore, come facciamo, e presentare a tutti e singoli voi, Eminentissimi signori Cardinali, voi carissimi Prelati, in cambio dei vostri, i Nostri auguri di buon Natale, di buon Anno e di ogni bene — proprio come voi tutti e singoli desiderate, e non soltanto per voi, ma anche per tutte le care cose e per tutte le care persone, che voi portate nel vostro pensiero e nel vostro cuore: care al vostro affetto familiare ed al vostro zelo sacerdotale e pastorale.

Sappiamo e pensiamo quanti preziosi aiuti Noi vi dobbiamo nel governo della Chiesa Universale e nella cultura di tante opere di santificazione e individuale e collettiva, segnatamente nelle Comunità religiose e nella a Noi sempre tanto cara Azione Cattolica, e cogliamo a due mani l'occasione tanto propizia per ringraziarvene con tutta l'anima.

Ed ora potremmo senz'altro aggiungere quella apostolica paterna benedizione che, da quei buoni figli che siete, così piamente desiderate e così ampiamente meritate. Se non che, da una parte ecco già quasi arrivata, con quella del Santo Natale, un'altra vigilia, alla quale da parecchie parti siamo pregati di dedicare un pensiero ed un cenno, che sembrano necessari — è la vigilia del decennale della Conciliazione —, dall'altra, ecco un uditorio del quale non potrebbe certo trovarsi o pensarsi il più opportuno, vogliamo dire il più intelligente, il più illuminato, il più rispondente insomma ad un argomento già così importante in se stesso, e reso ancora più importante, e certo non più facile, dalle circostanze attuali.

Ci affrettiamo a dire, anzi a proclamare da quest'alto luogo che la Nostra celebrazione del detto decennale vuol essere un inno di vivissimo ringraziamento — il Nostro Magnificat, il Nostro Nunc dimittis, il Nostro e vostro Te Deum — a quella divina Bontà, che fin dalla Nostra prima Enciclica Ci chiamava alla memoria e sulla penna la bella parola: Ego cogito cogitationes pacis et non afflictionis, e Ci faceva quasi presago il cuore di quell'ora, che la Divina Provvidenza avrebbe presto fatto suonare, e che sarebbe toccato a Noi di non lasciare suonare invano.

Occorre appena dire, ma pur diciamo altamente, che dopo che a Dio, la Nostra riconoscenza e i Nostri ringraziamenti vanno alle altissime persone — diciamo il nobilissimo Sovrano ed il suo incomparabile Ministro — ai quali si deve se l'opera tanto importante e tanto benefica ha potuto essere coronata da buon fine e felice successo. Diciamo anche le egregie persone — il Cardinale Pietro Gasparri ed il Marchese Francesco Pacelli — che Ci

assistettero con l'eroica assiduità di un lavoro, che forse affrettò la loro morte, ed è per questo che con grato animo ne ricordiamo i nomi onorati e cari.

Ma fatta la parte dovuta, troppo dovuta, alla Nostra riconoscenza verso Dio e verso gli uomini, fatta anche la debita parte alle Nostre cordiali congratulazioni all'Italia tutta, a Noi, come di dovere, particolarmente cara fra le parti tutte care della grande Famiglia Cattolica, dobbiamo purtroppo dire, per debito di apostolica sincerità e verità, come per la edificazione, di cui, anche per la Nostra età, siamo a tutti debitori, dobbiamo purtroppo dire che l'auspicato decennale, così come a Noi viene od è fatto venire, non può portare la serena letizia, alla quale sola vorremmo far luogo, ma piuttosto arreca vere e gravi preoccupazioni e amare tristezze. Tristezze amare davvero, quando si tratta di vere e molteplici vessazioni — non diciamo proprio generali — ma certo molto numerose e in luoghi parecchi, contro l'Azione Cattolica, questa risaputa pupilla degli occhi Nostri, la quale — lo si è dovuto riconoscere e confessare anche dalla manomissione delle diverse sedi e dei loro archivi — la quale Azione Cattolica non fa né politica né non desiderate concorrenze, ma unicamente intende a fare dei buoni cristiani viventi il loro cristianesimo, e perciò stesso elementi di primo ordine per il bene pubblico, massime in un paese cattolico come l'Italia, e come anche i fatti hanno dimostrato.

Osservando lo zelo negli strati inferiori, appare troppo chiaro che, quantunque la Azione Cattolica sia distintamente contemplata nel Nostro Patto di Conciliazione, dall'alto devono partire larghi — o piuttosto occulti — gesti di permissione e di incoraggiamento perché quelle vessazioni non cessino nei diversi luoghi da un capo all'altro della Penisola. E non soltanto in piccoli luoghi o poco importanti. Ieri Ci si segnalavano Venezia, Torino e Bergamo; oggi è Milano e proprio nella persona del suo Cardinale Arcivescovo, reo di un discorso e di un insegnamento, che rientra esattamente nei suoi doveri pastorali, e che Noi non possiamo che approvare.

Ma se siamo Noi a richiamare sempre a tutti quanti che non è veramente e pienamente umano se non ciò che è cristiano, e che è inumano ciò che è anticristiano; o riguardi la comune dignità dell'uman genere, o riguardi e tocchi la dignità, la libertà, l'integrità dell'individuo, al quale, salve le debite coordinazioni e cooperazioni, è destinata la Società, come all'individuo uomo è ordinata l'opera stessa di Dio Creatore e Salvatore, al quale ogni uomo deve dire: *Deus meus es Tu ed anche Dilexit me et tradidit semetipsum pro me!*

Non soltanto amare tristezze al cuore del vecchio Padre per i maltrattamenti della sua beniamina Azione Cattolica, ma vere e gravi preoccupazioni al Capo del Cattolicesimo e Custode della moralità e della verità ha inevitabilmente procurato l'offesa, la ferita inferta al Nostro Concordato, e proprio in ciò che va a toccare il santo matrimonio, che per ogni cattolico è tutto dire. Non abbiamo bisogno di aggiungere parola a questa sem-

plice enunciazione, per dire che quella ferita è andata dritta dritta al Nostro cuore, dritta e dolorosissima. Sappiamo essersi detto che il Concordato non è stato punto vulnerato, ma è rimasto illeso. È lontano quanto può essere da Noi il pensiero di entrare in una discussione del genere: crediamo invece di dover fare una osservazione di elementare evidenza, se nulla vediamo; e l'osservazione è questa: che per ogni patto bilaterale e per la sua osservanza, l'interpretazione non può usurparsi da una parte sola, molto più deve questo valere per una interpretazione così risolutiva e liberativa da ogni impegno.

Ed un'altra osservazione vogliamo pure fare, e questa è un richiamo alla grande e gloriosa memoria di Leone XIII. Ripensando alla recente apoteosi in questa stessa Roma, preparata ad una croce nemica della Croce di Cristo, a questa vulnerazione del Concordato ed alle altre cose sopra accennate, non sembrava soverchio neanche a Noi lo sperare un riguardo almeno alla Nostra canizie; si volle invece andar oltre ruvidamente (Leonis XIII P.M., Acta, XV, p. 369). E questo richiamo: facciamo sia per onorare la memoria veramente onoranda di quel grande Pontefice, sia per metterCi davanti allo spirito di quel magnanimo perdono, ed imitarne, come di tutto cuore facciamo, il nobilissimo esempio, pregando altresì il buon Dio che si degni illuminare le intelligenze e muovere i cuori nel senso della verità e della giustizia, che sono anche le sole vere e solide basi del benessere degli individui e dei popoli ancora, mentre sta scritto nel libro divino: *Miseros facit populos peccatum.*

Abbiamo offerto la Nostra ormai vecchia vita per la pace e la prosperità dei popoli; la offriamo di nuovo perché rimanga invulnerata la pace interna, la pace delle anime e delle coscienze, e la fiorente prosperità di questa Italia, che fra i popoli a Noi tutti cari è carissima, come particolarmente cara era la patria Sua a Gesù, che dava Se stesso alla Passione e alla morte per il genere umano.

È questo il nostro voto ed augurio natalizio, ed è con questo che tutti vi benediciamo di nuovo, con tutto quello e tutti quelli che ciascuno di voi porta nel memore pensiero e nell'affetto del cuore.

24 dicembre 1938

Pio XI



FROM THE NATIONS

ALBANIA: A new spring

Family is important in Albania, so Christmas is celebrated with loved ones. During the eve of December 25th, families exchange gifts. The tradition of Santa Claus is not very widespread, and unlike other European Countries, New Year's is celebrated more than Christmas.

Albania is a small country with less than three million inhabitants, about one million of whom live in the capital. Believers of different religions coexist peacefully. The majority are Muslims, while Catholics and Orthodox Christians are minorities. Catholics are mainly found in the north, and their numbers have grown in the last 25 years with the arrival of foreign missionaries.

It is important to remember that the communist regime that ruled the country from 1946 to 1990, tried to erase the religious traditions of Albanian culture. In 1967, dictator Enver Hoxha imposed state atheism, making Albania the only officially atheist state in the world. Religious rites were banned, and those who practiced them in secret risked execution. Confessional schools were closed, and properties owned by the Church or religious congregations were confiscated. Printing books about religion was also banned. The Orthodox Church in Durrës was destroyed, and over 2,000 churches and mosques were demolished or repurposed.

Suffice it to remember the story of Cardinal Ernest Simoni, who was held for 28 years in the terrible communist prisons of

Albania and forced into hard labour. On Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024, Pope Francis referred to him as a "living martyr".

Under the regime, all religious holidays were abolished, and worship was made illegal. Christmas was also prohibited and suppressed by law. This is why the Christmas tree became the New Year's tree, and Santa Claus was referred to as Father New Year to be saved from suppression. However, the regime was unable to completely eradicate faith among the people, and some religious traditions remained alive within families, where they continued to be celebrated in secrecy. Gradually, with the advent of democracy, previous traditions were revived, and Christmas began to be celebrated again.

In a short period, the holiday regained its former importance. In all the main squares of the cities, the classic Christmas tree is set up with decorations and lights and Catholic families prepare the Nativity scene.

According to Albanian tradition, a sweet called "boklora" is prepared for Christmas lunch, while on New Year's Eve, turkey is served with a typical dessert called "baklava", made with sugar, honey, and candied fruit. It is now common on New Year's eve to wait for midnight in the town's squares, where large Christmas trees are set up.



ANDORRA: The birth of Jesus among snow-covered mountains.

The Principality of Andorra, the sixth smallest state in Europe, is a mountainous country in the Pyrenees nestled between France and Spain. Andorra la Vella is the highest capital in Europe, at 1,023 meters above sea level. The Principality was founded in 1278 and governed by two co-princes: the Bishop of the Spanish Diocese of Urgell and the President of the French Republic. Christmas is celebrated here in a unique way, that combines traditional Christian elements with local customs. The mountainous landscape and snowy winters add an even more captivating atmosphere to the Christmas season. The population predominantly speaks Catalan, and traditions are heavily influenced by Catalonia, with Spanish and French elements. Christmas in Andorra is an important celebration that draws significant public participation. Christmas decorations are a crucial part of the festivities. Cities and villages are festively adorned. The decorations in the capital, Andorra la Vella, are particularly famous. Christmas preparations begin with Advent. The first event is the lighting of decorations in the capital. This also occurs in every other parish into which the state is territorially divided. In fact, the boundaries of the parishes, according to ecclesiastical jurisdiction, gradually became civil entities, like municipalities, which are the basic administrative divisions of the state. The lighting of the Christmas decorations in the parishes is always accompanied by a band, which in the capital, is the band of the Music Institute of Andorra la Vella.

On 13 December, the Santa Lucia fair takes place, featuring various Christmas markets where typical holiday decorations can be found. The one in Plaza del Poble is particularly

famous, with the participation of the Cor dels Petits Cantors de Andorra and the band of the Music Institute Andorra la Vella. Christmas in Andorra is a blend of traditional Christian customs and local cultural practices, creating a unique and memorable festive atmosphere.

On Christmas Eve, the classic feast takes place, with traditional dishes made with meat, pastries, and desserts. Among them is Trinxat, a dish made with potatoes, cabbage, and bacon, often accompanied by sausage; Escudella, a hearty soup with meat, vegetables, and pasta; as well as Embotits (local cold cuts like botifarra, spiced and cured pork sausages) and goat and sheep cheese, produced in the Andorran valleys. Coca Masegada is another typical dessert, similar to a sweet focaccia, often flavoured with anise.

Then there's the inevitable Santa Claus or the Tió de Nadal from Catalan tradition, the log that is fed and dressed and then beaten to release candies. The nativity scene is also a staple in every home and public place, and prepared with such great attention and passion that it is a true work of art. There's even a monumental nativity scene that has become a tradition, like the one in Canillo, which takes place along the streets and squares, involving local residents. This nativity scene consists of over two hundred life-sized figures spread across some 30 scenes that wind through Passeig Carlemany and the old town of Canillo, including the Plaça de Sant Cerni at the top of the church and the mill on Carrer Major.

Among the characters are Their Majesties, the Magi from the East, the shepherds tending to their flocks, and the farmers with their farm tools and farm animals. Since 1956, thanks to Esteve Albert i Corp, a living nativity scene has also been held in Engordany.

Els Pastorets (the little shepherds) is another Andorran tradition. It dates back to the miracle plays of the Middle Ages, called officium pastorum. These performances are now widely popular in Catalan-speaking regions, and since 1994, they have been organized every year in Sant Julià de Lòria, following the original work of Josep M. Folch i Torres.

The Principality keeps a number of Christmas traditions alive. One of these is the Misa del



gallo, the Eucharistic celebration on Christmas Eve held in all Andorran parishes. The reason it is called Misa del gallo is inspired by three traditions. The first comes from a popular legend stating that a rooster was the first animal in the stable to announce the birth of Jesus with its crowing, along with the angels. The second tradition dates back to Jerusalem, where it was customary to hold a midnight Mass that concluded with a procession to the city's most important temple, where a dawn Mass was celebrated at the moment the rooster crowed. The third tradition recounts that in fifth-century Rome, Pope Sixtus III initiated the practice of holding a night vigil at midnight on Christmas. Since it is a celebration, it is also customary to offer chocolate, mulled wine, and cookies at the end of Mass. In Andorra la Vella, the gathering takes place at the church of Sant Esteve and at the church of Santa Coloma. New Year's celebrations are also significant. A very important event is the traditional New Year's waltz concert, performed by the Andorran National Classical Orchestra (ONCA). Another classical music concert takes place in the National Auditorium in Odino, the northernmost parish of the country.

Epiphany is another important celebration. It begins on January 4, when a royal page announces the arrival of Their Majesties, the Magi from the East. Children can give their letters addressed to the Magi directly to their pages. For this occasion, special little houses are set up for the pages, where the letters are received. On the eve of the Epiphany, the famous "Cavalcata" takes place, when the Magi parade through the streets and squares of Andorra la Vella and Escaldes-Engordany. All the parishes get involved. During the parade, accompanied by floats and costumed characters, the Magi throw candy to the children as they pass by. Among the participants are shepherds, Romans, and camels, accompanied by musical bands. The day of the Epiphany is dedicated to attending Mass in various churches.



ARGENTINA: Jesus is born in the middle of summer.

Christmas traditions came to Argentina with the arrival of immigrants, particularly from Spain and Italy, and with the influence of Western culture conveyed by the mass media over the years. Indeed, even the food customs linked to the traditional holidays in the Northern Hemisphere, are observed, even though Christmas falls in the summer in the Southern Hemisphere. Thus, people eat dried fruits, nuts, hazelnuts, sweet breads with yeast, and other sweets.

There is no doubt that tradition dictates Christmas should be spent with family, around a decorated Christmas tree, enjoying a large dinner. On Christmas Eve, the faithful attend Midnight Mass. After Mass, a fireworks display is usually held, and, as in North America, the gifts that were placed under the tree are exchanged. Adults typically drink cider or fruit juice mixed with pieces of fruit, and given the summer season, young people go out to dance, while older people dance at home.

Argentines decorate their homes predominantly in red and white for Christmas. Families hang red Christmas stockings and decorate the tree with flashing lights. Due to strong European influence, it is common to see traditional Christmas decorations such as snow, reindeer, and Santa Claus.

Not only Buenos Aires, but all the provinces of Argentina have, in their traditional heritage, Christmas celebrations to observe the birth of Jesus. In almost every home, a 'pesebre' (nativ-

ity scene) or 'nacimiento' is set up.

People compete with one another to create the most original or most traditional nativity scene, with few or many figures, made of wood, ceramic, and plaster, and different settings.

The introduction of Spanish and Italian Christmas traditions to the country led to their local interpretations. Thus, the European winter celebration became a summer holiday in South America.

For the holiday feast, turkey and pork are inevitably served, accompanied by wine and toast or dessert. Also popular, are the famous Vitel Toné, a traditional egg salad with potatoes and mayonnaise, asado (grilled beef), served with chorizos (sausages) and morcillas (a type of blood sausage).

Stuffed tomatoes with tuna salad, as well as ice cream, cakes, and nougat, can also be part of Christmas meals. In particular, pan dulces (a type of fruitcake), puddings, canned peaches, and Mantecol—a semi-soft nougat made with peanut butter, inspired by the Greek dessert halva—are commonly enjoyed. Typically, clericó, an alcoholic drink made with various fruits such as oranges, pineapples, peaches, melon, and strawberries, is served, mixed with either white or red wine.

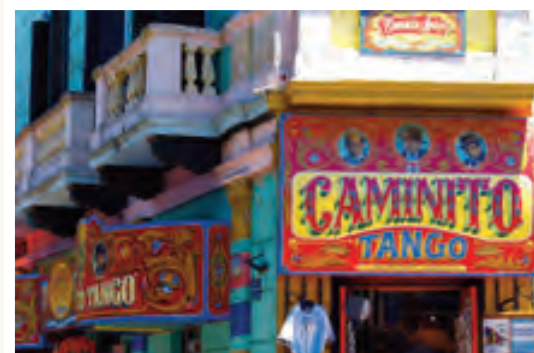
On 31 December, people gather for the holiday dinner and drink the traditional mate as a digestif. Mate is an infusion made from yerba mate, a plant that has been consumed by indigenous populations since ancient times. It is drunk using a metal straw called a bombilla, or as mate cocido and served in a large cup. Usually, it is shared from the same cup, making it a ritual that brings people together.

In Argentina, 6 January, the Solemnity of Epiphany, is a holiday. On the night of 5 January, children leave their shoes by the nativity scene, in the hopes of finding a small surprise (coins) upon waking,



or they leave letters with gift requests, so that the Magi will know how many children are in each home.

For the occasion, Rosca de Reyes is eaten, a traditional ring-shaped cake from Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas, filled with custard, hard-boiled eggs, and, in some cases, fruit. Inside, it contains 'surprises' from the Three Kings.



AUSTRIA: when baby Jesus brings the gifts

Snowy peaks, majestic mountains, cities rich with history and art where faith has deep roots. One month before Christmas, all of Austria lives in a unique atmosphere characterised by ancient traditions. Advent is called “the most peaceful time of the year”, in which people decorate their homes, learn and sing Christmas carols and make their famous cookies.

It all starts with the Adventkranz, the Advent wreath, a wreath made with pine branches and four candles that symbolize the weeks that remain until Jesus' birth. Both in churches and in homes, a candle is lit every Sunday to brighten up the brief hours of daylight. When the four candles are all lit, the children know that Christkindl, Baby Jesus, is about to arrive. It is he who brings the gifts to children, not Santa Claus. According to tradition, Baby Jesus goes to all the homes on Christmas Eve, and leaves gifts under the Christmas tree or the nativity scene, without being seen.

Another tradition is Adventkalender, Advent calendar, which has 24 windows, representing 1-24 December. Each morning the children open one window and find a surprise, or in larger calendars, chocolates. They thus learn to count the days left until Christmas in a fun way. During Advent, one cannot go without homemade cookies. All women, from homemakers to members of parliament, make some kind of Christmas cookie. The tradition is the same all over Austria and is the most obvious expression that cookies are a way to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Indeed, already in November, shops sell all the necessary ingredients: marzipan, hosts,

dried fruit, spices, candied fruit and chocolate icing. There are many different kinds of cookies as to satisfy everyone: Vanillekipferl, vanilla croissants covered with sugar, Linzeraugen, shortbread biscuits from Linz filled with apricot jam, Kokosbusserl, coconut kisses and speculoos or Lebkuchen, made with cinnamon and chocolate.

Mountain towns and villages spread across the highlands, celebrate Barbarazweige on 4 December, in memory of the martyrdom of Barbara, Patron Saint of firefighters. According to tradition, on that day, people cut branches, particularly from cherry trees, and put them in hot water in the hope that they will blossom on Christmas Eve. If they do, it will be a happy year.

Saint Nicholas arrives on 6 December, and is very celebrated by the children. On 5 December, parents prepare small gifts, especially sweets hidden in stockings. In some towns, Saint Nicholas, goes to the streets, dressed as a bishop, with a large sack filled with presents that he distributes to children. He knocks on doors where the children are waiting for him, singing songs dedicated to Saint Nicholas or reciting prayers in his honour. He is usually followed by a musical band and the Krampus, demons carrying chains and branches to “punish” children who misbehaved throughout the year.

On the three Thursdays that precede Christmas, known as Klöpfelnächte, the Anklöpfler (literally knocking at) roam through the streets of Tiroler Unterland. They are men dressed as shepherds who announce the birth of Jesus with carols that have been passed on from generation to generation. These shepherds knock on the doors of homes and sing songs, accompanied by traditional musical instruments. They wish to recall Mary and Joseph's search for an inn in Bethlehem.

Traditionally, people believed that the doors to the other world were open on the 12 Rauh-nächte (nights of incense), between 24 Decem-



ber and 6 January. To avoid the danger of being visited by unpleasant people, several customs and rituals evolved in Tyrol. Especially on the three most important nights, Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and the night of 5 January, Gömmenacht, many families still burn incense to protect their home from potential damage and to pray for good fortune in the new year. On Christmas, a tree is decorated in every home, church and public space. Almost all families use a real fir tree. Indeed, by the end of November, all kinds of fir trees can already be found in the main cities and also in Vienna. Even if it is purchased ahead of time, it will not be shown to children until Christmas Eve, after “Christkindl” which is announced by a little bell known as “Glöckchen”.

On Christmas Eve, families sing Christmas carols or read Christmas-themed poems or passages from the Gospel on Jesus' childhood.

As they wait for the arrival of “Christkindl”, everyone sits down for the Christmas Eve meal, usually made with simple food, such as baked sausages, (Bratwürstel), goose, soup, a plate of cold cuts and cheese, or fish, especially carp.

At midnight, families attend Christmas Mass. To meet the needs of people with younger children, parishes also celebrate Holy Mass in the afternoon of Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day, people visit their friends and family.

Nativity scenes are also part of the Christmas tradition in Austria, as is visiting nativity scenes which is known as “Krippele schaug'n”. People from different towns go in groups to visit nativity scenes in churches and public places. Private artisans allow visitors to see how they carve the figurines. In Tyrol, schools of sculpture and associations offer courses on how to make nativity scenes. Each year in Salzburg Region, from 24 December to 2 February, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, known as Candelora, many farmers and engravers open the



doors of their homes to allow visitors to see their family nativity scenes. Artisan nativity scenes and private ones are the result of a decree made by Emperor Joseph in 1782, who banned churches from displaying nativity scenes. Thus, talented artisans began to make artistic nativity scenes in homes, with characters and landscapes of Austria.

Usually, nativity scenes and Christmas trees are kept until the Feast of "Maria Lichtmess", on 2 February, Candelora.

In 1816, in Lungau, Salzburg Region, the priest, Joseph Mohr, wrote the words to *Stille Nacht*, one of the famous Christmas carols in the world, which has been translated into 300 languages and dialects.

Franz Xaver Gruber had composed the music. The carol was sung for the first time in public in 1818 during a Mass in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Oberndorf.

There is also a tradition of Christmas charity called "Lichts in Dunkel", Light in the darkness, promoted by the ORF-Landestudio Oberoesterreich Radio and Television of Linz, in which donations can be made to benefit disabled children, socially marginalized people and foreigners in need, such as refugees. As part of this initiative, in 1986 ORF launched "Light of Peace from Bethlehem", with the Christian tradition in mind and as a sign of gratitude for the many donations.

In the Basilica of Bethlehem, there is a permanently-lit oil lamp, provided by Christian coun-

tries. Each year, in December, just before Christmas, an Austrian boy, chosen because of his social commitment, travels to Bethlehem to light a lamp with the flame in the Grotto of the Nativity. The lamp is then brought to Linz on an Austrian airliner, and from there, with the cooperation of Austria's Österreichische Bundesbahnen (ÖBB), Vienna's scouts spread the light throughout the country. With the help of scouts from other countries, the light then spreads throughout Europe.

After Christmas, the Feast of the Epiphany is celebrated with great enthusiasm, accompanied by the traditional "Hymn of the three Magi". The Sternsingen, cantors of the star, usually three altar boys from the parish, dress up as the three Kings, while a fourth boy carries a stick with a star at the top. They go from home to home singing and narrating the story of the Magi, and collecting money for poor children in the world. At the end of their visit, the Magi bless the house, and write their initials with white chalk on the jamb of the main doors: 20 + C + M + B + 25. The meaning of the symbols is: 20 stands for 2000, the current century, c+m+b are the initials of the Magi, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, which can also stand for *Christus mansionem benedicat*, that is, may Christ bless this house. The number 25 indicates the year, so the next one will be 26.



BELGIO: celebrating with Saint Nicholas

In the Kingdom of Belgium, where chocolate abounds and there are 1,500 types of beer, many of which are made by Benedictine and Trappist Abbeys, Christmas celebrations begin with Advent. Homes and churches make Advent wreaths with fir leaves on which four different coloured candles are placed. The candles are lit each Sunday until Christmas Day. Children also use Advent calendars, from 1-24 December, and every day they find a new sweet or chocolate.

The main festivity for children is 6 December, Saint Nicholas Day. As tradition dictates, on the evening of 5 December, children leave their shoes near the chimney. They also leave a carrot for Saint Nicholas' horse. But the Bishop does not come alone. He is accompanied by his loyal assistant, Père Fouettard. This is why in some areas, children also leave a glass of beer

for Père Fouettard. If children were well-behaved during the year, Saint Nicholas leaves them some sweets, dried fruit and mandarins. If they were not, he leaves them a lump of coal. This tradition dates back to a legend that says that Saint Nicholas was particularly kind to children. One day, he came to know that a faraway village had been struck by famine, and that in a short time, innocent children would die if no one intervened. The Saint thus, took flour, sugar, fruit and other foodstuff and travelled by ship to the area, saving the community.

Students in university towns abandon their classes and gather to march, sing and drink. The money they need is collected by students, who go around the city asking people for a contribution. Those who refuse are covered in flour

On Christmas Eve, people gather with their



families to celebrate the birth of Jesus. In addition to Santa Claus, who leaves gifts below the tree, presents are often exchanged immediately after dinner without waiting for midnight. The supper is composed of stuffed turkey or game, roast and fish. For dessert people eat a yule log made of sponge cake covered in chocolate, or chocolate marzipan balls. Many attend Midnight Mass and then assemble in the squares of their cities. One of the most popular gatherings takes place in Brussels' Grand-Place, where thousands of people watch the lighting of the candles at midnight, with their families.

On New Year's eve, people celebrate well into the night. Children write letters to their relatives to wish them a happy New Year. At midnight, families and friends embrace and wish one another good fortune. New Year's day is the day of sauerkrauts and families get together to eat them.

The Solemnity of the Epiphany, 6 January is a much-loved festivity for children. They dress up as the Magi and go from house to house in their neighbourhood, singing Christmas carols. In exchange they receive sweets made with almond paste or a plastic figurine or a broad bean. Whoever gets the broad bean is king or queen of the evening. In the past, there was also a tradition of cutting a slice of cake for every person at the table, plus one, which was the portion destined for the poor. It was given to the first poor person who came to their home.

Since Belgium has three official languages, there are several ways to say happy Christmas. In Flanders, where Flemish is spoken, people say, "Vrolijk Kerstfeest". In the southern part of the country, in Wallonia, which is French-speaking, they say, "Joyeux Noël". And in the eastern part of the country, where there is a minority of German speakers, they say, "Frohe Weihnachten".



CANADA: The oldest parade in the world

Christmas in Canada is celebrated more or less like in other countries in the West, with greater similarities to France, Britain and the United States of America. Celebrations vary from one province to the next, but they are similar throughout Canada, the Great North, covered in snow and ice.

Traditional Christmas decorations are not very different from the French ones. There are Christmas trees and Christmas lights decorate the facades of homes and shops throughout the streets of cities and neighbourhoods.

Midnight Mass in Canada is packed, and usually starts at 8:00 p.m.

Like in France, Christmas lunch is a moment of communion within families. Turkey is a popular dish. In Québec, they eat tourtière, a pie stuffed with chicken or beef and spices in the consistency of paté, meatball stew and for dessert, Yule logs and eggnog. More than six million litres of eggnog are consumed in Canada during the month of December.

Among the traditions borrowed from the English, is the passion for Christmas jumpers. People compete for who wears the tackiest one.

In the towns and in cities, there are Christmas parades which are hugely popular, especially in Vancouver and Toronto. Thousands of people turn out to see them. Toronto has the record of holding the world's oldest parade for children. It has been organized for more than 100 years and

takes place in November. Meanwhile, in Montreal, there is the famous "Montreal en fêtes" festival.

Every year since 6 December 1917, when there was an explosion resulting from the collision of two ships filled with explosives, the city of Halifax in Nova Scotia donates a Christmas tree to Boston, to thank the city's Red Cross for sending aid to survivors.

Like in Great Britain, on 26 December, Boxing Day, gifts are given to mailmen and to people who have less. The term Boxing Day comes from the word box. In the 19th century, people had the custom of giving a gift to the poor. Wealthy British families filled boxes with the leftovers from Christmas lunch, and gave them to their serving staff.

Another explanation for the tradition, is the donation boxes that were placed in churches throughout



Christmastime. They were opened on 26 December and distributed among the poor. Like in France, on the Feast of the Epiphany, Galette des Rois is baked in honour of the Magi, and children receive gifts



CZECH REPUBLIC: When Baby Jesus is clothed in new white fabric

Christmas in the Czech Republic is observed both by Christians and by atheists, who are the majority of the population. From the first days of December, the start of Advent, cities are alive with lights, decorations, festoons and Christmas markets.

Like in Many northern European countries, in the Czech Republic the Feast of Saint Nicholas on 6 December is widely celebrated. It is not uncommon to see the Saint dressed in white in the company of an angel and a devil, in the streets of towns and cities, as he distributes sweets to good children or a lump of coal to children who misbehaved.

In Prague and in the whole country, Christmas is not celebrated on 25 December, but on Christmas Eve when all the shops and businesses close. Families spend the day at home, decorating the Christmas tree and preparing the Christmas supper. Traditionally, the meal includes carp. Families buy live carps from the market and keep them in water until the mo-

Vánočka, a sweet bread with almonds and raisins. Starting from Advent, the citizens of Prague bake Vánoční cukroví, Christmas cookies of various shapes, eaten with eggnog, an alcoholic drink made from egg, rum and milk. In accordance with tradition, during the meal, Baby Jesus (Jezisek) goes from home to home and leaves presents for children under the tree. In fact, one of the devotions that is dear to the citizens of Prague is that Baby Jesus. His statue is in the Church of Our Lady of Victories in the Malá Strana neighbourhood (small neighbourhood). The Church's name was inspired by a battle on the White Mountains in 1620, when the Protestant troops of Bohemia were defeated by the troops of Catholic Emperor Ferdinand II. The statue known as Child of miracles or Little King, was donated to the Discalced Carmelites in 1628. It is 45 centimetres tall and was made in Spain. Maria Manrique de Lara, a Spanish duchess, who had married a nobleman from Bohemia, took the statue to Prague and gave it to her daughter Polyxena von Lobkowitz, as a wedding gift. When she was widowed, she donated the statue to the Discalced Carmelites. The statue of Baby Jesus wears regal clothing and holds the emblem of the sovereign. He is in the act of blessing, highlighting both Christ's humanity and his divinity. Made of wood with a wax coating, it has 66 attires. The clothing in which it is dressed is decided on the basis of the colour of the liturgical time. Millions of faithful have prayed before it, among them, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) when she went to Prague on pilgrimage. A great apostle of devotion of Venerable Fr. Cyril of the Mother of God (+1675), to whom Baby Jesus made a promise in 1637: "The more you honour me, the more I will bless you". This promise is inscribed on all the replicas of the statue.

The tradition of setting up a nativity is widespread in the country. In Třešť, in the Region of Vysočina, the tradition was introduced at the end of 18th century. There is a museum of nativity scenes in the town, which is open all year, but at Christmastime, the houses become small museums open to the public. Also famous is



the nativity scene in Probošt, Třebechovice pod Orebem, eastern Bohemia, where it is the only official national cultural monument. It was made 100 years ago by Jan Probošt, using 2,000 pieces, and includes a mobile mechanism. It was so well known that even the Emperor of Austria went to visit it.

After a big meal on 31 December, Christmas festivities begin to wind down and end with the Solemnity of the Epiphany. In Prague, a parade moves along the city's main streets. The Magi are there on their camels. They greet the children they meet along the way. The parade begins with a blessing in the Church of Saint Thomas in Malá Strana, and continues along the little streets of the Old City until it reaches Prague's Clock Square and Charles Bridge over the Vltava River.



ment they have to be cooked. They are served with salad and potatoes. For dessert, they eat



CYPRUS: Amidst water and light

The splendid island of Cyprus, is the most eastern of the major islands on the Mediterranean. Because of its geographical location, it is a crossroads between the Middle East and Europe. Paul visited the island on his first missionary journey. Chapter 13 of the Acts of the Apostles speaks about Paul preaching with the Apostle Barnabas in Cyprus, a journey spurred by the Holy Spirit. "Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:1-3).

From the Acts of the Apostles, we know that Barnabas, whose real name was Joseph, was originally from Cyprus: "Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:36-37).

Paul and Barnabas set sail from Seleucia towards Cyprus. When they reached Salamina in the gulf of Famagusta, which at the time of the Roman Empire was the biggest commercial hub in the east, they began to proclaim the Word of God in the synagogues of the Jews and they brought John with them to help. After crossing the island, they found

a magician and Jewish false prophet in Paphos named Bar-Jesus, a follower of the Proconsul Sergius Paulus. According to the Acts of the Apostles, the Proconsul was "a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God But El'ymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) withstood them, seeking to turn away the proconsul from the faith".

With his theological debate with the false prophet before the representative of Rome, Paul started a new mission: to proclaim Christ to non-Jews and became the "Apostle to the Gentiles". "But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (Acts 13:9-12).

With a past that was so important for the faith and the proclamation of the Kingdom, the people of Cyprus have always celebrated Christian festivities and, after Easter, Christmas is undoubtedly the most celebrated one. The southern areas of Cyprus are predominantly Orthodox, while the northern part has a Muslim majority. Despite this,



Christmas is celebrated on 25 December which kicks off a series of traditions that end with the Solemnity of the Epiphany.

The Orthodox used to fast for 40 days in preparation for the coming of our Lord and to purify their bodies. Most people no longer observe this tradition. However for the ones who do, when the fast ends on Christmas day, food is heartily consumed.

The day in which Jesus is born must be marked by celebration and everyone gets involved. During the days before Christmas, children usually dress up as Saint Basil (in Greek Aghios Vassilis 329-379), Bishop of Caesarea and Cappadocia, whose memorial is celebrated on 1 January. They go around the streets with a triangle and a tambourine to accompany the "kálanda", traditional well-wishing carols. Men wear traditional clothing and give away coins.

On Christmas Eve, people bake a special bread, marked with a cross called, Christosomo, and offer a piece of it to whoever comes near them as they are taking it out of the oven. The bread must be eaten by the day of the Epiphany.

They also bake "birth pies" in various shapes, including animals and agricultural tools, and hang them off a beam in the ceiling of their home or in front of the icons, for good luck.

On New Year's Day, the Feast of Saint Basil, the people of Cyprus eat a soft cake, called





Vasilopita. It is placed in a wicker basket to be blessed, and eaten as the clock strikes midnight or at dawn on the first day of the year. A coin is inserted into the cake and whoever finds it in their slice will be blessed with good fortune throughout the year. The origins of the cake date back to the attack on Caesarea by the Cappadocians. To defend the city's churches, Saint Basil asked the citizens to donate all their properties for proprietary reasons. Once the attack was over, in an effort to distribute what he had collected fairly, he decided to put it in bread and offer it to all the citizens.

Traditions in Cyprus include the presence of the kalikantzaroi, mischievous elves with tails who wreak havoc to everything that

comes their way. On 25 December, they are believed to emerge from their hiding spot underground to seek revenge against humans, and they stay until 6 January, when, with the blessing of the water, they flee back underground.

On Christmas Eve, farmers slaughter a pig purchased on Palm Sunday, and make ham, posarti (soup with bones) and various types of cured meat. Some of the meat is fried and given to the poor.

At dawn on Christmas, the sound of bells announce the birth of our Saviour. The faithful participate in the Divine liturgy and then families celebrate together. After Mass, priests visit the homes of the faithful to bless them with holy water.

On the last day of the year, as they wait for Saint Basil, families assemble around the fireplace, and each member tosses an olive leaf into the flames. If the leaf crackles and turns on its other side, it is a sign of good fortune.

New Year's coincides with the Feast of Saint Basil, who is like Santa Claus for Orthodox children. He is depicted as an elderly

man with a long, white beard, wearing a red cloak and black boots up to his knees. He brings gifts for children, but instead of leaving them under the Christmas tree, he puts them under their bed or their pillow. To pay homage to Saint Basil, all homes leave the table set for him with a glass of wine and a slice of cake to restore him from his long travels. According to tradition, he also visits barns to bless the animals. For the occasion, it is customary to decorate the doors of houses with olive leaves or a wreath.

The Solemnity of the Epiphany on 6 January is a heartfelt celebration called "the day of Light", marked by the symbolism of water and light. The day's Divine liturgies recite the rite of Baptism for crosses, even the ones that are worn. The faithful light three candles from the one held by the celebrant and bring them home. In the past, families brought a small bottle of holy water with them to bless animals and fields.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, there are many processions along the sea and streams, for the ceremonial baptism of the Cross. The water recalls the River Jordan, in which Jesus was baptized. The faithful bring fruit and seeds to be blessed, in the hope of a good harvest. Moreover, grandparents offer money to their loved ones.



CROATIA: Hay and wheat to remember the birth of Jesus

In Croatia, Christmas is an important celebration, which the minority Catholic population lives with heartfelt participation. It begins with Advent and with the Feast of Saint Nicholas of Bari on 6 December, when children await the gifts of the Holy Saint, who leaves them in their shoes or boots. On 13 December, Saint Lucia Day, it was tradition for someone dressed in white to go around town distributing gifts of dried fruit and nuts to children. On this day (for some on 4 December, Santa Barbara Day), people plant wheat seeds in a container to germinate, leaving some space in the middle to fit a candle inside. Usually, some cotton is placed at the bottom to absorb water and to add some soil. Wheat is a symbol of life and fertility. Once the seeds have sprouted, they are wrapped in a ribbon bearing the colours of the Croatian flag: red, white and blue. During the Christmas meal, the container is placed on the table and throughout the festivities, it is placed below the Christmas tree, beside the nativity scene. Once the festivities are over, the wheat is fed to birds, because one cannot throw away anything that is used to remember Jesus.

Christmas Eve, is also filled with traditions: finding three wooden logs, laying out the hay, making the nativity scene and lighting candles. Three rather large logs, representing the Trinity, are put into the fireplace. Their embers are used to light the candles of the whole family. It was customary to offer

some food from the Christmas meal to the burning logs.

Another tradition linked to agriculture involves hay, a symbol to recall that Jesus was born in a stable. In the past, bringing hay into the home signalled the beginning of Christmas festivities. It was spread on the pavement below the table and under the table cloth where the meal was eaten. Once dinner was over, it was customary to sit on the hay on the floor to wait for Midnight Mass. Until the mid-19th century, it was not a tradition to set up a Christmas tree. In fact the first trees Croatians decorated were not fir trees, but rather frondiferous trees. For many years they were decorated with apples, oranges, plums, pears, sugary sweets, coloured paper, golden and silver threads and candles. Along the coast, it is customary to use some branches of sage or pine and ivy. Nativity scenes, also part of Croatia's traditions, are placed below Christmas trees. In the past, they were only set up in churches and were made of chalk and clay. However, since the 19th century, people have been setting up nativity scenes in their homes.

On Christmas Eve, all work, including cooking, had to be completed before the ringing of the evening bells. And while, people fasted on Christmas Eve, on Christmas Day, even the poorest homes had some meat to eat.

During the Christmas Eve meal, which is called *Badnji dan* in Croatian, traditional dishes like fish, cabbage and apple fritters are eaten, presents are exchanged and Christmas carols sung.

In accordance with tradition, meat is not eaten on Christmas Eve. Fish is the protagonist, especially cod, which is eaten with a spoon or spread on a slice of bread. Dalmatians serve, "*bakalar na uje*", which is cod in oil, cooked simply. In Istria and on the coast, cod is cooked with garlic and olive oil,



until it gains a patè-like consistency, and is spread on a warm slice of bread.

Cakes and sweets during the Christmas season include vanilla croissants, Linzer biscuits, *čupavci*, stollen (bishop's bread), *orahnjača* and *makovnjača*, wafers, "*mačje oči*" and savoury croissants. Cookies are baked in the shape of stars and sandwiched with jam, or in the shape of Christmas trees covered in marzipan cream. At breakfast on Christmas day, people eat a cake made with cheese. On the eve of the Solemnity of the Epiphany, water is blessed, while at dawn, stables and fields are blessed with holy water. On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, young people dress up as one of the Magi, as the bearer of the staff with the star and as other characters, and go from house to house singing Christmas carols.



DENMARK: Where Christmas is a light for all

Snow-covered expanses, decorated trees, balconies, windows, and streets filled with garlands, wreaths, and lights. Also in Denmark, Scandinavia's most southern country, Christmas traditions are deeply cherished. The birth of Jesus is celebrated with great devotion by the faithful of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, known as Den Danske Folkekirke or Folkekirke, as well as by Catholics who make up a small minority. With few hours of daylight during its winter, it is easier in Denmark to understand that Christ is the true Light of the world.

Light, therefore, is the element that marks every leg of the journey leading to Christmas, beginning with the celebration of the Advent Season, one of Denmark's most cherished traditions, involving both adults and children. Starting from 1 December to 24 December, an Advent candle is lit every day. Advent candles have markings with dates to countdown the days to Christmas. When the wax reaches the daily marking, it is put out and relit the following day. There are also weekly candles, with markings spaced out so in such a way as to ensure that the wax will last seven days.

It goes without saying that for children, this period is a true delight, as each of the 24 mornings they find a small gift pinned to the Julekalender, an Advent calendar, hung by a string on a wall or windowsill. The calendar marks the days in December leading up to Christmas, and parents attach small packages containing simple, inexpensive, yet symbolic gifts. This tradition is deeply cherished, even by

the media, so much so, that some children's television programs dedicate time to Julekalender. Another important event in the Christmas season is Luciadag, Saint Lucia Day, celebrated on the night between 12 and 13 December. It is widely celebrated in Denmark, especially by children. The festivity has its origins in the legend, in which Saint Lucia, in an effort to help the poor who were hiding in the catacombs, made a wreath on which she put some candles and placed it on her head. In this way, she could light the dark underground space of the catacombs, and her hands were free to distribute food to the people.

To commemorate the event, children participate in a candle-lit procession through the streets of towns and villages. A young woman wearing a white robe and a crown of lit candles on her head, leads a procession of young women, clad in white gowns and a red belt, carrying lit candles in their hands. It is the light of the martyr from Syracuse, whose name has its origins in the Latin praenomen, *Lúcia*, the female version of *Lucius*, from *lux* which means light. The meaning of her name is thus, "luminous", "brilliant". In antiquity, female newborns born before dawn, were often given the name.

The procession with the young girls dressed in white holding lit candles, symbolizes the desire to illuminate the hearts of those in need. This is why the parades also visit hospitals, nursing homes, and volunteer organizations.

The commemoration of the martyr Lucia, on perhaps the darkest day of the year, illuminates the streets of cities, towns, and villages across Denmark, proclaiming that soon the true Light will be born, the Light awaited by every man and woman: Christ the Saviour

Christians of all denominations are well acquainted with the words of the Evangelist John (8:12) on this matter: "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life". Some Church Fa-



thers, both Eastern and Western, liken the Church to the moon, which does not emit its own light but is illuminated by the sun, who is Christ. In fact, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, emphasizes that "Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mark 16:15), to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church".

The theme of light is also reflected in the Christmas tree, which has some unique characteristics. The choice of a tree is so important that during the Christmas season, a special train is organized to connect the capital,



Copenhagen, to the surrounding forests, where people can personally choose the tree they want to cut and bring home. Those with simpler demands buy their tree at one of the Advent markets, but even then, they opt for a natural, not artificial, tree. For Danes, contact with nature is very important, and respect for creation is fundamental. Decorations are often handmade and parents, grandparents and uncles help children make the ornaments from



paper and coloured cardboard, or out of natural objects found in forests, including leaves, moss, pinecones, and twigs.

The decoration of Christmas trees is a moment of delightful fun for children. In addition to the inevitable garlands made of many small Danish flags, decorations include paper hearts and stars, chocolates and clove and orange cookies, that fill the air with a distinctive aroma of spices.

On 24 December, the Danish hang real wax candles with candle holders on the branches of their Christmas trees. Each year a Christmas tree is set up in the Municipal Square of Copenhagen, Rådhuspladsen, which at a height of about 35 metres, is considered to be the tallest Christmas tree. During Cop 15, which was held in Copenhagen on 7-18 December 2009, in respect of creation, an environmentally sustainable fir tree was decorated with hundreds of lights powered by the energy generated by 40 bicycles placed in the Square.

The highlight of the Christmas season is the much-anticipated Christmas Eve, when Christmas, or Jul in Danish, is celebrated. December 25th is dedicated to attending Mass.

According to tradition, a festive dinner is organized, followed by the opening of presents, which usually takes place at midnight. In every family, including the royal family, before starting their meal and unwrapping presents, families hold hands in a circle and dance around the lit tree as they sing Christmas carols.

Christmas Eve dinner is an event that cannot be missed. It usually begins at 6:00 p.m. and

lasts for at least two hours. The meal consists of roast pork or duck, served with boiled potatoes, red cabbage, and gravy. For dessert, there is the traditional Risalamande, rice pudding with cherry sauce. A single almond is hidden inside the pudding, and whoever finds it receives a prize.

Even in Denmark, Santa Claus is a must, though he appears somewhat differently from the classic version we are accustomed to. He is called Julemanden, meaning "the man of Christmas", and is accompanied by a group of Nisse, mischievous elves. Julemanden delivers presents to children on 24 December.

The Christmas season is also an opportunity to open one's heart to solidarity and charity. Even a small postage stamp can help alleviate the suffering of others. In fact, Denmark has been issuing a special seal called Julemerket (Christmas stamp) since 1904. At that time, the country was struck by a severe tuberculosis epidemic that was harming children's health. Einar Holbøll, an employee at the post office on Purchmagergade, came up with the idea of issuing a charity seal for Christmas, and to donate the proceeds to protect children's health. The first stamp of its kind was issued on 6 December 1904, and featured an image of the Queen Louise of Hesse-Kassel, who had passed away in 1898. More than four million copies were sold in just one month, an unexpected success that raised almost 80,000 Danish kroner, a considerable sum at the time. The proceeds from the sales were used to purchase land near the city of Kolding, in southern Denmark. In the following years, the Christmas collection grew even more, becoming a competition of generosity. By 1911, a sanatorium for the treat-



ment of tuberculosis had opened in Kolding, entirely funded by the sale of the Christmas seals. Over the years, around 80,000 vulnerable children have benefited from the charity initiative, in five facilities built with the proceeds from the seals. In 2015, Queen Margrethe II designed the theme for the Christmas stamp. She had been depicted as a two year old on the 1942 stamp, and with her husband, Prince Henrik, in the 1972 issue.

Another Christmas family tradition is buying hand-painted ceramic plates, featuring Scandinavian winter scenes or Christmas-themed designs. Every household has at least one of these plates, usually bought in the year of the birth of a new family member. They are produced by Royal Copenhagen, the famous Danish porcelain manufacturer.

Another way to say "Merry Christmas" in Danish is "God Jul".



FINLAND: the home of santa claus

Rovaniemi, the biggest town in Finnish Lapland, is situated a few kilometres from the Arctic circle, and a few kilometres from Santa Claus' home, from where he leaves to travel around the world. It is his official residence, and one can meet him personally and visit his workshop and post office, where thousands of Christmas letters arrive from children the world over. In Finnish, it is called Joulupukki which literally means "Christmas Goat".

With about two and half hours of light in the day, and its snowy landscape, enveloped in darkness and lit only by stars and by ice lanterns in people's gardens, Christmas in Lapland is different from Christmas in other places. To bring some light to the arctic nights, Finnish people use lanterns placed inside a block of iced water or snow, creating an evocative atmosphere.

At Christmastime, wreaths made from fir branches are hung on the front doors of houses, and people enjoy gingerbread cookies or maustekakku a spiced Finnish doughnut, with a cup of glögi, a type of mulled wine, made with wine or red fruit mixed with spices. On 13 December, like in other Scandinavian countries, people celebrate Saint Lucia. On the eve of the festivity, the streets are filled with young women dressed in white, one of whom

bears a crown of candles on her head. According to tradition, the Saint distributes presents to children.

Another Advent tradition is Pikkujoulu, "Little Christmas", a series of celebrations dating back to the 1920s, involving families and coworkers.

Artisanal presents are made, candles are lit and one can hear traditional Christmas carols through the streets. People make traditional sweets such as joulutorrttu, Christmas stars made with puff pastry filled with plum jam, and piparkakku – spiced cookies in various shapes (flowers, elves, fir trees, piglets, half moons, stars). It is also a custom to make homemade beer around Christmastime and various types of casseroles: liver and barley, carrots and rice, potatoes, turnips and Baltic herring.

Christmas in Finland is celebrated on Christmas Eve, and the most attended Mass is Midnight Mass. It is also a time in which children await Santa Claus and his gifts. In addition to opening presents, Christmas Eve traditions include glögi, Christmas supper and time spent in saunas.

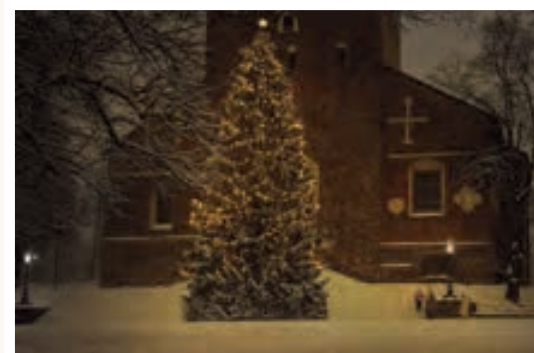
On 24 December, on the day of Christmas Eve (jouluaatto) many of the country's mayors proclaim the Declaration of "Christmas Peace", with which they give start to the season's cele-



brations. Dating back to the 13th century, the custom dictates that fire arms are banned on 24 and 25 December. The most famous "Christmas Peace" is the one in Turku, the old capital of Finland, which is broadcast on television. The ceremony ends with the Finnish national anthem. On Christmas Eve, the people of Finland visit their relatives to exchange gifts, spend time in saunas and organize the Christmas meal.

Among the traditions of the Eve, is a visit to the deceased. People leave lit candles on their friends' and relatives' tombs, creating a vast expanse of light that reflects off the snow. Christmas trees, Joulukuusi, are set up in the morning of Christmas Eve, after days of preparation for the holiday, and decorated with silver threads, candles, colourful baubles (pallo), objects made of hay, and the star of Bethlehem atop the tree. Additional ornaments, known as Joulukoris-teet, that are used to decorate the trees are gingerbread, snowflakes, (lumihiiutale), small angels, (enkeli), ribbons (nauha), wreaths (kranssi) and ornaments made from hay (himmeli and olkipukki). There is also the custom of Joululyhde, a Christmas sheaf made of ears of oats, that is placed in the courtyard for birds, who struggle to find food in the winter.

It is customary to eat pork for Christmas supper, as well as roast ham with mustard, and an array of fish. For dessert, the Finns eat spiced plum jam tarts and rice pudding.



On Christmas Day, after morning Mass, time is spent with the family. Traditionally on Saint Stephen's Day, people would go on day trips in horse drawn sleds.

Joulu is the Finnish word for Christmas, a word that is believed to have come from the late Nordic word joulo, while Hyvää Joulua is the traditional Christmas greeting.

Part of Finland's populations is Swedish mother-tongue. They refer to Christmas as jul, and wish one another a happy Christmas by saying, God Jul!

Like in many countries, Christmas celebrations in Finland, conclude on 6 January with the Solemnity of the Epiphany, loppiainen (a, "come to an end"). However, according to the traditional calendar, the real end of the merry-making took place after the Day of Knut, nuutinpäivä, a much more profane occasion than theophany, but not entirely without moral content.

Up until 1708, on 7 December, Finland celebrated the day of Sampsa, the biblical figure, Samson, a practice borrowed from the Orthodox calendar, and given value by an epic figure in popular tradition with the same name, Sampsa Pellervoinen, "rural Samson", mentioned in Ganander, who helps Väinämöinen



plant forests and lawns, in the cosmogony series.

To tame the wild nuutti and lead people back to Christian commemorations, the date was moved to 13 January, the Octave of Epiphany and the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, with which the liturgical Christmas season ends.

The day is dedicated to Canute IV, King of Denmark, who was killed in Odense in 1086 in the wooden Saint Alban's Church, where he had sought shelter to flee from the peasant revolt that had arisen in Jutland. Devotion to Canute is linked to his philosophical and ecclesiastic policies, which were opposed by the peasants,

and his pious defence of divine worship. The Swedes are responsible for the placement of the 13th day of the Gregorian calendar, the 20th day from Christmas Eve and the final day of "Christmas Peace" (joulurauha). During this time, according to tradition, work had to cease, or at least be reduced to domestic duties, in particular hunting and weaving. A wool winder, which was covered from Saint Thomas Day (tuomaanpäivä) on 21 December, was brought back into the living room on the day of nuuti, to indicate that from that time onwards, everyone had to return to their daily duties.



FRANCE: a nativity scene with mayors and sailors

Christmas is very significant in France, and is celebrated with customs that vary across the regions. Celebrations begin before any other country in Europe. In fact, starting from the memorial of Saint Martin, Bishop of Tours on 11 November, children begin to celebrate, looking for the Saint's donkey, which had gone lost among the dunes. According to a legend in fact, Saint Martin lost his donkey and some children with lanterns found it. As a reward, the Saint transformed the droppings of his donkey into sweets.

At the beginning of Advent, it is customary to give children a calendar that covers 1-24 December. Every morning, they open a small window corresponding to the day and discover a piece of chocolate. Houses are decorated with festoons and colourful ornaments. Families set up Christmas trees filled with baubles and bright adornments. In the past, fruit, especially apples, were used as ornaments, until a serious drought struck the region of the Vosges in eastern France, in the mid-19th century. The harvest of apples was compromised and there were no apples to decorate the trees. A glass-blower thus, decided to replicate the shape of apples, into red glass. The use of the glass spread quickly and it became customary to use glass baubles as ornaments.

Throughout France, Christmas markets are widespread, especially in Alsace. The ones in Strasbourg and Colmar, are particularly known for their many lights, traditional songs and sweets, and for their ornaments and artisanal products.

Many families, especially the ones in the south,

set up nativity scenes which are placed close to the tree. Nativity scenes are also set up in churches throughout the country. During the Revolution in 1789, public nativity scenes were banned as well as Midnight Mass. In Provence, in southeastern France, the faithful began to make their own nativity scenes. The first characters they made were called santons (little saints in the dialect of Provence) and were made out of the soft inside of bread. The bread was later replaced by clay. The figurines were dressed in traditional clothing from Provence. In 1803, Marseilles held the first festival of santons, which still continues to this day. The characters depict farmers, artisans, sailors, authors, intellectuals and poets. And of course, Baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the Magi, the shepherds, drummers, farandole dancers, lavender and olive pickers, parish priests, teachers and different animals.

Some parts of France, celebrate the arrival of Saint Nicholas on 6 December. He is the Patron Saint of Lorraine, but the day is celebrated throughout the northern part of the country. According to tradition, the Saint goes to homes, bearing gifts and sweets for well-behaved children. Dressed as a bishop with a white tunic and a red cloak, he is accompanied by Father Fouettard, who, dressed in black, cracks his whip on disobedient children.

Traditionally on Christmas Eve, children leave their shoes near windows or chimneys. They find them filled with presents the following morning because Père Noël has been there. He is depicted as a tall thin man dressed in red with fur fringes, similar to today's Santa Claus.

On Christmas Eve, it is customary to eat turkey with chestnuts, capon, oysters, smoked salmon and foie gras. The day's traditional dessert is called *Bûche de Noël*, Christmas yule log, a roll cake filled with chocolate or coffee buttercream, decorated like a Christmas tree. It recalls an old custom, in which a log was blessed by the head of the family during the vigil, for good fortune.

After the meal, the table is left set, so that Our Lady may pass through.

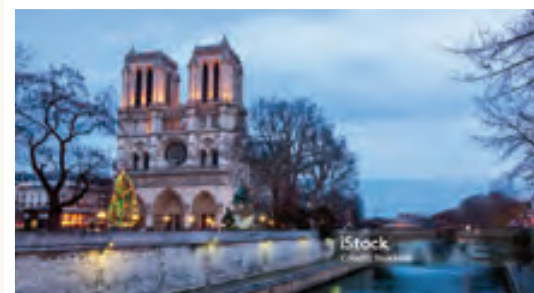


In the Alps, it is customary to go to Midnight Mass on skis. Carrying small torches, the faithful wind through snow-covered paths. On Christmas Day, turkey with chestnuts is the main course, but desserts are the main attraction. Thirteen different types of dessert are served in Provence, symbolizing Jesus and the twelve Apostles.

On 31 December, according to tradition, homes are decorated with mistletoe, which represents happiness. At midnight, guests exchange a kiss and wish each other a happy new year. A uniqueness of the occasion is that adults exchange gifts on New Year's Eve, instead of Christmas.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, the French eat a special cake known as *Galette des Rois*, in which a bean, a small figure of a particular character or another object, is baked into the cake. Whoever finds it in their slice is declared king or queen, and given a golden crown.

Happy Christmas, or better, *Joyeux Noël*.



GERMANY: the home of christmas trees

Several universal Christmas symbols have their roots in the regions of Germany. Christmas is a deeply felt celebration, to the point that some German Christmas traditions have spread all over the world. Celebrations begin on November 30th with Advent, and end on 6 January with the Epiphany. The Christmas season in Germany was officially introduced with the Council of Mainz, in 813. The German word for Christmas is Weihnachten or Weihnacht.

In preparation for Christmas, almost every home displays an Advent wreath (Adventskranz), a circular wreath made of evergreen branches, with four candles, one for each Sunday. Starting from the first Sunday of Advent, families assemble around the wreath to light a candle, read a passage from the Bible, and say a prayer. The lighting of the candles symbolizes the progressive victory of Light over darkness with the birth of the Savior. Its circular shape represents unity and eternity, while the evergreen branches symbolize hope. The first candle is called "Prophet's Candle", recalling the prophecies about the Messiah; the second one is called "Bethlehem Candle", in honour of the place where Jesus was born; the third is called "Shepherds' Candle", and represents the shepherds who came to pay homage to the Child; the fourth is called "Angels' Candle", and represents the angels who announced the birth of Jesus to the world.

The tradition of the Advent wreath originated in Germany in the second half of the 19th century, with Johann Hinrich Wichern, a Lutheran pastor, who made a wreath to

celebrate Christmas with orphans and abandoned children in Hamburg's Rauhes Haus. His intention was also to sell the wreaths, and use the proceeds to provide financial support to orphans. The pastor's original version included one candle for each day of Advent, whereas today, a red candle is lit for each Sunday. In the second half of the 20th century, the wreath spread throughout Germany and gradually to neighbouring countries.

The tradition of the Advent calendar (Adventskalender) also originated in Germany. It dates back to the 19th century, when the days leading up to 25 December were marked on the floor with chalk. Around 1850, Advent calendars similar to the ones we use today were created. The calendar with 24 cardboard windows, each hiding a piece of chocolate, became popular in Germany starting in 1920, and later spread to Europe and the United States. Every morning, children open a window on the calendar and find a piece of chocolate or a small gift. In many families, there is also the Christmas pyramid (Weihnachtspyramide), a multi-tiered wooden structure featuring the Holy Family and other figures, with candles or lights at its base and a propeller at the top that makes it spin. It comes in various sizes and shapes and resembles the traditional nativity scene. In some cases, it even replaces the Christmas tree. The pyramid, in its current form, was first made in the 18th century in the Ore Mountains (Erzgebirge) of Saxony, eastern Germany, near the border with the Czech Republic.

A highly anticipated day in Advent is 4 December, the memorial of martyred Saint Barbara, when it is a tradition to bring home a branch from a fruit tree (Barbarazweig) and make a fruit bread called, Kletzenbrot, made with pears, hazelnuts, raisins, and candied orange peel.

A visit to the Christmas markets, held in every city and town, is an unmissable tradition.

Another event not to be missed is 6 January the Feast of Saint Nicholas, or Nikolaus, as he is called in Germany.



Devotion to Saint Nicholas became widespread in the 10th century, thanks to Empress Theophanu, the Greek wife of Emperor Otto II. It was during this time that the tradition of Saint Nicholas visiting children and bringing them gifts became established. Its origins may be linked to the Feast of the Holy Innocents on 28 December, when monastic schools would hold the Bishofsspiel, in which a student played the role of abbot or bishop, and was in charge of the monastery or school. From the 13th century onwards, the custom was moved from 28 December to 6 December.

In the Middle Ages, the tradition of giving presents to children and the poor on 6 December, the Feast Day of Saint Nicholas, became widespread. However, with Martin Luther's Reformation, things began to change in Protestant areas. Since the veneration of saints was not permitted, it was decided that instead of Saint Nicholas, Christkind (Baby Jesus) would bring the Christmas gifts. This custom was also adopted by Catholics between the 19th and 20th centuries, while in Protestant regions, it was replaced by Santa Claus (Weihnachtsmann). In fact, in southern Germany, the gifts are still brought by the Christkind, who, according to an Alsatian legend, is not Baby Jesus, but a child who delivers the gifts on his behalf.

The figure of Nikolaus, who once brought gifts in Europe, gave rise to Santa Claus. In



Germany, Nikolaus is sometimes depicted as a Santa Claus who visits Christmas markets or schools to distribute small gifts to children. However, he is often dressed as a bishop.

In accordance with German tradition, on the eve of Saint Nicholas, children polish their shoes before going to bed and leave them on windowsills. Since it is believed that the Saint travels on a donkey, the children also leave a plate with a carrot for the donkey, and some cookies and milk for the Bishop, next to their shoes.

It is said that on the night between 5 and 6 December, Saint Nicholas travels through the villages, leaving candy, tangerines, and sweets in the shoes of good children, and coal and small branches of wood in those of naughty children.

It is also said that Nikolaus is accompanied by an assistant. In northern and central Germany, this assistant is Ruprecht, while in southern Germany, the more common figure is Krampus. The assistant helps Saint Nicholas distribute the gifts, or frightens the children who have not behaved well.

Ruprecht the Servant (Knecht Ruprecht) is depicted as a monk wearing a long cloak and a wig, and a long, dirty beard that reaches his feet. He carries a whip, which he uses to punish or threaten misbehaving children. His origins likely date back to the Reformation, when there was an effort to eliminate the veneration of saints. He was condemned by the Catholic Church as a demon in the 17th century. Krampus (from the Bavarian *krampn*, meaning "dead" or "decayed," or from *kramp*, meaning

"claw") is a terrifying, demon-like creature with monstrous, animalistic features who roams the streets in search of "naughty" children.

The Christmas tree first appeared in a chronicle from Strasbourg in 1605, which at the time was part of Germany. The text reveals that the first trees were decorated with multi-coloured paper roses, apples, sugar, and shiny objects.

Indeed, decorations in Germany are an important part of Christmas traditions. In addition to being expressions of great creativity, they are true works of art. The decorations include not only paper and coloured cardboard ornaments, but also a wide variety of lighting displays in many different colors.

Erzgebirge, located in Saxony, on the border with the Czech Republic, is well-known throughout Germany for its handcrafted wooden decorations and nativity scenes.

The most famous Christmas figures from Erzgebirge are:

Nussknacker, the nutcracker; Bergmannfigur, the man from the mountains with a candle; Reifendrehen, wooden figurines of animals, houses, and other characters; Spiel-dose, the famous music boxes; Weihnachtspyramiden, Christmas pyramids; Schwibbogen, wooden arch-shaped candleholders featuring nativity scenes at the center.

Another part of Christmas in Germany is lit candles, which brighten homes during the Christmas season when there are fewer hours of daylight.

Although each region has its own specialties, there are Christmas treats that are popular nationwide, such as Lebkuchen, spiced cookies covered in chocolate made with dried fruit, candied fruit, honey and marzipan, and Spekulatius, cookies spiced with cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves. Another classic is Baumkuchen, a skewer cake with several layers covered in chocolate glaze. And, of course, Christstollen (also known as Weihnachtsstollen or simply Stollen), the quintessential Christmas cake, originally from Saxony, but now enjoyed throughout

Germany. It is made with a leavened dough, butter, milk, candied fruits, dried fruit, citron, candied orange peel, and flavoured with cinnamon and cardamom.

For Christmas dinner, the traditional dish is usually roast goose stuffed with chestnuts, apples, and onions (Martinsgans), served with potato dumplings (Klöße) and red cabbage, or baked carp (Weihnachtskarpfen), with Stollen for dessert.

Christmas has a rich musical tradition in Germany. Among the most famous songs is O Tannenbaum, dedicated to the Christmas tree. The composer is unknown. Dating back to the 16th or 17th century, the folk song was first published in 1799, and lyrics were later added in 1819 by Joachim August Zarnack (1777-1827), an organist from Leipzig

Other typical German Christmas carols are: Schneeflöckchen, Weißbröckchen, a song dedicated to snowflakes, and Fröhliche Weihnacht überall.

For New Year's Eve, people toast with a classic glass of sparkling wine (Sekt), but also with Feuerzangenbowle, a drink similar to mulled wine, made with red wine, orange juice, lemon juice, sugar, rum, cloves, and cinnamon.

On 6 January, the Feast of the Epiphany, the Day of the Magi, children dress up as the Three Kings and visit homes, one of them carrying a staff topped with a large star, and sing carols along the way. People give them sweets or money. This tradition is linked to the Sternsinger (Star Singers), who go door to door collecting donations for children in poor countries around the world. On Epiphany, the Magi bless the house by marking the doorframe with white chalk: 20 + C + M + B + 25. The meaning of the formula is as follows: 20 refers to the year 2000, the current century. The letters C + M + B represent the names of the Three Kings in Latin: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. Alternatively, they are interpreted as Christus mansionem benedicat, meaning "Christ bless this house". 25 represents the year, so next year will be marked as 26.

Happy Christmas: Fröhliche Weihnachten!



GREECE: the focus is on theophany

After Easter, Christmas is the most important holiday of the year in Greece. It is celebrated on 25 December. The Christmas season begins on 6 December, with the Feast of St. Nicholas, Agios Nikolaos, the protector of sailors. He is honoured with processions, celebrations, festivals, and fireworks. According to tradition, people burn twigs around churches dedicated to him. One only has to consider how many people are named Nicholas or its diminutives, and how many place are named after him, to understand how widespread devotion to the Saint is.

As in other European countries, during the Christmas season, homes, villages, and cities are filled with decorations, lights, music, and ornaments. Although Christmas trees are becoming more popular in Greece, they are not part of local tradition. Instead, it is common to set up wooden sailing ships, decorated with colourful ornaments, flags, and brilliant lights, symbolizing the connection between Greece and its countless islands, and the sea.

Christmas Eve in Greece is an important event, marked by active participation in religious celebrations. At dawn, groups of children walk through streets and villages playing the trigona, metal triangles, while singing the kalanta, traditional carols that announce the birth of Jesus. They wish people good luck and receive coins, cookies, and sweets in return.

According to Orthodox tradition, on Christmas Eve, the faithful fast to prepare themselves for the birth of Christ. It is a day of waiting. On this day, they bake a bread made with walnuts, raisins, and pine nuts. Known as Christopsomo, Christ's bread, the loaf is marked with a cross or another religious symbol.

At dawn on Christmas Day, bells ring out to announce the birth of Jesus, and the faithful participate in the Divine Liturgy. Upon returning home, they sit at table for Christmas' main courses: roast suckling pig, symbolizing abundance, and turkey stuffed with rice, chestnuts, raisins, pine nuts, cinnamon, and other spices. The meal is an opportunity to rediscover family bonds and values. The head of the family blesses the food with the sign of the cross and recites the chrónia pollá, wishes of prosperity. Following tradition, the Christopsomo is cut and distributed to symbolize unity and sharing within the family. Other traditional Christmas sweets include melomakàrona, fragrant cookies made with olive oil and honey, and kourabièdes, butter cookies dusted with powdered sugar and enriched with chopped almonds.

From Christmas Day onwards, the kallikantzaroi, mischievous elves, emerge from the centre of the earth, bringing chaos, and roam through village streets. To protect themselves, families burn a log to prevent them from coming down the chimney, hang sprigs of blessed basil, or place a knife or other sharp object under the pillow to keep them from entering the house.

New Year's Day is dedicated to celebrating Saint Basil. He is not only a saint, but also the one who brings gifts to children, the equivalent of Santa Claus. The difference is that he does not come on the night of Christmas Eve, but on New Year's Eve. Saint Basil is highly venerated because of his charity to-



wards the poor.

It is tradition to eat vasilopita, or Saint Basil's cake, on New Year's Day, a cake made with almonds and spices. A coin is hidden inside, and whoever finds it will have a lucky year. Another custom is to bring a pomegranate to the Divine Liturgy to be blessed and then break it on the threshold of the family home. The seeds are scattered for prosperity, joy and happiness in the new year.

Theofania (the Feast of the Epiphany) is celebrated on 6 January, and marks the end of the Christmas season. It is one of the most significant holidays in Greece. In the Orthodox tradition the focus is on Christ's Baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and refers to the symbolism of water and light. Indeed, one of the most distinctive aspects of the celebration is the blessing of the waters, which takes place along rivers and by the sea. Many people bring bottles and fill them with the holy water, which is then stored at home and used for purification and protection. The blessing of the waters reminds the faithful of the gift of creation and the urgent need to protect it. One of the most widespread traditions is when the priest throws a blessed wooden cross into a body of water, such as a river or the sea, and the faithful dive in to retrieve it. It is believed that whoever manages to recover the cross will have good luck and blessings in the new year. It is not only an act of devotion, but also a moment of sharing.



ENGLAND: a tree in the heart of london



log is kept to light the one for the following Christmas.

On Christmas morning, children rush to look for their presents under the tree. This is followed by the famous Christmas lunch, whose main dish is stuffed roast turkey, served with cranberry sauce. Also part of the meal are Cornish pasties, smoked salmon casserole and roast lamb with mint sauce. The traditional dessert is Christmas pudding or Christmas cake, a fruit and nut pudding with dried and candied fruit, rum, and spices. A chocolate coin is hidden inside the pudding, and whoever finds it will be lucky.

Another custom is the Christmas cracker: paper tubes shaped like a candy containing a small surprise or gift and a paper crown to be worn. People sitting at the table cross their arms while holding their own cracker in their right hand, and pull the end of their neighbour's cracker with their left, revealing the surprises hidden inside.

There is also an important tradition for every resident of the United Kingdom: at 3:00 p.m., the King's speech, an eagerly anticipated event, is broadcast on television. It is followed by an unmissable James Bond movie. Then, as expected, it is tea time. Around 6:00 p.m., families gather to enjoy a warm drink and the famous mince pies.

On 26 December, instead of St. Stephen's Day, the English celebrate Boxing Day. This is the day when employers would give gifts to their employees. The tradition was to give something to your coworkers.

The Eve of Epiphany is known as Twelfth Night (the first night of Christmas is on 25-25 December, and the Twelfth Night falls on 5-6 January). In the past, it was dedicated to the mummers' play, which were popular performances by groups of amateur actors in costume. For Epiphany, people celebrated with a typical sweet, the Twelfth Night Cake, a cake filled with almonds and candied fruit. According to tradition, a dried bean or pea was baked into the cake, and whoever found them would be crowned king and queen of the celebration.

However, other items were sometimes included

in the cake, such as a clove or a sprig of rosemary. Whoever found the clove was considered a 'villain', and whoever found the rosemary, was marked a 'fool'. On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, it is traditional to prepare spicy foods, like gingerbread cookies, to remind people of the expensive spices brought by the Three Wise Men.

Accompanying the cake was a typical hot alcoholic drink called wassail. The name comes from the tradition of Wassailing, in which a group of 12 young people would visit nearby homes to bless them and offer them a sip of wassail in exchange for a gift. Over time, this tradition has faded and is being replaced by carolling—singing Christmas carols in front of neighbourhood homes.

Today, during Epiphany, it is customary to go to the theatre to see a performance of William Shakespeare's play, Twelfth Night.



There is no doubt that Christmas in London is something that fills with wonder. The entire atmosphere of the City takes on a special brilliance. Thousands of lights and Christmas decorations adorn shops and homes, and music and garlands brighten the steps of Londoners. Children use an Advent calendar to count the days until Christmas.

The tradition of setting up a Christmas tree in homes was introduced to England in December 1840, by Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Queen Victoria's husband. A native of Coburg in what is now Germany, he brought several red fir trees from his homeland to decorate the royal residences. He also distributed some to schools and barracks. However, the custom only became widespread a few years later, when magazines like Illustrated London News, Cassell's Magazine, and The Graphic, published images and descriptions of Christmas trees in royal palaces.

A majestic Christmas tree, an attraction for both Londoners and tourists, is set up in Trafalgar Square. It is donated by Norway to the United Kingdom each year, in gratitude for the assistance it provided during World War II in the fight against Nazi occupation.

On Christmas Eve, the faithful attend Midnight Mass, and on their return home, children hang the traditional stockings for Father Christmas, near the tree or the fireplace. They write him a letter, and to thank him for the gifts, they leave him a glass of milk and a mince pie, a small pastry made with shortcrust or puff pastry. They also leave a carrot for Rudolph, the reindeer who accompanies him.

Another tradition is to light a wooden log that burns for several days. Usually, a piece of this

IRELAND: A lit candle at the window to welcome Mary and Joseph



In Ireland, celebrations for Christmas, called Nollaig in Gaelic (birthday) last throughout the Twelve Days of Christmas, and end with the Solemnity of the Epiphany.

They begin with Advent, a time experienced with great intensity by the country's Catholic population. Traditionally, during this time, Irish households engage in a thorough clean-up of the home, that includes white-washing, in preparation for Christmas. In the countryside, sheds and stables are also thoroughly cleaned, in memory of the fact that animals, like the ox and the donkey, were present when Jesus was born.

It is traditional in Ireland to light some candles and place them in the window on Christmas Eve. During the lighting ritual, families pray and sing together. The candle is to let Mary and Joseph know that they are welcome to stay in their home, referring to the Gospel account which tells of Mary and Joseph not being able to find a place to stay and having to resort to a Grotto. Another explanation for the candles in the window has historical roots. When Ireland was under the English, and until 1829, it was prohibited to belong to the Catholic Church. A lit candle in the window signalled to priests that they could celebrate Holy Mass in that house.

On Christmas Eve, families in Ireland used to set an extra place for an unexpected guest. In some homes, after the evening Christmas meal, the table was set again, with a piece of bread with cumin seeds and raisins, a jug of milk and a lit candle. The door was left

open to give travellers shelter for the night. Nowadays, Christmas trees are decorated and presents placed below it. In some areas of Ireland, under the influence of the English, it is Father Christmas who leaves presents in stockings on Christmas Eve, while in others, Santa Claus, the celebrated Saint Nicholas of Bari, is the bearer of presents. On Christmas Eve, children hang their stockings or pillow sheets beside their beds to be filled with presents. Santa Claus leaves an apple inside the tip of the stocking and an orange or mandarin at the heel.

On Christmas Day, people make small gifts or give money to milkmen, street sweepers and postmen. In the past, this used to happen on Saint Stephen's Day, 26 December, known as "Boxing Day" in Northern Ireland and in England. According to tradition, on 26 December, comedies based around children's fairytales are staged, in which males usually take on the roles of female characters and vice versa.

It is traditional to play football and follow the horse races on that day, while children enjoy the "Wren Boys Procession", named after the tiny bird with the beautiful song. The procession recalls when a wren's song revealed where Saint Stephen was hiding, to the Roman soldiers, who then captured and killed him. Children dress up in ragged clothing and paint their faces. Accompanied by instruments, they go from door to door singing: "The wren, the wren the king of all birds, St Steven's day he was caught in the furze, Up with the kettle and down with the pan. Give us some money to bury the wren". They hang a replica of a wren off a holly sprig and receive pudding or money in exchange. The children from the homes they visit

then join the parade, so that the number of children continues to grow.

According to another tradition, in the 8th century, a wren struck a drum in a Viking encampment as Irish soldiers were surrounding them. The sound gave the Vikings away and they were killed.

On 31 December, it is customary to open all the doors in the house to usher in the new year.

Epiphany is the last of the Christmas celebrations and a time to clear away nativity scenes and decorations. Known as Nollaig Bheag, Little Christmas, is also a day to acknowledge the hard work of women throughout the festivities. While women go to the pub together for a meal and a drink, on 6 January, the men look after the home and children make presents for their mothers and grandmothers.

Like Italy, Ireland is also visited by the Befana on the night between the fifth and sixth of January. She slips down the chimney and leaves candy and toys in the stockings left for her by children, in expectation.



ICELAND: Christmas in the nights of the aurora borealis



Christmas, “jól” in Icelandic, is the most important holiday. It is celebrated both nationally and at the family level. In the land of volcanoes and ice, the Christmas atmosphere can be felt already in November with the start of Advent, when the first candle is lit on the fir, berry and pine cone wreaths. Three more will be lit, one on each Sunday until Christmas. The whiteness of the snow and the many candles and lights brighten the darkest month of the year, creating a picture postcard image, and the northern lights brighten up the night sky. People start to decorate their homes in October, to bring light to the long hours of darkness. For the entire holiday season, Reykjavík’s city centre and its outskirts are completely illuminated, It is traditional at this time, to decorate a flat and crispy bread, known as laufabraud, “leaf bread” because of its decoration.

Christmas celebrations in Iceland last 26 days, from 11 December until 6 January. Thirteen Yule Lads (Santa Claus), known as jólasveinar, named after their features, appear 13 days before Christmas and go to villages distributing gifts on each of the 13 nights.

They live in the highlands with their troll parents, Grýla and Leppalúdi, and their huge black cat called Jolakotturinn (Christmas cat). Every year, a huge statue of the Christmas cat is placed in Laekjartorg in the centre of Reykjavík. The Christmas period ends when the last Yule Lad has returned to the mountains on 6 January, Threttándinn, which means “Thirteenth” and corresponds to Epiphany. In fact, after 24 December, the jólasveinar start to make their

way home. The first one leaves on Christmas Day and then, one day after the other, they return to the highlands until the Christmas season ends.

When the people of Iceland speak of “jól”, they are referring to 24 December, which is called Aðfangadagur. Christmas is celebrated on the 24th because the old Icelandic calendar marked the beginning of a new day at sunset. As soon as the sun sets on 24 December, it is Christmas Day.

Undoubtedly, the way Christmas is celebrated in Iceland was influenced by Danish and American traditions, especially with regards to food. Many use Danish decorations and eat a sweet known as risalamande (rice pudding with almonds). Although the Yule Lads have Icelandic origins, sometimes they dress in red as Santa Claus, when like Saint Nicholas, they bring presents to children.

Iceland’s population is predominantly Lutheran. Catholics make up about 4 percent of the population. Christmas celebrations begin officially at 6:00 p.m. on 24 December, when the Ríkisútvarpið (RUV) broadcasts the sound of church bells and wishes everyone a Happy Christmas, Gledileg jól.

On the day before Christmas Eve, Holy Mass is celebrated in honour of Saint Thorlak Thorhalls-son, the Patron Saint of Iceland. Despite the country’s Lutheran majority, the day is widely celebrated. Families gather together and eat fermented skate and oatmeal porridge. An almond is mixed into the porridge, and whoever finds, it wins a prize. Books are among the most widely preferred presents in Iceland. In fact, during the Christmas season, a large number of books is published -- a sort of “deluge of books” (Jolabokafloðid).

Christmas meals include many traditional dishes, which are not eaten only on Christmas Eve and the next day, but also on New Year’s eve. One of these is smoked lamb, called hangikjöt (hung meat), which has a distinctive and salty flavour and can be served cold or hot,

often accompanied by laufabraud, peas, red cabbage and sauce made from white potatoes, similar to bechamel sauce, called uppstufu. It is served with a non-alcoholic drink called jolaöl (Christmas beer) made with malt and orange soda. Other popular dishes include hamborgarhryggur, roast pork served in a sweet sauce, with caramelized potatoes, pickled red onions and vegetables, and game meat, such as reindeer and white partridges. Reindeer live in the eastern part of Iceland, whereas white partridges are widespread. There is no Christmas without game meat.

One of the most delicious cakes eaten during the season is called “Sarah”, after Sara Bernhardt (1844-1923), the French Belle époque actress. It was created by Danish pastry chef, Johannes Steen, in 1911, to celebrate the actress’ visit to Denmark for the publication of her autobiography. It is an almond macaron, with a biscuit-base, filled and covered with chocolate. After the Christmas meal, presents are opened, followed by Midnight Mass.

Christmas Day is spent with family. People wear Christmas jumpers and eat yule logs and cookies. Saint Stephen’s Day, 26 December, is called “the second day of Christmas” (Annar í Jólum).



ITALY: Home of Nativity Scenes

The most important Christmas symbols in Italy are the nativity scene and the Christmas tree, even though the tradition of the tree, which is a Germanic tradition, only became widespread in Italy at the end of the 19th century.

The first nativity scene was set up in Greccio, in the Province of Rieti, Italy, in 1223, by Saint Francis of Assisi. He wished to relive the atmosphere of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It was a living nativity scene that involved all the people of Greccio.

According to tradition, Christmas trees should be decorated on 8 December, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Decorations include lights, garlands of evergreen leaves, holly and mistletoe. There are several symbols associated with holly: the leaves represent Christ's crown of thorns, while the berries represent the drops of blood that fell from his head. The quintessential Christmas flower is the Euphorbia pulcherrima, more commonly known as a poinsettia (Stella di Natale in Italian).

The main streets and squares of cities and towns become filled with lights, Christmas trees, wreaths and all kinds of decorations. The season's colours are red, green and gold. Red symbolizes the blood Jesus shed during the crucifixion, green symbolises eternal life, like an evergreen tree that never drops its leaves, and gold, a sign of regality, was one of the gifts brought by the Magi to

Baby Jesus.

Some Italian Regions, like many northern European countries, celebrate Saint Nicholas of Bari. In Friuli, Belluno, and especially in Trentino-Alto Adige, on 6 December Saint Nicholas arrives accompanied by the Krampus. He bears small gifts for children in a red sack, including chocolate, tangerines and dried fruit. In these regions, a candle on the traditional wreath is lit every Sunday in Advent, and children open a new window on their Advent calendar, every day.

In Milan, the Christmas season begins on 7 December, the memorial of the city's Patron Saint, Saint Ambrose. A Christmas market, known as Fiera degli Oh Bej! Oh Bej!, is set up for four days. The name recalls an event in 1510, when Giannetto Castiglione was sent to Milan by Pius IV to distribute presents. At the sight of the gifts, the children exclaimed "Oh belli! Oh belli!", which means how beautiful (Oh Bej! Oh Bej! in dialect).

In Alto Adige, on the evening of 24 December, Christkindl, Baby Jesus, arrives bearing gifts. In many provinces in northern Italy, Saint Lucia of Syracuse arrives on the night of 13 December, also bearing gifts. She is particularly celebrated in many cities aside from Syracuse, including Brescia, Bergamo and Verona. Children write letters to Saint Lucia to ask her for gifts, just as they do with Santa Claus. One of the reasons for this tra-



dition is that Saint Lucia is the "Saint of Light", and it is auspicious to celebrate her on one of the darkest days of the year.

In other regions, Christmas gifts are delivered on the night of 24 December, or the morning after, by Santa Claus.

On 24 December, it is traditional to prepare a banquet and await midnight to attend Mass. The day after Christmas, 26 December, is Saint Stephen's Day and is usually spent with family.

The most popular Christmas cakes in Italy are panettone and pandoro, which are now also eaten in other countries. Pandoro has its roots in Verona and its name comes from the local dialect, "pan de oro" which means "golden bread". Panettone was created in Milan, even though who was the first to make it is still unknown. A document from 1470 by Giorgio Valagussa, tutor of the Sforza family, mentions the so-called "rito del ciocco" (rite of the log). At Christmas-time, each home would put a log in their fireplace, as the head of the family distributed slices of wheat bread, keeping one slice for the following year as a good omen. It was a special occasion for the poor because during the year, there was a ban on wheat flour, which was only available to rich peo-





ple. Milan's guilds decided that the same bread should be given to everyone at Christmas. The bread was known as "Pan de Sciori" or "Pan de Ton", bread of the Lords. It was made with sugar, butter and eggs. One of the recipes of panettone dates back to 1549, when Cristoforo di Messisbugo, a cook from Ferrara, listed the ingredients of a cake that was made in the areas around Milan. They included flour, butter, sugar, eggs, milk and rose water. He also specified that it had to be leavened and have a circular shape. The first official definition of

panettone was in 1606, when it was called "panaton", a large bread made at Christmastime. In southern Italy, at Christmas there is the tradition of the zampognari, who announce the coming of the Lord. They are known by that name because they play a zampogna, which is a kind of bagpipe made from sheepskin. The instrument has two pipes. Starting in Advent the zampognari play in the streets of town centres. They are shepherds from the mountains, who wear short trousers and a dark cloak, and every Christ-

mas, they come down to the villages below, playing their instruments. The zampognari as we know them, date back to the 18th century when Saint Alfonso de Liguori, theologian and doctor, wrote the famous Christmas carol, Tu scendi dale stelle, adapting his melody to those he heard from the zampogne played by the shepherds in Abruzzo.

Epiphany concludes the Christmas festivities with the arrival of the Magi. Children dress up as the Magi, and go from house to house announcing the birth of Christ, and asking for sweets.

The tradition of the Befana, who arrives on-board her broom is also very popular. On the evening of 5 January, children hang stockings above the fireplace, so that the Befana may fill them with presents and sweets. If children have been naughty, the Befana leaves them a lump of coal.

Tradition says that when the Magi were travelling towards Bethlehem, they asked an old woman for directions along the way. The three kings tried to persuade her to go with them to bring gifts to the Messiah, but she did not want to go. However, she soon regretted not going. She filled a sack with gifts and set out to find the Magi and Baby Jesus, but was unable to find them. She thus decided to knock on all the doors, leaving gifts for children, in the hopes of being forgiven.



LIECHTENSTEIN: Lights and colours among the Alps and the Rhine Valley



Situated in the Rhine Valley, between Switzerland and Austria, Liechtenstein is the fourth smallest state in Europe. Its Christmas celebrations are inspired by Christian tradition and local cultural customs. Celebrations kick off with Advent when families light a candle each Sunday and decorate their homes and workplaces. The Principality fills with Christmas trees decorated with lights and bright ornaments and dozens of the country's blue and red flags. As of 2003, a Christmas tree is lit in the square facing government headquarters in

the capital city, Vaduz, and a nativity scene is set below it. Christmas trees became common in Liechtenstein in the second half of the 19th century. At Christmas, it is customary for families to read the Gospel account of Luke on the birth of Jesus, sing Christmas carols and eat the cookies baked during Advent.

In the past, Saint Nicholas brought presents for children on 6 December. Now it is Baby Jesus who leaves them under the Christmas tree on the night of Christmas Eve.

Christmas meals are known for their rich meat-based dishes, pastries and desserts. Presents are exchanged on Christmas Eve (Heiligabend) when families gather together for the banquet. Because the majority of the population is Catholic, Midnight Mass is attended in great numbers.

The festive season continues with New Year's celebrations and ends on 6 January when children sing songs to the Magi.



LITHUANIA: Dinner in honour of the Twelve Apostles

Advent in Lithuania is an important time in which it is customary to abstain from eating meat. Christmas Eve is a day of abstinence from meat, dairy and eggs. This is why the majority of dishes is made of fish, especially herring, served with mushrooms or vegetables. The country's closeness to Poland and the Christianization of old customs explain the reason for some of the Christmas traditions of Lithuanian families.

In fact, Lithuania shares many Christmas traditions with Poland. The majority of the people are Christian, even if Lithuania was one of the last countries to be evangelized. In the pre-Christian era, around the time of the winter solstice, the deceased were commemorated and harvest rites were performed. A dish known as *Kūčia* was prepared for the ancestors' spirits. The dish, made of balls of flour, yeast and poppy seeds, became popular especially after the country's independence, when Christmas could be freely celebrated again. Some traditions from the time when the ancestors were worshiped are still alive, including that of leaving the table set on the night of Christmas Eve so that the spirits of the deceased could eat or pray with their loved ones.

In Lithuania, it is important to begin the Eve with a prayer, usually led by the head of the family. After the prayer, an ancient rite takes place, known as *kalėdaičiai* in which *kalėdaitis*, elongated wafers decorated with images from the Nativity of Jesus, are distributed to each person at the table. In accordance with tradition, each person offers their *kalėdaitis* to the person sitting beside them along with best

wishes for the new year. When everyone has exchanged their wafer, dinner can begin. The wafers are blessed by priests and sold in churches at the beginning of Advent. The wafers symbolize the body of Jesus Christ, as for Lithuanians, Christmas Eve recalls the Last Supper and the manger in Bethlehem.

This is also the reason why Christmas Eve dinner has 12 courses, in honour of the twelve Apostles.

Another pagan custom that was later Christianized is that of putting some hay beneath the tablecloth. In the past it was to remember the deceased, but nowadays it is a symbol of the manger in which Baby Jesus was lain after his birth.

When the meal is over, the hay is removed, and whoever finds the longest twig among it is said to live the longest. Christmas is celebrated on 25 and 26 December, Christmas Day is spent with family, when presents are exchanged and festive dishes are eaten, such as roast, baked sweets and gingerbread. The following day is a day for guests and young people.

Among the traditional drinks consumed at this time, are *aguonpienas*, (poppy seed milk), made with water, sugar and crushed poppy



seeds, and *kisielius* (*kisel*), made from berries or fruit and potato or corn starch.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, a parade with the three Magi winds through the streets of Vilnius, to the delight of children.



LUXEMBOURG: Baby Jesus brings presents to children



Mir wölle bleiwen wat mir sin (We want to remain what we are) is the motto of Luxembourg, a small Grand Duchy nestled between France, Germany and Belgium. Christmas is observed and celebrated by the majority of the population, which is Catholic.

Preparations for Christmas begin with Advent and families follow special particular traditions. Among them, is one that is called Chrëschtbeemercher, Christmas tree decorations. Fir trees are bought three weeks before Christmas and decorated with baubles, bright wreaths and objects made of glass, ceramic or stone. At the end of the festivities, the trees' wood is stacked away to be burned during the Buergersonndeg, a bonfire also known as Fête des Brandons, which takes place on the first Sunday of Lent, and marks the end of winter. At dusk, a torch-lit

procession, Fakelzuch, winds through villages headed for the Buerger, which will burn throughout the night and into the morning, Making an Adventskranz, or Advent wreath, is a common practice in Luxembourg. Branches of fir, pine, holly and sometimes mistletoe, are intertwined, and four candles are fitted into the wreaths to be lit on the Sundays in Advent. Meanwhile, children use advent calendars that cover 1-24 December, and each day, they open the window that corresponds to the day's date, and uncover a piece of chocolate, a cookie or a toy.

On 6 December, all the children joyfully await the arrival of Kleeschen (Saint Nicholas) and his presents. Unfortunately, his companion Houseker always accompanies him, carrying a large sack from which he picks out presents with a small stick. Saint Nicholas is depicted as an old man with a beard and white hair, dressed in red. Unlike Santa Claus, Saint Nicholas wears a Bishop's robe and the pastoral. Houseker (Fr. Fouettard), leaves sticks to children who behaved unwisely.

In Luxembourg, this celebration is so important that the Minister of Education has decided to turn it into a feast day for elementary school children. In the days leading up to 6 December, the Kleeschen visit classrooms, much to the children's delight. At the end of November, children put a slipper in front of their bedroom to receive candy. The Saint goes from house to house on the night between 5 and 6 December, bearing gifts.

Midnight Mass (Metten) is very popular, especially the one celebrated yearly in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Luxembourg. After Mass, the faithful gather for a glass of glühwain (mulled wine) or another hot drink before returning home to make preparations for Christmas Day. According to tradition, Crëschtkëndchen (Baby Jesus) brings presents and leaves them under the Christ-

mas tree. Some families open their presents on Christmas Eve, while others do so on 25 December.

Many villages host the Krëppespiller (Christmas shows) performed by children in parishes. Christmas celebrations extend over three days: 24 December, (Hellegowend), 25 December (Chrëschttag) and 26 December (Stiefesdag). Some families gather together on Christmas Eve, while others gather together for Christmas Day lunch. Among the traditional dishes served are: game meat, trout and beef. Many customs have been introduced by immigrants, especially those from Portugal, France and Italy. The last day of Christmas, 26 December, is usually a day of rest, in which people often visit their friends and relatives.

Until 5 January, the capital city's trees are covered with the more than 20,000 spectacular lights and decorations of the Winterlights, a festival of Christmas lights.

Dudelange, in the southern part of the country, is famous for its Medieval Christmas market, and its medieval-themed shows on the tiny streets of the village.



MALTA: Christmas in the islands

There is no doubt that Malta is one of the most Catholic countries in Europe, which is why the Solemnity of Christmas is one of the most beloved and heartfelt celebrations. Not even 25 December is too cold on this splendid island, so people can easily celebrate outdoors. In fact, many Christmas events take place outside. From the beginning of November, the cities and towns are illuminated by a myriad of lights and wreaths, and festoons decorate the streets. In accordance with tradition, a Christmas tree is raised in the entrance to the capital city, Valletta, while others are placed along the city's main streets. After all, the people of Malta feel it is their duty to decorate their homes for Christmas. In many small towns, nativity scenes are set up with characters from the Bible. On Christmas eve, after a big supper, families go to Church, and it could not be otherwise, considering the large number of Catholics who participate in parish life. In Malta there are as many churches as the days of the year, all of them built with devotion by the people, and especially dedicated to the Apostle Paul, Patron Saint of the island. A nativity scene is set up in each of the churches, some of them with mechanical mechanisms.

In the days leading up to Christmas, local folk bands perform at an international Christmas festival in Valletta to welcome the festivities,

and the Malta National Children's Choir presents the Magical Christmas Concert, held at the University of Malta. The concert includes the participation of special guests,

Meanwhile on the island of Gozo, a living nativity scene is staged between December and January in Ta' Pass village. Known as Bethlehem f'Għajnsielem, it involves the participation of all local residents, from children right up to the elderly. In representation of Baby Jesus, a newborn is lain in the crib.

Spread across an area of 20 thousand square metres, the village commemorates the story of Bethlehem, recreating the atmosphere of the Holy Land at the time of Jesus, with replicas of workshops, jobs and artisans of the time. It is a true and proper living nativity scene in which the town folk dress up in clothing from the time of Jesus. There is also no shortage of animals, including horses, cows, goats and ducks. During the Christmas season, Maltese families eat roast turkey stuffed with pork, walnuts, almonds, raisins and a blend of aromatic spices, and Christmas desserts, such as Qagħaq tal-Għasel (sweet pastry with honey) and Helwa tat-Tork (a sweet made with almonds and sesame seeds, covered in honey).

On the morning of Christmas Day, after opening their presents, children dress up as Bible characters and walk to Church for Holy Mass.



Malta celebrates New Year's Day with spectacular fireworks, among the most famous of which, take place in Valletta.

Although the Solemnity of the Epiphany, is not a public holiday in Malta, a historical procession takes place in Xaghra that commemorates the arrival of the three Kings to the Grotto in Bethlehem. The offerings made on that day are sent to the Basilica of the Nativity of Our Lady in Gozo.



PRINCIPALITY OF MONACO: Christmas bread for the poor

The Principality of Monaco is the second smallest state in the world, second only to Vatican City, and one of the world's oldest. Its 2.08 square kilometres overlook the Mediterranean Sea and are completely surrounded by France. Its Christmas celebrations are marked by ancient traditions, one of the oldest of which, is "U pan de Natale", a sweet round bread, blessed during Midnight Mass. The bread is decorated with five walnuts shaped like a Latin cross and topped with a small olive branch.

The bread is blessed at the end of Midnight Mass by the Archbishop of Monaco in the Cathedral dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. On Christmas Day, U Pan de Natale is sliced and offered to guests as a sign of welcome, or it is simply eaten during Christmas lunch, after the eldest person in the family blesses it and says softly: "may evil be banished, and good be welcomed". An initiative called, "Operation Pan de Natale", takes place a few days before Christmas and is connected to the above mentioned tradition. Promoted by the Comité des Traditions, the initiative sees larger bakeries bringing their bread to the Principality's retirement homes. In exchange for a loaf, an offering is made to be donated to charitable organizations.

Another ancient tradition is dipping an olive branch in wine. The youngest or eldest performs this ritual by approaching the fireplace to lift up a prayer and make the sign of the

cross.

In accordance with tradition, on Christmas Day the tables of the Monegasques are decorated with 13 sweets, made in honour of Jesus and his 12 Apostles. The sweets are made with hazelnuts, walnuts, dried figs, almonds and raisins. The most important one is La Pompe, which is a sweet bread that is broken by hand in memory of Jesus at the Last Supper.

During the season's celebrations, Christmas trees and countless lights illuminate the streets of the City-state, creating an atmosphere that recalls a nativity scene. The more courageous, go for a swim in the icy waters of the Ligurian Sea on Christmas Eve.

As of 2014, an initiative called "Street of Nativity Scenes" has been taking place on the Rock of Monaco in which replicas of the Nativity from across the world are displayed in chalets and in some of the Rock's public buildings. It is inaugurated on 8 December by the Archbishop of Monaco, during a procession in honour of the Immaculate Conception, and concludes on 8 January.

In Monaco too, the Solemnity of the Epiphany is celebrated with a procession of the Three Magi and the classic cake, Galette des rois à la frangipane (almond cream). A small precious object, an almond or fava bean (fève) is placed inside the cake, and whoever finds it in their slice is proclaimed king for one day and dons a golden crown.

One cannot mention Monaco without also mentioning its Patron Saint, Saint Dévote. Originally from Corsica, she lived in the fourth century. She was persecuted during the reign of Diocletian, imprisoned and condemned to death for being Christian. She never gave in to the torture to which she was subjected and never reneged her faith. After she was killed, the governor ordered that her body be set on fire, but a few Christians were able to smuggle her body on board a boat headed for Africa. During the trip, the boat en-



countered a storm. A dove guided the sailors to the safe harbour of the shores of the Valley of the Gaumates, modern day Monaco. Saint Dévote was buried there and a chapel was built over her tomb. The people who lived in the area began to address their prayers to her to receive graces and favours. Unfortunately, one night an ill-intentioned person stole the Saint's body, but he was captured by a group of fishermen who took the relics back to the chapel. The thief's boat was burned on the shore. The event has been commemorated every year since 1924. On the night of 26 January, a boat is burned in the square facing the Church of Saint Dévote, in the presence of the reigning princes.

Saint Dévote has been the Patron Saint of Monaco since the 17th century, but one century earlier the Monegasques had turned to her intercession during the siege to the fortress by the Genoese, which lasted six months and ended with the Ligurian fleet retreating.

On the morning of 27 January, the Archbishop of Monaco celebrates a solemn Mass in the Cathedral, attended by the Prince, which is followed by a procession to the Rock, where the Archbishop blesses the Palace, the City and the sea.



NORWAY: christmas seen from the aurora borealis

In the land of fjords, which has a population of a little over 5.5 million people, Christmas is celebrated everywhere, both in the small villages of the Sami, a semi-nomadic ethnic group in Lapland, and in big cities like the capital, Oslo. Traditional celebrations in Norway last several weeks and give the snowy landscape and the long dark days a special atmosphere.

Norway has been a Christian country for over one thousand years. Christianity was introduced towards the end of the tenth century, and until the Reformation, it had an important role in public life. The Viking King, Olav Haraldsson (995-1030) converted to Christianity after the English invasion, and established it as the state religion of Norway.

Since that time, Christian festivities are celebrated at the public level. On the first Sunday of Advent, the streets of the towns and the homes are decorated with countless lights and ornaments. Many concerts and traditional markets take place at this time. Homes are filled with Advent wreaths, statues of angels, stars and gingerbread houses known as pepperkakehus (literally pepper house), which are used as Christmas decorations and then eaten after Christmas.

Christmas trees are set up with great care in

every home, town and village. Entire cities get involved in Christmas preparations. In Bergen, kindergartens, schools, businesses and the people of the town participate in the construction of a gingerbread village.

Tromsø, known as the capital of Norwegian Lapland, is considered the official Christmas City of Norway. From 18 November, the streets are filled with lights, making Christmas shopping pleasantly evocative.

During the winter months (23 November to 18 January), the sun never rises above the horizon in Tromsø, and the aurora borealis is visible.

Another city from where the northern lights can be seen is the beautiful town of Henningsvær in the Lofoten Islands, where Christmas preparations start at the beginning of November. Henningsvær is a village of fishermen with many traditional shops that sell candles, woollen hats and blown glass.

Røros, a UNESCO world heritage site, is an old mining town with wooden homes dating back to the 18th and 19th century, which takes on a special atmosphere during Advent. Visitors to the town often come to eat reindeer meat and arctic char and drink artisanal beer.

In Lillehammer, an enchanted town on the shores of Lake Mjøsa houses the open-air mu-



seum of Maihaugen, where visitors can see how Christmas was celebrated throughout the ages, starting with the Middle Ages.

Tregårdens Julehus Christmas House in Drøbak, in southern Norway, is open year round and is stocked with everything that has to do with Christmas: decorations, candle holders, table cloths and candles. It is also the site of Santa Claus' post office, where mail can be stamped with an official post stamp.

In Norway, Christmas celebrations are called "Jul", and coincide with an ancient pagan rite in which animals were sacrificed and beer was consumed. It is still observed to this day. During the Advent season, employers, associations and groups of friends organize a Julebord (Christ-



mas meal), a pre-Christmas celebration with traditional dishes for this time of year.

The menu usually includes ribbe (pork ribs), pinnekjøtt (lamb ribs), and in some areas of Norway, cod, and Christmas biscuits like goro, krumkaker and berlinekrans. There are at least seven types of Norwegian Christmas cookies, Jul takes place in five phases: Advent, Julaften, Romjul, Nyttår (new year) and Epiphany.

On 23 December, Lille Julaften, little Christmas eve, families clean and decorate their homes together and set up the Christmas tree. Among the ornaments are heart-shaped baskets with many delicacies and Norwegian flags. Many families make gingerbread houses and a traditional rice porridge made with sugar, cinnamon and butter. In the countryside, people leave a bowl of porridge outside their barn for the elf who is said to live there. An almond is hidden inside the porridge and whoever finds it in their bowl receives a marzipan in the shape of pig as a prize. An estimated 40 million marzipan figurines are consumed by Norwegians during the Christmas period.

Another tradition that keeps families glued to their televisions is a British comedy sketch known in Norwegian as Grevinnen og Hovmesteren, Dinner for One. It is the story of the 90th birthday of Miss Sophie who organizes a dinner for her friends each year, although they are all dead. Her butler James impersonates each of the guests. He sits in each of their seats and has a drink. As he moves around the table, James becomes drunk and repeatedly asks Ms. Sophie, "The same procedure as last year Miss Sophie?" and she replies "the same procedure as every year, James!"

Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) broadcast the sketch in 1953. From 23 November 1980, Norway's national television NRK, has been broadcasting a shorter version of it each year.

On Christmas eve, 24 December, Norwegians gather for the traditional Christmas supper, and "Julenisse" (Santa Claus) visits people's homes. Christmas Eve is the most important part of



Christmas celebrations, which includes a moment of prayer in the Lutheran Churches. Most of the country's population in fact is Protestant. Though Catholics are a minority, they have great vitality. At 5:00 p.m., supper begins and Christmas presents have already been placed below the tree, waiting to be opened later in the evening.

Church bells ring at 5:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, announcing the beginning of Juletid. Once the supper is over, people usually make a circle and dance around the Christmas tree, singing Christmas carols. The most famous one is Så går vi rundt om en enebærbusk, which means "here we go around the mulberry bush". On

Christmas Day, Norwegians traditionally raise the flag at dawn and lower it at sunset.

Christmas supper includes pork ribs, lutefisk (codfish), pinnekjøtt (lamb), boiled cod, roasted ham and turkey.

Romjul, the time between Christmas and New Year's Day, begins immediately after Christmas. It is a time for vacation for most workers, and for many, a time to spend on ski slopes.

The precise date of the end of Christmas varies. Usually it is the 13th day of Christmas, on 7 January. Another date is the 21st day, 13 January, St Knut's Day, when Christmas trees and decorations are taken down.



NETHERLANDS: celebrating with Saint Nicholas

In the Netherlands, Saint Nicholas (Sinterklass) is an important part of Christmas festivities, not Santa Claus. In November the cities and streets of towns light up and Christmas decorations begin. One can smell Olliebollen, balls of oil, that are similar to doughnuts with powdered sugar, as well as ginger cookies and gluhwein. According to tradition, the Holy Bishop arrived in the Netherlands after travelling from Spain in mid-November with his companion Zwarte Piet (Black Pete). Nicolas' arrival by boat along the cities of the coast is an event in which hundreds of people take part. Zwarte Piet is a character that looks like a Moor and is dressed in a flashy costume that was typical of the 16th century. He is festive and loves to play and make jokes. From the day of the landing until 5 December, Black Pete goes around cities and towns to offer ginger cookies and sweets. Saint Nicholas is celebrated with great honour. He is a saint that the Dutch introduced to the whole world, including to America, where Dutch settlers founded New Amsterdam, in what is now New York. Sint Klaas soon evolved into Santa Claus. Accompanied by Zwarte Piet, Saint Nicholas brings gifts for children, with his faithful friend, the white horse, Amerigo. On the night between 5 and 6 December, children leave their shoes by the door or by the fireplace in expectation of presents, a carrot for Saint Nicholas' horse and some chocolate for Zwarte Piet. On 6 December, families organize a true and proper present hunt. The evening of 5 December is also known as Pakjesavond (evening of packages). In the morning, children open their presents, which are usually accompanied by a brief poem

or nursery rhyme that gives clues on the gift they will receive. During dinner, people eat a typical sweet made of marzipan known as letterbanket, "sweet letter".

From 5 December onwards, Christmas trees appear in homes and in public places. The trees are always real. The tradition of setting up nativity scenes is not very widespread. Instead, representations of everyday life, including traditional homes, are displayed in the windows of homes.

On Christmas eve, in anticipation of Midnight Mass, families gather around tables in their homes, where each place is marked with a chocolate letter. Christmas supper includes oysters, salmon and caviar. On Christmas Day, families gather together again for lunch. Prior to eating, they stand before the prune-stuffed turkey for three minutes of silence at noon. The menu also includes bitterballen, fried meatballs made with beef, chicken, veal or mushrooms, and for dessert, a yule log and a Baby Jesus made of sugar.

On New Year's Eve, one of the most anticipated moments is dinner with traditional dishes, such as Stampot, a soup made with peas and



sausage, and Kerststol, a sweet Christmas bread. Some end the year and begin the new one with the New Jaar Duik, a traditional dive into the icy waters of the North Sea at midday on 1 January.

Wishing everyone Gelukkig Kerstmis: Happy Christmas!



POLAND: A place for an unexpected guest

The cold and the snow announce that winter has come and with it Christmas. In this period Poland rediscovers traditional rites that have their roots in the Christianization of the country by the first sovereign Mieszko I (930 ca. – 992), who was king from 960. He was baptized along with his court in 966. Since then, the Solemnity of Christmas has had fundamental importance for Polish people. The time begins with Advent, on the Feast day of Saint Martin, 11 November. In the past, the faithful fasted and prayed, except for a brief pause for the Feast of Saint Catherine of Alexandria on 25 November, and that of Saint Andrew the Apostle on 30

living nativity scenes. The Polish's love and passion for nativity scenes led to the establishment of a historical competition in Krakow in 1937 called Szopka Krakowska. Krakow's tradition of preparing nativity scenes date back to the Middle Ages. However, in the 19th century, artisans began to use the city's historical buildings as settings. After Poland's independence in 1918, the szopkas were purchased by tourists as souvenirs of Krakow. In order to keep this tradition alive, a well-known competition was organized in December 1937 which, with the exception of the second world war, has been taking place each year on the first Thursday of December, in Krakow's main square. The best szopkas are displayed in the city's historic museum in Krzysztofory palace. In 2018 the competition was inscribed into UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list.

Christmas Eve finds families gathered around the Christmas supper. Dinner does not begin until the first star appears in the night sky, around 6:00 p.m. In accordance with tradition, before people begin to eat, wafers, called *opłatki*, are placed on the table. Each guest takes one of the wafers in their hand and offers Christmas greetings to all those present, and then breaks a piece off of the wafer of the person beside them and eats it. This continues until everyone has had their turn, after which the meal can begin. Because no one is allowed to leave until the meal is complete, all the food is laid on the table or on a piece of furniture nearby that can be reached from the table.

The uniqueness of this supper is that it is set for one more person, to welcome an unexpected stranger (*nieznajomy*) or in memory of the deceased. Recalling Jesus in the manger, some hay is placed on the table underneath the white tablecloth, and is considered a good omen. The menu consists in 12 dishes,



and differs according to the regions. Meat is not consumed on Christmas Eve. Instead people, eat mushroom or, beetroot soup, *łazanki*, similar to tortellini, filled with mushrooms and sauerkraut, carp, pierogi, herring, and sauerkraut, and for dessert, *makówki*, made with poppy seeds from where its name is derived (*mak* in Polish means poppy) and *piernik*, gingerbread. They also drink *kompot*, made from cooked dried fruit.

After the Christmas meal, children receive their presents and place them below the Christmas tree, which is followed by carolling until it is time for Midnight Mass.

Christmas and Saint Stephen's Day in Poland are referred to as First and Second Day of Christmas (*Pierwszy i Drugi Dzień Świąt*). On those days, children and young people go from house to house to offer Christmas greetings and sing Christmas carols. This tradition is known as *kolędowanie* from the word for cantors, *kolędnicy*.

After a big meal, fireworks and a toast on New Year's eve, Poland celebrates the Solemnity of the Epiphany on 6 January, which is called *Trzech Króli*. The *kolędnicy* dress up as the three Magi and sing Christmas carols, going from house to house.



November, who are venerated as Patron Saint of marriages.

Poland also has the tradition of celebrating *Święty Mikołaj*, Saint Nicholas of Bari, who is loved by children and adults alike. On 6 December, the Holy Bishop visits schools and homes in cities and towns, bearing gifts for good children.

Christmas markets known as *Jarmarki Bożonarodzeniowe*, a German tradition, that spread to Poland, begin to appear in the first half of December. City squares are filled with stalls that sell handmade items, sweets and other traditional Christmas products.

Homes and public places are decorated with Christmas trees and nativity scenes are displayed in all churches. Some towns organize



PORTUGAL: A country that faces the Mediterranean Sea and the Ocean

The pre-Christmas season is always somewhat strenuous, but nothing is too much, and the fatigue is hardly felt as Christmas approaches... The streets light up, homes, in which people spend more time than usual, are decorated and the welcoming atmosphere has to be maintained through the coldest days of winter. Nativity scenes are made at the beginning of December. Some are more elaborate, while others are simpler. They are placed in the rooms in which people spend most of their time. Christmas trees are also set up, with brightly coloured baubles and lights that delight children.

Portuguese families who follow the old traditions gather together on 24 December. If possible with many relatives. The Christmas meal is cod-based, the most popular dish being boiled cod with potatoes and boiled cabbage, dressed in olive oil. For dessert there is the Bolo-Rei, made with candied fruit and dried fruit, traditional sweets such as broas castelares (cakes of the castle) and fried desserts, such as filhoses, sonhos and rabanadas.

In the southern part of the country, cod is substituted by turkey and other meat, usually eaten on Christmas Day and the days that follow it. At midnight, the faithful attend Holy Mass and nativity scenes are placed in a special spot in the Church, replicas of the stable in which Jesus was born, reproduced by Saint Francis of Assisi in the 13th century, and very popular in Portugal.

In many towns, including Bragança, Guarda, and Castelo Branco and in many parishes of cities and villages, on the evening of 24 December, a wooden log is burned on the parvis of churches, or in other areas close to the church. It is an occasion to gather together with friends and neighbours and exchange Christmas greetings, warming the atmosphere and hearts.

Christmas presents are exchanged after midnight or the following morning, according to family traditions. In the past, before the popularity of Santa Claus, Baby Jesus was the one who distributed gifts. I remember that when I was little and the clock rang midnight and I was already in bed, I was very peaceful if I woke up, and focused. I thought of Baby Jesus on the other side of the wall, putting present in the shoes. There was no doubt in my mind as a child that it was Baby Jesus, but it was forbidden for children to enter that room. We had to wait until the morning to see what he had put in the shoes. In fact, as they went to bed, children left their slippers near the chimney or the Christmas tree and in the morning, they would check to see what surprises he had left. It was a joy for children, but perhaps even more for parents, who were glad to see their children's joy.

On the 25th, there was joy everywhere. No one missed Mass, although people had different degrees of awareness of what was being celebrated, but there was certainty in the air that we were celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Christmas cards were sent in large quantities in the past, and most of them depicted nativity scenes. Lately, the images have changed and have been substituted mostly by Santa Claus. Children do not really associate Christmas with the birth of Baby Jesus, as much (with many exceptions, thanks be to God).

After New Year's, the festivities end with the day of the Magi, on 6 January. One can still hear Janeiras (from January) through the streets and the monuments, and in churches. They are traditional songs that wish people a good year. Small groups of people also go from house to



house or visit convents and rest homes, dressed in traditional clothing. Three of them dress up like the Magi in ornate clothing. They also sing traditional songs about the Epiphany and Christmas, filling the air with joy.

The lights will remain lit until the Day of Epiphany. For children, and not only, it is always a bit sad to see the Christmas lights and decorations disappear. Parents console their children by saying, "There will be even more next year, God willing"!

Discalced Carmelites
Monastery of Saint Joseph
Fatima - Portugal



ROMANIA: A family celebration

Christmas is a big family celebration in Romania. During this time, many emigrants return to their homeland to spend the holidays with their relatives and friends. They are welcomed by an atmosphere steeped in tradition, folklore, and joy over the birth of Jesus. The Christmas season begins with the Feast of St. Nicholas of Bari, a highly anticipated moment for children, who polish their shoes in the hopes that the Holy Bishop will fill them with candy as he passes through the houses.

In the days leading up to Christmas, children are taught several Christmas carols. On Christmas Eve, they go "carolling". They

for the holiday meal. In some rural areas, the whole family gathers to witness the slaughter. Children even climb onto the pigs, as it is believed that this will help them grow big and healthy. Tied to agricultural traditions is the custom of going around the villages with a plough to bring good wishes, cracking whips along the way. The Christmas tree is a must, along with the exchange of gifts on Christmas Eve or on the morning of 25 December. During the night, children dressed in costumes go around the villages wishing everyone a Happy Christmas and a Happy New Year.

On Christmas Eve, everyone eagerly awaits the *cozonac*, a traditional holiday cake, which is shaped like a loaf cake and filled with walnuts and special candied fruits, some even rose-flavored. It is served with mulled wine with spices and cloves.

The Christmas feast is centred around pork. People drink *țuică*, a high-proof plum brandy to whet their appetite, then they enjoy *sarmale* (cabbage or vine leaf rolls filled with minced meat), *piftie* (garlic-flavored jelly made from pig's feet, ears, and head), *șoric* (salted and washed pigskin), *toba* (a large sausage made with pig's offal, seasoned with a bit of mustard), and *grătar de porc* (roast pork).

The Epiphany or Theophany, commonly known as *Boboteaza*, on 6 January, is the feast that marks the end of the Christmas holidays.

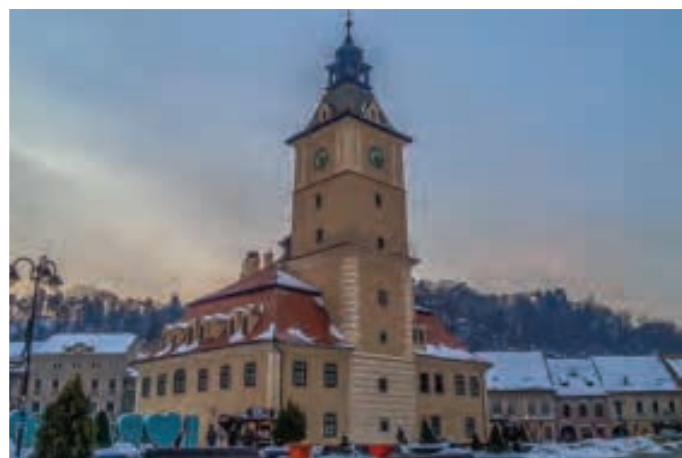
It is a very important occasion, so much so, that on the eve of Epiphany, Romanian Orthodox Christians, who are the majority in the country, observe a fast, like on Good Friday. Tradition holds that on 5 January, priests should go from house to house to bring the blessing of the



Trinity. The blessing of the waters for Theophany, the Great Aghiasma, is an ancient sacrament celebrated both on the eve of the feast (5 January) and on the day itself (6 January) after the liturgy of St. Basil. The Holy Water of Theophany is kept throughout the year and used for specific rites, such as the blessing of sacred objects, a new altar, certain exorcisms, and generally for important ceremonies or occasions. Priests ensure that plenty of Aghiasma is prepared so that there is enough for the entire year.

According to tradition, the blessing of the water used to take place on the banks of rivers. After the rite, the priest would throw a cross into the river, and some men would dive in to retrieve it. The person who found the cross would receive gifts, but if he was a convict, he would be granted clemency.

travel through villages on a wooden-wheeled cart pulled by horses, singing Christmas melodies. It is a festive time for the entire community, with people coming out of their homes to offer coins, candy, and dried fruits to the children. A *colindă* (or *colind*) is a ceremonial Christmas song, composed of ritual elements, passed down orally from one generation to the next. The word *colindă* comes from the Latin *calendae*. In many areas of Romania, people believe that animals can talk to one another on Christmas Eve. This is why it is customary to wear masks representing bears, wolves, and sheep, in order to listen to the animals' conversations. Animals play an important role during the Christmas festivities, starting with pigs, which are slaughtered to provide meat



SAN MARINO: A Myriad of Lights in the Land of Freedom

In what is considered the oldest republic still in existence, San Marino, an enclave located between Rimini and Pesaro, Christmas has its roots in the early centuries. The state itself has a saint as its founder, Marinus, a Dalmatian stonemason from Arbe, who sought refuge on Mount Titano to flee from the persecution of Diocletian. There he founded a Christian community on September 3, 301. The land on Monte Titano was owned by Donna Felicissima of Rimini, who donated it to Marinus. From then on it was known as the "Land of Marinus". Upon the Saint's death, tradition holds that he left his disciples with these words: "I leave you free from both men", referring to the emperor and the pope. The community founded its independence on these words, asserting its freedom from any external power. It is said that in 1296, a trial was held against the people of San Marino for not paying taxes. The verdict was an acquittal, as "They do not pay because they have never paid. It was their Saint who set them free".

The tradition of nativity scenes could not be amiss in a capital where the presence of Franciscans was twofold: a church dedicated to Saint Francis with an attached convent of Con-

ventual Franciscans, and a church and convent of Capuchin Friars.

A Neapolitan nativity scene with figures inspired by Saint Marinus is on display in Saint Peter's crypt, located in San Marino's Piazzale Domus Plebis. Not far from the square, inside a tower, is the famous San Marino nativity scene, created in life-size dimensions.

The entire medieval village is transformed into a vast nativity scene, illuminated and filled with the flavours and smells that are typical of the Christmas season. The unmistakable aroma of Bombardino fills the air—a drink made with cream, warm zabaglione, brandy, and coffee. In the narrow streets, the scent of chocolate, cheese, and truffle can also be detected.

In Piazza della Libertà, where the Palazzo Pubblico and the Clock Tower are located, there is a giant star illuminated by countless low-energy LED lights.

A Christmas market is set up around the walls, selling artisanal craftwork. Traditional work, such as canvas printing and embroidery, is reinterpreted using reclaimed materials to make works of art.

On the panoramic Terrace of the Canton, performances are held with artists and ice sculp-



tors. At the Cava Antica, a Spiegeltent, a wooden structure typical of the 1920s, is set up, where fun and creative activities for children and families take place.

In San Marino, the faithful celebrate Christmas by attending Midnight Mass in the Basilica of Saint Marinus, also attended by the Captains Regent, the two heads of state of the Republic who serve a six-month term. The Saint's relics are kept in the Basilica.

A special guest comes to visit the ancient Republic on the Solemnity of the Epiphany: the Befana. With her broom, she lands on the Torracchia airstrip, where she distributes candy and sweets to children. A procession then winds through the streets of the historic center, much to the delight of the children.



SLOVENIA: The Country of Trees

In a country like Slovenia, whose surface area is almost 60% forest, Christmas trees are a natural tradition. However, it wasn't always this way. In fact, until World War I, instead of a red fir tree, Slovenian farms would prepare a "bogkov kot", a corner of the house dedicated to God, where branches of red fir tree, mistletoe, ivy, nuts, garlands, and dried fruits were placed. Yet, trees were never lacking. The largest forested area is in the Kočevje region, home to the "Queen of Rog" the most majestic fir tree in Slovenia, which stands at 55 metres and has a circumference of over five metres. It is a tradition to decorate the Christmas tree with lights and colourful baubles. In the past, apples, pears, and nuts were used as

decorated sweet milk bread made with white flour, and symbolizes good wishes for health and prosperity in the coming year.

In Slovenia, Christmas was traditionally celebrated over three days. Christmas Eve, on 24 December was dedicated to preparing bread and sweets, as well as attending Midnight Mass. During the night, bonfires were lit, bells were rung, and mortars were fired to drive away evil spirits. In Styria, it was customary to bring pumpkin seeds to Midnight Mass to usher in a good harvest in the coming year. The 25th of December was spent at home with family.

The second Christmas was celebrated on 31 December with a night vigil. The following morning, gifts were given to children. In

Styria, mothers would scatter a basket of nuts, dried pears or apples around the house, making noise. If the children immediately got out of bed, it was considered a sign that they would wake up without much fuss throughout the coming year.

The third Christmas (Little Christmas) or the Feast of the Magi (5 January) was also known as the Vigil of Pernaht. During the December festiv-



ities, many places host the Calendae, a tradition that dates back to Roman times. This custom involves koledniki, carollers, who go from house to house, wishing the residents good fortune. Among these, the most famous is the Calendae of the Three Magi, in which the koledniki, dressed up as the Three Kings, perform short theatrical scenes and receive gifts. To protect homes, the koledniki write the initials of the names of the three Magi above the door, using white chalk — C + M + B (Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar)— along with the current year.



decorations, symbolizing hopes for a good harvest. Today, decorations are also made from wood shavings, straw, terracotta, or lace.

During Advent, the cities and villages light up with a myriad of lights. Christmas markets sell craftwork made out of wood, lace, crystals, honey-based products, and wine. Among the dishes served at Christmas dinner, is the putizza, a rolled sweet pastry filled with dried fruit, a classic choice for the season. There is also poprtnik, the Christmas bread, which was traditionally placed on the table during the holiday season. It is a de-



SPAIN: Nochebuena and the Magi

Christmas is perhaps the most traditional and family-oriented celebration in Spain. It is preceded by Advent, a period during which the Church calls us to prepare ourselves in anticipation of the arrival of Jesus into the world. It is important to observe that the Advent season actually originated in Spain. In 380, all the Bishops of Spain and the Bishops of Aquitaine, gathered for a council in Zaragoza, where they discussed, among other things, the need for a time of preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus, which at that time was observed on 6 January. The bishops encouraged Christians to gather in churches to pray every day from 17 December until Christmas. The goal was to avoid participations in pagan festivities and to prepare the faithful to receive baptism during the solemnity of the Epiphany.

In the eighth century, starting from 17 December, catecheses were prepared on Jesus and on how he had been foretold in the Old Testament. Among the figures highlighted during Advent, were the Virgin Mary, the prophet Isaiah, and John the Baptist, the Forerunner. Some traces of these teachings remain in the short prayers recited before the Gospel during Advent Mass. Additionally, at the end of a catechesis in monasteries, monks would distribute sweets or nuts. This tradition evolved into the custom of offering doughnuts in the days leading up to Christmas. Later, with the establishment of Christmas on 25 December, Advent was moved to the four Sundays preceding it. This period became so significant that it marked the beginning of the liturgical year. Another characteristic aspect of Advent is the Advent wreath, although it is not a tradition strictly linked to Spain. In fact, this custom originated in Germany in the nineteenth century. On Sundays, when families gathered for a

meal, it was customary to pray and bless the food. A wreath with four candles would be placed on the table, and one candle would be lit for each Sunday of Advent. The wreath was made of intertwined green plants, in a circular shape, symbolizing the yearly cycle and the eternity of God. In the last century, this tradition was also adopted by churches, where wreaths with candles began to appear.

Advent wreaths evoke several symbols: light, which signifies the journey, and is the symbol of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. The colour green represents life and hope. Lighting a candle each week emphasizes the gradual approach to the fullness of Christ's light.

An important public event that reminds all Spaniards that Christmas is approaching is the drawing of the Lotería Nacional on 22 December. The grand prize, known as "El Gordo" (which means "the fat one" in Spanish), is considered the richest lottery in the world. People take part in large numbers, buying a tenth of a ticket, and the drawing is widely followed on television. The winning numbers are drawn at random and announced by children, who sing the results.

From that moment onward, everyone knows that Christmas has arrived, and preparations begin. On the 24th, Christmas Eve, families traditionally gather together for Christmas dinner, which usually consists of roasted meats or fish, soup, the essential Jamón Serrano (Spanish cured ham), Iberian ham, seafood, and cheese. Then come the sweets and desserts, which are the stars of Christmas meal, including turrón, a sweet almond nougat, marzipan, "polvores" and "mantecados".



For several decades, the kings of Spain have delivered a Christmas Eve speech, a moment eagerly anticipated by the Spanish.

After the Christmas dinner, the Spanish attend Midnight Mass, known as the 'Misa del Gallo' (Rooster's Mass), because, according to popular tradition, roosters joined their voices to the angels' song that announced the birth of the Saviour, on Christmas Eve. To commemorate the event, Catalan nativity scenes, include representations of roosters.

After Midnight Mass, the streets come alive with celebrations for the birth of the Son of God, accompanied by traditional Christmas carols featuring "zambomba", tambourines, and guitars. Zambombas are traditional percussion instruments used in flamenco, and are particularly popular during the Christmas season in Andalusia. They resemble a type of drum, made from a clay or wooden vessel, covered with a membrane or animal skin.

Christmas Eve is the night when Santa Claus brings gifts to all well-behaved children. In the Basque Country, Olentzero delivers the toys, while in Catalonia and Aragón, it is the Tió de Nadal. Although Santa Claus is known worldwide, in Spanish tradition, it is not the famous bearded old man who brings the gifts, but the Magi.

Traditions vary depending on the region. In Catalonia, on 8 December, children begin "feeding" a wooden log every night, covering it with a blanket to keep it warm. On Christmas Day,



the log is placed in the middle of the home, and the children hit it with sticks, while singing a traditional song, so that Tió will bring gifts and presents. They then remove the blanket and find candy and other sweets, under the log.

The Basque Country also has its own version of Santa Claus. His name is Olentzero. He is a giant dressed as a farmer, with a pipe in his mouth. On the night of 23 December, he walks along Bilbao's Gran Vía towards the Arriaga Theatre, and delivers gifts to the children he meets along the way.

Throughout Spain, Christmas Day is dedicated to attending the solemn Mass.

But the festivities do not end with Christmas. On 28 December, Spain celebrates El Día de los Santos Inocentes (Day of the Holy Innocents), a tradition observed throughout the country. On that day, it is customary to pull small pranks. One of the most popular is to attach a small white paper doll to someone's back, without them noticing. Many regions of Spain also have their own unique celebrations for 28 December. For example, the Fiesta de los Locos de Jalance in Valencia, where the mayor of the "Locos" governs the town for 24 hours; the Fiesta de los Santos Inocentes de Nogalte in Murcia, with folk dances and music from bands; the Danza de los Locos de Fuente Carreteros in Córdoba; and the Bispillo celebration, which takes place in places like Burgos, Palencia, León, and Murcia, in which a child is chosen to perform the duties of a bishop for the day. There is also the Fiesta dels Enfarinats in Ibi, Al-

icante, where people engage in a playful battle with eggs, flour, and firecrackers.

El Día de los Santos Inocentes commemorates the suffering and death of innocent children on the day in which King Herod ordered the massacre of all boys under the age of two. For this reason, they are considered martyrs for Christ. However, popular culture has shifted this perspective and now considers "the innocents" to be those who, on this day, walk around with a doll attached to their back or those who believe the stories and pranks they are told.

This brings us to 31 December, the last day of the year. While Christmas Eve is a family celebration, New Year's Eve is celebrated in the company of others.

After the traditional New Year's Eve dinner, everyone prepares for the arrival of the New Year. Just before the clock strikes midnight, people gather in squares or homes to eat the "12 grapes of luck." During the final 12 seconds of the year, with each chime of the bells, people eat one grape per second. Crowds gather in squares, especially in front of the famous clock at Puerta del Sol in Madrid, or watch the broadcast of the chimes on television. It is a way of wishing each other good fortune for the coming year. Those who manage to eat all 12 grapes in time will be blessed with a year full of prosperity and fortune.

On 5 January, the eve of Epiphany, the day is dedicated to children. In the afternoon, large floats with the Reyes Magos (Three Kings) parade through every city and town, throwing sweets and candy to children. This parade is

known as the cabalgata (cavalcade), and features musicians, performers, and people in costume.

The parade also includes a procession of allegorical floats, similar to those seen during carnival, with characters from fairy tales, cartoons, or fables. After the parade, families return home so the children can have an early dinner and leave their shoes in the living room. This is the only way the Magi will know where to leave their gifts during the night.

Tradition holds that each child should write a letter to the Magi, telling them how they behaved throughout the year and what they would like as gifts. In shopping centres and recreational spaces, mailboxes are set up to send these letters to the Magi.

In Spain, gifts for children are not brought by Santa Claus, but by the Magi on 6 January. Today, this tradition is beginning to change, and children now receive gifts both on Christmas Day and on Epiphany.

On that day, the Spanish eat the famous Roscón de Reyes: a ring-shaped cake with candied fruit, filled with whipped cream or custard. Two surprises are hidden inside the cake: a figurita (a small figurine) and a haba (a fava bean). Whoever finds the figurita in their slice of cake, has the honour of wearing a crown and becoming the king of the celebration, but those who find the haba, have to pay for the entire cake.

It is a fun way to celebrate the manifestation of Jesus in the world, and to wish everyone: ¡Feliz Navidad!



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: The homeland of Christmas, among lights and trees

It can undoubtedly be said that the United States of America has become the homeland of Christmas. It is no coincidence that the most famous Christmas tree in the world is located in New York at Rockefeller Center. Its stunning lights are turned on, on the Wednesday after Thanksgiving Day, which is celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. The lighting ceremony is a must-see event, not only for Americans, but also for people around the world, who visit New York or watch the show on television. After the holiday season, the tree is donated to charity so its wood can be used.

American tradition does not include plastic trees, so families purchase real fir trees. This helps reduce pollution.

Another old tradition is the practice of burning a wooden log in the hearth and letting it burn until Epiphany. This custom, tied to agriculture, was a way to express the hopes for a good harvest and a flourishing, prosperous new year.

Starting from the day after Thanksgiving, when families gather to enjoy stuffed turkey with cranberry sauce, the preparations for Christmas begin. Families compete to create the most beautiful decorations and light displays.

On the other hand, Christmas is deeply cherished, and some traditions, influenced by European customs, vary across different regions. Every American tries to make their yard brighter than their neighbour's, so cities spare no expense when it comes to decorations. In homes, real Christmas trees are a must, along with stockings hung by the fireplace and additional sprigs of mistletoe and holly.

There is no doubt that no other country gets as involved in Christmas as the United States. In

every city and home, garlands, decorations, lights, stars, trees, and hundreds of Santa Clauses parade through the streets, handing out little gifts to children and entertaining them. Santa Claus in America is depicted as a smiling old man, dressed in red with a white beard, high black boots, a sack full of gifts, and his unmistakable round belly. He is often accompanied by two reindeer pulling his sleigh, filled with presents, and his iconic bell that announces his arrival.

It was following a marketing idea from an agency working for Coca-Cola that St. Nicholas of Bari, or Santa Claus, was transformed into the Santa we know today. In 1931, illustrator Haddon Sundblom designed this modern version of Santa to promote Coca-Cola during the Christmas season.

Some of the most famous Christmas-lit houses are undoubtedly those in Brooklyn's Dyker Heights neighbourhood. This residential area, which developed in the early 20th century, features private driveways, gardens, and typical columned porches. The neighbourhood became famous as the setting for movies like *Miracle on 34th Street* and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. Residents compete to create the most beautiful decorations, with Christmas lights, snowmen, statues, and illuminated characters in their gardens. The first ones to start the competition were Lucy Spata (1152 84th Street), who decorated her facade with a Santa Claus theme, and Alfred Polizzotto (1145 84th Street), who drew inspiration from *The Nutcracker*. Their friendly rivalry sparked a competition that eventually involved the entire neighbourhood. Walking tours, lasting about 1.5 hours, and bus tours are organized to showcase the spectacular Christmas displays. Another tradition is wearing big, cozy Christmas jumpers, often hand-made. People wear them all day long and take photos to send to friends and family far away, to wish them a Merry Christmas and feel a little closer despite the distance.

Stuffed turkey, cranberry sauce and Christmas pudding are essential for the Christmas table. This classic American holiday dessert is a rich



fruitcake made with dried fruit, raisins, apples, and spices, and additional personalized ingredients. Mince pies, instead are the treats preferred by Santa Claus and his reindeer. They are small pastry tarts filled with a mixture of apples, red berries, raisins, and dried fruit marinated in brandy.

It is common to exchange Christmas greetings on the streets, even with strangers, and to send Christmas cards to friends and loved ones.



SWEDEN: the splendour of light

Christmas is a very important holiday in Sweden, and the entire population prepares for it well in advance, starting in November, when streets are illuminated with festive lights, shop windows are decorated and the first Christmas markets start to appear.

The first Sunday of Advent, officially kicks off the season's preparations, as homes are brightened with Christmas lights and a four-arm candelabra is lit. Each candle represents a Sunday.

Among the traditions adopted from Germany in the 19th century are Advent wreaths, Christmas stars or Moravian stars,

from Germany. A 110-point paper star was constructed at the Moravian boys' school in Niesky, Saxony, in 1821. A few years later, Peter Verbeek, a former student of the school, opened a bookshop and began to sell the materials required to make the star. The tradition reached Sweden at the end of the 19th century, when a Moravian star was donated to the Cathedral of Västerås. Its popularity became widespread thanks to Julia Aurelius, the German wife of a Protestant pastor, who brought the star from Germany to Lund. Since then, Swedish families have been hanging the star on the windows of their homes. In the 1930s, the stars were mass-produced in various shapes, colours, and materials. From then on, in addition to the candelabra, it became common practice in Swedish homes, shops and offices to display a Moravian star on their window sill.

In a country with few hours of daylight in the winter, the memorial of the martyr, Saint Lucia, on 13 December, has great significance. It is the festival of light, in which candles are lit to brighten the darkness. Girls wear white gowns, a red belt, and a crown of candles on their heads. To avoid accidents, the younger girls' crowns are fitted with electric candles, and only Saint Lucia has real candles in her crown. Boys also take part in Luciatåg (Saint Lucia procession).

and gingerbread biscuits (pepparkakor). The Advent wreaths are similar to those in other European countries, and are made with evergreen branches and leaves arranged in a circular shape. Wreaths represents God's infinite love, while the candle-light symbolizes life that endures, even in the darkest months of northern latitudes. Although the tradition was introduced at the end of the 19th century, it was not until the 1920s that it became widespread throughout the country. The original candelabra had seven arms for seven candles, but it evolved into an electric version or, more commonly, into a four-candle candelabra, one for each Sunday of Advent. The origins of the Moravian star also hail



They wear white pageboy costumes and pointed hats with stars, or brown costumes that recall gingerbread cookies. The children sing traditional Christmas carols associated with Saint Lucia Day. After the music, participants enjoy saffron buns, Lussekatter, or gingerbread cookies, Pepparkakor. Stockholm Cathedral, Storkyrkan (big church) the city's oldest church dating back to 1200, and the church dedicated to Saint



James, St. Jacobs Kyrka, in Kungsträdgården Park, hold concerts in honour of Saint Lucia,



in the weekends preceding her feast day and on the eve of the festivity.

It is no surprise that Christmas trees are used by most people in a country, in which forests cover a large part of the surface area. Red fir trees, which can be bought at affordable prices, are decorated with candles, cookies, lights, and, of course, Swedish flags. At the end of the Christmas season, the trees are neither discarded nor burned, but instead submerged in lakes, rivers, or the sea, to provide shelter for fish, especially for laying their eggs.

In Swedish and Danish, Christmas is known as Jul (jol in Norwegian, jöl in Icelandic). Jul is a Germanic word that means "festival" or "festivity", and specifically refers to the month of December and the winter solstice celebration (Yule). During this time, it was customary to eat, drink, and make animal sacrifices, particularly of pigs. This midwinter sacrifice (midvinterblot in Swedish) is the precursor to the Swedish Julbord (Christmas banquet), in which pork is traditionally served.

Julbord has its origins in the Viking Age, although some dishes were introduced in the early 20th century, such as Christmas sausages and ham. In the 1970s, meatballs were added to the menu.

Julbord, one of the most important Christmas traditions in Sweden, is served and enjoyed on Christmas Eve, the day Swedish people celebrate Christmas. The tradition stems from the practice of starting new days at sunset rather than at midnight. While conventions for measuring time have changed, the tradition has remained. Swedish families gather for lunch to exchange gifts and enjoy the Julbord. Throughout December, companies invite their employees to join in their Julbord. In addition to herring and meatballs (kötbullar), two dishes are essential: Christmas ham (Julskinka) and marinated salmon (Gravlax). These are accompanied by Christ-

mas beer (Julöl) and Julmust, a non-alcoholic drink. December 25th is dedicated to resting after the Julbord.

At 3:00 p.m., Swedish families assemble in front of their televisions to watch "Donald Duck and His Friends Wish You a Merry Christmas" (Kalle Anka och hans vänner önskar God Jul), a tradition that has been ongoing since 1960. The Disney animation special showcases the adventures of Mickey Mouse, Pluto, Jimini Cricket, Ferdinand the Bull and the Ugly Duckling. Many families exchange their presents after the show.

In Sweden, Santa Claus is known as Jul-tomten, which means "Christmas elf" or "Christmas gnome". Before Jultomten, he was a man dressed as a goat (julbock). Christmas gifts, called julklappar in Swedish, come from att klappa, which means "to clap" or "knock", with Jul referring to Christmas. The etymology harkens back to the tradition of "Christmas knocking", when, young people from the countryside would knock on doors on Christmas Eve,

leaving behind a piece of wood or a figure made of hay. There was usually a message explaining the reason for the "gift", which was sometimes playful, sometimes cheeky. To remain anonymous, they would knock on the door and quickly run away.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, Sweden's postal service, Postnord, places special red Christmas mailboxes, known as julbrevlåda, in cities throughout the country, specifically for Christmas cards, as well as smaller boxes for children's letters to Santa Claus. His address is: Tomten, 173 00 Tomtebodå, which until a few years ago, was Sweden's postal service sorting centre.

Christmas in Sweden concludes with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, known as Knut's Day (or the twentieth day after Christmas) when Swedes say: "tjugondag Knut körs julen ut" (Knu's Day sends Christmas away) or "tjugondag Knut kastas granen ut" (on Knut's Day, Christmas trees are thrown out).



SWITZERLAND: The Postal Address of Baby Jesus



Snow-capped peaks and valleys, a festive atmosphere in every town and city, lights and decorations adorning the streets, traditional music, and mulled wine. This is Switzerland preparing for Christmas, transforming the holiday into a truly special celebration.

The Solemnity of Christmas is deeply felt by the nearly nine million residents of Switzerland. Beginning in Advent, the family-oriented celebration includes the Advent calendar, a wreath with candles, and traditional Swiss German carols, such as *Das isch de Stern vo Bethlehem* or *S'isch heilige Wiehnachtszyt*.

Most Swiss homes set up a Christmas tree.

window, which gradually adds to the growing display. The tradition ends on 6 January, when the windows are taken down.

On 6 December, Switzerland celebrates St. Nicholas of Myra (*Samichlaustag*). Unlike German and Austrian traditions, the Holy Bishop is not accompanied by Krampus, but by his servant. In German-speaking and Italian-speaking Switzerland, this servant is called *Schmutzli* or *Butzli*, while in French-speaking Switzerland, he is known as *Père Fouettard*. *Samichlaus* appears differently depending on whether the region is predominantly Catholic or Protestant. In Catholic areas, he is dressed as a bishop with a white robe and a red cloak, holding a pastoral staff, while in Protestant areas, he is depicted as an old man with a long beard, a walking stick and a hooded cloak.

Unlike the German tradition, *Samichlaus* does not arrive in the morning but in the evening of 6 December. He carries a book in which he reads whether children have behaved well throughout the year. Those who have been naughty are given the chance to earn forgiveness by reciting Christmas poems and sayings by *Samichlaus*. The little ones receive small gifts such as tangerines, chocolate, gingerbread, or nuts. In many parts of Switzerland, during this time of year, there are also St. Nicholas processions, such as the *Claus-Chlöpfen* in Lenzburg or the *Klausjagen* in *Küssnacht am Rigi*.

When it comes to gifts, it is not always the same character who distributes them; it varies according to the linguistic tradition. In the western part of Switzerland, *Père Noël* (*Santa Claus*) leaves gifts under the tree, while in the rest of Switzerland, *Baby Jesus* brings the presents. After all, *Baby Jesus* has a postal address in Switzerland, specifically in *Wienacht-Tobel*, a village in the Canton of *Appenzell Ausserrhoden*. *Baby Jesus* receives letters from Swiss children and from children the world over. Until 2020,

the director of *Wienacht's* post office, *Willi Würzer*, was entrusted by *Baby Jesus* to reply to all the letters. Since his retirement, a family-run business now handles the replies to the hundreds of letters received from around the world, on behalf of *Baby Jesus*. The address is: Postcode 9405, *Wienacht* (CH).

On 25 December, the faithful attend Mass, while others have already done so the previous evening at *Midnight Mass*. Most families exchange gifts on 24 December, while some wait until Christmas morning. However, everyone gathers together for Christmas lunch. The traditional Christmas dishes vary depending on the region, but *fondue chinoise*, *cheese fondue*, *raclette*, *schüfeli* and *rolled ham* are popular across the country. Depending on the region, one can find different local delicacies. In German-speaking Switzerland, there is the ancient tradition of a classic roast with potato salad. In the French-speaking part, turkey is served, which symbolizes wealth, abundance, and community. In Italian-speaking Switzerland, *panettone* is the typical dessert. In *Ticino*, *capon* is often eaten along with *tortellini* or *ravioli* in broth as a starter. In the Canton of *Bern*, a typical dish includes meats, dried beans, *sauerkraut*, and potatoes. There are also the classic Christmas cookies flavored with cinnamon, vanilla, and almonds.

In various locations scattered across the country's valleys and mountains, there are



In some towns in *Ticino*, a fir tree is placed in the town square, while nativity scenes are displayed at home. Like in other European countries, a candle is lit on the Advent wreath on the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. Each day children, who have their own Advent calendar that runs from 1-24 December, open a window and find a piece of chocolate. However, Switzerland has a particularly unique Advent calendar. Known as the *Advent windows*, this initiative involves entire villages and originated in *Aargau*. Twenty-four villagers decorate one of their windows. A sort of lottery is held to decide who will decorate their window and on which day. Every evening, at twilight, a new Advent window is revealed. The villagers gather to admire the newly decorated



unique traditions for the end of the year. In Rheinfelden, in northern Switzerland, the Brunnensingen (fountain singing) has been held since 1541. It originated in response to the plague that was afflicting the population.

On the evenings of 24 and 31 December, twelve members of the Confraternity of St. Sebastian, invoke against the plague. Dressed in black and carrying lanterns, they walk through the historic centre. They pause at the city's six fountains to sing the Christmas carol *Die Nacht, die ist so freudenreich* (The night is so joyful). For one hour, Rheinfelden is left in darkness, with the only light coming from the lanterns of the confrères. In the mountain town of Klosters, in eastern Switzerland, on January 1st, a traditional race takes place. Known as *Hotschrennen der Glückssäuli* (The Lucky Piglets Race) it involves 10 piglets running along a snowy course, as the locals enjoy betting on which piglet will be the fastest.

In Appenzell, a rural region in northeastern Switzerland, New Year's is celebrated twice: on 31 December and on the night of 13 January (New Year's Eve according to the Julian calendar). At dawn, men dressed as *Silvesterchläuse* (St. Sylvester's figures) visit local farms, ringing bells and performing a distinctive wordless yodel. This is their way of wishing everyone a happy New Year. The *Silvesterchläuse* are traditional figures associated with the Christmas season and are divided into three groups: the Handsome (*Schöne*) the Ugly (*Wüeschte*), and the Kläuse of the forest or nature (the *Schö-Wüeschte*). The Handsome wear traditional clothing, complete with silver thread braids and headdresses depicting scenes of everyday life. The Ugly, instead, wear rough cloaks covered in dry branches, foliage, or straw, and cover their faces with demonic masks. The Kläuse too, use natural materials like fir twigs and moss, though their costumes are more carefully crafted compared to those of the Ugly.

On the Feast of the Epiphany, it is very common to sing the hymn of the Magi, or the hymn of the Star which has earned a place



in the list of "Living Traditions in Switzerland". Children go from house to house dressed as the Three Magi, singing both ancient and modern religious hymns. In some areas of Ticino, the Three Kings arrive on horseback and distribute sweets to children. In addition to the Magi, the *Befana*—much loved by children in nearby Italy—also arrives in Ticino on Epiphany.

In German-speaking Switzerland, 6 January is linked to 1952, when the bread historian Max Währen from Basel revived the long-

forgotten tradition. In addition to plastic figurines, small plastic statues are also inserted into the crowns of the Magi, and whoever finds them is crowned king or queen and wears a small crown all day.

In French-speaking Switzerland, it is traditional to enjoy a *Gâteau à la frangipane* or a *Galette des Rois*, a pastry filled with almond cream, while in Ticino, alongside the crown of the Three Kings, it is customary to also eat panettone.



HUNGARY: “God bless the Hungarians”

Christmas is a fundamental celebration for Hungarians, who are predominantly Christian. More than half the Christian population is Catholic. As Advent begins, lights and garlands decorate the city streets, homes and shops. It is traditional to wait until 24 December to decorate Christmas trees. The trees are decorated, not only with lights and baubles, but also with szaloncukor, chocolate covered sweets filled with marzipan, hazelnuts and fruit, wrapped in colourful wrappings, and mézeskalács, which are gingerbread cookies made with honey, sugar, flour and eggs and spiced with cinnamon

with walnuts or poppy seeds, known as beigli.

After supper and before Christmas Mass, people exchange Christmas gifts, which in Hungary, are brought by Jézuska, little Jesus, and greetings. Happy Christmas in Hungarian is Boldog Karácsonyt kívánok, whereas Happy Holidays is Kellemes Ünnepeket kívánok.

At midnight on 31 December, Hungarians sing the national anthem in their homes and in city squares: “God bless the Hungarians”, and then celebrate the new year. The greeting for the new year is Boldog új évet kívánok, but since it is too long, people abbreviate it to búék.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, children dress up as the Magi and go from house to house carrying a nativity scene. They are given some coins in exchange. Meanwhile, in the Eastern tradition, there is the evocative rite of the blessing of the water in the Danube.

After the Divine Liturgy in the Church of Saint Florian, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Hajdúdorog for Catholics of Byzantine rite, leads a procession to the Danube, in front of the Hungarian parliament, where the water is blessed.

and ginger, baked in various shapes, including stars, snowmen, and hearts. The tree is decorated in the afternoon, when children are sent outside to play, so that upon their return, they will be pleasantly surprised.

On Christmas Eve, known as holy night, szent este in Hungarian, families sing Christmas carols together and eat halászlé, carp fish soup. Because it is flavoured with lots of paprika, it has a red colour, and thanks to the onions and lard, a strong flavour. Also part of the traditional Christmas meal are cabbage rolls stuffed with minced meat and rice, covered in sour cream, known as töltött káposzta, and for dessert, a roll cake stuffed



FROM COMMUNITIES

ENGLAND: BENEDICTINE AMPLEFORTH ABBEY, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Making Christ present



Christmas is one of the very few occasions when we do not have guests staying at the Abbey. This makes the celebration of the birth of Jesus a 'family affair' for the monastic community. We try to keep Advent to the full, so decorations and preparations of cribs etc., only begin on the morning of 24th December after Mass. If possible, each of the monks, who are able bodied take part in the various tasks: preparing the Christmas tree, putting up the numerous Christmas cards, erecting the crib in the monastic choir and in the Lady chapel, as well as cooking and washing up. There are flowers, of course, to prepare as well as the liturgical music.

Welcoming Christ into the world begins for us with Pontifical Vespers of Christmas Eve, followed by a simple supper. Then at 8.30pm we sing Matins culminating with the singing of the Genealogy from Matthew's Gospel. This meditative reflecting on God's Word leads us naturally into the first Mass of Christmas at 10.30pm which finishes around midnight. Many visitors come to join us and after Mass we gather with them in the hall for mince pies and cocoa.

Christmas Day itself begins with Lauds at



8.00am, Conventual Mass at 10.00am where once again many visitors join us. After Sext at 1.00pm we have a light lunch preparing ourselves for the festive Christmas meal which will take place after Pontifical Vespers at 4.30pm. We have drinks before this meal and then relax and enjoy time together. Each monk will receive a small gift, a sign of appreciation for all that they contribute throughout the year, a mark of genuine fraternity. The day then comes to an end with Compline at 8.00pm.

Throughout the octave of Christmas, we try and make meals and recreation special. Sometimes films are arranged and occasionally there is a walk organised for the more energetic. Thankfully many of our friends are very generous in gifts of cakes and special treats. The highlight, of course, is the way we try to enter more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation; to make Christ present among us and recognise that presence in each brother. Thank you for the opportunity to share and be assured of our union in prayer.

Robert Igo OSB
Abbot



ANDORRA: SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF MERITXELL



A Christmas Jubilee of Hope

Christmas has begun
And the people are on the move
From the peaks to the villages
Celebrations in Andorra
A star appeared on the snow
It came to us
From a foreign land
To Casamanya

This Christmas hymn, which is typical of Andorra, is sung by schoolchildren in Plaça de Carlemany, in front of the Canillo's town hall. It is the first Sunday of Advent. Council authorities have transformed the parish of Meritxell in Soldeu into a nativity scene. The streets, squares and river host scenes from the first Bethlehem and those of Christmas 2024. The figures are as big as the adults and children of the village. Throughout Advent until the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the shepherd and his flock of sheep, the cows the washerwoman, the baker and the Magi are the citizens of Andorra. As the people of Canillo and visitors contem-



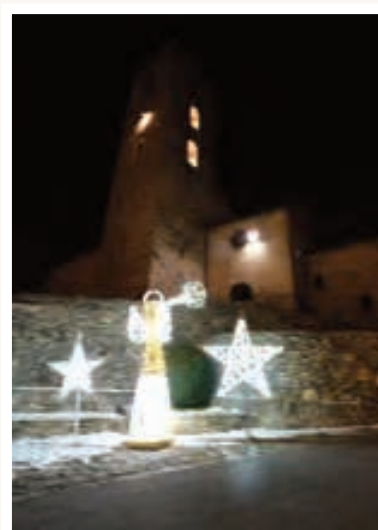
plate the nativity scene, they appreciate the beautiful ancient sites of Canillo, including the Placeta del Pui and the fountain of the windmill. The nativity scene is located in Carrer de l'Areny. The portico of the Romanesque Church of Santa Creu, hosts Mary, Joseph and the Divine Child. The scene echoes the Christmas of Fr. Cinto Verdaguer. It is said that the wood from the crib in Bethlehem was used to make the Cross on Calvary.

This year too, the Major Councillor and the Minister of Culture inaugurate the nativity scene by cutting the ribbon to the applause of the whole neighbourhood. The Councillor says: "The road towards Christmas has begun". We welcome the light of Meritxell: Meritxell's coat of arms has representations of each of the parishes in Andorra: Canillo, Encamp, Ordino, La Massana, Andorra la Vella, Sant Julià de Lòria and Escaldes Engordany. The longest ray is l'Estel de Meritxell, which connects the whole country to Casamanya, the emblematic summit of Andorra. The Councillor invites the children to walk towards Christmas. With a smile, he tells them to "make a nativity scene at home and participate in the weekly courses of Christmas hymns".

We journey towards Christmas. Four children from the Christmas hymns workshop go on pilgrimage to Meritxell. They make a mural depicting Christmas symbols to remind pilgrims of the Advent journey. They offer it to the Virgin Mary, Patron Saint of Andorra, and sing to her: "What shall we give to the Son of the Mother"? The encounter in Meritxell ends with the statuettes of Mary and Joseph, without the Child, as the children sing: "Drop down the dew, you clouds above, and let the clouds rain

down justice".

The third week of Advent is the most important leg of the journey. The young instructors of AINA (Any Internacional del Nen D'Andorra) (1) and the youths from the camp participate in a Christmas formation course, on site. On Friday after dinner, they comment on a film with a Christmas-related theme. On Saturday, the young people put on their cross-country skis or snowshoes, and carry the nativity scene, the artistic work of colonial workshops and of the Gospels, up one of the mountains. They can choose to climb Casamanya, Comapedrosa, Torroella, Pont Travenc, the intersection between the paths of Juclar and Siscaró, or Mereig in the Tamarros camping area. A pine tree acts as a support for the nativity scene. They read the Gospel of the Nativity of Jesus and they sing, Holy Night. In the afternoon after some rest, the parish priest delivers a talk



on Christmas. They then break up into groups and answer a few quiz questions. After dinner, there is a moment of bonding, which ends with Christmas carols and goodnight greetings. The course ends with the celebration of Holy Mass at the Sanctuary of Meritxell. During the offertory, they exchange the gifts that each of them brings for a companion.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, a catechism course retraces scenes from the town's nativity scene. The scene is analysed and then a Christmas hymn is sung.

On the 24th, Midnight Mass is celebrated in Soldeu and in Sant Serni de Canillo, at 10:00 p.m. and at 12:00 a.m. respectively. They are attended by national authorities and by people from neighbouring municipalities. We sing "Midnight rings, the Child God, son of Mary, is already born". At the end of Mass, all the parishioners are like the shepherds, in adoration of the newborn Jesus, as they sing the most popular carols. Cakes and chocolate are served in fraternity at the Church exit, a beautiful way to celebrate Christmas. On 25 December, there is a solemn Mass at the Sanctuary of Meritxell for pilgrims from Les Valls. We sing: "Our hearts join/in your warmth/peaks and valleys applaud/their love for this nest".

On 27 December, the Feast of Saint John the Evangelist, Holy Mass is celebrated in the Romanesque Church of Saint Joan de Caselles, in which there is an altarpiece from 1537 depicting scenes of the Apocalypse. Outside the Church, the people of Armià and Vilà perform dances. Another way in which the family of Canillo celebrates Christmas.

On 28 December, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, snow games are held for all the children, especially for those who, for whatever reason, cannot participate in skiing. The celebration begins with Christmas hymns sung in the AINA nativity scene, followed by traditional Andorran Christmas games. The morning ends with a snow sculpture contest. After the children have finished their Christmas lunch, the "tio" gives them a toy, as dessert. As the motto of Càritas de Canillo reads, no child is without a toy at Christmastime.

On the evening of 31 December, we bid farewell to the year, with a torchlight procession down the ski slopes of Soleu, an ideal place for an evening with the family, for those

who are snow enthusiasts. The following day, we celebrate the new year by celebrating Holy Mass in Sant Pere Church, at the bottom of the ski slopes of Tarter. After Mass, neighbours offer parishioners coca cola and chocolate to welcome in the new year.

Christmas celebrations end with their majesties, the Kings of the Orient, Melchior, Caspar and Bathazar riding their horses along the nativity scenes through the streets and squares of Canillo. The children from the nursery school and their parents welcome them into Plaça Carlemany, and then the children sit on the throne of the King to receive an embrace and an invitation to a cross-country ski course run by AINA. On 31 January, at the end of the school term, there is the "crema del mai" (Bonfire of the tree). A waitress brings dry branches to light a fire. The Major Councillor lights the fire, a tradition in Canillo that signals that the worst



of the rigorous cold of winter has passed and it is time to move forward.

When he will inaugurate the 2025 Jubilee Year, Pope Francis will say, "Hope does not disappoint". Let us continue to walk with He who left heaven to become man and be our Way, every month of the year.

Monsignor Ramon de Canillo



PORTUGAL: CARMEL OF CHRIST THE REDEEMER, AVEIRO

A Carmelite Nun's Christmas

Christmas is still a deeply heart-felt celebration today, a liturgical feast that has permeated culture. There are certainly some negative aspects, such as rampant consumerism, that leads to the paradox of a Christmas celebration in which Christ, the central figure, seems to be have been forgotten. Whereas in the fourth century Christians had Christianized a pagan holiday, in the 21st century a Christian celebration has become partially secularized.

How does a Carmelite nun experience Christmas in a way in which Christ is, not only the centre of the liturgical celebration, but also of her entire life?

The key word is Love, the vocation of every man and woman, which can only be fully realized by loving. When we discover that "God is Love" and that we can fulfil ourselves as individuals, Christians and Carmelites through love, our lives take on a new and unique meaning; that of Jesus' new commandment, to love as He has loved us.

From this perspective, if every year is an opportunity to live fraternity as friendship - one of the foundations of our charism- then Christmas is a privileged time to deepen this friendship with our "Friend, the Word made flesh", and with



our friends, who are the joyful embodiment of Emmanuel - God with us-. It is only through this relationship of friendship with our Sisters that we can fulfil our vocation to "be friends with those we know love us".

Is this love monotonous or a routine? From within Carmel, we say no, because it is Christ himself who makes all things new, thanks to the actualization of His Paschal mystery that begins at Christmas.

"Jesus Christ is born today", we sing in the antiphons of the Christmas liturgy, because this "today" has become an eternal presence in the incarnate Word. It is this "today", that of Jesus, which gives fraternity, joy, and solidarity a new flavour, and fills our lives with a joyful announcement of peace: "Peace on earth to those who please God".

Day by day, we see that we can only be happy when we live the "today" of our lives without being dragged down by a past that no longer belongs to us, or by a future that we can only build from the present. God's truth becomes a light in our lives that we can offer and share with our Sisters and all of humanity. This is one of the goals of our pilgrimage of faith along the journey of

life.

Like all journeys, this one too has its obstacles, but by contemplating the mystery of Love made Child—free and selfless, weak and lifeless—we learn year after year about this love, which gives without expecting anything in return. In giving ourselves, we overcome difficulties and find true happiness and fulfilment.

This "today" of Jesus' birth brings a festive atmosphere to the convent and makes our family home and the community, welcoming. For Saint Teresa, these days were filled with special fraternal joy, which is why she composed several "vilhancicos". Sung with tambourines and castanets, they were a simple expression of the mystery of the condescension of God, manifested in the humanity of Christ.

To better internalize these Christmas celebrations, we hold the "Retreat of the Child", when each Sister is called to accompany Mary in deeper silence and reflection during this time of waiting. The liturgy holds a prominent place;





we carefully prepare the Eucharistic celebration because it is the place where God Love is present, not because "the Child is born" on the altar, but because the incarnate Word, who died and is glorified, is always present in the Eucharist.

Among the traditions we have preserved are: Each of the Sisters decorates the most significant places in the convent and in her workspace: the wardrobe, the refectory, the kitchen, the locutorium, etc., using the creative ingenuity that distinguishes each of them. For example, the Sister who cooks, transforms a pumpkin into the cave in Bethlehem, and a cabbage leaf is placed into the manger where the Child is laid...

The memory of the "inns" where Joseph and Mary sought lodgings. Here, we relive the mystery of God, who could not find room among men. Sometimes we walk through the convent, accompanying Joseph and Mary in the silence of the night, to the sound of hymns, knocking on the door of each cell to ask for hospitality. Other times, the mystery is "re-enacted" in the refectory, depending on which Sister is tasked with the organization.

After Midnight Mass, joyful hymns, drums, tambourines, and castanets blend with the contemplative silence of adoration. Like the shepherds, we go to worship the Child in the "Grotto of Bethlehem", which the convent sets up for these days.

To bid farewell to the year that is ending and to welcome the new one, we gather once again around the altar for a Eucharistic celebration in which we give thanks for all the blessings, situations, and circumstances we have experienced, and we entrust our new desires and plans to God.

But just like our lives,

our Christmas is a time of sharing with our brothers and sisters, which is why our celebrations are open to all those who wish to celebrate and experience the coming of Jesus, with us. At the end of the Eucharist, everyone is invited to the locutorium, where we express, in simplicity, the joy of having a God who is with us, through Christmas carols, drums, castanets, and tambourines. We wish you all a Holy Christmas and a new year filled with the blessings of the God made Child.

The Discalced Carmelites.



HOLY LAND: CARMEL OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS, BETHLEHEM

Living on the crest of a volcano

The birth of the flesh of the Word of God – Christmas – is like a Divine eruption on creation, of the Infinite onto what is limited ... in the end, the birth of quintessential Love into our humanity, that is quickly forgetting what a human being is...

To live Christmas in Bethlehem, is like living on the crest of this volcano that is erupting. It is both fascinating and earthshaking, even “dangerous”.

A volcano in eruption is an image of a destructive force... and yet this Divine eruption is Fragility itself, the weakness of a child, the tenderness of a mother and the sweetness of a family... And what's more, it took place in the middle of the night (of the world – this very day!), in the poverty of the simple and uncomplicated faith of Mary and Joseph, when no one expects that God is coming to share our humanity in this way... This terrible paradox causes a sense of wonder without measure, and the wonder and adoration are intertwined with the joy that we share in the community.

To prepare ourselves for Christmas in the community, the day before we ask forgiveness for our lack of charity and we thank one another for the shared presence. At last, it is the feast of the Presence, par excellence, the presence of God among us. It is a family: welcoming a Child!

We let ourselves be guided by the great Liturgy of Christmas: the breviary intertwined with the



Word of God has been proclaiming the Coming of the Saviour for centuries, and the Readings of Mass provide nourishment for this joy! How beautiful it is to taste the solid food of the Church! It is so simple and so true! The divine Office, sung in the community, immerses us into the Mystery we are celebrating and every year it allows us to discover the Presence and Divine love, a little more.

Of course we want to share this simple and extraordinary joy! We have various simple and unpretentious ways to do so at the Carmel. Everywhere one looks, there is a Nativity Scene set up by our sisters. We come from 10 different countries and each Nativity Scene reflects something of each country. Visiting the cribs to the sound of Christmas hymns: what a simple and profound joy! What better way could there be to adore such a mystery? Making the mind give in and pouring our heart before God made Child, to welcome his Love, to adore him ...

We are in the Carmel of the Holy Child Jesus – this “forces” us and gradually teaches us about the simplicity of God. The Christmas hymns are filled with theological and lyrical meaning. Christian tradition is filled with wisdom and richness! All we have to do is reawaken our faith to be able to discover its treasures.

This Christmas Vigil does not take place in silence. It is time for the nuns to rejoice together, as it is also for the faithful who participate in Midnight Mass with us. They are our friends, but there are also pilgrims from other countries (at least until recently, before the war). We sing Christmas hymns and share our time together. “To waste time” with our neighbours; being with our brothers and sisters as a family, freely:



Tonight more than ever, Emmanuel-God-is-with-us teaches us to be humans... I often think that for me, this is an invaluable lesson, but it is also for today's world!

We also try to share this joy with the poorest. If conditions allow it, the entire Community makes small gifts for the children and for our friends, which Sister Turner distributes. I cannot describe the joy and happiness that blossoms in our hearts during this task.



Lastly: being in silence, in adoration before He who was made flesh and will remain with us forever in the Eucharist ... In Adoration, being with him and savouring his Presence. In simplicity. Giving thanks for this indescribable Gift and





asking for the ability to welcome him as He wants to be welcomed. From our cells, we can contemplate the bell tower of the Basilica of the Nativity. It is a constant reminder of this event, of this eruption of



Love that overturns our life, gradually transforming it by opening the eyes of our mind... eyes that begin to glimpse the mystery of his Love in everyday life. Often the most important things take place at night, in the routine of a life of faith, fidelity, of forgetting oneself, in order to spring forth into this Christmas night, into a joy that becomes more profound and solid with the passing years. In the simplicity of a Faith shared with our sisters.

One of our sisters quoted the following passage of the Word of God (Rm 8:22-23) from the Sixth Sunday: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies".

During this year in which violence and despair seem to take up so much space, to live Christmas will mean above all to protect a space



within ourselves that will remain free and attentive to the Presence of the Lord, a place that desires him and loves him; protecting this presence in our heart in order to be, like the "Grotto in Bethlehem", a place in the world that can welcome him again today...

This small child who comes among us. God made flesh, Jesus, Emmanuel, a tiny and fragile human in need of being protected, so as not to disappear, and yet, he is the salvation of our humanity...God is with us when we welcome this fragility that gives itself and saves us.

Sr. Anne-Françoise OCD, Prioress



ENGLAND: BENEDICTINE BUCKFAST ABBEY, BUCKFASTLEIGH



Between light and charity
Our Advent carol service and Christmas Fair mark the beginning of our journey towards Christmas. Throughout Advent we host various charitable carol services which culminate in our Buckfast choir's Festival Carol Service. This last service is very popular and people come from miles around to participate in it. The monastic Community busy themselves with making Christmas puddings, decorating the Calefactory's magnificent Christmas tree and assisting in setting up the crib in the Abbey church. A special list of charities is drawn up and money donated to them. During Advent the trees outside the Abbey Church are festooned with lights as night falls reminding us of the coming of Christ, the light

of the world. On Christmas Eve lights are placed around the cloisters and the Abbey tower and its accompanying turrets are lit up. The Church interior is decorated with seasonal flowers, lights and candles ready for the Christmas Masses. All of these Masses are very well attended by parishioners and visitors alike. The monks Christmas routine starts with first Vespers, a light supper, the Office of Readings/Christmas Matins followed by a choral Midnight Mass. On Christmas day they sing

Lauds and participate in the Pontifical High Mass on Christmas morning. This is followed by Sext and a feast day Christmas lunch in the refectory which they share with any assisting staff.

Christmas Vespers is at 3pm followed by recreation. The monks then retire to bed.

David Charlesworth OSB
Abbot



ARGENTINA: BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF SAINT SCHOLASTICA

A joy that brightens our daily chores

How do we prepare for Christmas in our monasteries of Saint Scholastica and Mater Ecclesiae? It is not easy to answer this question, but we could begin by explaining that, for a Benedictine nun, Easter and Christmas are the two most important dates of the year. The Paschal mystery is the centre of our lives, as it is for all Christians, along with the mystery of Christmas, when we celebrate the coming of God's Son to the world. The most important events in our lives are often planned ahead. As we all know, the more important an event is, the more intense is its preparation. This is why the Church dedicates a special time to prepare for Christmas: Advent. Advent makes us glimpse, little by little, the arrival of the child-God into the world, and this is why it is a time of hope and serene joy. The hymns and prayers of the liturgy during those days beautifully express the joyful waiting for the Lord, who truly comes.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the nuns all join together in a choir. We sing an antiphon with all our hearts: "Looking afar I see the power of God coming, Go towards him, all the people of the world, the rich and the poor"! These words are from the Word of God, and when we sing them on that day, they have a special power. The words make a profound desire to open ourselves to that coming, arise in our hearts. It is wonderful to realize that God visits us with his power and his grace, every Christmas.

This truth is becoming ever more evident. During our Advent journey, we enter into this limitless mystery of God who comes. First, we do so with our gaze turned to the final coming of the Lord, when he will come in his power and his glory, and then by approaching the birth of our Saviour, our eyes lingering on the Child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in the manger, God and man, light and life of our souls.

The week before Christmas, takes on the atmosphere of an impetus and a special solemnity; impetus and solemnity, which the Church expresses with the traditional "O" antiphons, thus named, because they begin with the same exclamation that invokes the Lord with strength, asking him to hasten his coming, to not delay his coming. His name is called with the different names with which he has been invoked throughout the centuries in the Sacred Scriptures: "O Wisdom of our God Most High, guiding creation with

power and love: come to teach us the path of knowledge! O Leader of the House of Israel, giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai: come to rescue us with your mighty power! O Root of Jesse's stem, sign of God's love for all his people: come to save us without delay! O Key of David, opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom: come and free the prisoners of darkness! O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death. O King of all nations and keystone of the Church: come and save man, whom you formed from the dust! O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law: come to save us, Lord our God"!

It is true that Christmas occurs towards the end of the year, at a time in which we are often overwhelmed with fatigue, worries and discouraged by the apparent victory of evil in a world afflicted by wars without end. But it is precisely in this context, that it is good to listen to the promise that the Lord comes with power. How beautiful it is to experience that our God visits us with his grace.

On the day before Christmas, this certainty grows. The liturgy reminds us of this with the words: "Tomorrow all evil on earth will be destroyed by Him, and over us all reign the one Who comes to save the whole world". It is impossible not to exult with joy before such an announcement! This promise brightens our days with joy and makes hope arise in our hearts. This is why at this time, the Church offers us Saint John the Baptist, the shepherds of Bethlehem and the Virgin Mary as our travelling companions. They teach us to wait for the Lord, to wait for the hour of his manifestation and his grace. As we get closer to the great day of Christmas, our souls become more joyful and the whole monastery is filled with this joy. It is a joy that transcends our souls, that goes from within to the outside. A joy that brightens our daily activities: cooking, cleaning the house, floral arrangements, tuning our voices to sing the hymns in the same tonality as the angels: "Glory to God and peace on earth to people of good will". The joy over this coming is such that we want to share it with the whole world. Even the work we carry out in our laboratories is affected by this joy. Baked goods, like sweet breads, for example, are made with a greeting that brings to mind the men on that Holy Night: "A Child is born to us, the hope of our salvation"



On Christmas Eve, the joy turns inwards and more peaceful, as if wrapped in the silence of the night. Here the contrast with Christmas celebrations in the world is great. One of the things that strikes those who come to celebrate Christmas at the monastery for the first time is precisely the silence. It is a silence that speaks, a silence filled with presence. In one of the antiphons from the Book of Wisdom, we sing: "For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven". Yes when the night was half gone, that is at midnight. This is why we nuns celebrate Christmas Eve Mass at midnight, the hour in which the Word was made flesh.

Of course the Christmas we celebrate at the monastery is essentially the same Christmas celebrated by everyone else. It is the same, but we celebrate it differently. On that night, there is Fire, not an artificial one, but the one announced by Jesus himself: "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled". There are lights, not coloured ones but those that illuminated "the people who walked in darkness"; there are instruments, music and celebration, that of the heavenly army that comes down from Heaven to announce that, "the Saviour of the world is born".

The most beautiful thing of all is that Christmas does not end the following day because that Child we await and adore is God with us, Emmanuel, the same one who, before his Ascension to Heaven, promised he would be with us every day until the end of the world. Lastly, we want to reassure everyone who comes to know about this humble account of how Christmas is celebrated in our monastery, that on Christmas Eve, we will utter their names before the Lord, so that he may truly be born in their hearts, filling them with light and peace, and that they may transmit to one another the most authentic and Happy Christmas.

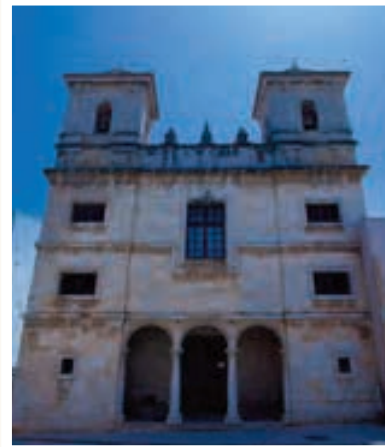
POLAND: MONASTERY OF THE CARMEL, TARNÓW

A dance to express the joy of the birth of Jesus

Saint Teresa of Jesus, enamoured with the Humanity of "Christ, our Good", as she loved to say, gave the hearts of her Carmelite nuns the same love for the Saviour. This is why awaiting his coming to the world and Christmastime are lived with special intensity. On the First Sunday of Advent, we cast lots for the so-called "Offices of the manger", that is the tasks that each one of us has to do for Baby Jesus, who is about to be born. One of us has to have a gentle heart like Mary, another the foresight of Saint Joseph, another, like the Magi, has to look for him and yet another has to become smaller and smaller, like the donkey.... Moreover, during this time, each nun designates a day in Advent in which she will receive the manger with Baby Jesus in her cell. He is still hidden in Mary's womb so he cannot be seen nor touched. On that day, the nun keeps vigil in a special way beside Jesus present in the womb of his Mother, and tries to be in touch with Mary's heart to be as close as possible to her. At dawn on Christmas eve, 24 December, after Lauds one of the nuns solemnly sings the Roman Martyrology, the announcement of Christmas. It starts with the words "When God created the heavens and the earth". Thus, we reach the beginning of the story of salvation. This is followed by the promise of the coming of the Messiah to the People of Israel, until "The forty-second year of the reign of Octavian Augustus; the whole world being at peace"... to the words "in Bethlehem of Judea", when the whole community kneels down while listening to the cantor sing loudly: "The birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to

the flesh". Lastly, in a gesture of gratitude and humility, in adoration of the mystery of the Word made flesh for our salvation, we kneel down touching the ground with our foreheads. A nun wipes the tears that are involuntarily falling from her eyes. After a moment of silence, the Mother Prioress signals for us to stand.

After the Vigil, and before the solemn Hour of Readings and Midnight Mass, it is time for the so-called "Vigil of the shepherds". Saint Teresa herself instituted this procession in her convents on 24 December. She wanted to remind them of the painful journey of the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph through the City of David and the streets of Bethlehem in search of an inn, before the imminent birth of our Lord. Each of the nuns receives a visit from Mary and Joseph in their cells, brought in the form of figures in the hands of the Mother Prioress and her deputy. Accompanied by hymns, Mary and Joseph enter each cell, blessing the nuns as they kneel down to kiss the images as a sign that they wish to welcome the Holy Family in their home. At the end of the procession in the Chapel, we listen to Gospel Readings on the birth of our Lord Jesus and we process towards the religious choir for the solemn hymn of the Hour of Reading. During this procession, the Mother Superior or sometimes the youngest sister, carries the statue of Baby Jesus to the manger in the choir of the monastery. After Midnight Mass, we go to the monastery's choir to "sing to the Newborn" for a bit longer. On this night, there is a *silencium sacrum* – holy silence – because it is a Night filled with joy. On the same day of Christmas, we are not awakened by the usual Mass, but by some of the nuns who sing Christmas hymns. They are



joined by other nuns who are already awake. Then, we all take our first steps towards the Newborn in the manger, in a chorus, to joyfully sing to him until the early hours of the morning. At Christmastime, almost the whole house is decorated with nativity scenes and we carry a statue of Baby Jesus to the refectory and during recreation. On the more solemn days of this time, the blessing of Baby Jesus takes place before supper. The nuns sing a prayer by the light of a candle and bless the community with the statue. On these days, after supper we take our hymns to the recreation room where the so-called "dance in honor of Baby Jesus", takes place. Each sister dances with the statue, surrounded by a circle of nuns who sing and dance with her. During the second half of evening prayers (interior prayer) we sing hymns with instruments, around the nativity scene. On the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus – 3 January – many communities celebrate Jesus' name day. In the evening, each nun kneels before the statue of the Child in the recreation room and professes her love to Him, usually with a poem or a song, according to her abilities. It is up to her. Later, there is the dancing mentioned above, and then the Divine guest of honour invites us to a banquet in his honour. During the Solemnity of the Epiphany, some communities renew their vows because the three vows are their gift to the Newborn. Other communities pay their solemn homage by bowing three times. Our Carmelite traditions for Advent and Christmas were born out of love for the Divine Child, the Word, of which Saint John of the Cross wonderfully wrote in a poem:

"when the time had come for him to be born, he went forth like the bridegroom from his bridal chamber embracing his bride".
Discalced Carmelites of Tarnów



FRANCE: CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF OUR LADY OF CÎTEAUX, SAINT NICOLAS-LÈS-CÎTEAUX

Contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation in silence.

Christmas celebrations at Cîteaux are quite similar to the observance of each ordinary day that unfolds the mystery of faith in human time. Indeed, the celebration of the Word made flesh gives meaning to all Christian life, especially within the Cistercian tradition. Thus, every day we can say, "Today a Saviour is born to you"!

By offering himself as the Word made flesh, God comes to meet our humanity and bestows definitive dignity upon every human action. From the time God entered our flesh through Jesus Christ, eating, sleeping, reading, speaking, working, praying, and even daydreaming, have been elevated to the dignity of God. On Christmas Day, this ordinariness of the day regains its ultimate meaning. It is thus fitting that Christmas Day is like any other day: living together, praying, and reading.

But the mystery of the Word made flesh is not a one-sided mystery. "Flesh" does not just indicate a concrete and fragile humanity. Flesh is flesh, meaning what is offered in sacrifice. If the Word becomes flesh, it is because the worship God expects from us is not to offer him the fat of rams, but his Word, presented by a heart that seeks to understand it and to be understood by it. Thus, by receiving the grace of the Word, we can return it in gratitude.

We live this Word made flesh mainly through the celebration of the Eucharist and its unfolding in the entire Liturgy of the Hours. It is He who comes each day to shape our inner being; it is He who guides our hearts and voices to form the small Church of Cîteaux; it is He whom we await on the Last Day.

This Word made flesh, which is our daily bread and our bread of the Last Day, is also the bread of that most holy day in which a Saviour was born for us. This is why it is fitting that the ordinary aspects of life take on a special grandeur on Christ-

mas Day.

First and foremost, Christmas Day is a day of rest. This is obvious, but it is important to recognize: the Incarnation of the Lord does not take place in the humiliating toil of man serving the earth, but in the noble humility of one who enters into God's place of rest. In fact, on the day of creation, there was not a man who served the earth, but rather, a man appointed by God to rest in the garden, in that rest which is the sole concern of the Sabbath, the concern for God.

To speak of this rest, we keep vigil. In a life that is very consistent, a slight change in schedule makes a big difference. This is the only time of year in which we celebrate evening vigils, to express our anticipation of Christ's coming and our gratitude for his presence in the community in prayer. He is here, but not yet, and we can sing, "Today the Lord will come; in the morning you will see His glory"!

Every night we celebrate Vigils with the Virgin Mary, and with her we wait for Christ, our rising Sun, so that he may find us ready on the day of his coming. On Christmas eve, just one night per year, we wake up in the middle of the night because here is the groom leaving the house. "Now what the angel had predicted to the Virgin Mary is fulfilled". We celebrate Midnight Mass in the middle of the night.

The celebration of this Mass is in sharp contrast with the solemnity of the Gregorian Introit which contemplates the eternal generation of the Son: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you", and the newness of the Gospel of the Nativity according to Saint Luke, with the angels and the shepherds. Face with such majesty and humility, so much greatness and simplicity, we can sing in thanksgiving with Saint Bernard after Communion: "Jesus Christ, Son of God. is born in Bethlehem of Judea! What man with a heart of stone would not stop before this Word?" Because he is the Lord of Lords and Kings who comes in the form of a small Child to a manger in Bethlehem, the house of bread, and to the altar of our community, born in Judea, the place of praise, and whom we receive in our mouths, through the Bread and through praises, through the bread of praise.

Just like the shepherds went to the Mother and Child, after a few hours of rest, in simplicity, we



too celebrate Dawn Mass in simplicity because the mystery of the Eucharist is the same, whether the solemnity is celebrated with a large organ or in the poverty that God himself chose.

Christmas Day Mass is very different from the Night Mass. The Gregorian Introit leads us to exultation "For unto us a child is born, Unto us a son is given", while the Day's Gospel Reading of Saint John invites us to contemplate the eternal presence of the Word in God. In this case too, after Communion, the community can bring together these two mysteries, the Incarnation and the Eucharist, by singing the poem, *Verbum caro, panem verum*, magnificently set to music by Orlando de Lassus.

At last the celebration is complete because it illuminates what is human in our lives: a good meal enjoyed among brothers. Like every day, this meal takes place in silence, and on this day, even more so, because our human words cannot express the Word made flesh. This is why the readings in the refectory leave room for a language without words that can only speak of the Word: music which expresses and constitutes our communion. At the same time, the joy of the festivity is expressed in the quality of the food and the drinks that we share. Cîteaux is in Burgundy and our incarnation takes the colour of this unique territory. For us, on this most blessed day, Bethlehem is also Burgundy, a land where food and wine are joined in celebration to pay homage to he who took on our humanity, all our humanity.

Fr. Benoît OCSO



ENGLAND: POOR CLARES MONASTERY, ARKLEY

A Franciscan Christmas in England

Franciscan spirituality has been traditionally – if somewhat simplistically – expressed in the tagline ‘The Crib, the Cross and the Eucharist’. Even if perhaps somewhat glib and superficial, this catchphrase does at least convey the importance and the centrality of the Incarnation to the spirituality of Francis of Assisi. And in the thirteenth century, a time when the Church was becoming ever more rich, powerful and controlling in the lives of Western Christians, it was the poor and humble Christ that attracted Francis and whom he wanted to bring to others. After his own ‘conversion experience’ when he believed the figure of Jesus had spoken to him from the cross and told him to ‘re-build my Church, which as you see is falling into ruins,’ he wanted to live as a wandering mendicant like the poor Christ. In 1223, two years before he died, according to the biography written by St Bonaventure, Francis enlisted the help of a friend, Giovanni, to set up a manger with hay and live animals, an ox and a donkey, in a cave in the village of Greccio. He wanted to show the people how he imagined the birth of Jesus to have been. And Mass was celebrated in the cave with Francis taking the liturgical role of the deacon and preaching movingly about the poverty and simplicity of



the birth of the ‘Babe of Bethlehem.’ (Bonaventure also made the claim that hay from the scene when taken away by local farmers miraculously cured diseases in cattle). Because of this tradition, the Crib has always figured largely in Franciscan Christmas celebrations and prayer round the Crib with the familiar figures of Mary, Joseph, shepherds and kings has always been part of our Christmas devotions. In England, carol singing at Christmas time has always been a central part of celebrating the birth of the Christ Child, going back probably to pre-Norman times when the Anglo-Saxon phrase ‘wæs hael’ meaning ‘be in good health’ was used as a toast. (‘Wassailing’ did, unfortunately, degenerate in some areas from its original intention into drunken orgies). Until very recently groups of carol singers would go from

door to door in the days leading up to Christmas, singing carols and collecting money for charity. During the same time frame, carol services have become popular and are organised by most churches. So the singing of carols to herald the birth of the Christ Child has become an inseparable part of the Christmas celebrations. The Christmas tree, decorated with lights, and sometimes also with sweets and baubles, is an essential part of an English Christmas, even in families with little or no religious connection. To bring branches and greenery into the house in midwinter is a custom which goes right back to the Romans in pre-Christian times, but the custom of having an evergreen tree suitably decorated and with gifts for the family below is traditionally ascribed to Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, who brought the custom from Germany where it had been a long-standing Protestant practice. These are just some of the ways Franciscans in England combine the traditions of the Order with local usages and conventions to honour the birth of the Christ Child.



LUXEMBOURG: ABBEY OF ST. MAURICE AND ST. MAURUS OF CLERVAUX, CLERVAUX

The Incarnation of Christ: an ever new event
 It is midnight. Bells and angels sing in the midst of the silent night. "Gloria in excelsis Deo...". The Night Mass has just started. The bell tower above lights up with music, a light that delights eyes and warms hearts. Flickers of eternity, moments of serenity! "Peace on earth...". At the end of Advent at last, it is Christmas! Voices of angels resound and a new and unimaginable joy blossoms in our sky!

The Eve

But let us start from the beginning.

On the evening of 24 December, first solemn Vespers happily anticipate the festivity. Dinner is at 7:30 p.m., followed by a time of silence as last minute preparations are made in the Church of the Abbey ... and in the kitchen! With a bit of rest.

At 10:00 p.m., the bell calls. The community gathers together below the cloister for the most intense moment of the eve. Vigilant expectation and prayerful recollection. At 10:15 p.m., the Eve of the Nativity begins. The nave of the Church of the Abbey is filled with people. The Invitatory begins this gentle vigil. The monks sing everything, with a single heart: hymns, psalms and responsorial, in Latin Gregorian Chant or in French, accompanied by the organ of the choir. The Vigil culminates with the Abbot singing "The Book of the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, Son of David", from the Gospel according to Matthew. He then sings the hymn, Te decet laus (Praise to you...)

and concludes this long nighttime Office with the festivity's prayers. It is 11:45 p.m., a wonderful preparation for the first Christmas Mass and for the whole Season!

Night Mass

Soon everything is ready for Midnight Mass. The altar is covered with the solemnity's cloth, and six candles reserved for important celebrations burn brightly. Inside and around the sanctuary, flowers bring the freshness of their colours...Plumes of green on the walls of the Church of the Abbey add a festive atmosphere. And above all, in this perfectly prepared House of God, the manger awaits the divine Guest, the Blessed Child, gift of the Father and the Virgin Mary.

The manger is set in a beautiful area on one side of the nave. The monks built it with white wax and translucent alabaster. The effect of brightness is remarkable. In its way, it evokes the new land inaugurated by the arrival of the Messiah. The figures approach the still-empty manger, which will be on display until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which marks the end of the Christmas period. The Night Mass ends at 1.30 a.m. on 25 December with the final enthusiastic notes of the grand organ. Baby Jesus is placed in his manger. Although it is late at night, or rather, early in the morning, the faithful are invited to a festive reception in the guest hall. Meanwhile, the monks enjoy a delicious and simple light meal in their decorated refectory, in silence, to restore themselves and give thanks in fraternal communion.

This is how Christmas eve is spent in a monastic community filled with the peace of the sweetest certainty: the Virgin Mary shows us Jesus to give him to us!

Dawn Mass

But Christmas is not over yet! After five hours of sleep, the great day is here. It begins at 7:30 a.m. with a Dawn Mass.



It is the second solemn Mass, with special hymns and Readings in Latin Gregorian Chant or in French. At 8:30 a.m., the bell rings for the Angelus. It is breakfast time for the monks and guests.

Christmas Day Mass

According to the Christmas liturgical tradition of the West, priests can celebrate three Masses. The celebration of the third Mass, the daytime Mass, begins at 10:00 a.m. Due to the number of Masses, it is important to understand that the intensity and beauty of these celebrations are far greater than expected during their preparations. In fact, if Advent stirs any desire for the Lord's coming, its fulfillment brings a presence that is greater than all hope. The Church constantly rediscovers the greatness of the mystery of the Incarnation: The Word became flesh. It is fair to say that Christmas celebrations throughout the years are never experienced in the same way, because the event that we celebrate is always new. The proclamation in the Prologue to the Gospel ac-



According to Saint John, points to this boundless greatness. Contemplative monks are particularly sensitive to this aspect of untold newness. The third Christmas Mass concludes at 11:30 a.m.

Second Vespers and Blessing with the Most Holy Sacrament

At the end of the morning, towards lunch time at 1:00 p.m., the little hours, the Office of the Sixth and the Ninth Hour, are sung with the organ. The afternoon is reserved for a long time of silence and rest. Before solemn Vespers, the community gathers together for a fraternal snack and freely talks about the communion shared during the celebrations. A clever brother has beautifully decorated a big Christmas tree in the meeting room -- the scriptorium --. Below it is an adorable little bed. Vespers begin at 5:00 p.m. The Blessing with the Most Holy Sacrament marks their conclusion. The Christmas period thus begins in the midst of the Christmas cycle that was inaugurated by the first Sunday of Advent, and extends until the Baptism of the Lord. "Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God" Within this context, a question might arise. Do the monks who celebrate Christmas in this fraternal climate and in a peaceful religious atmosphere, which we might describe as "safe", forget the distress of people in the world? Do they perhaps not know about the suffering of many people and families on this very day of cel-

ebration? How can they ignore the tragedies suffered by countless oppressed peoples? Is it not an intolerable injustice? It is true that there is a great antinomy between these situations: on the one hand a joyful celebration and on the other, terrible distress. In order to respond to this serious criticism, we have to understand that the Church wants and must solemnly celebrate the birth of Christ on earth. The Gospel leads her to look to Jesus and pray. The angels themselves sing a hymn that was later developed into a liturgical hymn. They admire and adore the Child born in poverty in a stable in Bethlehem. The Church has understood that with her prayers, especially on this day, she invites all the faithful, not to forget the misery of humans, but to turn their attention to the poorest man that ever lived on earth. Christ is quintessentially poor. He represents all the poor in the world. The monks thus celebrate the Glory of God, even while recognising Christ as being the one who is most in need of consolation, tenderness and compassion. Here we can put into action what Saint John Paul II wrote regarding the Passion: that Jesus "particularly deserves mercy from the people..." (Encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, nn. 7 and 8). There are thus two feelings involved: indescribable joy over the blessed birth and distress of the heart before the poverty of the Holy Family. It is always like this in the celebration of



the mysteries of Christ.

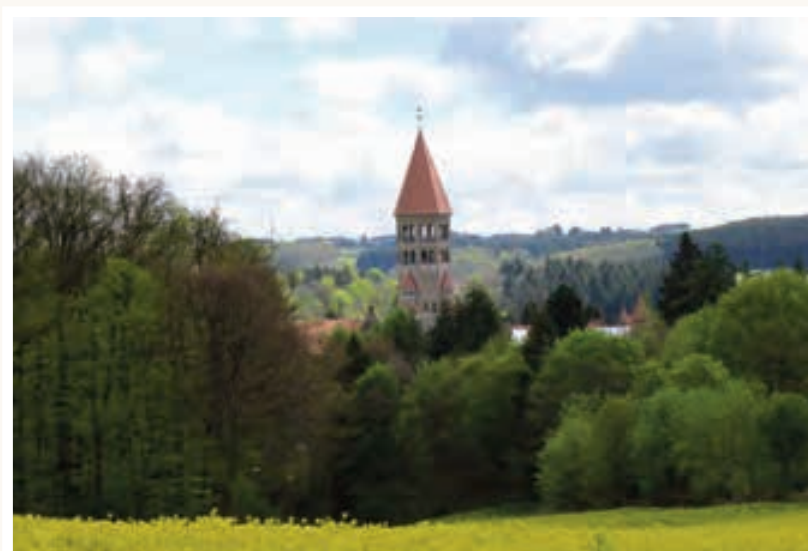
Thus, at the two extremes of the story, the joy of the Annunciation is not incompatible with the suffering of the Passion. Undoubtedly, it is in the heart of the Virgin Mary that the monks, who are so attentive in venerating her, perceive the supreme continuity in this surprising paradox of Christian faith. Christmas is a special place for this divine and human sublimity.

This is why the Solemnity of Christmas is celebrated with joyful intensity in our Abbey of Saint Maurice and Maurus of Clervaux. The monks pray that the Star of Bethlehem may attract humanity towards the place in which, through Jesus, God gathers all his scattered children.

"Peace on earth to all those pleasing to God". Jesus is our peace. He is in our midst!

Father Michel Jorrot

Abbot



PORTUGAL: CARMEL OF SAINT TERESA, COIMBRA

Christmas- because "the nature of love is to humble oneself"

To the cadence of the rhythm of the liturgy, our lives as Discalced Calermitans is marked by every liturgical season. We reach Christmas by way of the wisdom of the Church through the Season of Advent, an essential step, which is prepared and lived by us with attentiveness and above all (we try) with reflection and love, under the gaze of Mary and her profound experience of interiority. It is within this context that the sacred words resound with an ever new tone: Listen, daughter, look and pay attention, your Lord is knocking at the door! God leads us to him through this "time of desire" which renews in each of us the awareness that my Beloved is for me and I am for my Beloved. In the glimpse of every Christmas, this restlessness of the Spirit is reborn, drawing us to God and at the same time, creating an openness in us, availability and detachment, which draw him and invite him to come down. Yes, it is Christmas, when these two humble aspects merge: God's and ours.

One aspect that stands out in this experience is sharing. Many people remember us and make offerings, some whom we know well and others somewhat less. We feel moved by their affection and attention towards us – or better towards the Lord in us. The traditional "Bolo Rei (Cake of the King) is never lacking, as well as other traditional sweets of the season (radishes, chicks, pumpkin sweets); olive oil, cabbage and cod for the *consuada* (1) (traditional name for the Christmas eve meal); warm clothing because it is very cold this time of year. We too have joined this flow of "doing good", which is not only for Christmas, but it does have a special "perfume" that comes from God Child.

When the traditional "O Antiphons" begin, it is a sign that a new task is beginning. After preparing our hearts and our lives to receive Jesus, we have to organize his stay in our home. Traditional nativity scenes appear gradually throughout the house (they number about 15-16). Some are complete with the traditional Christmas tree, the Holy Family, animals, shepherds, the Magi (the week before Epiphany), and



moss or mistletoe. Others are simpler, sometimes just a crib wrapped in cloth and hay.

On the night of the 23rd, we begin to feel that the time has come, with the "Procession of the Betrothed": Mary and Joseph walk through the corridors of the Monastery asking for a place in the cell of our heart, a holy place that recalls the invitation once made to Moses - Remove the sandals from your feet! Thus, in the nakedness of the soul and in the simplicity of means, another Holy time begins with the Vespers of the Solemnity of the Lord, which we conclude with the beautiful hymn, the *Kalenda*. On this holy night of Christmas, the silence we usually observe during meals is suspended, and the decorated refectory is filled with laughter and joy. Before supper, we share a significant moment: "a community embrace", a fraternal greeting which we share with everyone – and which we complete with another embrace one week later, in which along with greetings for the new year, we ask and offer forgiveness. Because this is also what the Lord's Christmas teaches us. Christmas eve is also marked by a brief telephone call to our families (during Advent we do not receive visitors and our contact with the outside is reduced to the bare essential), the hymns of the Office of Readings and, above all, the solemn Mass in the evening. In this last celebration, there are more people than usual and in the end, we go to the parlatory to greet them. There are friends of many years and "new faces" who come for the first time, a small image of the Church of Jesus Christ, who welcomes everyone in the diversity of their languages and vocations and unites all in the same body. Moreover, we also have a very special encounter! In our inner chapel the nativity scene is below the altar where we have the Lord in the Tabernacle. Tonight, seated on the pavement or on the pews, close to him, we play Christmas hymns, some of them well-

known and others written by us, with our lips and our hearts. The Prioress gives each of us a moving image of the Saviour. It is an intimate time, filled with simplicity and beauty like many others in our hidden lives. Giving God love for love and asking him to take it far, to the many brothers and sisters who have a special place in



our hearts at this time: the sick, the imprisoned, those who are alone, those who suffer from the horror of war those who do not know that it is Christmas... everyone there in our hidden chapel, in silent love...

Between 2000 and 2003, we spent this time together in another place, in the cell of one of our sisters who is very special – Sr. Lucia. Throughout her life as a Calermitan, when she was strong enough, she joyfully participated in the Christmas celebrations and their preparation. For many years, she was in charge of dressing the Betrothed for the procession of the 23rd and preparing Baby Jesus in her workshop. She participated in the dinners and the recreational moments of the night of the 31st. In 2000, it was a great sacrifice for her not to be able to participate in Midnight Mass, which we tried to mitigate by accepting the request to go to her cell with the Child at the end of Mass. With what tenderness she caressed him! In 2004, she could no longer do so because of her weakness, but the next day we went to embrace her and celebrate with her.

The festive atmosphere runs throughout the time of Christmas. The Feasts and Solemnities are shared with music, dance and theatre, which the younger sisters set up, leaving a trail of joy and good humour, in the Carmelite way. After all, a Saint who is sad is a sad saint... These days are different from usual but they express the communion generated in Jesus, for Jesus and towards Jesus so that the world will believe. And make Peace!

May Jesus truly be born this Christmas in our smallness. If I am his added humanity in which he renews all his mystery, the world moves forward. Pray for us so that it may be so. And rest assured that you are in our prayers!

The Discalced Carmelites

CANADA: SAINTE-MARIE DES DEUX-MONTAGNES ABBEY, SAINTE-MARIE-SUR-LE-LAC

The peace of God in the middle of the snowy expanses

Christmas in Canada! A traditional day of family rejoicing, and a day of grace for the Benedictine nuns of the Abbey of Sainte-Marie des Deux-Montagnes. But how could the nuns forget those for whom this Christmas will not be a day of celebration? Pope Francis asks the Contemplatives to pray for peace, to carry the Church in their prayerful hearts and especially people who suffer. Christmas sings the gift of peace: Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth... Peace! We know the Benedictine motto: Pax! These are also the first words spoken by the Holy Father and the bishops at Mass: Pax vobis. So many human beings will suffer from the lack of peace at Christmas this year... But, on a second thought, was the first Christmas pleasant for Mary and Joseph? Jesus was their incomparable gift! However, has anyone ever thought to what extent the joyful mysteries were for Joseph a long way of the Cross? Starting with the need to have only a manger to offer to the Newborn... It is with this very holy and poor Family, and with those who suffer from war, poverty, malnutrition, that we celebrate the grace of Christmas, which will be a new Hodie: today Christ is born for us. Christmas is today!

Christmas in Canada! ! Christmas for the nuns of the Abbaye Sainte-Marie is an unforgettable, long-awaited celebration; preceded by four weeks of Advent, it is a time of joyful expectation. A



young friend of the monastery sees it as the most beautiful time of the year. As a child, she discovered the Church through a midnight Mass. Since then, this liturgical season has been the greatest joy of her life. A nun of Sainte-Marie, who awaited Christmas with an incomparable love, reminded her Sisters, on the 25th of each month: In "x" months, it will be Christmas!

The liturgical solemnity

The Abbey of Sainte-Marie des Deux-Montagnes belongs to the Congregation of Solesmes. Like the nuns of this Congregation, they celebrate the liturgy of Paul VI, the "Novus Ordo" in Latin and Gregorian. Led by their Abbess, Mother Isabelle Thouin, they have at heart to maintain the solemnity of the offices and the singing of the masses, because this is the responsibility entrusted to them on the day of their solemn profession. When they watch on the screen the masses presided over by Pope Francis at Saint Peter's in the Vatican (the nuns are fond of the Pope!), they see the same liturgy, celebrated with obviously more pomp, because there are not as many masters of ceremonies and acolytes in their church. But it is indeed the same liturgy. Christmas begins with the solemn announcement of the Nativity, sung before the mass of December 24, in a tone full of munificence, says Dom Guéranger: In Bethlehem ludae, nascitur ex Maria Virgine, factus homo... In Bethlehem of Judea, the eternal Son of the Father is born of the Virgin Mary, made man... At these words, the community prostrates itself, adoring this ineffable mystery, which will never be able to be fathomed. He who created the stars and galaxies makes himself very small!

Then, in the evening, what a profoundly spiritual joy, what a grace, to sing the Christmas Vigils, with its psalms, its extracts from the prophet Isa-

iah: ... Ego qui loquebar, ecce adsum. I who spoke (through the mouth of the Prophets) behold, I am present (Is. 52:6). This vigil culminates with an incomparable melody which expresses adoration and wonder: Verbum caro factum est. The Word was made flesh.

The Vigils, a monastic office, are followed by the night mass, beginning with a well-known Introit, which could be characterized as a lullaby sung by the eternal Father to his eternal Son who has entered into time: Dominus dixit ad me, Filius meus es tu... The Lord (Father) said to me: You are my Son, today I have begotten you... Everything could be quoted from this liturgy of the Holy Night.

At dawn, the nuns meet again in the Choir for Lauds sung with the shepherds: Quem vidistis pastores, dicite... Who have you seen? Shepherds, tell us. The antiphon (the refrain) that introduces the canticle of Zechariah (the Benedictus) will be a new opportunity to pray for peace: Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax... The melody descends very low during the alleluia that ends it, as the eternal Word descended infinitely low, and as those who suffer from the lack of peace are plunged into the abyss.

That's not all for the nuns! As every day, they enter in procession behind Mother Abbess for the mass of the day: Puer natus est nobis, a very small Child is born to us, a Son, the Son has been given to us. The Benedictines will still have voices to sing the Little Hours, then Vespers, whose antiphon to



Magnificat, modulated in a simple and candid tone, is very well-known: Hodie, Christus natus est; today Christ is born. The Anglican liturgy has sung it in English for centuries.

Celebrating the feast with family





However, they are not angels, even if the angels sing with them, which they firmly believe, as their Father Saint Benedict says. The night mass is followed by a special night collation in the refectory, according to family tradition; but at Sainte-Marie it is taken in silence, because it is 'night silence', and they cherish this silence.

The recreation moments of these feast days are spent singing Carols near the Crib. Here, the tradition is particularly rich. As in the monasteries of the Congregation of Solesmes, since the time of Dom Guéranger, the nuns sing old French Christmas carols: Between the ox and the grey donkey, sleeps, sleeps, sleeps the little King ... Between the thieves on the Cross, sleeps, sleeps, sleeps, the King of kings ... or again: Saint Joseph, from his hat, made a cradle, he put the Baby there And Joseph speaks to the Child: When you will be 15 years old, you will learn the shop trade. You will know how to make a Cross that will be all your bait until death. The Abbey of Sainte-Marie also welcomes English-speaking vocations, and they also sing English Carols: Away in a Manger, Joy to the World, or even: Lo, how a Rose, and bilingual Christmas carols: Silent Night, Sainte Nuit.



In music

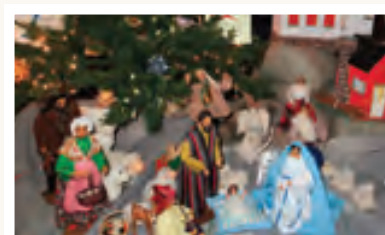
Singing, praying in music, is praying twice, says a proverb. These beloved melodies that renew for each of us the joys of our childhood, the nuns, their guests and the people present at mass in the chapel, hear them played on the organ, the harp, and in a duet harp and positive organ. Because music, that of the organ especially, a consecrated liturgical instrument, blessed for the glory of God, is heard in the liturgy and would like to open a door to heaven. The great musical works created for Christmas must resound: some of Bach's chorales, the Christmas carols of Corette and Daquin, Widor's Gothic symphony, some excerpts from Handel's Messiah and Messiaen's Nativity. The nuns also like to hear, performed on the harp, the melody of Jesus Ahatonhia, Jesus is born, the Huron Christmas carol whose text was composed by Saint Jean de Brébeuf.

White landscapes

Christmas in Canada! Should it be added that for Canadian women, snow and the beauty of winter landscapes are an obligatory part of the joys of Christmas time? Unfortunately, climate change often deprives the inhabitants of the most beautiful country in the world of their beautiful white Christmas... To celebrate the beauty of the monastery under the snow and ice, a nun was inspired to add a few verses to one of the old French Christmas carols: If Jesus wants the forest in prayer / Silver of ice of light / Crystal sparkling with soft fires / The great woods will pray / At our place!

To conclude: seek peace...

The Benedictines form a large family spread throughout the earth; following Mother Abbess Isabelle, they are in communion with their Sisters from all countries. This year when all pray for



peace, they would like to share an excerpt from the letter written by Mother Abbess Klara Swiderska, from the Abbey of Zhytomyr, in Ukraine, a monastery financially supported by the International Communion of Benedictines: "We have learned to fully live with all the daily violence that surrounds us. Amid our rhythm, our psalmody, our processions, the roar of sirens is as real as what we celebrate in our liturgical rites. We have learned that the only thing we can do and change in the world is our little heart. And the only peace we can bring is the one we have acquired through hard struggle. (...) We contemplate reality and continue to seek ways to convert our hearts as if the fate of all humanity depended on it. Perhaps it is appropriately Benedictine to start by rooting out one's own evil, because nothing else is within our power. And maybe someday, if we endure this with our dignity intact, without bitterness and without diminishing love, we might contribute to the creation of a new goodness and a new order."

Sœur Bernadette Marie Roy OSB



SVIZZERA:

Abbazia Benedettina di Einsiedeln, Einsiedeln

Un Introito dice tutto

Dominus dixit ad me: Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te. Quando i nostri confratelli della Schola cantano questa strofa all'inizio della Messa di Natale, tutti sappiamo: sì, è Natale! Eppure questo introito è tipico di come celebriamo il Natale a Einsiedeln sotto diversi aspetti. Vogliamo analizzarlo di seguito.

In primo luogo, il testo della strofa iniziale è lo stesso ogni anno. A prima vista sembra banale. Ma questo fatto è fondamentale. Perché i rituali sempre uguali sono particolarmente importanti in occasioni così emozionanti come il Natale. In tempi caratterizzati dalla volatilità e in cui è quasi impossibile dire come sarà la propria vita l'anno prossimo, le tradizioni offrono una confortante continuità e una rassicurante affidabilità. Costituiscono punti di ancoraggio importanti nelle tempeste del mondo, che le persone desiderano ritrovare. Sarebbe quindi impensabile che l'orchestra e il coro cantassero e suonassero qualcosa di diverso dalla Missa pastoritia in do maggiore di Karl Kempter (1819-1871), la cosiddetta "Messa del pan di zenzero", e dall'offertorio *Christe Redemptor* del nostro confratello padre Basil Breitenbach (1855-1920) nella solenne Messa di mezzanotte celebrata dall'Abate. Perché questo è ciò che i fedeli si aspettano.

Alcuni vengono alla nostra Messa proprio per questo motivo e rimarrebbero delusi se as-



coltassero una musica diversa, per quanto bella possa essere. Per loro non sarebbe Natale. Mancherebbe qualcosa di essenziale.

In secondo luogo, va notato che il versetto citato è cantato come parte di una funzione religiosa. Anche questo è tipico. Per noi monaci, il Natale si svolge principalmente nella chiesa del monastero, nella liturgia, in cui mettiamo al centro del nostro canto e della nostra preghiera il Dio che si è fatto uomo per noi uomini. Il Natale non è fatto di regali, di riunioni in famiglia o di un buon pasto. È piuttosto la celebrazione di questo evento di salvezza, così decisivo per l'umanità, in una funzione religiosa.

Anche il suono dell'organo che precede la strofa del corale è significativo. Questo perché l'organo è rimasto silenzioso durante il precedente periodo di Avvento. Come la Quaresima, dovrebbe essere un tempo di riflessione e di pentimento in preparazione alla grande festa. L'Avvento è un tempo semplice e tranquillo, caratterizzato dalla semplicità, non solo a tavola, ma anche nella nostra chiesa del monastero di Einsiedeln, che è decorata solo con una corona d'Avvento.

Questo è in netto contrasto con la frenesia del Natale al di là delle mura del monastero, con i rumorosi mercatini di Natale, gli alberi di Natale

illuminati nei negozi e le sontuose cene di Natale organizzate da vari club e aziende. Naturalmente, per noi è una sfida mantenere il silenzio e non farci prendere dalla frenesia di questo periodo. A volte funziona meglio, a volte meno.

In quarto luogo, si può sottolineare che l'Introito citato all'inizio si applica a tutto il mondo cattolico. Questo sottolinea la nostra integrazione in una comunità mondiale, che è evidente anche in altri elementi di questo Natale: per esempio, attraverso i numerosi ospiti provenienti da tutto il mondo, come quelli da Roma. È una bella tradizione che un gruppo di giovani seminaristi del Collegio Nordamericano trascorra abitualmente il Natale con noi. Anche la Benedizione Apostolica, che l'Abate è autorizzato a impartire ai fedeli pre-





senti in nome del Santo Padre al termine della Messa solenne celebrata in latino, ricorda il legame con Roma.

Un quinto punto è già apparso in questa sezione: Non celebriamo il Natale da soli a Einsiedeln, ma con altri, con persone provenienti dall'estero, anzi con l'intera umanità in tutto il mondo.

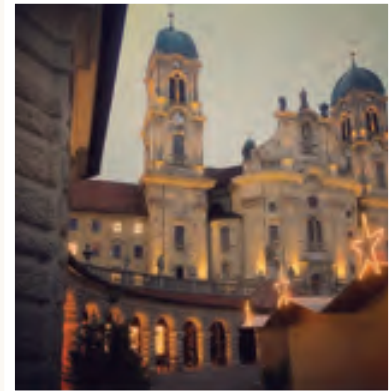
Il Natale è una festa che mira a unire. E celebriamo il Natale anche per gli altri, sotto forma di aiuti temporaneo, con i confratelli che si recano nelle parrocchie prive del proprio sacerdote per celebrare la Messa con la gente.

Colpisce anche una sesta cosa: L'Introito è cantato solo dalla Schola, non da tutti i monaci. Anche questo è tipico del nostro Natale. Perché ognuno di noi ha i suoi compiti specifici in questi giorni di festa, in modo che siano distribuiti su diverse spalle e si pensi a tutto nello stesso momento. O-



nuno sa cosa deve fare, in modo che tutto funzioni come un orologio svizzero ben oliato: quando ci si occupa degli ospiti, della musica, della sacrestia, dei ministranti all'altare, ecc. Ai più giovani è affidato anche un compito meraviglioso: decorare la nostra sala da pranzo, il refettorio, in un accogliente spirito natalizio.

Questo è un buon passaggio al settimo e ultimo punto. L'Introito Dominus dixit segna l'inizio del Natale. Naturalmente, questa celebrazione non termina con la fine della Messa di Natale. Piuttosto, la celebrazione segna l'inizio di una lunga stagione di festa, in modo da avere abbastanza tempo per permettere al messaggio dell'Incarnazione di Cristo di portare frutto nella nostra vita e risuonare nella nostra quotidianità. Celebriamo il Natale per molti giorni, mentre fuori gli alberi di Natale sono già stati smaltiti da tempo. Anche le celebrazioni natalizie della nostra comunità nel refettorio si svolgono durante questo lungo periodo di festa. Perché anche per noi il Natale è una festa di famiglia. Tuttavia, poiché molti di noi sono via il 24 e il 25 dicembre, lo celebriamo solo la sera del 26 dicembre. Molti confratelli vi contribuiscono anche suonando della musica o recitando un testo. Il silenzio a tavola viene tolto per poter par-



lare allegramente tra di noi. E molte cose si ripetono come ogni anno: come potrebbe essere altrimenti! Sappiamo già che ci saranno biscotti natalizi, noci e vin brulé come dessert. La bella tradizione prevede anche di cantare insieme Stille Nacht, durante la quale spegniamo le luci della stanza. E quando cantiamo Christ der Retter ist da (Cristo il Salvatore è qui) nella sala da pranzo buia, illuminata solo dall'albero di Natale al centro, allora lo sappiamo: Sì, è Natale. Cristo è qui, non solo 2000 anni fa come piccolo bambino, ma anche oggi, in mezzo a noi, in ogni persona che è con me.

P. Thomas Fässler OSB



PORTUGAL: CARMEL OF SAINT JOSEPH, FATIMA

Towards the Light with joy

“When the days grow shorter and shorter, when – in a normal winter – the first snowflakes fall, then quietly and softly thoughts of Christmas begin to surface, and from the mere word a certain magic exudes that affects every heart. Even those of other faiths, or of no faith at all, to whom the story of the Child of Bethlehem has no meaning, prepare for the feast and even make plans to convey its joy here or there. Months and weeks in advance, there flows a warmth like a stream of love over the whole world. (Edith Stein, *The Mystery of Christmas*).

Christmas is highly significant in the life of Discalced Carmelites. Saint Teresa of Jesus, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus and many other Carmelite Saints speak of the mystery of the Incarnation with such intensity that it is easy to understand how the Word made Flesh is the source of our spiritual heritage. This heritage which directs our hearts towards the contemplation of the “holy Humanity of Christ” (Saint Teresa of Jesus), shapes the spiritual life of Carmelite nuns. Saint Teresa of Jesus enriched her inner life by meditating on the Passion of the Lord, by adoring the Eucharist and by joyfully celebrating the mysteries of Jesus’ childhood.

In one of her poems Saint Teresa wrote: “Today he comes to redeem us/he is our relative/he is God Almighty” (cf. Poem n. 12).

On that Christmas Day, Saint Teresa did not scold any of her sisters for wearing out their shoes from too much dancing...

At Christmas, Saint John of the Cross used to say: “if love is to slay me, the hour has now come”. He joyfully danced while carrying a statue of the Infant in his arms.

Christmas is always a very special time of celebra-

tion at the Carmel. The Liturgy, which is simpler during Advent, becomes more expansive with joy at Christmas, and we are pleased to invite people to participate even more in the various celebrations. We invite them to the evening Mass (which in Portugal is also called “*Missa do Galo*”). After all, the Midnight Mass renews this great mystery of our faith.

On Christmas Eve, as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, said, “when the lights on the tree are lit and the gifts are being exchanged, that unfulfilled longing is still there groping for another ray of Light until the bells for Midnight Mass ring out, and the miracle of that Holy Night is renewed upon altars bedecked with lights and flowers: ‘And the Word was made flesh’. Now the moment of blessed fulfilment has arrived.” (Edith Stein, *The Mystery of Christmas*).

We invite whoever wants to participate (believers and non-believers) to the Mass of the 25th and to Vespers of the entire Octave of Christmas. Many non-believers come, and at least during these days, they come to “see” the Child. We offer the faithful the opportunity to listen to the hymns to the Child Jesus, every day before Vespers from the 25th to Epiphany. We advise parents to bring their children, even the younger ones. The hymns are very cheerful and are accompanied by instruments: the organ and the piano and may percussion instruments: tambourines, bells, drums, reco-reco, etc. During these days no nun is without instrument in her hands.

Children come with their curiosity to our grate and it is such a joy to see the joy in their sweet and bright eyes. There is a warm atmosphere of tenderness, a jovial joy and some adults also like to be part of this mystery of innocence, candour and love...Even some priests who



know these traditions join the festivity.

If it is so difficult to look at a child, and to go way from them, how can it not be difficult for children and everyone to leave the Chapel during these days?...



The Nativity scene beside the presbytery is also a special attraction for everyone, especially for the youngest. What joy for them to slowly contemplate all they can see there: the Infant with Mary and Joseph, the donkey and the ox and many other characters, the bell of the stable that the children often ring, all of it covered in moss, cedar leaves, roads for the shepherds and the Magi, stones that form a well, sheep and chickens ... and above all the bright lights ... so much to contemplate! It is not easy for children to leave the nativity scene... “Does the Kingdom of God not belong to them?

One could say more, especially because it is Christmas inside the Carmel, but the Carmel also keeps its “secrets” on its Christmas celebrations.

The Discalced Carmelites



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF THE GENESEE, PIFFARD, NY

As Cistercian monks, the Liturgy is woven into the fabric of each monastic day. The celebration of Christmas cannot but revolve around the Opus Dei because St Benedict reminds us in his Rule that 'Nothing is to be preferred to the Opus Dei.' Our experience of time is first and foremost liturgical in character and is marked by the solemn march of the liturgical seasons and feasts.

Our preparation for Christmas begins with the strong season of Advent. In upstate New York where the monastery is located, the short days and the lengthening darkness accentuate the mood of waiting and longing, a mood particular to Advent. As Christmas approaches, we look forward in joyful anticipation to the sublime "O" antiphons at Vespers portraying the mystery of Christ with the Old Testament types. There is now a gathering momentum propelling us toward the solemnity of the Birth of the Lord. Besides 'Ora' (Prayer) the great pillar of our lives, there is also 'Labora' (Work), hence the brothers also prepare for Christmas in practical Trappist fashion. Brothers search our large property for a beautiful fitting Christmas tree for our refectory. Others decorate the church, set up the creche in the refectory itself, prepare for Christmas dinner (the main meal after noonday prayer) and decorate the refectory. As Christmas Eve gives way to the night watches of Christmas, the community gathers in the Abbey church at 2:00 am to celebrate the Vigil of Christmas integrated with Christmas Midnight

Mass. After Mass, around 3:30 am, we assemble in our refectory where we sing carols, the Abbot blesses the creche, the Christmas tree and the food on the serving tables. The brothers go around wishing each other Merry Christmas and then while classical music associated with Christmas is played, we eat in silence with dimmed lighting and candlelight. There are no words spoken but what is palpable is the presence of the brothers to each other, brothers who have lived in close and peaceful proximity to each other over long decades.

On Christmas Day itself, we have Lauds at 6:30 am followed by the Day Mass at 8:00 am. After Mass, we sing the Office of Terce. After the Office of Sext at noon, we process to the refectory for a very festive meal together. This meal too, is in silence, as we listen to a selection of classical music. After a very welcome siesta, the Office of None is prayed in the church at 2:00 pm. Then there is time to pray, read, and some of us (of course well bundled up) will go for a long walk on our extensive property comprising 2400 acres. In the evening we have the Vespers of Christmas at 5:30 pm. The whole day of prayer and festivity is rounded out with the Night Office of Compline at 7:30 pm.

Christmas does not end with Christmas Day but is prolonged for us by the Octave of Christmas, rich in feast after feast. It is also a time for a prolonged celebration with festive meals together with music. We have more leisure with a lighter work schedule and this helps us assimilate the richness and the joy of this season. During the Octave, we also have our Christmas movie which some brothers attend.



For many people, it is the custom to exchange of gifts at Christmas. This is not our custom. The greatest gift we give each other in community is the gift of our acceptance of each other, our fidelity to the monastic way and our stability in community. In a world that is rife with loneliness and instability - this gift of the stable presence of brothers seeking the 'unum necessarium' is indeed priceless.

Fr. Gerard DSouza
Abbot



HOLY LAND: MONASTERY OF THE POOR CLARES, JERUSALEM

Sentinels on the walls

Christmas is a celebration that Christians should never fail to observe, especially in times of war, in the Holy Land and elsewhere. Christmas is the feast of hope, a small, silent hope that is manifested in Baby Jesus. Jesus is our hope, the hope that abides in us, during this time of dreadful wars and blood-soaked conflicts. With the birth of Jesus in the Grotto in Bethlehem, God becomes fully involved in our history. He comes to write straight on our crooked lines. The Holy Father reminds us of this, with the motto he chose for the Jubilee Year: *Peregrinantes in Spem, pilgrims of hope*. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end" (Isaiah 9 1-6).

All of us, who are sentinels on the walls, along with the Universal Church, believe that this Child is God's full and definitive answer. Isaiah seems to speak words that describe our time, a situation of darkness, like ours is today, and he invites us to celebrate Christmas.

Our monastery is located in Jerusalem on Hebron Road, about half way between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. According to tradition, the Holy Family had travelled on this road, heading for this direction. We too each year in December, after the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, begin

to spiritually travel on the road that goes from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, towards the nativity scene. We set up small and big nativity scenes throughout the monastery. In the days preceding Christmas, when we walk through the monastery's big corridors we see the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, heading to the nativity scene. It is a material preparation that helps our hearts prepare spiritually, to celebrate the real event of Bethlehem. In an international community like ours, with sisters from five countries (Italy, France, Argentina, Brazil and Rwanda) and four continents (Africa, Europe, America and Asia), there is no lack of creativity with specific references to different countries of origin

Each sister is committed to preparing the way for the Lord and the place of his birth in this land, where Christians are a small minority. The nativity scenes, from the ones made out of wood to the ones made in terracotta, bring alive the expectation of all peoples, from every language and ethnic background and every country. Even in this simple way, we are sharing Francis' love. Just as before him, shepherds tending their flock at night heard the announcement of Jesus' birth: -- "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord", -- and were not satisfied with just hearing the choir of angels praising the Lord, -- saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased"--, wanting instead to go and see, Francis was not satisfied with just contemplating the great mystery of the coming of the Saviour into the humility of human nature with the eyes of faith and an inner gaze. Brother Francis wanted to see with the eyes of his body.

He made the first nativity scene in the world in Greccio, so that he could somehow "see with the eyes of the body the hardship in which he found himself for lack of the necessary things for a newborn, how he was laid in a manger and how he lay on the hay between the ox and the donkey". Francis had a special fondness for the Solemnity



of the Birth of the Lord. He described it as "the feasts of feasts" (2Cel. CLI 199: FF 787). We too, by setting up nativity scenes throughout the monastery, allow ourselves to be captivated by the great news, and we welcome the gift of peace





that God, just like then, gives to people of good-will with His coming.

As a symbol of this Gift, the community decides what presents to make friends and benefactors who are close to use, ahead of time: a candle decorated by us, a jar of our jam, oil from our garden.... Small signs of gratitude that we feel it is good to do in this season in which God gives us the quintessential Gift.

We cannot neglect to mention Saint Clare's love for the mystery of the Incarnation. Those who know her spiritual side know that for her, in perfect harmony with Francis, the Incarnation was central. One of the fundamental aspects of her contemplation was the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, which was not only linked to the liturgical commemoration of Christmas, but

was a contemplative moment throughout her life. She saw the mystery of poverty, humiliation and charity fully realized in the Incarnation that marked the whole life of the Lord and began at the very start of his human existence in Mary's womb.

We celebrate a solemn Mass at midnight with hymns in different languages: Hebrew, Arabic, French and Italian. It is a public celebration, also attended by our Jewish friends. Holy Christmas is a celebration that is dear to many in this land: Jews, Muslims and Christians.

After Midnight Mass, we exchange greetings in the parlatory with a group of friends who have been coming to celebrate Jesus' birth with us, for a long time. When they leave, they walk to Bethlehem (we are located seven kilometres from there), to participate in the Masses in the Grotto of the Nativity, which follow one another without interruption on that day. And with our thoughts and hearts, we go with them, as we move through the Monastery as a Community, from one nativity scene to the next, adoring newborn Jesus and singing Christmas hymns in various languages.

And it is with this same heart, that we hope this Advent and this Holy Christmas will be a hope-filled journey towards God, our Saviour, for each one of you, for all peoples of all languages, ethnic backgrounds and nations.

Poor Clare Sisters of Jerusalem



AUSTRIA: CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF HEILIGENKREUZ, HEILIGENKREUZ IM WIENERWALD

Celebrating Jesus with horses and lanterns
In the Monastery of Heiligenkreuz, a Cistercian monastery in Austria which has been in existence since 1133, we celebrate Christmas in a very solemn way. A beautiful tradition is the distribution of the light of Bethlehem. Moreover, at mid-day on 24 December, the knights of the surrounding stables arrive on their horses, carrying lanterns. In the courtyard of the monastery, one can hear hymns and a priest gives his solemn blessing. The lanterns are lit with the light of Bethlehem. The knights carry it on their horses to their villages, and during the Christmas Fair, the light is distributed to the people, who place them in their homes to brighten up their windows during the Christmas holidays.

are books. But soon the priests go away because they have to celebrate Christmas in the parishes entrusted to their care. At 11:00 p.m., Christmas Mass is celebrated in the Church of the Abbey, which is brightly lit with candles and Christmas decorations. Each year, a large number of people come to celebrate Christmas Mass with us, sing old Christmas hymns and listen to the good news: "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord". After Mass, the Abbot and many monks are out-

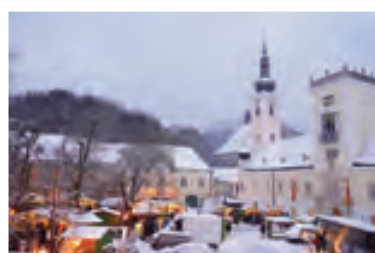
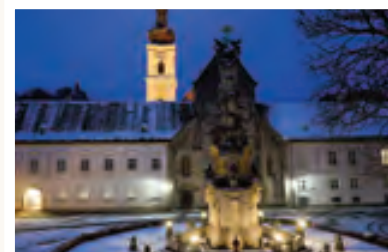


side the Church to wish everyone a happy and blessed Christmas. Each year volunteer firefighters prepare the punch – a traditional drink for the winter season – and distribute it. On the tower above the monastery's gates, trumpets and horns play old Christmas tunes. On Christmas Day, the real Christmas Mass is celebrated. Everything is very festive: the liturgy, time with the community and the meal. Then, it is Christmas in our hearts too.

Fr. Giovanni Paolo Chavanne O Cist, Prior



On Christmas Eve, at 6:00 p.m. the monks pray the first Vespers of Christmas in the Church of the Abbey. Prior to this, the youngest novice puts Baby Jesus in the nativity scene before the altar. Many faithful participate in these Vespers in the Church, after which the monks go to their dining hall for dinner. Most of the meals include fish as Christmas Eve is still a day of fasting. In the afternoon, the novices decorate the Christmas tree, which is now shining and sparkling. We sing Christmas hymns. There are cookies and punch and we are all together in a Christmas atmosphere. The priest often reads a Christmas story and delivers a speech and wishes everyone a happy Christmas. Each one receives a present that they can ask for, before receiving it. Mostly these



FINLAND: ST. HENRY'S CATHEDRAL, HELSINKI

The inculturation of the mystery

In our diocese and especially in our Cathedral parish there's always a kind of a mixture of traditional catholic customs and typical Finnish traditions.

The Advent season is naturally an important preparation for Christmas time with Advent candles, gregorian chants as well as traditional Finnish hymns of the period sung at masses and vespers. The first Sunday of Advent is traditionally very important both in Finland and Sweden, which marks the start of the festival season and also the famous "Pre-Christmas party" season. It includes various ways of celebrating Christmas time in advance in homes, working places, schools, and to some extent in our catholic parishes as well, although it doesn't actually belong to catholic Christmas celebration. In the same way some Finnish advent hymns are almost "obligatory" as regards important elements concerning preparation for Christmas time. Quite a good example of adjusting local culture and religion in Scandinavia. The nine-day Christmas Novena Prayer marks the liturgical preparation for Christmas from Dec 16 till Dec 24, the Christmas Eve. Our diocese is very international which means that in our diocese and at St. Henry's Cathedral you can see several ways of celebrating Christmas. Every Sunday we have masses in many languages in our Cathedral with Advent and Christmas songs in English, Finnish, Swedish, Spanish and Italian(as well as in Latin of course). The crib is present in the Cathedral from 4th Sunday of Advent till Baptism of the Lord and Christmas tree as well. The figures of the crib are very beautiful dating back to the 1950's. There are many cribs in Lutheran Churches too, it has become more and more popular in the Protestant tradition.

We have masses for families especially on Christ-



why we thought it could be good to sing them at the correct time, when it is Christmas! You don't actually have to travel abroad to get to know other cultures, they are all here in our catholic diocese! The World is already here! I wish You all a very blessed time of Advent and Christmas 2024!

Rev. Mr Marko Pitkäniemi
Deacon and Organist

mas Eve in the afternoon in Finnish and Swedish since it's quite late for families with young children to attend the Midnight Mass. All services are crowded and it's very crowded during Christmas time in general. Christmas Day and St Stephens' Day are popular days too and many parishioners are coming to several masses during Christmas Octave.

Christmas Carols are sung not only at masses but also at a special service on the 26th of December. A tradition which exists since 1996! Traditionally Christmas Carols are sung in Finland already before Christmas during Advent Season and that's



DENMARK: CARMEL MONASTERY OF HILLEROD



The birth of Jesus in a secularized society

In Denmark, as in probably many other places around the world, Christmas has a lot to do with a special atmosphere, a mixture of nostalgia and longing, as well as with the desire for joy and community. But the reason why we celebrate Christmas seems to have disappeared among the younger generations. Here it is not the birth of Jesus Christ in the flesh that is celebrated; the emphasis is instead on food, gifts, family reunions and just the atmosphere. It starts to build up already in late November with for instance displays of suitable Christmas presents in the shops, Christmas decorations in public areas and offers of Christmas menus in restaurants. And in the secularized Scandinavia the season of Advent has mainly lost its traditional Christian meaning of a sober and serious preparation for the coming holy days, instead it is more like Christmas in advance. Also in Scandinavia the by far the most important day in the Christmas season for most people is not Christmas Day but Christmas Eve. However it should be mentioned that a good number of people attend a religious service around Christmas and surprisingly many end Christmas Eve by watching Midnight Mass with

the Pope in Rome! Fortunately Advent and Christmas in Carmel are spent in the traditional way mainly marked by the liturgy. No Christmas decorations before December 23-24, only the Advent wreath.

Gradually a sense of joyful expectation is building up, so much stronger as we haven't anticipated the celebration.

Christmas starts with 15 minutes of bellringing at

4 p.m. on Christmas Eve followed by the martyrology and the announcement of the Birth of Christ. After the hour of silent prayer and solemn Vespers we have a rather festive supper in the candlelit refectory followed by a few hours' sleep before Matins and Midnight Mass. Not many laypeople fill the pews in the middle of the night but some do, and we always go to the parlour after Mass to wish them a happy Christmas.

It is often around 2 o'clock when the community can gather for their nightly recreation feast with nice things to eat and the opening of the first Christmas gifts. The high point on Christmas Day is of course the solemn Day Mass with the prologue of St John's gospel followed by some socializing in the parlour. After the festive dinner there is also a coffee party with cakes and a carol or two. And an early night. In fact in one way or the other we go on celebrating the Lord's birth during the whole of the octave, not least on the feast of the Holy Innocents, a day not alien to childlike pranks. New Year's Day, Solemnity of the Mother of God, has a different character. We have Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and pray for peace in the world, so urgently needed in our days.



ICELAND: CARMELITE MONASTERY, HAFNARFIORDUR

JESUS CAME TO EARTH AS LIGHT

We are a Polish community of Discalced Carmelite nuns that has been living in Iceland since 1984. Iceland is a Lutheran country of slightly more than 350 thousand of inhabitants.

Christmastime here is tightly bound with Advent, one can say that the beginning of Advent already introduces the atmosphere of Christmas, which in Icelandic is called "Jól". At this time, Icelandic people willingly attend various events and concerts organized on the occasion of Christmas.

The Christmas season itself lasts in Iceland for 13 days – from December 24 to January 6th. In the old Catholic tradition, the night before major church feasts was a vigil, and because there was a belief that the new day started at 6 p.m., at this time on December 24, Icelanders traditionally went to church or started celebrating in their homes.

At 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve, the main TV and radio stations broadcast the ringing of church bells from the Lutheran Cathedral in Reykjavik. This is when Icelanders exchange wishes and sit down to dinner.

Now, when Iceland, as many other countries, becomes more and more secular, there are continuous attempts to erase the Christian roots and character of this solemnity.

At the same time, the old, typically Icelandic traditions, are widely and eagerly cultivated – as hanging a jól-sock, where the jól-boys (who come

from the mountains 13 days before Jól) put gifts in or... a potato – depending on whether a child was polite during the year or behaved badly.

This is, of course, also the time of preparing traditional Christmas dishes. Some of them may surprise other inhabitants of Europe, as rotten stingray (skata). The fish is kept in a container for three weeks to be completely fermented (before the process is completed, it is poisonous!). Skata is consumed on December 23, and for many it is a family meeting. Due to the very intense, unpleasant smell, it is necessary to wash the clothes after consuming skata. That, and the other traditional Icelandic dishes (today curiosities) are the effects of searching ways of food preservation, which were not easy in the past centuries. By the way, this tradition goes back to the Catholic times in Iceland, when a fast from meat was observed during Advent. December 23 is the feast of the only Icelandic Saint canonized (by St. John Paul II in 1984) – St. Thorlak. His day is commonly called – by the believers or not – the Thorlak's Mass (Þorláksmessa), and from ages has entered Icelandic Christmas celebrations.

With the beginning of Advent, streets, homes and gardens are richly adorned with coloured lights, which are accompanied also by traditional Advent decorations, as a seven-branched candlesticks in windows and a wreaths with 4 candles, one more lit every subsequent week of Advent. It's interesting, that in Iceland Christmas Eve is the day of visiting closest ones' graves, which, too, are

decorated with lights. Immediately after January 6th, all decorations are removed.

These lights create a very special atmosphere in Icelandic dark winter season, and help to "survive" the darkest months. In the past, it was really a matter of survival, because the dark winter time was often accompanied by hunger. The echo of that, often tragic reality, is the simple question about one's age, which in answered not: x years old, but: x winters old, which means: the person has survived one more winter... Nowadays, the dark time still has a strong influence but affects psychological and mental side of a human. It is the reason why Icelanders often decide to spend this part of a year, including Christmas, abroad – in a friendlier aura.

It should be noted that in Iceland not only winter darkness is an issue, but also the weather. It concerns especially the south-west part of the island, particularly "favoured" by atmospheric lows – and right there our monastery is located. In general, the weather here is very changeable, with frequent strong winds and rain. It happens that for the most part of a year we can't see the blue sky but only a thick cover of clouds, which significantly reduces daylight. All the more, it concerns winter – the time of intensified rainstorms. Snow would make this time a little brighter, which would be more bearable. Unfortunately, if snow appears (sometimes in incredible amounts), it is usually washed away very quickly by streams of rain falling horizontally with extreme wind. Hence,





such winter days (that may be prolonged for many weeks) give no light but only an effect of gray, gloomy dawning.

Such a scenario helps us to better understand what it means that Jesus came to earth as Light: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on the inhabitants of a country in shadow dark as death, light has blazed forth." (Is 9:1). It begs the spontaneous question: what would have been if Jesus had not be born? No life...

Before Christmas, we build a large crib in our chapel, and invite people to come to watch it with their families. For many, such a visit has already become a tradition. There are not many places here to see something like this. The crib is a lot of fun for both children and adults. It is full of statues of different people and animals who came to greet little Jesus. During Advent, every sister has a special day of waiting for Jesus. In the evening before, we go in procession to her cell with a statuette of baby Jesus covered by a white veil. The next day is for her a special day of solitude and prayer, together with Mary expecting the Child. He, Jesus, and His arrival on earth are in the very focus of our Christmas celebration. The whole liturgy – Mass and Breviary say about that. As Contemplative Carmelite nuns, every day we spend 2 hours in mental prayer. It is a great time to enter the depths of the mystery. Since the first Advent Sunday, delving into Biblical prophesizes

about the greatest miracle ever – God giving Himself, we walk to the culmination point: He is... born! As a... human! As a... child!

On the Christmas Eve, we start our celebration of this unique Nativity by singing *Martyrologium Romanum* in Latin, and announce solemnly:

"JESUS CHRIST, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, desiring to consecrate the world with his most loving presence, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and when nine months had passed since his conception, was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judah,
AND WAS MADE MAN"

Then the Mother Prioress blesses the community with the statue of baby Jesus that lies in a manger in the enclosed part of our chapel, and in procession, singing a carol, we go to the refectory for Christmas Eve supper, which we start by reading an excerpt of the gospel about the birth of Jesus. Then we share a special white wafer while exchanging Christmas wishes – this is a beautiful Polish tradition. At this joyful, community meal, both Polish and Icelandic traditional dishes find their place on the table (but not skata...)

After the evening Office is Midnight Mass. Everybody, both Catholic and Lutheran, is welcome. Then we meet in the parlor and sing together. At the end, when we disperse to our cells, each sister finds there some small, practical gifts from the Child Jesus, that she could ask for by writing her requests during Advent. It is also a reminder,

that the most wonderful Gift, which contains all others, is He Himself.

During the following days, we ponder the mysteries that Liturgy puts before our eyes. It is also a time of visits from our friends (not from our families, as they are far away) Catholic or Lutheran, who found in our monastery friendship and a place full of peace. At evenings of these days, we used to sit with various instruments around the crib and sing carols for baby Jesus (there are a lot of them in Polish!) to thank Him that He has come to stay with us, and to entrust to Him people's joys and sorrows that they share with us in prayer intentions. It is Jesus, the Light of the World, who changes the atmosphere of the dark time of human life after the sin into the one full of hope. We know and try to share with the people that there is the inner world that everyone bears in his heart, that every one's soul is the place where Jesus wants to be born. There we can meet Him at any time – a loving Friend who is leading us. by the hand through the uncertainty and darkness of this life, always ready to support us and comfort.

Those who are interested in our life and spirituality, we invite to visit our website: www.karmel.is our Fan page: <https://www.facebook.com/Karmelitanki.Bose.Karmel.Iceland/> and our YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChXOYNM7U6zuYDWo8rtY9rA>

FRANCE: MONASTERY OF THE POOR CLARES, LOURDES

Joy for the birth of Jesus

Advent is already a revitalizing "Time". Immediately, we feel motivated to live it with fervour and joy.

From the beginning of the "O Antiphons", we start to set up the nativity scene in the Chapel. We do it while standing at the Altar, which providentially has a structure that is very suitable to accommodate it. In France, nativity scenes are not like in Italy, with the exception of Provence where they are very similar, with scenes from villages and the countryside, and many characters that here are called "Santons" (little saints) etc. In the rest of France, the Nativity scene is stripped down to the key characters: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and perhaps an Angel, a shepherd, a lamb... a very sombre decoration, reduced to the essential.

On 24 December, everything is ready. All the Nativity scenes in the Monastery (they are spread everywhere), all of them without Baby Jesus. In some cases he is carefully covered up.

First Vespers for us begin with a paraliturgical hymn, which is like a solemn announcement of the celebration and an invitation to the universal joy of Salvation.

The author is a Dominican priest who has now passed away, who wrote many liturgical pieces, after Vatican Council II. He is almost a celebrity in France and beyond... André Gouzes.

The Antiphons are sung and everything reflects our willingness to give the celebration the greatest solemnity despite the humbleness of our means.

Depending on the availability of the Celebrant (we do not have a fixed chaplain), Mass takes place at nighttime. Unfortunately, these opportunities are always decreasing, and Mass is moved forward ... to 11 :00 p.m., and even earlier. The Office of Readings precedes Mass, and the Office is preceded by the solemn announcement (this time liturgical) of the Event set in the



historical Time and in space.

In the past, this announcement was mandatory, I think for every Saint. It was called *Ménologe* in French, which meant Memory.

The Psalm hymn, accompanied simply by a zither, is performed by two soloists, in the total darkness of the Choir and of the Chapel. It is very evocative.

At the end all the lights are switched back on and all the candles are lit, as the Abbess brings the Child to the Nativity scene and places him in the manger. The community prostrates with their face against the ground in adoration, as the organ accompanies the movement. After a brief moment of silence, the true and proper celebration begins, sometimes with a hymn to the Virgin Mary and then a Christmas Hymn chosen by the nun responsible for the liturgy. The repertoire is abundant in France, including traditional ancient songs that we always joyfully rediscover.

This is followed by a heartfelt solemn Mass. After this, according to our tradition, we assemble in the refectory around the tables decorated and lit only by small red lights. One of the past years, our young sisters surprised us by appearing dressed as Angels and danced around the tables singing a traditional hymn that could be compared to our own, *Tu scendi dalle stelle*. It was beautiful and moving.

We then turn the lights on and enjoy a hot chocolate, a herbal tea or something else. We eat some traditional sweets and then finally, tired

and sleepy, we retire to our cells for a few hours of well-deserved rest. In the morning we wake up a little later.

At breakfast, we gather in the refectory and wish one another Happy Christmas in the various languages of our countries of origin, since the Community's sisters come from six or seven different countries, the very image of Lourdes, where one can tangibly feel the universality of the Church.

The following hours are spent in Adoration and in various preparations, including lunch, which we enjoy in an atmosphere of celebration and joy. Then comes the time for recreation (otherwise we would be too tired the following day). We exchange gifts that were prepared in secrecy and for which we draw lots, amid exclamations and cries of joy and surprise. Of course, they are small things, more or less useful for our daily needs, but every now and again we truly feel like little girls.

When circumstances allow us, we consecrate an evening in the days that follow, to publicly evoke the first Nativity Scene, the one Saint Francis made in Greccio, with a text by Eloi Leclerc, a French Franciscan author, interspersed and traditional hymns.

However, we do not forget the world and its tragedies, its distress and anxieties. In the secrecy of our hearts and our prayers, each of us brings all this to the Child and the Virgin Mother. But, each makes the effort of lifting the other's load throughout these days of holy joy.

Sr. Maria Pia Crestini OSC



IRELAND: Monastery of the Carmel, Malahide

Take the Time

Three words uttered by Thomas Merton when asked how to deepen prayer. This captures the commonality of all born of flesh: the lowliest, the shakers and movers, the centenarians, the child new-born, the physically challenged, the strong and sound of limb, those brought into being and unseeing of daylight and starlight.

I write this from a Carmelite Monastery located in North Co. Dublin in the coastal Village of Mulach Ide: Malahide. Our Carmel is dedicated to the Star of the Sea. We all exist in both time and location. As cloistered contemplative Carmelite nuns place has a particular and precious importance for us: a re-creation, in a small and modest way, of the dedicated life of the Hermit Brothers of Mount Carmel in the thirteenth century down the years to its dynamic adaptation and enhancement by St Teresa of Jesus and her Sisters in mid-sixteenth century Spain, and now present in almost every part of the world. A largely hidden life of prayer, interior prayer, prayer as friendship with Jesus, at the service of the church. A strongly social and hermit life in community; friendship with one another, lived as an enlightening and strengthening constituent. All this within the liturgical life of the church. Every contemplative community is blessed by relatives of the nuns, the local church, contacts with people reaching over decades and generations, physically near and far; with people who are constant in their affection for us, some of whom we have never known by name.



Each Carmelite community has a history. Ours here, above the sea and looking towards the Mourne and nearby Lambay for just on fifty years, goes back to the mid-seventeenth century during which our nuns had neither sight nor sound of the sea. The first mention of Carmelite nuns in Ireland is to be found in the Latin Rinuccini Manuscripts and the reference can be back-dated to the early 1640s. Our Monstrance, still in use here, is inscribed in Latin, 'Made in Paris A.D. 1661 for the Venerable Monastery of Discalced Carmelite Nuns, Dublin.' Our history has 'taken the time' and as U.A. Fanthorpe, the poet, puts it, our nuns, and we, have often 'Walked haphazard by starlight.' Location and time. Location, as noted, is of particular significance for Carmelites in that each house is a small Mount Carmel, but also time in that we endeavour to apportion our days and our hours. This latter is most obvious in that we, and our days, are bound together by the strong spiral of the liturgical seasons. Advent and Christmastide are a time when symbolism dresses most tangibly in sight and sound and texture and scent and taste. It might be supposed that belonging to a centuries old Order our customs (these are probably as individual to each Carmel as the nuns themselves) are a fly set in amber; simply a reminder of the past by being created in the present, and Christmas customs are caught and held 'in the reality of the moment.' What do we actually do? How do we honour the Birth of the Lord? The eve of the first Sunday of Advent we arm ourselves with the next seasonal volume of the Liturgy of the Hours. There is a sense of anticipation even in the simple handing of this book: what riches of scripture will open themselves, what wisdom from this year's acquaintance with the Advent Antiphons and lessons? On the first Sunday of Advent our wreath is blessed as one of our nuns reads verses inviting us to open our hearts to the love that Advent brings. Are these days quiet? Tranquil? Both yes and no. We have the tradition of making Advent a time of withdrawal so we close the parlours but life, in all its various aspects, goes on and is no respecter of persons nor cloisters.



We have a precious custom, though perhaps not the ultimate in theological soundness: according to the number of nuns in the community, we each choose a day, counting back from Christmas Eve, when we shelter the Bambino in the 'womb' of our cell. Each day the nun chooses a hymn, a poem, a reading, a prayer and this is sung or recited at the conclusion of Evening Prayer in choir. The nun then leads the way, followed by the prioress (this is the nun chosen to serve the community) who carries the Bambino. Once arrived the Lord is placed in a basket to spend twenty-four hours in the company of our Sister. We spend as much time as we can in this hallowed company. U.A. Fanthorpe puts it neatly in another, and no less perceptive, poem entitled 'Atlas': 'There is a



kind of love called maintenance / Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it; / Which checks the insurance, and doesn't forget / The milkman . . . ' so, yes, Advent is both tranquil and a season of lists, gaining momentum as the weeks shorten, and the darkness and the lists, lengthen. The biblical texts, chosen with care, take us on our journey until we come to the seventeenth of December and the great Antiphons begin with their evening cry of longing, 'O . . . ' It would be tempting to list them here but instead a suggestion: take the time to be with these biblical Antiphons in quietness, in The Liturgy of the Hours for Evening Prayer, in the Daily Missal, on-line. Love is our lodestar giving us direction. Carol Ann Duffy noted that, 'Love's time's beggar, but even a single hour, / bright as a dropped coin, makes love rich.' Find the Great O's beautifully illustrated by hands long laid to rest among what we Irish call, 'the quiet people'. What of the Christmas post? We hear from our families, our personal friends and the many kind people who are friends of the community. We do our best by mail and email; we write a community letter. It is a great joy to hear from our friends. Handwritten greetings and handmade cards bring a particular pleasure; the sender is present in their DNA and there is a vitality in the paper fibres, our lives are not full of dynamic interest but brimming with our salvation story (the retrospect glance) and, most excitingly, our salvation journey right now, today, both as a Carmelite community and as individual Sisters. We are more than the sum of our parts. On Christmas Eve morning we have the Martyrology. This takes us back, beyond recorded history, to the dawn of creation and aeons bringing us to the birth of Jesus in time. Who could not be moved? Looking around our community we know we

would not be present to God and one another without being sharers of an inheritance all underserved. But we cannot be in choir all day and there is much to be done: greeting one another and away to breakfast. We aim to leave placing the several cribs (some made by a friend) and the Christmas tree and the decoration of the monastery until the last moment. The Magi are kept well out of sight; they were dressed by one of Sisters who made her vows over a hundred years ago. There are lots of questions: does anyone what has happened to the ass? where are the drawing pins . . . ? Nightfall comes and from the top of our meadow the glow of Dublin's lights; to the front of the monastery the twinkling house lights and, depending on the lunar phase and cloud density, the moon shining on the sea and many stars in a black sky. Located between these worlds of light and darkness the Vigil Mass shines out with its beautiful texts. Christmas Day and the Bambino, is brought to choir and handed to the celebrant to be laid in the manger of the large crib in the monastery church. All the Advent Wreath candles are alight and our hearts too aglow. This is truly Glory to God in the highest. Our monastery is situated for just on fifty years at the highest point of a small housing estate, aptly named Seapark (before which we were almost two hundred years in Ranelagh on the south side of Dublin). Here is an area with a fervent Catholic community and considerable musical talent. Throughout these years, with the exception of Covid restrictions, so many have formed a choir to sing with us on the liturgical feasts and play a variety of instruments. This has formed deep friendships and developed a beautiful source of praise. Sometimes we are asked whether we have visitors on Christmas Day. Some families



from the area have built us into their Christmas customs and we are honoured that they should spend time with us. Being together is the greatest of gifts. Christmas Day itself is a mix of liturgy, silent prayer, admiring the decorations for this house sets off colour beautifully; talking together as if we had not met since before Advent began. Carols, if we care to note the words as well as the familiar melodies, oftentimes draw us to the 'mystery play' that is every human life. Each evening at the close of Night Prayer, we gather around the crib in the church to sing the Final Antiphon to Mary.

What is it that draws us to gaze upon the Child? It is the pull, irresistible as the turning tides, below us. Colleen Millsteed describes it well: 'I feel the love that spans the decades . . . that love will always be ours'.

The Discalced Carmelites



MALTA: ST. MARGARET'S CARMEL, COSPICUA

Jesus shapes the life of the community

Here at the Monastery of St Margaret in the historic city of Cospicua (Bormla) in Malta, we are eight solemnly professed Discalced Carmelite sisters and one postulant. Our day is characterised by several moments of prayer and meditation balanced by work, rest and recreation. In all our activities centred around the cloister, we try to "seek the face of God." Advent and Christmas provide a perfect opportunity for us to grow in our faith. Our Holy Mother St Teresa of Jesus, prayed to God to keep Advent in her soul, "that is, a continual longing and waiting for this great Mystery wherein You, O Word became flesh to show me the abyss of your redeeming sanctifying mercy!" In our community, this period provides a perfect opportunity for us to continue to delve into the great mysteries of our faith, and to grow in our love for the Lord.

The season opens on the First Sunday of Advent with a short procession with a statue of the Child Jesus around our monastery. The Prioress reads an exhortation on the upcoming season and every nun shares a short meditation on every figure represented in the crib.

Together with the rest of the Church, we look at Advent as a particular moment of grace which allows us to grow in our relationship with God. In order to help our prayer and meditation, we receive no visitors and no phone calls during Advent. Moreover, we also have a weekly meditation

by an invited speaker in preparation for Christmas. The days of the Christmas Novena in preparation for Christmas are particularly meaningful. The statue of Baby Jesus leaves the recreation room and is taken in turn to the cell of each of our nuns. Each procession is accompanied by the singing of Christmas Carols.

On Christmas Eve, we rejoice with the Church at the birth of Jesus. We temporarily stop our fasting, we resume receiving visitors and we have shorter periods of silence.

Some Maltese traditions are also part of our communal life.

Just before the start of Midnight Mass, a small boy or a small girl, dressed in the Carmelite habit, delivers a traditional homily announcing the birth of Christ.

During the Christmas Octave, we also hold our Carmelite traditional procession with the statue of Baby Jesus within the walls of our monastery from our Choir to the Refectory while we chant Christmas carols together. This procession is also common in Maltese streets and owes its origin to the Maltese Saint George Preca.



Our celebrations are simple but they remind us of the joy that the Child Jesus brings and that his presence fills and shapes the life of our community.

Sr Pawlina Xuereb OCD
Mother Prioress



BELGIUM: BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF MAREDSOUS, DENÉE



Contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation Christmas is a heartfelt celebration in the Abbey of Maredsous, both liturgically and in terms of tourism

Liturgically speaking, the celebration is traditional. It is celebrated with the Monastic Offices, in particular with the Vespers and Vigils of 24 December, which are joined together in a great prayer of expectation and contemplation of the mystery of Incarnation. Our Offices are sung in French, but some Gregorian chants are also part of this big celebration. During Night Mass, a choir of some 20 people adds to the solemnity of the liturgy. The Pontifical Mass is celebrated with deacons and acolytes, and it is always a child who brings the figure of Jesus to the nativity scene, during the entrance procession. At the beginning of the ceremony, a hymn recalls the Exultet of Easter and the entire Holy Story, from the creation of the world to the birth of Jesus. During this hymn, the Basilica is immersed in half-light. Then everything is lit and the celebration begins.

On Christmas Day, Lauds, Mass, Vespers and Vigils are moments of prayer around this great mystery. At noon, the monks, guests and singers enjoy and aperitif and a meal together.

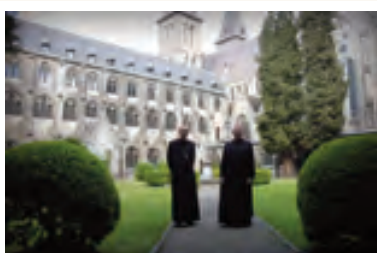
Christmas in Maredsous also includes a Christmas market, or more precisely, an Advent market,



which begins at the end of November and runs until Christmas. It is a small market with 60 stalls that sell traditional products of the season: santon, ornaments, warm clothing and food and drinks. The inspiration for this market is both Christian and Alsatian. There is no Santa Claus, but there is a nativity scene at the entrance. On 6 December, Saint Nicholas, who is very popular in our areas, comes to bring presents to good children. The market is only open on weekends and attracts many families. The favourite place of young people and older people alike is the ice-skating rink. It echoes early Flemish paintings, like those of Brueghel, in which the mystery of Christmas appears discretely in the midst of crowds skating on the frozen canals.

In Belgium, December days are cold and dark. Christmas lights are joyfully anticipated and they allow families to get together and spend some time in the Abbey of Maredsous.

Bernard Lorent Tayart
Abbot



SWEDEN: BENEDICTINE JESU MODER MARIAS MARIAVALL'S ABBEY, SKÅNE-TRANÅS

The Light of Christ in the dark of days

All through the year we are reminded of the mystery of Christmas as we pray the Angelus prayer. Three times a day we make a pause and reflect on how God came to dwell among us and still as we light the first Advent candle a longing awakens in us for the celebrations of that night of wonders when Jesus was born.

The season of Advent helps us to move forward with anticipation to the celebration of this mystery. We are helped by the liturgy - guided by the texts that the Church gives us, texts that slowly lead us to what is about to happen. The expectation that once filled the people of Israel we can now share. Isaiah says. 'O people of Zion, behold, the Lord is coming to save the nations'.

The celebration of saint Lucia on December the 13th is in Sweden an important part of this preparation. On her day we light a special candle in the form of a crown. As we approach the darkest day of the year on the Northern hemisphere, the winter solstice, she comes with light as a foreboding of the coming of the Light of the world. With this sign of hope we may also have a taster of the special bread and cookies that we bake for Christmas.

The lighting of the Advent candles one by one on the four Advents Sundays rekindles the childhood joy. In the window of our refectory a star shines out into the black night, calling us all to the manger. Advent is a time of fasting before the feast, and we mark this by having simpler meals.



We try to plan the various tasks for the Christmas days well in advance. Some Sisters have the task of finding suitable Christmas trees on our grounds and bringing them into the church, refectory and calefactory on Christmas Eve, decorating the ones in the church and refectory with lights only. The Christmas tree in the calefactory where we meet for recreation is decorated in colourful ways to express the joy of the season as Psalm 96 expresses it: "Then all the trees of the woods will rejoice". In the centre of the church is the empty manger is waiting for the infant Jesus.

As the day passes into evening the monastery grows quiet and then finally the church bell starts to toll for the midnight Mass. Fr Ingmar and his two brothers come from Saint Benedictus monastery, which is situated only 500 m south of ours, to celebrate the Mass. Some old and new friends find their way to our church too.

After Mass the visitors are offered something to drink and some sweets before they start their sometimes not so short homeward journey. We sisters meet in the Chapter room where we offer one another a peace greeting, saying 'The Word was made flesh' with the response "and dwelt among us".

In the refectory candles are lit on the tables and the lights in the Christmas tree are lit. After all the great things that have happened, we savour the moment with a glass of wine and sweets while listening to orthodox Christmas chant on the CD, before going to bed.

For us Epiphany is the climax of the Christmas celebrations. We invite the monks in are neighbouring monastery to join us at the recreation on that day. Various sisters have been given the task of making small cards that symbolises the gifts of the magi. On the card symbolising gold, a name of a saint is written and he or she will be a special companion for the coming year. Incense is a virtue either to be practised during the year or it is a characteristic of the one receiving it. The gift of myrrh is an edifying sentence. As each of us draw our cards we share what is written on them. There is often laughter and recognition as we receive a saint or virtue that all can appreciate as appropriate.

After Epiphany the Angelus prayer continues to remind us that the Incarnation of the Son of God sanctifies matter and everyday life.



FRANCE: BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF SAINTE MARIE DE MAUMONT, JUIGNAC

Joining all those who are on their own at Christmas

The Solemnity of Christmas in our Abbey is both grave and simply joyful. Singing the Offices helps us understand the immensity of the gift of God, who through his birth among men, accepted to deliver himself to us in the sacrifice of the Cross, spurring spontaneous joy each time he comes as a small child to bring the joy of the angels on earth.

Our guests, who are not many during these family festivities, are not mistaken. They know that the long and demanding Offices will allow us to reach all those who live Christmas alone, in poverty and in the distress of life's trials, to bring them the sweetness of hope.

The "O" antiphons we sing at Vespers from 17-23 December are a vibrant appeal to He, whose Name we do not utter until first Vespers on 24 December. The community then enters the Church and prepares to prostrate itself, as on Good Friday, while a cantor sings the "martyrology", chanting in French, announcing the birth of Jesus. As soon as his Name is uttered, the community prostrates. During First Vespers, the Gregorian Antiphons and the Psalmody are sung in French, and guests are free to join in, as the chants are simple.

Vespers are followed by a fraternal encounter in which the community retraces the important events that occurred throughout the year. The Abbess then delivers a few words to outline our path. (it is a way to live the new year).

Vigils begins at 9:00 p.m. with the Invitatory of

the day that accompanies the procession of the decorated Gospel with the genealogy, according to Saint Matthew, which is placed on the altar. The Psalmody, lessons and Responsorial Gregorian chant are alternated with silence, and the Gospel is solemnly sung, closing this long and beautiful journey.

There is then a sort of pause in which well-known Christmas hymns are played on organ and violin, welcoming the guests who come to Midnight Mass, which begins at 10:45 p.m. The Eucharistic celebration ends at around 11:45 p.m. As we exit the Church, we join our guests in singing a traditional Christmas carol that everyone knows and enjoys.

Christmas day is marked by the richness of the Gregorian chants, which are well-known and anticipated, by the beauty of the liturgy of the Word of God and by the Psalms which are sung in French. It is a unique Sunday of its kind, thanks to the grace of He, who makes all things new with his coming among us: Emmanuel!

Sr. Dominique OSB



AUSTRIA: CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF WETTINGEN-MEHRERAU, BREGENZ



The greatest gift

Like Easter, Christmas is a time of year in which everyone works for the successful outcome of the celebration. The kitchen smells like biscuits and other delicacies, the Church is festively decorated, the table is set and the tree is decorated. At home, one can feel that Christmas is approaching.

Like a watch whose serrated wheels click together to make a complete work of art, the other confrères share the expectation of Christmas like a gift, through their work.

Christmas starts with the yearly liturgy of Christmas Eve on 24 December. The Father Abbot presides over the Pontifical Mass in the Church of our monastery, where there are many faithful and everyone anxiously waits for the Christmas festivities to begin. Once they are in the sacristy, the confrères exchange their first Christmas greeting. All the confrères who are unable to participate in the community feast because of their commitments outside the monastery, return to the monastery for the Christmas holidays.

On the evening of the first day of Christmas, -- dinner is usually eaten in the monastery's refectory in silent prayer, accompanied by spiritual readings and music -- the convent assembles in the recre-

ation room, the common room where the table is richly set and the Christmas tree is decorated by the monks. Christmas hymns are sung and the superiors deliver brief Christmas speeches. A Christmas story is also shared. Tags with the names of all the monks in the house are set on the long table. The table with presents is prepared by everyone. The Father Prior

prepares the presents with great care, in order to make daily life with the confrères easier and more pleasant, and many monasteries of our Congregation give the priests of our house, treasures and delicacies from their convents, in thanksgiving for their sacramental service and their help throughout the year. No one leaves the Christmas party without a present because the greatest gift of all, the birth of our Saviour in the manger, close to the Virgin Mary, is carried from the community to the rooms of the confrères. And from this joy come the strength and perseverance of the new ecclesial year, to see Christ revive our hearts, each day.

Fr. Maurus Korn OCist



SLOVENIA: CARMEL MARY QUEEN OF ANGELS, MIRNA PEČ

St Joseph knocks on the cell door

The mystery of Christmas is great, solemn, and our celebration is nice, sweet and simple.

The essential event takes place in our hearts, where with faith and love we prepare the way for the birth of our Saviour into this world. In the first place in our own hearts and then in the hearts of the whole humanity.

During Advent, more attention is put on silence, not only external, but most of all to the inner silence. We have an Advent wreath in the chapel. The image of Mary makes its daily pilgrimage from one cell to another; each evening another sister accepts Mary and that is the retreat day for the sister. We have no visitors during Advent. In the last days, we set up the crib in the enclosed chapel, the outside chapel, as well as in other places in the convent. On Christmas-eve we have a retreat.

Before the Solemnity we pray the Novena, including in the Holy Mass with singing the hymn: Let us adore the Lord, the king who is to come, the Magnificat with the O-antiphons.

On the Christmas Eve's day we have fasting, also for the supper. At nightfall, before the vespers, the priest blesses the crib in the chapel. Before supper we wish each other Merry Christmas. In the refectory we greet St. Joseph (in the person of one sister who takes over his role), who knocks at each sister in searching of a place to stay.

After supper, washing the dishes and last preparations for the Solemnity, we bless the entire monastery, according to our Slovene national cus-



tom. We do the same two more times during Christmas season: on New Year's Eve and Epiphany's Eve. Starting in the chapel and while praying the rosary we go through all the rooms in and around the monastery with incense and blessed water. We usually pray one part during this, and then the other parts of the rosary in the chapel.

The sisters use some of their free time to rest or pray and sing. In the spirit with Mary, in the silence of the heart, we await the birth of Jesus.

At 10:30 p.m., we wake up with bells and singing, that's the only way it is on Holy Night. At 10:45 p.m., the sisters gather in the recreation room in white coats and with candles in their hands. The sister sings the gospel about the birth of Jesus. In the procession, we head towards the chapel, along the fully lit passage, because the Light has come! At the head of the procession goes the sister who carries the baby Jesus, we go with candles in our hands, singing the song "Holy Night". At 11 p.m., we solemnly pray the hour of liturgical reading. At midnight we

have midnight Mass. We receive Jesus with a grateful heart. God became man, He was born to save us!

Strict silence is not during Holy Night. Afterwards, we linger in the refectory for tea. The sisters receive the letters, which they do not receive during Advent.

Christmas days are days of deep gratitude, the first four are conversational days when we connect to each other as a religious family. On feast days, we sing Christmas carols during the half-afternoon meditation, while cradling Jesus.

The external celebration aims to express joy at the birth of Jesus. God's incomprehensible love bends down to man. The Great God became man and came into the world. He is looking for a heart to accept him. And we want to accept Him!

Carmelite Sisters



PRINCIPALITY OF MONACO: OBLATES OF OUR LADY OF FATIMA, MONACO VILLE



A small community in a small State tells us about its Christmas

We are four Oblate Sisters of the Virgin Mary of Fatima, who live on the Rock of the Principality of Monaco, and we wish to share with you some of the typical aspects of our Christmas preparations and celebrations in Monaco, where Catholicism is the State religion. Each year, our community, which has an apostolic life, draws its main spiritual nourishment for Christmas preparations, from the richness of the liturgy of the Advent Season, whose sobriety is interrupted by two festivities that are important in the Principality: 6 December, the Feast of Saint Nicholas, protector of sailors and children, and the Solemnity of the Immaculate, when we remember a vow that the Monegasques made in 1631, to be freed from the plague. In contrast to the unrest of external preparations, which are increasingly more pompous, in our community we try to be attentive to times of silence and reflection to nourish the awareness of the expectation of the Coming of the Saviour. We use this same spirit with the recipients of our apostolate: in parishes, in the Catholic school, in some facilities for elderly people, in prisons.... In particular we invite children and young people to prepare themselves for these long-awaited festivities with a Christian spirit that translates into a commitment to solidarity. Hence, the idea of suggesting some manual work (cards, small decorative objects,...) to offer to the elderly who are on their own and those who are impris-



oned, or to sell for charity. Faced with a multitude of "Advent calendars" filled with chocolate and lacking in any religious meaning, we suggest "other calendars" to our catechism children, with which to journey towards Christmas in the joy of giving something freely and personal to the Lord and to others.

Usually, the entire Church of Monaco engages in reviving the

Christian meaning of this celebration, starting from external signs such as setting up nativity scenes, not only in places of worship and in family homes, but also in many public places! There are many initiatives. For example, for the last ten years, a "chemin des crèches" has been prepared, an itinerary through the historical centre, where countless artistic nativity scenes of the most varied origins are set up. There is also a tradition that each parish in the Principality is in charge of setting up a nativity scene in one of the floors of the new hospital complex for long-term illnesses and patients with Alzheimer's.

Another customary initiative in parishes is to prepare a Christmas play with children and adolescents, performed immediately before Christmas Mass, as a kind of vigil, with the great participation of relatives and friend. It is after all a Cathedral and at midnight, we celebrate Mass tied to the Monegasque tradition, with the presence of some faithful in traditional clothing, an offertory procession with local products and the blessing with the olive branch of the "pan de Natale", by the Archbishop. That "pan de Natale" is an ancient tradition of the Principality in which each family had a large round bread for Christmas lunch, decorated with walnuts arranged in the shape of a Latin Cross. Before cutting the bread, the eldest in the family would offer a prayer of blessing with a small olive branch, sometimes together with an orange and a lemon branch, asking that evil stay away and to implore the good of the family. The cross of walnuts recalls the Christian roots of the Monegasques, the olive branch symbolizes peace and the orange and lemon branches recall the richness of the territory's local products.

All these preparations, which are added to the customary commitments might make some think of a "doing" that is excessive and exhausting, but

in reality all this disguises a profound joy. To find ourselves more often among people to pray and to praise the Lord for all his blessings, living charity together with our youth, exchanging sincere greetings, all this opens our hearts to welcome the grace of Christmas.

The community of Oblate Sisters of the Virgin Mary of Fatima



SPAIN: ABBEY OF MONTSERRAT, MONTSERRAT

Feeling nostalgic about "Moreneta"

At the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Montserrat, Patron Saint of the Dioceses of Catalonia, popular piety in all Marian shrines is enriched by the liturgical aspect that marks the presence of the Benedictine community. This Jubilee year coincides with the 1,000th anniversary of the community's presence on the Holy Mountain.

All pilgrims perceive that the sacred fence, and in particular, the Basilica, contain iconographic elements and inscriptions regarding the mystery of the divine motherhood of the Virgin Mary. Many of them are recorded in liturgical texts on the solemnity of the birth of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the most significant one is that of the entrance steps to the Camerino of Our Lady, where visitors climb the stairs and contemplate the mosaics of the Holy Mothers on the left, and those of the Holy Virgins on the right. The first group is led by Eve who sustains the first part of the Christmas Antiphon, *Gaudia matris habens* (She has the joy of being a mother). The group of Virgins is led by Saint Agnes, in the second part, *Cum virginitatis honore* (with the honor of virginity). *Sedulius'* hymn marks a spirituality culminates in the Holy Image -- with a serene expression, she holds her Son, as he blesses the faithful People of God.

The context that welcomes the Assembly at prayer is significant in its details, of which we have provided only one. But the community of monks and pilgrims give life to unity in prayer. Due to the winter and unlike other festivities of the year, the flow of visitors is limited to those who come specifically to participate in liturgical celebrations. Every element of the Liturgy of the Hours and the two Eucharistic celebrations mark this important day, in which the monastic character, popular zeal and especially participation in the celebrated *Escolania*,



merge in harmony.

In addition to the classical musical repertoire of the solemnity, there are also liturgical hymns in Catalan, the work of composer monks who in the years after Vatican II, offered the best of their talents to ensure that especially on that "Night of Peace", music and liturgical texts would merge in a respectful and solemn repertoire. This explains the devotion of pilgrims who come to the Basilica on a winter's night.

The evangelizing impact transmitted by the liturgy may be surprising to those who are not familiar with the Sanctuary. However, Montserrat's role in the last century in promoting a liturgical movement, following a tradition which already in the 17th and 18th century had its musical apex in its Christmas repertoire, is well-known.

Nowadays, the sacred space has widened, thanks to the current means of communication. The transmission of Christmas celebrations allows us

to form a single assembly, as prayers are often said with those who are present and "those who join us from afar". In his way, the nostalgia of devotees is spiritually filled. As the hymn of Our Lady of "Moreneta" says, bringing comfort "to those who yearn for the homeland without seeing the peaks of Montserrat".

Fr. Bernabé Dalmau OSB



CZECH REPUBLIC: TRAPPIST ABBEY OF NAŠÍ PANÍ NAD VLTAVOU (OUR LADY OF THE MOLDAU), NEVEKLOV



A nativity scene in all the common areas

Our days as contemplative nuns are marked by the sound of the bell that calls us to Church seven times a day to sing lauds to He who is the Lord of the universe and is the Love of our lives. In our Cistercian spirituality, the Mystery of Christmas is very important.

But to better describe how we celebrate Christmas, we have to start with Advent.

For us, Advent is a time of waiting like a mother who carries a child in her womb: a time of waiting that is filled with silence that allows us to keep in our hearts the presence of God, who is already here and who is being born, who is coming at any time, who comes every day in the Eucharist and who will come at the end of time, when we will see him face to face. Our entire lives are in preparation for his coming. Advent is the liturgical time in which we experience this more intensely.

Czech hymns, the antiphons, psalms (always sung) and the readings speak of this waiting, and in various ways, repeat, "Come, Lord Jesus"! We

ask this, not only for us but for everyone. Come, Lord Jesus, to this sick world, torn apart by violence and discord. Come, King of peace"! In these last years, we ask this especially for Ukraine...

Both in Church and in the cloister, we have a so-called Advent wreath, with three purple lights and a pink one, that are lit one by one on the Sundays of Advent, so that by the end of Advent, all four of them will be lit and announce, "The Lord is near"!

Preparing the Advent wreath, decorating it with branches of fir, flowers and berries, is customary, not only in our monastery but in all the Czech Churches. With this waiting filled with desire for the Coming of the Lord, we reach Christmas. We meet at 10.20 p.m. in Church for the hymn of the Christmas Vigil and for a time of silent prayer in darkness, until midnight. This is followed by Holy Mass: the Child is already present in the manger and we contemplate his birth and the beginning of our redemption.

Our tradition is to set up a nativity scene in all the common areas of the monastery and in the various workplaces. The biggest one, aside from the one in the Church and the one in the guesthouse, is in the chapter house where we assemble as a community every morning after Mass to listen to the reading of the Rules, and in the evening to sing traditional Czech Christmas hymns.

This nativity scene has a different theme every year, based on a Bible quote or on a theme that reflects an important event in the world, in our Order or in our community etc...

Preparations ahead of Christmas include decorating the Christmas tree. Unlike other countries in the world, in the Czech Republic, the Christmas tree is not a pagan symbol. It is placed inside all the country's Churches.

Our tree is in the chapter house and is usually decorated by the novices and postulants. The tree is ready by 17 December, when the Christmas novena begins, but we light it on Christmas.

The Christmas atmosphere is joyful just like the liturgy. Whereas during Advent we feel a greater need for solitude and intimacy, at Christmas we feel the need to live our joy together. On Christmas eve day, we rest a bit before meeting at around 10:00 p.m. for the Vigil and Midnight Mass, which is attended by many faithful from neighbouring parishes. We joyfully sing: "A child is born for us, the Son was given to us. His power is everlasting". After Mass, we go to the refectory for a hot chocolate and Christmas sweets, and we eat in silence by the light of the Christmas candles. Even though we are tired after a long night of Vigil, we feel a great spiritual joy and the desire to be together. We express it by breaking the silence in the chapter house in front of the lit tree to wish one another a happy Christmas. We distribute small gifts. After Mass, our guests go to the dining hall in the guesthouse where they find a lit nativity scene and ...sweets.

We wish everyone the same Christmas joy that we experience. The joy that comes from Christ himself, who we welcomed into our home, We identify with Origen's words: "What good does it do me if Christ was born in Bethlehem once, if he is not born again in my heart"? Let us pray that his coming among us will bring peace in our hearts and in the whole world.

Sr. Maria Michela OCSO



LITHUANIA: ST. BENEDICT'S MONASTERY, PALENDRIAI

Experiencing peace and passing it on to others

Our community was founded by the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes in France 26 years ago. It is presently made up of eleven brothers from Lithuania, France, America and Kazakhstan. Ours is a contemplative monastic tradition centered upon the celebration of the Liturgy with Gregorian chant. In our Western society during the first three weeks of December and even earlier, our cities are light up by an abundance of promotional decorations meant to stimulate feverish waves of gift and food shopping. In places of work, anticipated «Christmas parties» are often held. One has the feeling that the time for feasting and celebrating is already in full swing. In the monastery on the other hand Advent is a time of joyful but sober preparation characterized by more intensive prayer and abstinence which help to nourish an ardent desire to encounter the Lord Jesus. The final week before Christmas is marked by the beautiful O antiphons sung each evening at Vespers and in which we pray for the coming of Christ using imagery drawn from the Old Testament. It is only on December 24th that the Creche is set up in the Church and the house decorated.

On December 24th, Christmas Eve, which is called Kūčios, almost all Lithuanian families are accustomed to gathering together to observe a particular set of traditions. Our monastery has adopted some of these. The first is the sharing of kalėdaičiai, fairly large unleavened rectangular Christmas wafers embossed with scenes of Christ's Nativity. In the evening, after the First Vespers of Christmas, the monks gather in the community room around the fireplace. The "Martyrology" of December 25th with its long and solemn proclamation of the feast of Christ Nativity, is read. The



sub-prior then speaks, briefly recalling the principal joyful and sorrowful events of the previous year, and the Prior answers by mentioning various projects and hopes for the year to come. After this all sing the Our Father and the kalėdaičiai wafers are distributed to each member of the community. The brothers then exchange greetings with one another and each time, in symbolic expression of mutual thanks and forgiveness, each monk breaks off and consumes a piece of the wafer held by the brother to whom he is giving his wishes. After this all go to the Kūčios supper which is normally supposed to consist of twelve dishes symbolizing the twelve Apostles. The traditional menu at this meal excludes both meat and dairy but includes cold dishes of herring or other types of fish, vegetables served with special sauces and mushrooms, different kinds of bread, "spanguolių kisielis" (cranberry kissel- with the berries suspended in a semi-liquid gel), and perhaps most essentially, bite sized hard biscuits called "kūčiukai" which are

soaked in poppy seed milk ("aguonų pienas"). According to ancient tradition the kūčiukai biscuits are thought to symbolize the departed souls of past generations who are present in spirit at this feast, having been redeemed by the coming of Christ.

In our monastery all or most of these traditional foods are prepared. But because December 24th sometimes occurs on days of the week when our monastic fasting rules allow for only one full meal at midday with a much lighter snack in the evening, we tend to divide the traditional dishes between lunch and dinner, consuming most of them at lunchtime. (The Lithuanian custom on the contrary, is to fast during the day with Kūčios supper as the main meal).

Nonetheless at our monastery, the traditional evening meal, even when taken under "fasting conditions" with limited amounts of food, has a





festive character : tables are decorated with ever-green wreaths and candles, and recordings of classical Christmas music are listened to in place of the reading which normally accompanies silent monastic meals.

At 10 PM we gather in the church for the monastic service of Night Vigils consisting of psalms, readings from Scripture and the Fathers, and beautifully elaborate Gregorian chant responses which introduce magnificently into the contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation. Vigils end at 11:30 PM with Christ's genealogy from Matthew's Gospel, sung on a special melody in Latin by the Prior amidst clouds of incense. This is followed shortly afterwards my Midnight Mass, and the Gloria in excelsis Deo, accompanied by the tolling of all bells in the church tower, is sung almost exactly at 12 o'clock. Even when there is snow this "Mass of the Shepherds or Piemenėlių Mišios" as it is called here, is usually quite well attended (with people arriving little by little during Vigils) unless icy road conditions have prevented them from reaching the monastery. After the service which ends at about 1:30 AM, we enjoy a wonderful Christmas snack with a selection of

pastries, crescent rolls, cheese, honey or jam, washed down with hot chocolate or herbal tea. It is however advisable to eat moderately so as not to have trouble sleeping during the few short hours remaining before the the Mass of the Dawn, celebrated together with Laudes at 7 AM and ending at 8:30. Although few people attend this service, it is celebrated with all the trappings of a fully solemn Mass. This is followed by breakfast which gives us the opportunity to finish up the goodies from the night before. The Mass of the Day with its splendid entrance chant "Puer natus est nobis" is held at 11 AM and lasts for almost two hours. We then sit down to a well earned Christmas dinner followed by recreation in the community room. where coffee, cake and various types of candy are served. After a brief nap we have solemn Vespers followed by adora-

tion of the Blessed Sacrament.

The chants sung on the Feast of Christmas and during all season of Christ's Nativity mark one of the serene high points of the liturgical year. They tend to alternate between tender evocations of the newly born Christ Child in the humble surroundings of Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph, and expressions of reverence and awe in the presence of the Eternal Son of God who became flesh to dwell among us. Each year in our increasingly troubled world, they give us and all those come here to participate in our prayer, the opportunity enter into a deeper bond with the Lord Jesus, to experience his peace, and to communicate it to others.

Father Gregory Casprini, OSB



HUNGARY: BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF PANNONHALMA

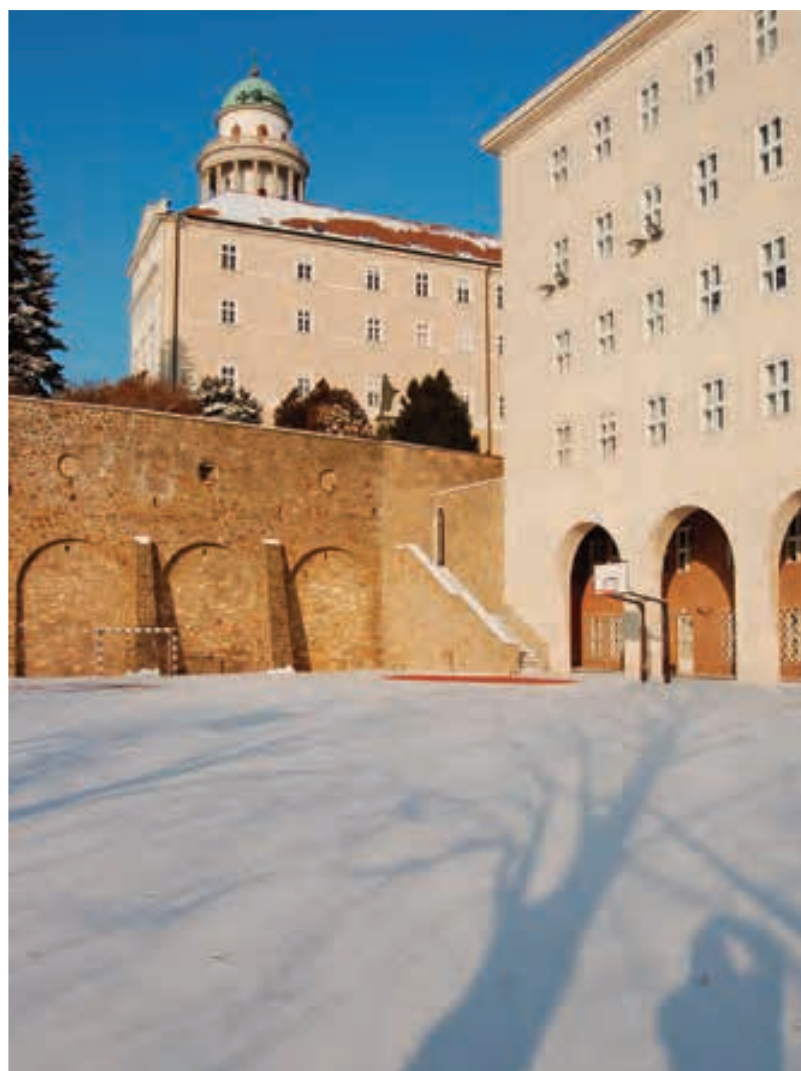
Truly living humanity

We aspire to celebrate Christmas in our monastic community in a very family-like way, as a truly internal event. On the 24 of December, everyone helps in different steps of the preparation. We decorate, tidy, bake, set and wrap. Between the first vespers and the midnight mass, we are on our own. After having a candlelit dinner, we light the candles and sparkles near the Christmas tree, while caroling and open the presents. A long vigil of prayer follows the joyful, expectant gathering. In this prayer, we divide the readings and they are sung in turns. In addition to the well-known Isaiah texts from the Advent season, the festive speech of Pope Leo the Great is recited. At the beginning of the sermon, the reason of the joy Christmas, and the ultimate mystery of salvation, are discussed:

„Let us all rejoice, beloved, for today our Saviour was born. There can be no room for sorrow where life has been born, which has taken away the fear of mortality from us and promising eternal life, has poured its joy upon us. No one is excluded from this blissful joy. And behold, the fullness of our joy has one common cause: our Lord Jesus Christ, the conqueror of sin and death, having found no one free from sin, came to bring salvation to us all....let all sinful men rejoice, for they are called to repentance”.

The feast of Christmas is an invitation. The God made man invites us to truly live our humanity. Let us notice all its joys and difficulties, but at the same time let us be aware that He has taken it on, experienced it, and thus brought it as close to Himself as possible.

The celebration of Christmas is not a single night or a single day. The feast lasts eight days in the



liturgical calendar. Even if we feel powerless or not-at-arrival at the beginning, let us not be discouraged, but continue on our journey towards God. It is not the extent of our steps, not our performance, but it is our intention and our awakening commitment that counts.

„O man, you do not have to sail across the seas, you do not have to rise above the clouds, you do not have to cross the Alps. I will show thee a short way: hasten thyself before God”. (Saint Bernat the Abbot)



POLAND: MONASTERY OF THE CARMEL, TARNÓW



A dance to express the joy of the birth of Jesus

Saint Teresa of Jesus, enamoured with the Humanity of "Christ, our Good", as she loved to say, gave the hearts of her Carmelite nuns the same love for the Saviour. This is why awaiting his coming to the world and Christmastime are lived with special intensity.

On the First Sunday of Advent, we cast lots for the so-called "Offices of the manger", that is the tasks that each one of us has to do for Baby Jesus, who is about to be born. One of us has to have a gentle heart like Mary, another the foresight of Saint Joseph, another, like the Magi, has to look for him and yet another has to become smaller and smaller, like the donkey....

Moreover, during this time, each nun designates a day in Advent in which she will receive the manger with Baby Jesus in her cell. He is still hid-

den in Mary's womb so he cannot be seen nor touched. On that day, the nun keeps vigil in a special way beside Jesus present in the womb of his Mother, and tries to be in touch with Mary's heart to be as close as possible to her.

At dawn on Christmas eve, 24 December, after Lauds one of the nuns solemnly sings the Roman Martyrology, the announcement of Christmas. It starts with the words "When God created the heavens and the earth". Thus, we reach the beginning of the story of salvation. This is followed by the promise of the coming of the Messiah to the People of Israel, until "The forty-second year of the reign of Octavian Augustus; the whole world being at peace"... to the words "in Bethlehem of Judea", when the whole community kneels down while listening to the cantor sing loudly: "The birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh". Lastly, in a gesture of gratitude

and humility, in adoration of the mystery of the Word made flesh for our salvation, we kneel down touching the ground with our foreheads. A nun wipes the tears that are involuntarily falling from her eyes. After a moment of silence, the Mother Prioress signals for us to stand.

After the Vigil, and before the solemn Hour of Readings and Midnight Mass, it is time for the so-called "Vigil of the shepherds". Saint Teresa herself instituted this procession in her convents on 24 December. She wanted to remind them of the painful journey of the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph through the City of David and the streets of Bethlehem in search of an inn, before the imminent birth of our Lord. Each of the nuns receives a visit from Mary and Joseph in their cells, brought in the form of figures in the hands of the Mother Prioress and her deputy. Accompanied by hymns, Mary and Joseph enter each cell, blessing the nuns as they kneel down to kiss the images as a sign that they wish to welcome the Holy Family in their home. At the end of the procession in the Chapel, we listen to Gospel Readings on the birth of our Lord Jesus and we process towards the religious choir for the solemn hymn of the Hour of Reading. During this procession, the Mother Superior or sometimes the youngest sister, carries the statue of Baby Jesus to the manger in the choir of the monastery.

After Midnight Mass, we go to the monastery's choir to "sing to the Newborn" for a bit longer. On this night, there is a *silencium sacrum* – holy silence – because it is a Night filled with joy.

On the same day of Christmas, we are not awak-



ened by the usual Mass, but by some of the nuns who sing Christmas hymns. They are joined by other nuns who are already awake. Then, we all take our first steps towards the Newborn in the manger, in a chorus, to joyfully sing to him until the early hours of the morning.

At Christmastime, almost the whole house is decorated with nativity scenes and we carry a statue of Baby Jesus to the refectory and during recreation. On the more solemn days of this time, the blessing of Baby Jesus takes place before supper. The nuns sing a prayer by the light of a candle and bless the community with the statue. On these days, after supper we take our hymns to the recreation room where the so-called "dance in honor of Baby Jesus", takes place. Each sister dances with the statue, surrounded by a circle of nuns who sing and dance with her. During the second half of evening prayers (interior prayer) we sing hymns with instruments, around the nativity scene.

On the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus – 3 January- many communities celebrate Jesus' name day. In the evening, each nun kneels before the statue of the Child in the recreation room and professes her love to Him, usually with a poem or a song, according to her abilities. It is up to her. Later, there is the dancing mentioned above, and then the Divine guest of honour invites us to a banquet in his honour.

During the Solemnity of the Epiphany, some communities renew their vows because the three vows are their gift to the Newborn. Other communities pay their solemn homage by bowing three times.



Our Carmelite traditions for Advent and Christmas were born out of love for the Divine Child, the Word, of which Saint John of the Cross wonderfully wrote in a poem:

"when the time had come for him to be born, he went forth like the bridegroom from his bridal chamber embracing his bride".

Disalced Carmelites of Tarnów



ITALY: BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF PRAGLIA, TEOLO, PADUA

A special Gregorian repertoire for the celebration

Christmas celebrations in the monastery involve the disruption of our usual schedule, which with the exception of Easter, for the rest of the year, allows only slight changes to our life together between 5:00 a.m. and rest time shortly after 9:00 p.m. (Sundays and on special anniversaries). There are two "night" celebrations, and this characteristic, which highlights its absolute exceptionality, is observed with attention, within the limitations. In essence, our current practice was fixed in the first decade of the 1900's, at the time of the re-opening of the Abbey after the suppression of 1867. From 17- 23 December, Vespers are celebrated solemnly and the antiphon of the Magnificat is sung every day, by a priest monk in age order, starting from the Abbot with the O Sapientia on 17 December. On the morning of the Vigil, at the end of Lauds the martyrology (Kalenda) is solemnly sung, announcing the imminent solemnity of Christmas.

During morning Mass, another text is always sung (as the Gradual or Offertory) Tollite portas, principes vestras from Psalm 23 (24), which has been part of our tradition, and of the Evangelical Churches (the choral, Macht hoch die Tür, die Tor macht weit). And this is the second characteristic element of Christmas celebrated by monks: a Gregorian repertoire that is absolutely unique to this celebration, wonderful and always the same, which like other popular melodies since the Middle Ages, creates a unique "atmosphere": perhaps with a little more theological depth (though the term has been overused) of contemplative intensity.

In the morning, the guests in the guesthouse are offered an introduction to Christmas celebrations. The afternoon is free from commitments and is dedicated to rest, last minute preparations and listening to confessions. The true celebration of Christmas begins with the first solemn Vespers presided by the Abbot, like almost all Christmas celebrations. We do not celebrate an afternoon Mass on Christmas Eve, in order to safeguard the centrality of the night celebration. Supper, which is served earlier than usual (at 7:00 p.m.) is always simple but not penitential. In the past it also had a festive nature: "Plain pasta, mullet...second glass (white sweet wine), nougat, mostarda and oranges". Nougat from Cologne and mostarda are typical of the Venetian Christmas tradition.



The community assembles at 10:00 p.m. in a room to informally exchange greetings and enjoy a cup of coffee or punch, as we prepare for the long night liturgy, which begins at 10:30 p.m.

The "morning service" (vigil) is sung entirely in Gregorian (as only happens during the Easter Triduum), alternated with Psalms in Italian with the faithful, who at the start of the celebration, are few in number and become numerous for the in nocte Mass: most of the faithful do not come from nearby, but from far away. The Eucharistic celebration begins a few minutes before midnight and has a particularly Marian character: traditionally, for many centuries, the fixed parts (Kyrie, Gloria ...) are those of the Masses in honor of Our Lady (de Beata). Everything ends after 1:00 a.m. with the Alma Redemptoris Mater, sung by the Assembly. At the end of Mass the nativity scene is unveiled: the tradition of setting up a nativity scene in the Church was introduced in the beginning of the 1900s, like the first wooden statues, by an Abbot from Genoa, who had done so in an area (Colli Euganei) where it was practically unknown. From Praglia, it spread to the parishes and to families that lived in the area.

Almost everyone goes to rest. Only the young people and those with commitments to sing and serve in the liturgy take advantage of the opportunity for a slice of panettone and a glass of spumante. The alarm rings at 7:30 a.m., and at 8:00 a.m., we solemnly sing Lauds in procession, with a celebrant, like at Vespers (like at Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost). At 11:00 a.m., there is the Pontifical Mass and then lunch (obviously special). After lunch the community and guests of the guesthouse, men and women (women have their lunch in a separate refectory), share coffee and a digestive drink. The afternoon is dedicated to rest until solemn Vespers at 6:00 p.m., introduced by a procession to the hymn, Puer natus in Betlehem, (sung again at Vespers for the Epiphany). We have a light supper, the solemn compline and then rest at an earlier time than usual, 8:00 p.m. The days that follow have yet other festive aspects (time, food) introduced during a time in which everyday life was by choice but even more by necessity, truly poor and austere, and which today—unfortunately—is not necessarily appreciated.

Father Stefano Visintin OSB
Abbot



CANADA: MONASTERY OF HÔTEL-DIEU OF QUÉBEC, QUÉBEC CITY

Growing with Jesus

To speak about Christmas with the Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus in the monastery of Hôtel-Dieu in Quebec, means to speak about a great family story. On the one hand there is the religious community, and on the other the hospital community. In this sense, Christmas is a day of festive liturgical celebrations, and at the same time, a time of fraternal encounter among ourselves and with the sick, our sisters in the infirmary, the nursing staff and other collaborators and visitors.

An analyst from 1933, described our Christmas of the time as follows: "Christmas is a day of prayer, Midnight Mass is preceded by Morning prayers and by Dawn Mass. The community then visits the novitiate to sing a motet to Baby Jesus. Remaining in silence, they then go to the refectory where a Christmas broth is served as well as a plate of chocolate sweets for the postulants. They say that even the cooks spend part of the night preparing small Yule logs for each sister. The following day at 7:30 a.m. a Day Mass is celebrated, Before lunch, they sing the great Benedicite, the *Verbum caro factum est* and the *Laudate Dominum*. After that, the Christmas tree is unveiled in the paediatric ward of the hospital".

Today's reality has the same unifying themes, but the experience is somewhat different. In the same monastery, Advent is a special time of spiritual and fraternal preparation with the Virgin Mary. The nativity scene is set up in the choir area and the only figure present is the Virgin Mary with an open Bible, as she awaits the word made flesh. During this time, the community assembles at the foot of the nativity scene, in the choir room or in the rooms of the monastery to share the Word of God. Then, the whole house gradually gets dressed for the celebration of Christmas. Each one

participates according to their abilities.

Preceded by the solemn announcement of the birth of Jesus, the traditional Midnight Mass, which today is celebrated around 8:00 p.m., brings together the community and the people from the outside to celebrate the Nativity of Jesus with the organ, hymns, decorations and naturally, Baby Jesus is in the manger surrounded by Mary, Joseph and the humble shepherds. The Vigil in the refectory of the community and the other meals are joyful and festive. On the 25th after Lauds, a solemn Mass and lunch, the community goes to the monastery of the Hôpital Général de Québec for the rest of the day: a visit to the sisters in the infirmary, Vespers because the prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours have a predominant place in our lives, an abundant supper and a "festive" evening with hymns from the past, surprise events and costumes, presents and joy.

As of 2015, the first Augustinian monastery of Hôtel-Dieu of Québec, including its annexes and archives and museum collection of the 12 hospital-monasteries since 1639, was entrusted to a social utility fund. Its restoration has made it a welcoming place, of wellbeing and enhancement of the material and immaterial heritage of Augustinian nuns. An exhibition titled *L'ultimo piccolo Gesù, luce su un'abilità passata* (The last little



Jesus, light on a past ability) has been open to the public for two years. Traditionally the nuns used to make small wax statuettes of Jesus, but the last nun to master this ability closed her workshop in 2021. That was the last time they were made by an Augustinian nun, but the tradition remains alive in our daily life because, from one difficulty to the next, humble Jesus has made his home among us. Saint Augustine wrote, "He is born let us grow with him", and "let us go to Him not walking, but loving" (cf. Ep. 155,13). This is the ever relevant and vibrant message of the profound and great mystery of the Incarnation of our Saviour lived in our humble everyday life.

Sr. Carmelle Bisson
Augustinian Sister of the Mercy of Jesus



GREECE: PARISH OF RHODES, ISLAND OF RHODES



A gift for every child

We are fortunate that in Greece we have celebrated Christmas and Easter together with our orthodox brother and sisters for many years which enables our parishioners, many of whom are of mixed families, Catholic and Orthodox, to celebrate together.

Our preparations for the feast begin a few weeks before Christmas. We are blessed to have a huge Christmas Nativity scene, housed in its own building at the entrance of the church, constructed by the Italian friars in the 1930s. It is wonderful. There are figures that move, depicting everyday life activities, a waterfall, an abundance of bright and colourful Christmas lights, music playing in the background and even scented "plug-ins" that give the aroma of Christmas perfuming the air with waves of cinnamon and cloves. All our senses are addressed in this way and there is a small brochure that explains how St. Francis made the first crib in Greccio, this is provided in ten languages. The people visit from all over the island. The presepio that is: the Christmas Nativity scene, is well known to all the people of Rhodes and great grandparents, grandparents bring their grandchildren with nostalgic and yet with renewed innocent joy. The church is decorated inside and out with lights that draw people in during the dark nights of winter, the doors are always open. Our neighbours have suggested that this year we decorate the street which the parish pastoral council is much in favour of; anything that enables us to work together for the good of

the local community is always a plus.

We are blessed with a parish theatre, again built by the Italians in the 1920s. This place becomes a hive of activity at Christmas time as the local schools use it for their Christmas plays. The street around the theatre and church rings with the sound of the voices and laughter of the children. The Christmas Novena begins on the 16th December and with it, you can already begin to feel the tingle of Christmastide and know that this great feast is really very near.

On the Sunday before Christmas eve, we gather at one of our Churches on the island dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi; it is near the magnificent walled Old Town of Rhodes. We have an international and ecumenical carol service which concludes with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. We sing carols in different languages, including Greek of course, and different language groups sing carols in their own languages. The church is filled to standing room only with Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic alike, enjoying being together at this special time and savouring the true spirit and meaning of Christmas.

At Midnight Mass, the central act of Christmas, above the high altar is placed an image of the baby Jesus brought from Bethlehem, veiled until the moment of the consecration, then as the host is lifted up and the bells ring in and outside the Church, the image is unveiled revealing the Christ Child. At the end of Mass, a procession is formed with the smallest child in the church carrying the baby Jesus to the presepio which is just outside the main door of the church. The image is placed

lovingly in the manger and the Mass concludes there with the singing of Christmas carols in different languages depending on who is present. At all Masses chocolates are given to the children, which as you can imagine are very well received!

The other side of all this Christmas joy is serving the local poor and the many refugees. Each Tuesday we provide food bags for 700 hundred needy people, prepared and distributed by volunteers from the parish hall. At Christmas in addition to the usual fare, we give a small bag of chocolates and sweets to each person. We have done this for many years because these needy people do not have money to buy basic food, so how many would ever receive a Christmas present? They are so grateful for the little we give. Many of those who come are muslim, but they are equally glad to share in the joy of the season. Throughout the year we collect secondhand toys and store them in the cellar of the monastery so that at Christmas the poorest families can collect a box of toys so that no child awakes on Christmas morning and has nothing to open.

Yes indeed, Christmas is a celebration, a time for giving and not simply a day we exchange gifts but the true spirit of Christmas is in the 'togetherness', it's in the thought to which we put into thinking about others, it's a selfless time, where we forgive, take stock of what's important and become 'better' versions of ourselves. The Christmas spirit is expressed in Philippians 2: to have the same mind in ourselves that is ours in Christ Jesus, following His example by considering others as more significant than ourselves, and then looking to their interest

We find the real joy of Christmas when we make Jesus our Lord and Saviour the focus of the season. Our celebration of Christmas should be a reflection of the love and selflessness taught by the Child Jesus, born in a lowly stable for our salvation. Giving, not necessarily getting or expecting something in return, brings to full bloom the Christmas spirit. The Holy Spirit is the true Christmas spirit embodied. He equips us with the peace, joy, love, and hope found in Christ alone.

Fr. Luca Gregory OFM
Parish priest of Rhodes-Greece

NETHERLANDS: SINT-BENEDICTUSBERG ABBAY, VAALS

Waiting with Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Here, in South Limburg Province, in the far south-east corner of the Netherlands, at Abdi Sint-Benedictusberg (a.k.a Vaals Abbey), we celebrate the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God in time, the birth of Jesus Christ, according to the traditions of Roman Catholic, Benedictine monastic life which have come down to us. We are members of the Benedictine Congregation of Solesmes, and thus we celebrate the divine mysteries of God's love for us with a preference for the traditional Latin and Gregorian chant. We prepare for Christ's coming through the Advent liturgy, guided by the beautiful antiphons in the Solesmes Antiphonary. The antiphons which are based on Old Testament prophecies help us commemorate the first coming of Christ, in humility, at Christmas. Other antiphons based on New Testament prophecies announce His second coming, in glory, at the end of time, to judge the living and the dead, and rule over His Kingdom in the Heavenly Jerusalem. During Advent, we take up fasting and abstinence from meat, and strive towards simplicity of life in order to better consider the divine mysteries at hand. There is more sobriety in our life and liturgy, except for feast days and Sundays. We listen to

appropriate readings for Advent during our meals and before the office of Complines, at the end of the day. We also have the traditional Advent Wreath, which we light for every Sunday in Advent. As Christmas approaches, on December 20, when the Gospel of the Annunciation is read in the Mass, the Abbot gives a special conference to the community. This conference is known as the Homilia "Super Missus Est". This conference helps us to be more aware of the profound effect of God's grace in the actuality of our world and in our very lives, and how this is all due to Mary's willing cooperation with God's plan for her to become the Virgin-Mother of God Incarnate, the Mother of Jesus Christ.

Beginning eight days before Christmas, we sing special antiphons assigned for each day, which invite the Lord to come among us once again through this particular liturgical celebration of Christmas. At Vespers we also sing the beautiful, very melodious "O" antiphons for the "Magnificat" canticle. The "O" antiphons invite the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah, according to His many biblical names and titles (King of the Gentiles, Branch of Jesse, Adonai, Emmanuel, etc.) to come among us and save us, here and now, once again. In this same week we begin to assemble a Christ-

mas nativity scene and Christmas trees decorated with light strands, in the Crypt and in the Recreation Room.

During the day on Christmas Eve, we prepare the church with decorations: hanging cloth banners and placing flowers at the altar and at all the statues and images of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus. On the night of Christmas Eve we begin to celebrate Jesus' birth among us. At 20:30 hrs, we pray the office of Vigils, sung according to beautiful melodies, with special antiphons. We listen to twelve short readings sung according to a solemn melody: Four from the Prophet Isaiah foretelling the Lord's coming to save His people as a Divine Child; four from St. Augustine over the wonderful fact that God almighty saved us by becoming a tiny, dependant infant out of love for us; four from the Letter to the Hebrews over how God, through His incarnation and redemptive sacrifice in Jesus, has opened the way for us to share in His Divine Life. Each reading is followed by a melodious, sung responsory which focuses on a particular aspect of the Christmas mystery. The Vigils culminate with the solemn singing of the Te Deum and the sung Gospel reading of the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham, David, and ultimately Mary, the wife of



REPUBLIC OF SAN MARINO: BENEDICTINE DAUGHTERS OF DIVINE WILL, SAN MARINO



The Mystery of the Incarnation on the summit of Monte Titano

We are the Benedictine Daughters of Divine Will, a small religious community of three sisters at the top of Monte Titano, behind the Basilica of San Marino. In great expectation of Christmas, we prepare the Church together with beautiful liturgies and hymns. During Advent when the days are dark and shorter, immersed in an atmosphere of joy, waiting and hope, we nurture a little Bethlehem in our hearts for the coming of our King, Baby Jesus. Nine days before the great celebration, we contemplate the mysteries of the Incarnation with the Christmas novena of our spiritual mother, the Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta: "The Nine Excesses of Love", honouring the nine months that Jesus spent in the Our Lady's womb. Saint Hannibal Maria Di Francia described this meditation by saying, "The immense Love and immense suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ blessed for our love, for the health of souls, is astounding ..." (cf. from a letter from Saint Hannibal Maria Di Francia to the Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta, Messina 14 February 1927).

On the morning of Christmas Eve, we begin our usual schedule with the Divine Office, Lauds, Holy Mass and 20 minutes of thanksgiving. Each sister does her two hours of daily Adoration: one in the morning, and the other in the afternoon. We joy-

fully continue our morning of Ora et Labora on this special day, enriched by decorations already in place, as the perfume of Christmas is in the air. We bake cookies for our friends and neighbours, prepare a special meal for the evening and begin preparations for the following day.

At midnight, we join our sisters in our Italian house in Talamello, and together we open simple



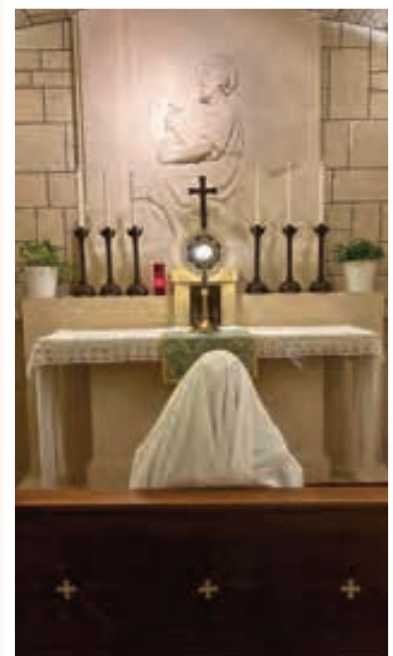
presents prepared by the Superior. We pray, share a meal, joy and laughter in communion. When we return home, we begin preparations for the solemnity of Midnight Mass.

The Basilica of San Marino at that time evokes that night of long ago, of waiting in silent darkness in the fields of Bethlehem. As the lights are turned on, we experience a blinding brightness that recalls the moment in which the Glory of God and his Redeeming Love entered the world. Like the shepherds who went to pay homage to the Child King, the people of San Marino and sometimes also the Captains Regent, assemble for Holy Mass in honour of the arrival of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Christmas liturgy, the incense, the hymns, the presentation of Baby Jesus in the manger are all mysteriously fitting to the overwhelming joy in our hearts. A beautiful start to the Octave of Christmas. For us the solemnity is a day of prayer and rest as we contemplate with great reverence the Word made flesh, whom we welcome also in the mangers of our hearts.

Praised be Jesus Christ now and forever!

Benedictine Daughters of Divine Will



FRANCE: CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF NOTRE DAME DE SÉNANQUE, GORDES



A bridge between the East and the West

Our monastic community at the Abbey of Sénanque currently consists of five monks, four of whom were professed at the Abbey of Lérins on the island of Saint Honorat, off of Cannes.

We belong to the Cistercian Congregation of the Immaculate Conception, which is one of the 12 Congregations of the Cistercian Order.

Like all monastic life that follows the Rule of Saint Benedict, the Divine Office (Opus Dei) is at the forefront of our daily lives. The liturgical year expresses all the richness of the Mysteries of Christ's life, from Advent to Christmas, from Lent to Easter, and "Ordinary Time", enriched by the sanctoral of the universal Church, of the Cistercian Order and of the diocese.

Our Liturgical Office in Sénanque is celebrated in the vernacular (in this case French), with the unique characteristic that the music is taken from Slavic melodies and the liturgical texts (hymns and antiphons) come from the Latin and Oriental tradition, because "The Church must breathe with her two lungs" to use an expression of saint John Paul II. The celebration of the Nativity of the Lord, prepared by the rich time of Advent is, as for the whole Church, one of the most important times of the liturgical year, opening out a horizon towards the Easter Triduum, source and culmination of all liturgical prayers.

The celebration of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas) begins with the Office of Vespers at 6:00 p.m., with the sung announcement by two Brothers of the Announcement of the Feast (Praeconium) which allows us to enter the Mystery being celebrated:

"Many centuries after the creation of the world", follows the whole "litany" of the Story of Salvation until "it is the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh, come adore him"! Then everyone kneels.

At the end of Vespers, we have a quick meal and then attend to the material preparation of the Fes-



tivity, before resting until the Christmas Vigil, which we celebrate at 10:15 p.m. with our guests on retreat and with people from the outside who join us in prayer. For one and a half hours, hymns of the six psalms and three hymns from the Old Testament are alternated as well as the hymn of the celebrated prophecies of Isaiah: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder..." (Isaiah 9:6, 6 and 52, 1-6). The Reading of the Church Fathers is always taken from the Christmas sermons of Saint Leo the Great, who was the great cantor of the Mystery of the Word made flesh in the Patristic era.

At the end of the Vigil, we prepare ourselves for the solemn celebration of the Night Mass (commonly known as "Midnight Mass") that lets us enter and participate in the heart of the Mystery being celebrated: the Word is made flesh, especially during the consecration of the bread and the wine that become the Body and Blood of Christ. After the Communion, a statuette of Baby Jesus is placed in the Nativity scene at the bottom of the altar in our Chapel, by the main celebrant.

We meet again after the Mass for a festive breakfast with Christmas music.

A uniqueness of our Christmas celebration is that we assemble again in the Chapel to sing the Offices of the shepherds and the Magi, from the Liturgy of the Office of the Night of Eastern Christians for 30 minutes: "Shepherds tell us, what did you see in Bethlehem? We saw a newborn and a choir of Angels singing. They praised God and said, Hallelujah!"



After a brief time of Adoration before the Most Holy Sacrament, we take a well-deserved rest. It is 2:30 a.m.

At 7:30 a.m., we celebrate Lauds and at 8:30 a.m. the Dawn Mass, which is very sombre and without song, in order to internalize the mystery being celebrated.

At 10:00 a.m. we celebrate the Day Mass, welcoming the faithful from outside and our guests on retreat. Each enters into the Mystery in their own way. The Liturgy is a powerful tool to help the People of God be committed to what constitutes our Christian faith: welcoming the incomparable Gift of the One in the Blessed Trinity, made Man.

The rest of the day until the Compline at the end of the day is spent in the light of what was celebrated during the Night: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us".

A fraternal encounter among the community in the afternoon, helps to crystallize this joy among us on this day of the Liturgy.

"Christ is born; glorify Him. Christ is descending from the heavens; come and meet Him. Christ is on earth; rise up to greet Him. Let the whole world sing praises to the Lord and let people proclaim their joy so that his glory spring forth".

Fr. Jean-Marie O.Cist.



ENGLAND: BENEDICTINE STANBROOK ABBEY, WASS, YORK



In the liturgy to welcome Jesus



Our celebration of Christmas begins with the singing of the Roman Martyrology on Christmas Eve at Vigils. Candles are lit on either side of the lectern from which a clear soprano sings Stanbrook's adaptation of the ancient words... 'Centuries untold after the creation of the world... long ages after the Flood, two thousand years after the birth of Abraham, 15 centuries after Moses and the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt, a thousand years after David was anointed king; in the 194th Olympiad and the 752nd year from the foundation of Rome... all the world being at peace Jesus Christ, Eternal God and Son of the Eternal Father, intending to consecrate the world by his merciful coming, nine months having passed since his conception by the Holy Spirit (the tone goes up a minor third and we all kneel in adoration and awe) Was Born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Juda God Made Man, the birthday of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh.

Christmas Eve is a day of hustle and bustle with much cleaning, cooking, singing practice, and

mounting expectancy. Final presents are wrapped. Many of our friends receive home-baked Christmas cakes and star-shaped biscuits with a fruit sweet.

At I Vespers the regal Latin antiphons proclaim the approach of the long-expected Messiah.

The Christmas Night Office is timed to allow a short gap before Midnight Mass. A monk comes from Ampleforth Abbey four miles away, sometimes on foot, after their earlier Mass in order to celebrate ours. Midnight Mass begins with the ancient spine-tingling Introit Dominus Dixit. The responsorial psalm was written for us by Dorothy Howell, a distinguished composer and a Catholic. The alleluia, sung before and after the Gospel is a delightful rocking lullaby composed by Dame Felicitas Corrigan. The Offertory Song and Communion are sometimes compositions of Dorothy Howell. Lauds in English follows beginning with the tender hymn Christ is born, Emmanuel, Majesty so mild; wisdom dwells with grace and truth hidden in this Child.

There are numerous cribs about the house. In the

Blessed Sacrament chapel we have a set of French crib figures from the monastery of Pesquiers. Last year Sr Julian fashioned a cave around them (picture attached). In the calefactory we have a set of knitted figures in muted colours complete with knitted stable made by one of our oblates. Our own Sr Stephen has now knitted fourteen sets of crib figures in very bright colours including a very fetching donkey, one of which is displayed in the infirmary. The Mass chants of Christmas Day are Latin beginning with the Introit Puer Natus est nobis but Stanbrook's English Christmas Canticle composed largely of quotations from Isaiah is included as we don't have the full Mid-day Office this day. We have a traditional English Christmas dinner with turkey and trimmings. But nowadays we have a lighter dessert instead of Christmas pudding which is saved for another day in the Octave.

At II Vespers the Latin antiphons unfold the theology of Christmas, prophesied in the psalms we are singing, and today fulfilled. The highlight is reached at the Magnificat Antiphon, Hodie Christus natus est; its four 'Hodie's, each differentiated, dance with joy as heaven and earth sing together. The antiphon is well known as the processional and recessional of Benjamin Britten's Ceremony of Carols, and as such unites Christians and non-Christians the world over. On Christmas Day the rule of silence in the monastery is suspended. After Vespers, again in Latin, we have a buffet supper in the calefactory and gather sleepily round the Crib for Compline.

On January 6th we have a "Gaudy", a celebration supper and an entertainment – skits written by the nuns, songs and dances.



SLOVENIA: CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF STIČNA, IVANČNA GORICA



Walking in the snow with torches

For centuries, Slovenia was part of the Hapsburg monarchy, and therefore, many of the customs related to the preparation and the celebration of Christmas are very similar to those in other countries that belonged to the former monarchy.

Modern trends aside, in which the greater part of Christmas is focused on commercial things, the focus of average Christian Slovenians in preparation for Christmas is on the Eight Days of Christmas, which are among the most important days in the Church calendar. Especially children but also many adults, attend Mass during this time, in which in addition to Holy Mass, liturgical chants of the texts of the Octave and the O antiphons, there is always a reflection on the Gospel, and a commemoration of Mary and Joseph in search of lodgings. This act of popular devotion towards Mary and Joseph is also observed by Christian Slovenians, in places other than Churches. During the eight days of Christmas and in some places, throughout the Advent period, the faithful go from door to door, carrying a statue of Mary, as they pray and sing. In the evenings, they take the statue home, where the whole family assembles to pray together. It is interesting to note that this custom was alive during the communist period, although it was done in secrecy.

The Christmas Eucharist concludes the vigil. Many parishes celebrate the first Mass of the Vigil on Christmas Eve, especially for children and the elderly, who may struggle to make it to midnight. Christmas Eve is a time of celebration within families. Slovenian Christians spend a significant amount of time in prayer. The first part of the festivity always begins with blessing the home, which is done by families. They prepare the coal and place some green twigs on it, usually ones that were blessed on Palm Sunday, although nowadays, many forego the coal in favour of incense. As they pray the Rosary, they bless the house with

perfumed incense and holy water. The ceremony concludes with the nativity scene. The Son of God is placed in a stable, as Christmas hymns are sung. This is followed by a festive supper with the whole family.

Many attend Midnight Mass, with some people travelling to church on foot, carrying torches, which is particularly beautiful when the countryside is covered with snow.

A solemn Mass is celebrated at midnight, and is attended in large numbers, as occurred under communism. I have noticed however, that this Mass has become increasingly more a Mass for Christians who come from far away, whereas the everyday faithful prefer to attend day Masses. After Mass, people usually assemble outside the Church to drink tea and mulled wine.

Our monastic Cistercian community tries to unite and preserve both Slovenian traditions and monastic ones. During the Christmas season, we participate in an additional Mass at the Convent. In the evening, the Abbot prepares a spiritual reflection before the Colletorium. For pastoral reasons, we dedicate a considerable amount of time to reflection, both in the Basilica and in surrounding parishes. We decorate the main rooms, chapels, refectory, halls etc with nativity scenes. On the holy night, we gather together to recite two sections of the Rosary, which is followed by Pontifical Vespers, to which we also invite the faithful. After Vespers we recite the third section of the Rosary, and then we enjoy a meal. We do

not bless our rosaries on this day, which we do on 6 January. We spend the evening in conversation, playing board games and listening to Christmas hymns. At 10:30 a.m., there is a vigil in the Basilica, during which we pray the liturgical reading and solemnly sing the Te Deum. This is followed by a Solemn Pontifical Mass, celebrated by the Abbot, which is attended by all the monks and many faithful. After Mass, the faithful assemble in front of the Church,

Christmas Day begins with hymns and Holy Mass in the convent, and is followed by breakfast and a festive Mass. The day usually includes a concert of Christmas hymns performed by our chorus.

In our monastic community, Christmas echoes throughout the eighth hour of prayer, and the Christmas atmosphere is further enhanced by visits from families and by the nativity scenes setup in different churches in the area.

Maksimilijan File O. Cist.



NORWAY: TRAPPIST MONASTERY OF MARY, TAUTRA



Welcome Jesus with the "ringing"

In contrast to the secular tradition which begins with the Christmas celebrations in November or December and ends around Dec. 27, Christmas at Tautra Mariakloster – as in most monasteries – begins at Midnight Mass and ends after Epiphany.

Of course, there are a few exceptions: singing practices in Advent to prepare the rich Christmas liturgy, decorations and trimming the tree about a week before, and the blessing of the tree by our Chaplain on Christmas eve when the tree is lighted for the first time. Before First Vespers, the Advent wreath is removed, and the Christmas crib appears before the altar. In Norway we have the particular tradition called: "the ringing in of Christmas." This means that we ring the two bells for 15 min. before Vespers. (Traditionally, this practice lasted a full hour, but our community needed to shorten it.)

At 22:30, the Christmas Vigils begins and lasts an hour. A few minutes before Mid-



night, a few carols are sung. Then begins the celebration of Midnight Mass in full solemnity and exuberance! The Lord has come!

After the Mass, the guests are invited into the monastery for refreshments, with quite a few of the cakes and sandwiches brought by the guests themselves. We might have 10 to even 35 guests, most of them non-Catholics. We try to be in bed by 02:30 as soon enough we are up at 06:30 to begin a time of Adoration followed by Lauds.

Many in the community then help with the preparation of Christmas dinner. At 11:00 there is the Christmas Day Mass with appropriate carols followed by a festive Christmas dinner when we invite our Chaplain and have a speaking meal.

The afternoon hours are obviously quieter with Sisters attending to their own needs, but after Vespers, the community gathers around a tree and opens the gifts sent by friends and relatives, the Sisters each receiving a small bag of Christmas treats. It's a time for simply being together and enjoying the feast.



The few days after Christmas are hermit days. This may sound strange but in a community that ordinarily lives in a lot of silence and solitude, these hermit days create a balance to the big Christmas day festivities. They provide a time for prayer, reading, sending messages to family and friends, and reading the community Christmas cards which have been saved in a box all through Advent. They provide the energy needed to continue the celebration of the rich Christmas season liturgies in the following weeks until Epiphany, the highlight, after which the decorations come down and we move into a quieter period of the year. And such is a OCSO Christmas at Tautra Mariakloster!



HOLLAND: ST. WILLIBRORD'S ABBEY



Subdued joy: Christmas at a Benedictine abbey in the Netherlands

How is the high feast of Christmas celebrated at St Willibrord's Abbey in Doetinchem/Netherlands? Monks live closely with the liturgy of each day. Five times a day we gather for the liturgy of the Hours which are like a garland of praise and thanksgiving around the daily Eucharist.

Christmas is the feast of God's incarnation. For us, Advent is an intense period of looking forward to the Lord's coming. This expectation is intensified from 17 December when we sing the O antiphons in Vespers at the Magnificat. On 24 December, we sing the first Vespers of Christmas at 5pm. The abbey church is festively decorated and a small nativity scene has been placed in the cloister. The statues were once made by a fellow brother. Of course, the green Christmas tree is not missing.

After Vespers, preparations begin for the Night Vigil and Night Mass. The abbey is silent. This

silence strengthens inner expectation. We celebrate the Nativity Mass at 22.30 pm together with christians from the surrounding area and guests staying in our guesthouse. This vigil extends into the Eucharist, which takes place

around midnight. We sing the Gregorian chants that inimitably express the spirituality of Christmas.

After the Night Mass, we exchange Christmas wishes with the churchgoers in the narthex of the abbey church. Afterwards, the monks join the house guests in the monastery refectory for a glass of wine, accompanied by a savoury snack, to express the joy of Christ's birth. Around 2 a.m. in the night, we seek our bed before getting up again at 6.30 a.m., because at 7.30 a.m. we sing the Lauds of Christmas.

The highlight of Christmas Day is the pontifical Eucharist at 9.30 am. In recent years, we have seen the number of churchgoers decline, but on this day, on average, more people than usual come to Mass. Although it is a great celebration, it is also hard work for the monks: the sacrista's, the singers, the cook and not forgetting the abbot who presides and has to preach! So after all the efforts, we enjoy a mid-day feast-meal. Less wine is drunk in the Netherlands than

in Italy. And monks are fitting, according to St Benedict, to abstain from wine. But on Christmas and other high days, we drink wine with the meal. After washing up, the monks retire for a short afternoon's rest. And the rest of the time, until the second vespers of Christmas at 4.30 pm, the friars spend relaxing.

At 6.30pm, we gather for the evening meal. According to Dutch custom, we have a hot meal only once a day, in the afternoon. In the evening it is always very simple: we eat bread with savoury and sweet fillings and drink hot tea with it. During the meal (which in the monastery is always in silence) we listen to classical music both at noon and in the evening. The choice of music is determined by the Christmas season. There are beautiful motets and concertos composed especially for Christmas.

After the necessary washing up, the monks gather for a longer recreational session in the abbey's living room. The person in charge of the wine cellar then has a small selection of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks ready with some sweet and savoury snacks. This is always a cosy moment where we as a community are together informally and share news and other trivia. This also gives Christmas a homely character. Usually, we also have a small Christmas group in our living room for the sake of atmosphere. Our Christmas celebration has nothing of outward, commercial glamour, but is characterised by subdued joy for the Lord who came into the world and was born in our hearts.

Fr. Henry Vesseur OSB
Abbot of St. Willibrord's Abbey.



ENGLAND: BENEDICTINE WORTH ABBEY, CRAWLEY, WEST SUSSEX

Concentrate the heart for the coming of Jesus

At Worth Abbey our main works consist of a school, a parish, a retreat centre and a farm. After the school has broken up for the Christmas holidays, we close our retreat centre and start our preparations for Christmas by having a three day silent retreat. These few days of silence help us to step back from our everyday preoccupations and cares and centre our minds and hearts on the coming of the Christ child. Following the retreat, we have a meeting to conclude any outstanding business items left over from the preceding year. The Abbot then reviews the major events of the past twelve months, whether for individual monks or for the community.

On Christmas Eve we decorate our refectory and our calefactory (a monastic word for a common room or sitting room). In years past this was quite a major operation which involved borrowing more comfortable furniture from the School. Nowadays, as we have fewer younger

members, we content ourselves with just rearranging the existing furniture and putting up a Christmas tree with some lights. We also light a log fire over the Christmas period to create a more joyful and celebratory atmosphere in our sitting room. The Rule of St Benedict stresses the importance of community life and at Christmas we try grow closer to one another and to rejoice more in each other's company.

At Midnight Mass many people, from far and near, join us to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Afterwards, they are all invited to share a festive drink with us. Monastic office starts a little later on Christmas day and is followed by Christmas day Mass at 10am which also attracts a large congregation. From midday on we have an 'open door' drinks party to which everyone living on the Estate is invited. When all our guests have departed, we sit down for our Christmas day lunch at around 2pm. We used to have turkey but for many years now we have had beef wellington instead, and there also is a vegetarian option. After this generous meal most

of the monks are ready for a siesta but some of the more vigorous brethren will enjoy a walk in the surrounding forest and countryside. In the evening, after cope vespers at 6pm, we have a light evening meal followed by recreation in our sitting room with refreshments.

On boxing day (St Stephen's day) our tradition is to walk or drive to a nearby pub and enjoy a meal out. For the rest of the Christmas octave we enjoy a more relaxed timetable with a lie-in in the mornings and permission to accept invitations out for lunch, if offered and as appropriate. On the last day of the octave we take our decorations down and return everything to its usual place, ready to return to our normal more demanding timetable the following day. During the Christmas octave we give thanks in silence and in community prayer for the gift of the Christ child and we also seek to come together more closely as a community.

Fr. Peter Williams OSB, Prior



THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SAINTS

SAINT AUGUSTINE AND CHRISTMAS

The Word teaches humility

Aurelius Augustine was born on 13 November 354 in Thagaste, in Proconsular Numidia, modern day Sūq-Ahras, Algeria. His father, Patricius, was an official. His mother's name was Monica. Because they were aware of Augustine's intellectual abilities, they gave him all the help he needed in his studies.

Between the ages of 6 and 13, (361-367), he studied literature in Thagaste. He then studied grammar in Madaura (367-370), and after a year of hiatus due lack of funds, he studied rhetoric in Carthage (371-374).

While reading Cicero's dialogue, Hortensius, he developed great interest for philosophy, and embraced Manichaeism, as a scientific explanation for the universe.

He directed a school of rhetoric in Carthage for six years, between 375 and 381.

In 383, he left his mother, opened a new school of rhetoric in Rome, and participated in a public bid for the position of Chair of Rhetoric at the Imperial House of Milan, and came first.

He moved to Milan the following year. His meeting with Saint Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan, and his reunion with his mother, later led to his conversion. He gave up the Chair and his professional career in the summer of 386.

He was baptized by Saint Ambrose on the eve of Easter, 24 April 387. He returned permanently to Africa and dedicated himself to religious life. In 391, he was ordained a priest in Hippo, where between the end of 395 and 396, he was consecrated a bishop by Valerius, his predecessor.

He was very charitable and helped the poor and the needy. He once went to the extreme of melting down sacred vessels to pay the ran-

som of prisoners. With zeal and efficiency, he defended the Catholic faith against heresy. He wrote more than 60 writings that are very important for the Church, including, Confessions and City of God. He died on 28 August 430 in Hippo, as the city was three months into a siege by the Vandals of Gaiseric. In 725, his remains were translated to the Basilica of San Pietro in Ciel d'oro in Pavia, by the Lombard King Liutprand. He is one of the first four Doctors of the Church in the West.

Let us reflect on the mystery of the birth of Jesus by reading Saint Au-



gustine's Sermon 188 on Christmas.

The Word of God remains a mystery

1. It is not at all strange that human consideration and human speech are inadequate when we undertake to praise the Son of God, the Word of God and God Himself, the Life and Light of men, as He exists in the bosom of the Father, equal to and co-eternal with Him in whom all things visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth, were established. For how would our tongue be able to pay suitable tribute to Him whom our heart, destined by God to be the instrument by which He is to be seen, as yet cannot see, if iniquity would be purged, weakness be healed, and the clean, of heart become blessed because they will see God? It is not strange, I say, for us to fail to find words in which to speak of the Word by whom the word was spoken which gave being to us who would now say something about Him. For our mind brings words into existence after they have been thought over and formed, but our mind itself is formed by the Word. Nor does man fashion words in the same way in which man was made by the Word, because the Father Himself did not beget His only Word in the same way in which He made all things through the Word. For God begot God, but the Begetter and the Begotten are one and the same God. Moreover, God made the world but the world passes while God remains. Although these things which were made certainly did not make themselves, He by whom all things were made was made by no one. It is not strange, then, that man, one of those created things, does not know how to discuss the Word by whom all things were made.

The eternal word was born in time for us

2. Let us direct our ears and minds to this consideration for a little while to see if, by any chance, we can say something suitable and worthy, not by reason of the fact that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God,' but because 'the Word was made flesh'; to see if, by chance, something adequate may be expressed by us because He 'dwelt among us'; or if, perchance, He may be satisfactorily discussed there where He wished to be seen. For these reasons we celebrate this day on which He deigned to be born of a virgin, a generation which He Himself caused to be narrated by men. But 'who shall declare his generation' in that eternity in which God was born of God? Such a day set apart for solemn celebration does not exist in eternity, for the day in eternity does not pass, destined to return with the revolving year; it remains without a setting because it began without a rising. Therefore, the only-begotten Word of God, the Life and Light of men, is indeed the Eternal Day, but this day on which, joined to human flesh, He became, as it were, a 'bridegroom coming out of his bride-chamber' is our today and passes as tomorrow becomes yesterday. Nevertheless, our today commends the Eternal Day born of the Virgin

because the Eternal Day born of the Virgin consecrated this day. What praises shall we voice, what thanks shall we give for the charity of God who so loved us that for us He by whom all time was made became Man in time; that He, in His eternity more ancient than the world, became inferior in age to many of His servants in the world; that He who made man became Man; that He was formed in the Mother whom He Himself formed, carried in the hands which He made, nourished at the breasts which He filled; that, in the manger in mute infancy, He the Word without whom all human eloquence is mute wailed?

The Word is the teacher of humility

3. Consider, O man, what God became for your sake; understand this lesson of surpassing humility presented by a teacher who, as yet, says no word. Once, in paradise, you were so eloquent that you named every living thing; for your sake, however, your Creator lay speechless and did not even call His Mother by her name. By disregarding obedience, you have lost yourself in the tractless reaches of fruitful groves; He, in obedience, came into the very narrow confines of mortality so that by dying He might seek you who were dead. Though you were man, you wished to be God, to your own destruction; though He was God, He wished to be man that He might find what He had lost. Human pride brought you to such a depth that only divine humility could raise you up again.

The Virginité of Mary and the Church

4. Therefore, let us celebrate with joy the day on which Mary brought forth the Saviour; on which the one joined in marriage brought forth the Creator of the union, and a virgin, the Prince of virgins; on which one given to a husband is a mother not by that husband, since she was a virgin before marriage and in marriage, a virgin when with child and when nursing her child. The birth of her omnipotent Son detracted in no way from the virginité of holy Mary, whom He Himself chose when He contemplated the assumption of human nature. Fertility is a blessing in marriage, but integrity in holiness is better. Therefore, the Man Christ who was able to furnish both prerogatives to His Mother (for He was God as well as Man) would never have granted to His Mother the blessing in which wives delight in such a way as to deprive her of the better gift for which virgins forego motherhood. And so, the holy Church, as a virgin, celebrates today the child-bearing of a virgin. For to the Church the Apostle says: 'I have betrothed you to one spouse, that I might present you a chaste virgin to Christ. Why, addressing so many persons of both sexes, including not only youths and maidens but also married men and women, does he say a chaste virgin'? Why is this, I repeat, unless he refers to the integrity of faith, hope, and charity? Hence, Christ, intending to establish virginité in the heart of the Church, preserved it first in the body of Mary, In human marriage, a woman is given to her husband so that she may no longer be a virgin; but the Church could not be a virgin, unless she had first found the Son of the Virgin as a spouse to whom she might be given.

THE ALLEGORICAL CHRISTMAS SERMON OF SAINT ANTHONY OF PADUA

With the defenceless Baby in his arms

Anthony held Baby Jesus in his arms in ecstasy. Count Tiso could not believe his eyes when he saw the flash of light and the splendour coming from the room of the Saint. He approached, opened the door and saw a scene that remained impressed throughout his life. He watched that ecstasy until his friend Anthony recovered. When the Saint noticed Tiso's presence, he had him promise that he would tell no one what he had seen. In fact, he kept the secret until the death of the Saint. The prodigious event took place in May 1231 at Camposampiero, some 20 kilometres from Padua. Anthony died shortly thereafter, on 13 June. At that time, there was a hamlet with a castle owned by Count Tiso VI, who had been converted by the Saint. The Count had succeeded in bringing Anthony to that place to rest and dedicate himself to prayer.

Anthony spent his days immersed in nature and contemplation. Walking through the woods, he saw an enormous walnut tree, and asked the Count to build a sort of cell in its branches. Tiso did not hesitate to have it built. The Saint loved to stay in that walnut tree, absorbed in prayer, and only descended at nighttime to sleep. In the fifteenth century a small sanctuary was built where the tree stood, and called, The Sanctuary of the Walnut Tree. The Sanctuary of the Vision was opened in Camposiero, which houses the cell of the vision, the place where Count Tiso saw the scene in which Anthony held Baby Jesus in his arms.

The Saint's devotion to the Incarnation of the Son of God and to Christmas was great, to the point that he dedicated several Sermons to this solemnity. The Sermones (Sermons) are the literary and theological heritage left by Saint Anthony. In each of them, the Saint, through the Readings of the Sunday liturgies and festivities of the time, wished to provide his commentary on all Sacred Scriptures, using the doctrine of the Fathers, the theologians and philosophers and pagan poets. The Sermons were written in medieval Latin.

In particular, The Sunday Sermon dedicated to the Christmas of Our Lord, is an invitation to reflect on the humility of God, who makes himself man on earth. His words invite us to contemplate the Lord made Child for humanity. The explanation of the Saint for this choice is essential: Christ wanted to be called a "child" for many reasons, but one in particular. "If you hurt a child, make him cry, or smack him, but then show him a flower, a rose or something like that, and after showing it give it to

him – then he will not remember the hurt, he will put away his indignation and run to embrace you. In the same way, if you offend Christ by mortal sin, or inflict any kind of injury on him, but then offer him the flower of contrition or the rose of tearful confession ("Tears are the soul's blood"), then he will not remember your offenses, he will take away your guilt and run to embrace and kiss you". The Child therefore is the most evident expression of divine mercy, the sign of the infinite love of the Father for his creatures. A child was born at Christmas, the Saint stressed. What advantages will this birth bring to humanity? The Saint, who knew the Scriptures perfectly, so much so that Pius XII proclaimed him Evangelical Doctor in 1946, cited Isaiah: "The sucking child shall



play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain" (Is 11:8-9).

The regulus snake, the Saint explained, means "small king", and is so called because "it was believed to be the king of snakes; this poisonous snake, also called asp, represents the devil and his mouth and den are the hearts of the evil, in whom our child has put his hands when the power of his divinity has extracted the devil himself".

Anthony highlighted that it is the task of the midwife to draw out the fruit of labour from the darkness and bring it to light. So Christ with the hand of his power, tore the old serpent, the devil, from the dark hearts of reprobates: and thus the serpent and his satellites will no longer be able to cause damage to bodies, if not by his permission. In fact demons were not able to enter pigs without his permission (cf. Mk 5:13) and will no longer strike souls with eternal death.

The birth of Jesus is thus a liberation for humanity. It is the end of the slavery of the devil and the consequences it entailed. This has an integral importance because it frees the body and the soul from the influx of evil. With regards to this, Saint Anthony wrote, "Before the coming of the Saviour, the demons had great power over humans, such as to vilely assault the bodies of men and drag souls in misery to hell. But from now on they will not be able to cause damage 'on all my holy mount', that is, all my Church, in which I myself live". There is no doubt that the coming of Jesus involves a distinct before and after. Before, the world was in the hands of the devil, after the birth of Jesus and redemption, the dominion of the evil one was defeated by the power of God. On the other hand, the Saint highlighted that "A child was given to us". To the humanity in need of redemption a child is given, It is what it needs to change its destiny. This is why, Anthony mentions the Bible passage: "There is a concordance to this in II Kings 21: There was a third battle in Gob against the Philistines, in which Adeodatus the son of Forest an embroiderer of Bethlehem slew Goliath the Gethite. (2Kg(Sm) 21.19)".

Anthony noted that the first battle had happened in the desert: "Jesus was led to the desert..." (Matt 4:1), while the second one happened in public, Jesus "was casting out a demon" (Lk 11:14) and the third happened on the Cross, "nailed to which he defeated the 'Philistines' (i.e. the spiritual powers)" (cf. Eph 2.2).

The third battle "took place 'in Gob' (which means a lake or hollow) referring to the wounds of the Redeemer, and especially to the wound in his side, from which flowed the twin streams of our redemption". In this lake, "Jesus is given to us simply by the mercy of God the Father, to be our champion". The wounds of the Lord are undoubtedly the source of the salvation of humanity. It is important that the Evangelical Doctor associates the birth of Jesus with his Passion, death and resurrection. The two mysteries are intimately linked by the continuous thread of the economy of salvation, by which Christ became the hope of every creature on earth.

Christ, Anthony continued was the "son of Forest" because as Mark

says, "he was in the wilderness with the wild beasts" (cf. Mk 1:13). Or because "he was crowned with thorns". But Anthony observed that, "He is 'an embroiderer', having adorned with the sevenfold gifts of grace the 'coat of many colours', human nature, which he made ready for himself in the Virgin's womb". This is the explanation for the the coat of many colours. In his Sermon, Anthony says that Jesus is a Bethlehemite because he is "of Bethlehem", because he was born of the Virgin this very day in Bethlehem". The Evangelical Doctor however, also offers another interpretation: "Alternatively, he is 'son of Forest' in his Passion, 'an embroiderer' in the general Resurrection (when he will clothe us in a robe adorned with four gifts), and 'of Bethlehem' in the eternal banquet. This our champion, though knocked down at the low point of his Passion, in turn struck down Goliath of Geth (the devil)".

The Child is therefore a "champion", who defeated Goliath of Geth, the devil, with that "lake", that is, his Passion.

Power was placed on Christ, as the Messiah, a descendant of David, of royal lineage. Here too, the Saint noted that "Abraham took the wood for the holocaust, and laid it upon Isaac his son. (Gen 22.6) It says in John 19: And bearing his own cross he went forth to that place which is called Calvary. (Jn 19.17) How great the humility of our Redeemer! How great the patience of our Saviour! Alone, for all of us, he carried the wood on which he was hung, on which he was crucified, on which he died. As Isaiah 57 says: The just perisheth and no man layeth it to heart. (Is 57.1). There is the foreshadowing of the cross in these words, the instrument chosen by God to bring salvation to the world.

Power was also placed on Christ's shoulders. Anthony highlights that the Father spoke through the Prophet Isaiah: "I will lay the key of the house of David upon his shoulder (Is 22.22). The 'key' is the Cross of Christ, which opens for us the gate of heaven". He noted that the cross "is called both 'key' and 'government': a 'key' because it opens heaven to the elect; 'government' because by its power it thrusts the demons down to hell".

The symbolism used by the Saint is essential in understanding that through the cross, not only is the power of the devil on earth destroyed, but the doors of Heaven, at one time closed, are opened.

Anthony concluded his Sermon by noting that he "shall be called Wonderful (in his Nativity), Counsellor (in his preaching), God (in his working of miracles), the Mighty (in his Passion), the Father of the world to come (in his Resurrection). When he rose, he left us the sure hope of rising ourselves, as it were an inheritance for his children after him. He will be the Prince of peace in eternity. May he, the blessed God, graciously grant us this. Amen". Only in Christ, in the Son of God made flesh in the womb of Mary, can humanity find hope of life after death, an existence without end marked by peace".

THE BIRTH OF JESUS ACCORDING TO THE VISIONS OF BLESSED ANNA KATHARINA EMMERICK

“The Blessed Virgin remained for some time rapt in ecstasy. I saw her laying a cloth over the Child, but at first she did not touch Him or take Him up. After some time I saw the Child Jesus move and heard Him cry. Then Mary seemed to come to herself, and she took the Child up from the carpet, wrapping Him in the cloth which covered Him”. This quote is from *The life of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, by Anna Katharina Emmerick (1774-1824), in which she gives details that are not included in the Gospels. This is why, to satisfy the curiosity of wanting to know everything about the birth of Jesus and not having much information from the Gospels and apocryphal texts, we turn to the visions of the German mystic.

Blessed Anna Katharina Emmerick was born on 8 September 1774, in a community of farmers in Flamsche near Coesfeld, Westphalia, modern day Germany. Her family was poor, and she soon was sent to work on a farm. She learned to cook and sew, but she was drawn to religious life,

Unfortunately having no dowry, her desire to enter a monastery remained unfulfilled for some time. In 1802, she was welcomed into the Monastery of Agnetenberg near Dülmen, and she professed her vows the following year. She was given heavy chores. In 1811, the Monastery of Agnetenberg was suppressed and she was forced to abandon it. She was welcomed into the Abbey of Lambert, by a priest on exile from France, who lived in Dülmen. She became ill and was confined to her bed. It was at that time that she received the stigmata, which did not remain hidden. She was always charitable towards her neighbours. She made clothing for poor children from her bed, and her house soon became the destination of many, who asked her for prayers. She had words of encouragement and comfort for everyone. In 1818, she met Clemens Brentano, who visited her every day and transcribed her visions.

In the summer of 1823, Anna Katharina’s health worsened, and she offered her suffering for the salvation of humanity. She died on 9 February



1824, and was buried in the cemetery of Dülmen.

The following is our translation of Chapter IV Life of The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary:

61 – The Holy Family settles in the Cave

The sun was setting on the horizon when Mary and Joseph arrived at the cave: the donkey was jumping happily at the entrance. Mary said to Joseph: "See, it is certainly God's will that we stay here". But Joseph was sorrowful and troubled by the unwelcome reception received in Bethlehem. After leading the donkey under the eaves in front of the entrance, Joseph prepared a seat for Mary. The entrance was quite narrow, obstructed by twigs and straw, above which, were dark mats. Several objects hindered and prevented much movement.

Joseph began to clean the cave in the best way possible. First, however, he hung a lantern on the wall to light up the intense darkness. He had Mary lay down on a bed made of twigs, leaves and rags, he had prepared for her earlier in the day. The holy man felt profoundly ashamed and asked for forgiveness for the inadequate shelter. But Mary was thoroughly happy and filled with hope. As the Blessed Virgin rested, Joseph took a goatskin flask and went behind the hill to a small stream in a meadow. After filling the flask, he went to town to buy some supplies. The Sabbath was approaching and the town was filled with strangers, and to better meet the needs of so many people, tables laden with food had been set up on street corners.

I saw Joseph on his way back. Among the things he had bought was a metal box with grates and a handle, containing burning coals. As soon as he had entered the cave, he lit a small fire in the northern part of the cave. He then prepared a meal consisting of a kind of porridge made with a cooked fruit and seeds. There were also some loaves of bread. They prayed for a long time. I saw Joseph preparing a sleeping place for the Blessed Virgin. He made a bed of rushes and covered it with one of the blankets made in Anna's house. He put a rolled-up rug at the head. Lastly, he brought the donkey to the cave, tied it, and closed the entrance with a curtain of twigs. Joseph then prepared his own sleeping place close to the entrance. Because the Sabbath had begun, the holy Couple resumed their prayers and then ate their meal. I saw Mary wrapped in her cloak, kneeling in prayer, as Joseph left the cave. When she had finished her prayers, Mary lay down on the bed on her side, with her head resting on her arm. Joseph did not come back until late in the night. He humbly prayed and then lay down on his bed. I think he wept.

62 – Most Blessed Mary spends the last hours of the Sabbath in "Maraha's Cave"

The Blessed Virgin spent the Sabbath in the cave in meditation and prayer. Joseph, instead, left several times, probably to go to the Synagogue in Bethlehem. I saw them eat part of the food that had been prepared the day earlier. Then they prayed. After lunch, when it is Jewish

custom to go for a walk, Joseph took the Virgin Mary to the valley behind the Cave of the Nativity, to the tomb of Maraha. They spent some time in the tomb, which was more spacious than the Cave of the Nativity, and Joseph prepared a sort of chair for Mary. They spent the rest of the time under the sacred tree in prayer and meditation.

In the evening, Joseph and Mary returned to their cave. The Blessed Virgin told Joseph that midnight would be the hour of the child's birth, nine months since the Angel had greeted her as the Mother of God. Then she begged Joseph to do all he could do to ensure that the Child, promised by God and supernaturally conceived, would be welcomed with all the honours possible. She also asked him to join in her ardent prayers to ask God for mercy for the hard-hearted people who had refused to give them shelter. The Blessed Virgin declined Joseph's offer to call for the assistance of two pious women he knew in Bethlehem, saying she did not need human help.

Joseph went to Bethlehem to buy some things, including a stool, dried fruit, loaves of bread and raisins, and returned to the Cave of the Nativity, where he found Mary lying on her bed. He prepared some food and they ate and prayed together. As the prodigious event was about to take place, Joseph separated his sleeping area from the rest of the cave with posts, on which he hung some mats. He fed the donkey, which was tied close to the entrance. The Blessed Virgin told him that the time was drawing near and that she wanted to be alone. She asked him to retire to his room and pray. But first, he lit more burning lamps to keep the cave well-lit. He heard a noise outside and hastened to see what it was: the donkey was joyfully jumping as if to announce the Event.

Smiling, Joseph tied it under the eaves and fed it. When he came back into the cave, Joseph saw that it was filled with supernatural light. He saw Our Lady kneeling, surrounded by a halo of bright rays. She was praying on her knees, on her bed, with her face turned towards the east and her back to the entrance. The cave was completely illuminated with intense light. Joseph contemplated the scene like Moses had done when he saw the burning bush. Then he returned to his cell in holy awe and threw himself on the ground in devout prayer.

63 – The Birth of Christ

The radiance around the Blessed Virgin grew ever greater, so that the light from the lamps Joseph had lit could no longer be seen. Our Lady was kneeling on her rug, with her face turned towards the east. A loose robe without fastenings was spread out around her. At midnight, she was wrapt in an ecstasy of prayer, with her hands crossed on her breast. I saw her body lift from the ground. Meanwhile, the cave became ever brighter until the Blessed Virgin was completely enveloped in a splendour of infinite magnificence, as were all the things in the cave. The scene radiated so much Divine Grace. I cannot describe it. I saw Most Blessed Mary absorbed in ecstasy for some time. I then saw her carefully cover a small figure that had emerged from the radiant splendour, with a cloth,

without touching him, nor lifting him.

After some time, I saw the Child move and I heard him cry. Then Mary seemed to come to herself. She lifted the Child and wrapped him with the cloth she had used to cover him. Having lifted him from the rug, she held him to her breast. Our Lady sat and enveloped herself and the Child in a veil, and fed the Redeemer with her holy milk. I saw a multitude of angels in human form kneeling on the ground and adoring the Divine Newborn. There were six Choirs of angels inside a halo of dazzling radiance. About one hour after His birth, Mary called Joseph, who was still absorbed in prayer. I saw him humbly draw near as he looked in devout joy at the Divine Child. Only when Mary asked him for a second time, to accept the gift of the Most High into his heart with gratitude, did he take the Child in his arms and praise the Lord with tears of joy.

The Blessed Virgin then wrapped the Child in swaddling clothes. I saw her first cover him with a red cloth, then she wrapped him in a white cloth up to his armpits, and wrapped another little cloth around his head. Our Lady only had four cloths. I then saw Mary and Joseph sitting on the ground. They did not speak and appeared deep in meditation. I saw the beautiful and radiant Child in swaddling clothes lying on the rug, as Mary looked upon him. At that sight, I cried out: "This small body is the salvation of the entire universe". A little while later, the Holy Couple lay the Divine Newborn in the manger, which had been filled with twigs and delicate herbs, and they covered his small body with a cloth.

After laying the Child in the crib, which was at a lower level from the place he had been born, the Holy Couple wept tears of joy and praised the Lord. Joseph put the Blessed Virgin's bed and chair beside the crib. Before and after the birth, I saw Most Blessed Mary always wearing a veil and dressed in white. On the first days after the Event, she sat or knelt or slept on her side. I never saw her ill or fatigued. When someone came to visit her, she wrapped herself even more closely and sat upright in the place where the Birth had taken place.

64 – The Angels Announce the Birth of Our Lord to the shepherds – The movement and emotion of men and nature – The shepherds' tower
In these images of Christ's birth, I saw the ancient symbols filled with wonderful meaning. I saw an extraordinary movement in nature, in men and in many places of the world. Everywhere was imbued with exceptional emotion. The cosmic symbols of the Nativity of the Light of the world filled the consciences and hearts of many men. The hearts of all good men were moved with joyful yearning, while those of wicked men were filled with fear. Even the animals were filled with joyful yearning. In many places I saw flowers, herbs and shrubs shoot up. I saw the freshened trees scatter sweet scents. I saw many springs of water gush forth. In the very moment in which the Saviour was born, I saw an abundant spring well up in the cave that was south of where the Birth had taken place. The following day Joseph dug out a canal to make an

outlet for it.

The sky over Bethlehem was gloomy and had a reddish glow, but above the Cave of the Nativity, Maraha's tomb and Shepherds' Valley, there was a shiny mist. About an hour and a half's journey from the cave, in Shepherds Valley, where the vineyards began and stretched to Gaza, lived three shepherds who ruled over three tribes just like the three Magi. At a distance from the Cave of the Nativity, among the trees, there was a shepherds' tower, a high pyramid-shaped structure with wooden beams. It was a meeting place for all the shepherds in the region. It had stairs and galleries.

It had small look-outs like those in watch-towers, and the walls were covered with mats. The tower resembled the structures used by the Magi to observe the stars at night. Seen from a distance, the shepherds' tower looked like a tall ship with many masts and sails. From it, one could see the whole surrounding area, including Jerusalem and the Mount of Temptation in Jericho. The shepherds stationed men there to watch over the flocks and to give warning by blowing the horns, when there was danger from robbers or enemies. The families of the shepherds lived near the tower in huts that were surrounded by fields and gardens. There were huts on the slopes of the hill, one of which, was larger than the others and separated into many partitions where the wives of the watchers lived and prepared food. Tonight, I saw flocks in the open, but the herd on the hill had been put inside a shed. The Holy Night was immersed in a starry silence. I saw a cloud of light cover three shepherds, who were gazing at the beautiful sky in admiration. At the same time, I heard a sweet and serene song in the immensity of the silent night. The shepherds were afraid at first, but an Angel soon appeared and put them at ease: "Fear not! I bring you good tidings that will make all the people rejoice because today is born to you our Saviour in the city of David, Christ the Lord. You will find the Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger".

As the Angel spoke, the surrounding radiance around him increased, and I saw six or seven beautiful bright angels appear to the shepherds. They were holding a long band or scroll on which some words were written in large letters, each of them about as big as the palm of a hand. A beautiful song could be heard: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of good will". A little later, the shepherds who kept watch had the same apparition, as did the shepherds who were gathered around a spring, three hours from Bethlehem.

After the vision of the Angels, the three shepherds did not immediately go to the Cave of the Nativity, which was half an hour away, nor did the shepherds in the tower, who were twice as far. They all gathered in council to decide what gifts to bring to the Newborn. When they had come to a decision as to what to give the Child, they hastened to get their gifts together. They arrived at the Cave early in the morning.

THE MYSTERY OF THE BIRTH OF THE SAVIOUR IN THE NATIVITY SCENE SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI'S WONDER AT CHRISTMAS

"Above all of the other solemnities he celebrated with indescribable fervor the Nativity of the Child Jesus, and called a 'feast of feasts' the day on which God, having become a little infant, suckled at a human breast" (Fonti Francescane, n. 199). In this way, Tommaso da Celano, the first biographer of Saint Francis of Assisi, highlights the Poverello's great affection for and veneration of the birth of Jesus, in Second Life.

In his biography, Tommaso da Celano provides some details on Francis' devotion to the mystery of the Incarnation of our Saviour: "He would avidly kiss pictures of those infant limbs, and his compassion for the child overflowed his heart, making him stammer sweet words, even like a child. The name Baby Jesus was for him honeycomb-sweet in the

mouth". There is no doubt that after his conversion, Francis was the perfect alter Christus, the follower and disciple of the Teacher in every moment and on every occasion. At Christmas, he could glimpse the Son of God, who wanted to be incarnated to redeem humanity. In the mystery of the night in Bethlehem, he could touch the love and mercy of Christ towards his creatures, fallen into sin.

With the wonder of children, Francis paused to contemplate the Child lain in a manger, surrounded by Mary and Joseph. He had understood that the coming of the Child on earth had overturned the order of the world. Nothing would ever be the same. The Incarnation of the Word was an event that marked a line between before and after. For Francis



this mystery expressed, in a clear and definitive way, that what had spurred God to make himself flesh was only and exclusively love. In fact the birth of the Son of the Father reveals precisely the truth that God is love.

In *Second Life*, Celano highlights that the Saint wanted to involve all of creation in the contemplation of the mystery of Christmas -- men, women, animals and plants. Everyone had to participate in the joy over the birth of Jesus. That day was to be marked by charity towards everyone because the Lord had manifested himself as a God who is near, Emmanuel. Tommaso Celano writes: "He wanted that on this day, the poor and beggars would be fed by the rich, and that the ox and the donkey would receive a more abundant than usual ration of food and hay". Francis went so far as to think of appealing to the emperor to ask him to issue an edict saying, that "all those who can, should spread wheat and grains on the streets, so that on such a solemn day, the birds and especially the larks could feed in abundance" (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, n. 200).

All of creation is involved in participating in the gifts God offered to humanity. Spreading grains on the streets so that birds could feed means manifesting the abundance that the Kingdom of God brings to earth. As he thought of Jesus lying in a manger, Francis contemplated the poverty of God who made himself Man in simplicity, in the humble condition of a wayfarer, in precariousness. Tommaso da Celano highlighted the degree to which the poverty of Bethlehem shaped Saint Francis' behaviour:

"He could not think of the poverty endured by the young Virgin on that day, without being moved to tears. While he was sitting for lunch one day, a friar reminded him of the poverty of the Blessed Virgin and the destitution of Christ her Son. He immediately got up from the table and burst into tears of pain, and with his face still wet, he continued to eat the rest of the bread on the ground".

Saint Francis' reflections often turned to the shared condition of destitution, poverty and need of the Virgin Mary and the Son. What better way to relive the atmosphere of the mystery of Christmas than the nativity scene he created in Greccio's Valle Reatina?

Three years before his death, Francis left Rome – where on 29 November 1223 he had received the approval of his Rules by Honorius III – and made a stop in Greccio. The mountain landscapes reminded him of the caves in the Holy Land and of Bethlehem. He wanted to make a living nativity scene, perhaps inspired by the mosaics in Rome's Basilica of Saint Mary Major, where the slabs of wood from the manger in which Jesus was laid, are kept.

Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis asked a nobleman from Greccio, named Giovanni, to help him make the living replica of the birth of Jesus, as Tommaso de Celano writes, "to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay". (*First Life*, 84; *Fonti Francescane*, n.468)

Giovanni enthusiastically accepted the Poverello's request and began to make preparations. A manger was set up with hay, an ox and a donkey. On 25 December, many friars and people from the surrounding countryside arrived to Greccio, with flowers and torches to illuminate the night. When Francis arrived, he found before him the scene of the Nativity with many people like him, pleased to celebrate the mystery of what took place in Bethlehem. A priest celebrated the Eucharist on the manger, thus expressing the bond of the Sacrament with the Incarnation of the Son of God. The first nativity scene had no statues because all the characters were alive, just like the shepherds and the friars.

Tommaso da Celano also recounts a detail that characterized that Christmas night. Francis had a wonderful vision. He saw a small Child in the manger who awoke him from sleep: "Neither did this vision contradict the facts, because by the grace working in the saint and servant Francis, Baby Jesus was reborn in the hearts of many who had forgotten him, and this remained profoundly impressed in their loving memory" (cf. *First Life*, n.86). Francis' love for the humanity of Christ is thus revealed, for that Child who presents himself defenceless to the world, not in glory or power, but in simplicity and poverty. The Saint made tangible the closeness of God to each man and woman. On that night in 1223, the tradition of representing the birth of Jesus to relive the mystery of Christmas began.

Throughout the centuries, the Magisterium has given importance to nativity scenes because they help us understand the *kénosis* of the Son of God. In his catechesis on Wednesday 23 December, 2009, Benedict XVI underscored the pedagogy of God towards humanity: "His condition as a Child also points out to us how we may encounter God and enjoy his presence. It is in the light of Christmas that we may understand Jesus' words: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 18: 3). Those who have not understood the mystery of Christmas, have not understood the crucial element of Christian life. Those who do not welcome Jesus with a child's heart, cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven: this is what Francis wished to remind the Christians of his time and of all times, until today".

Meanwhile in his Encyclical Letter *Admirabile signum*, on 1 December 2019, on the meaning and importance of the nativity scene, Pope Francis wrote: "the enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus' birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realize that so great is his love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him".

This is why the nativity scene brings young and old together in the contemplation that He is the God-with-us.

CHRISTMAS WITH SAINT FRANCES DE SALES

"I do not know whether I find any mystery which so sweetly mingles tenderness with austerity, love with rigour, sweetness with severity", Saint Francis de Sales wrote in a letter to a religious woman in the Abbey of Saint Catherine. It is only one of the many thoughts expressed by the Holy Doctor on Christmas. To delve deeper into the mystery of the birth of Jesus, during his catechesis at the General Audience of Wednesday 28 December, Pope Francis chose the "company" of Saint Francis de

Sales on the fourth centenary of his death. We think it would be interesting to present that Catechesis here again.

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and again, Merry Christmas! The liturgical season invites us to pause and reflect on the mystery of Christmas. And since today – today – marks the fourth centenary of the death of St Francis de Sales, Bishop and Doctor of the Church, we can take a cue from some of his thoughts. He wrote a great deal about



Christmas. In this regard, today I am pleased to announce that the Apostolic Letter commemorating this anniversary is being published today. The title is *Everything pertains to love*, taking up a characteristic expression of the Saint Francis de Sales. In fact, this is what he wrote in his *Treatise on the Love of God*; he wrote: "In Holy Church, everything pertains to love, lives in love, is done for love and comes from love" (Italian original from: Ed. Paoline, Milan 1989, p. 80). And may we all go down this path of love, which is so beautiful. Let us then try to delve a little deeper into the mystery of Jesus' birth, "in the company" of St Francis de Sales, thus uniting the two commemorations.

Saint Francis de Sales, in one of his many letters addressed to Saint Jeanne Frances de Chantal, he writes as follows: "I imagine I see Solomon on his ivory throne, all beautifully gilded and carved, which, as the Scripture tells us, had no equal in all the kingdoms of the earth (1 Kings 10:18-20) neither was there any king that could be compared, for glory and magnificence, with the king that sat upon it (1 Kings 10:23). And yet, I would a hundred times rather see the dear Jesus in his Crib, than all the kings of the world on their thrones." What he says is beautiful. Jesus, the King of the universe, never sat on a throne, never: He was born in a stable – we see it represented thus [indicating the manger scene in the Paul VI Hall] – wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger; and finally He died on a cross and, wrapped in a sheet, was laid in the tomb. Indeed, the evangelist Luke, in recounting the birth of Jesus, insists a great deal on the detail of the manger. This means that it is very important not only as a logistical detail. But how to understand it as a symbolic element? In order to understand what kind of Messiah is He who was born in Bethlehem; what kind of King He is, Who Jesus is. Seeing the manger, gazing upon the cross, looking at His life, a life of simplicity, we can understand who Jesus is. Jesus is the Son of God Who saves us by becoming man, like us; stripping Himself of His glory and humbling Himself (cf. Phil 2:7-8). We see this mystery concretely in the focal point of the crib, namely in the Child lying in a manger. This is "the sign" that God gives us at Christmas: it was at the time for the shepherds in Bethlehem (cf. Lk 2:12), it is today, and it will always be so. When the angels announce the birth of Jesus, [they say,] "Go and you will find Him"; and the sign is: You will find a child in a manger. That is the sign. The throne of Jesus is the manger or the street, during His life, preaching; or the Cross at the end of His life. This is the throne of our King. This sign shows us the "style" of God. And what is the style of God? Don't forget, never forget: the style of God is closeness, compassion, and tenderness. Our God is close, compassionate, and tender. This style of God is seen in Jesus. With this style of His, God draws us to Himself. He does not take us by force, He does not impose His truth and justice on us. He does not proselytize us, no! He wants to draw us with love, with tenderness, with compassion. In another letter, St Francis de Sales writes: "The magnet attracts iron, amber attracts straws. Whether, then, we are iron in our hardness, or straws in our lightness and worthlessness, we must unite ourselves to this little Infant." Our strengths, our weaknesses, only resolve themselves before the crib, before Jesus, or before

the Cross. Jesus stripped, Jesus poor; but always with His style of closeness, compassion, and tenderness. God has found the means to attract us however we are: with love. Not a possessive and selfish love, as unfortunately human love so often is. His love is pure gift, pure grace, it is all and only for us, for our good. And so He draws us in, with this unarmed and even disarming love. Because when we see this simplicity of Jesus, we too cast aside the weapons of pride and go, humbly, to ask for salvation, to ask for forgiveness, to ask for light for our lives, in order to be able to move forward. Do not forget the throne of Jesus. The manger and the Cross: this is the throne of Jesus.

Another aspect that stands out in the crib is poverty – truly, there is poverty there – understood as the renunciation of all worldly vanity. When we see the money that is spent on vanity... so much money [spent] on worldly vanity; so much effort, so much seeking after vanity; while Jesus makes us see with humility. St Francis de Sales writes: "My God! my daughter, how many holy affections does this birth make rise within our hearts, above all of the perfect renunciation of the goods, the pomps, ... of this world. I do not know whether I find any mystery which so sweetly mingles tenderness with austereness, love with rigour, sweetness with severity." We see all this in the Nativity scene. Yes, let us be careful not to slip into the worldly caricature of Christmas. And this is a problem, because this is Christmas. But today we see that, even if there is "another Christmas," in quotation marks, it is the worldly caricature of Christmas, that reduces Christmas to a sappy, consumerist celebration. We want to celebrate, we want to, but this is not Christmas, Christmas is something else. God's love is not sugar sweet; Jesus' manger shows us that. It is not a hypocritical goodness that hides the pursuit of pleasures and comforts. Our elders, who knew war and also hunger, knew this well: Christmas is joy and celebration, certainly, but in simplicity and austerity.

And let us conclude with a thought of St Francis de Sales that I have also taken up in the Apostolic Letter. He dictated it to the Visitandine Sisters – just think! – two days before his death. And he said: "Do you see the baby Jesus in the crib? He accepts all the discomforts of that season, the bitter cold and everything that the Father lets happen to him. He does not refuse the small consolations that his Mother gives him; we are not told that he ever reached out for his Mother's breast, but left everything to her care and concern. So too, we ourselves should neither desire nor refuse anything, but accept all that God sends us, the bitter cold and the discomforts of the season," everything. And here, dear brothers and sisters, is a great teaching, which comes to us from the Child Jesus through the wisdom of St Francis de Sales: to desire nothing and reject nothing, to accept everything that God sends us. But be careful! Always and only out of love, always and only out of love, because God loves us and only ever wants our good.

Let us look to the manger, which is the throne of Jesus; let us gaze upon Jesus in the streets of Judea, of Galilee, preaching the message of the Father; and let us look upon Jesus on the other throne, on the Cross. This is what Jesus offers us: the street, but this is the path of happiness.

SAINT LEO THE GREAT'S SERMON ON THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

Among the 100 Sermons of Leo the Great that have endured, 18 are on the solemnities of Christmas and the Epiphany. His words present the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word through a simple and understandable catechesis. This is why the memory of the Saint and Pope is closely linked to the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

His Sermons highlight the centrality of Christ Man-God, his life, death and resurrection, the redemption of humanity, the mystery of the Church and the significance of the Sacraments. Born in Tuscia at the end of the fourth century, he received a good education. We know that at the time of the Pontificate of Celestine I, he was already a deacon and was tasked with solving delicate matters. He was sent to Gaul by the emperor to settle a dispute between the military commander of the province and a praetorian prefect. He was in that area when Sixtus III, whom he had served as a counsellor, died in August 440. He was proclaimed Pope on 29 September. His Pontificate coincided with dramatic historical events on the Italian peninsula following the invasion of the Huns. In 452, the emperor sent him as part of a delegation that went to meet Attila for peace talks, a moment which was immortalized in a fresco by Raffaello Sanzio, currently displayed in the Vatican Museums' Room of Heliodorus. In 455, the Vandals of Gaiseric attacked Rome, but Leo's intervention was decisive and the lives of the citizens were spared.

He was involved in Christological debates, especially in the controversy against Eutyches, considered to be the founder of monophysitism. Leo joined the discussions in his Letter to Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, in which he expressed his opposition to the heretical theories of Eutyches. The letter was read out publicly at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which condemned monophysitism and exiled Eutyches.

Leo also defended the primacy of the See of Peter and instituted the Feast of the Chair. He was the first pope to be called Great. He died on 10 November 461 and was buried in Saint Peter's Basilica. This Christmas, we recommend reading his first Sermon on the solemnity of Christmas. Universal joy for the immaculate birth of the Lord

"Our Saviour, dearly-beloved, was born today: let us be glad. For there is no proper place for sadness, when we keep the birthday of the Life, which destroys the fear of mortality and brings to us the joy of promised eternity. No one is kept from sharing in this happiness. There is for all one common measure of joy, because as our Lord the destroyer of sin and death finds none free from charge, so is He come to free us all".



Pope Leo begins his Sermon with an invitation to be joyful because the Lord is born. The joy is twofold: joy at the birth of a child and joy for humanity, for this birth that radically changes our perspective. The birth of the Lord brings a joy without end because death is defeated and a path to eternity is opened up.

This joy is for everyone and no one is excluded because the Son of God comes to free humanity from sin and because we are all part of it for the joy is universal.

In his text, Leo asks for joy without distinction: the sinner because he can be forgiven, the saint, because the definitive encounter with Christ is possible, the pagan because he too is called to share in the external happiness. All this is possible through Christ, who defeated the devil that brought death into the world, and reconciled humanity with the Father: "Let the saint exult in that he draws near to victory. Let the sinner be glad in that he is invited to pardon. Let the gentile take courage in that he is called to life. For the Son of God in the fullness of time which the inscrutable depth of the Divine counsel has determined, has taken on him the nature of man, thereby to reconcile it to its Author: in order that the inventor of death, the devil, might be conquered through that (nature) which he had conquered".

In Christ's fight against the devil, there is a singular aspect: the Lord defeated, not with his omnipotence, but with his very human nature, without sin. This victory is even more important because as the new Adam, he wins against the old enemy of man, once and for all: "And in this conflict undertaken for us, the fight was fought on great and wondrous principles of fairness; for the Almighty Lord enters the lists with His savage foe not in His own majesty but in our humility, opposing him with the same form and the same nature, which shares indeed our mortality, though it is free from all sin. Truly foreign to this nativity is that which we read of all others, no one is clean from stain, not even the infant who has lived but one day upon earth".

In the economy of salvation, Jesus Christ is free from sin. He is born of Mary, she too free from the stain of sin, and through her, he is inserted into the line of David. With Archangel Gabriel's Announcement, Mary learns that the Lord has a plan of salvation, and that it would come to pass through her acceptance of divine will. With Mary's "yes", a new era begins for humanity, no longer enslaved by sin, but free to participate in the joy of God. The mystery of the Incarnation of the Word finds its expression and manifestation in Mary: "Nothing therefore of the lust of the flesh has passed into that peerless nativity, nothing of the law of sin has entered. A royal Virgin of the stem of David is chosen, to be impregnated with the sacred seed and to conceive the Divinely-human offspring in mind first and then in body. And lest in ignorance of the heavenly counsel she should tremble at so strange a result, she learns from converse with the angel that what is to be wrought in her is of the Holy Ghost. Nor does she believe it loss of honour that she is soon to be the Mother of God. For why should she be in despair over the novelty of such conception, to whom the power of the most High has promised to effect it. Her implicit faith is confirmed also by the attestation of a precursory miracle, and Elizabeth receives unexpected fertility: in order that there might be no doubt that He who had given conception to the barren, would give it even to a virgin".

LUCIA THE MARTYR: THE SAINT OF LIGHT

She is known as the Saint of Light because of a plan she devised to free her hands, and at the same time, provide light to the tunnels of the catacombs. She wore a wreath with candles on her head, so she could have her hands free to help the poor in her city. There is no Christmas without Lucia, the martyr from Syracuse, who preannounces the coming to the world of the true Light, the one that illuminates the world's men and women. There is not much information on Saint Lucia, who according to tradition, was martyred on 13 December 304. What we know is that she was born into a noble family at the end of the third century in Syracuse, and was orphaned at a young age. She was educated in the faith and was a stranger to paganism. It is said that she distributed the goods of her rich family to the poor. The *Passio* which gives an account of her life dates back to the fifth or sixth century and many details are legends.

According to tradition, she went on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Agatha in Catania, where she obtained the healing of her mother. Upon her return, she made a vow of virginity and refused to go through with an arranged marriage to a young man. In order to make her change her mind and marry him, the young man denounced her to the imperial authorities as a Christian. However, Lucia did not renege her faith and did not make sacrifices to the gods, stating instead that she was willing to face any sacrifice for Christ. The documents of her martyrdom describe the tortures she was subjected to by the magistrate. She never gave in to the threats. She was either decapitated on 13 December 304, or was killed with a stab to her throat. There is no mention that she was blinded, but thanks to the etymology of her name (*lux*, light), the faithful invoke her for eye illnesses. The iconography that depicts her with her eyes on

a plate, comes from popular devotion's tradition of invoking her as a protector of eyesight, because it was believed that her eyes had been gouged out. Saint Lucia is thus not only the Patron Saint of Syracuse, but also of the blind, eye illnesses, eye doctors and electricians. Devotion to the Saint spread from Syracuse to the rest of the West. Her body was first buried in the catacombs, and later translated to a Basilica dedicated to her. During the Arab conquest of Sicily in the ninth century, her relics were hidden in a secret location. When the Byzantine General, George Maniakes, reconquered Sicily in 1040, he took Lucia's mortal remains to Constantinople. In 1204, during the fourth crusade, Doge Enrico Dandolo brought the relics to Venice. Devotion to Saint Lucia spread especially across Scandinavian countries in northern Europe, where pagan traditions were replaced by devotion to her. Since then, she has become a Saint that is beloved by children and by families. On the night between 12 and 13 December, the winter darkness in the streets of towns and cities in northern Europe is brightened by the candles that children carry in memory of Lucia.

The Saint is beloved by families and children because of her charity towards the poor in the catacombs, and she is celebrated as the one who brings light, as well as presents for children. There are parades, processions, traditions and hymns in her name.



A CHRISTMAS POEM

BY SAINT MOTHER THERESA OF CALCUTTA

(1910-1997)

Jesus is born in our hearts so we can give him to others

It's Christmas
It's Christmas
every time you smile at a brother
and offer a helping hand.

It's Christmas every time
you keep silent
to listen to someone.
It's Christmas every time
you reject those principles
that push the oppressed
to the margins of society.

It's Christmas every time
you hope with those who despair
in material and spiritual poverty.
It's Christmas every time
you humbly accept
your limits and your weakness.
It's Christmas every time
you allow the Lord
to be born again, to give Him to others.
Mother Theresa of Calcutta

The words "every time" run through Mother Theresa of Calcutta's poem, reminding us that it is Christmas again when certain situations occur, in particular, when we open ourselves to our brothers and sisters, when we open wide our hearts to those in need, and to those who are struggling or are excluded by society.

Mother Theresa was well aware of the condition of many desperate people who had nothing to lose, whose only wealth was the warmth of a fraternal hand on their head. This is why the Saint's verses underline that it is Christmas only when we reject selfishness and bend towards those who are suffering or are abandoned. The example of the Son of God who was incarnated in Mary's womb and became man by being born in a cave in Bethlehem, expresses the humility of the Lord and how he made himself small to save humanity. If the Creator chose to come to the world without the splendour and triumph pleasing to the world, then the path he outlined for his disciples is the same: the path taken by Mother Theresa throughout her life, by being a Good Samaritan to anyone she met on her way.

To smile and hold out a helping hand to a brother is thus to relive the mystery of Christmas, as Jesus did in his kénosis. Even to remain in silence is to make Jesus be born again in the hearts of those who are wounded, immersed in their problems and their worries. It is to share

the distress, suffering and worries making others feel that they are not alone, that the Lord never abandons anyone, even in the most difficult moments in life.

Jesus is born again when we react before injustices, when we are not indifferent before social iniquity, when we do not accept exploitation, oppression and all discrimination, as inevitable. Jesus is born when we do not accept as inevitable the fate of many forced to live in marginalization.

It is Christmas when we share the hope of the joy of the birth of Jesus with those who are desperate, and in material and spiritual poverty, but also when we admit before the Child, our weaknesses, our sin, our infidelity, our pride. To admit that we are in need of forgiveness and mercy is already to make Jesus be reborn in us, remembering that if we allow Christ and his grace to grow within us, we will be theophany for those we meet on the way, and become like Mother Theresa, an instrument of salvation for others in body and spirit. Let us keep her words in mind: "If you judge people, you have no time to love them".



NICHOLAS OF BARI: THE SAINT OF CHARITY

There is no Christmas without Saint Nicholas of Bari, or better, there are no gifts for children, without this Bishop. Indeed, it is from him that the character we all know as Santa Claus is derived. In time, Nicholas became Santa Claus in North America and Europe, a distortion of Sanctus Nicolaus.

In many Italian cities and in many countries, 6 December, the memorial of Nicholas, is a very important festivity, and is the eve that brings presents to children.

What do we know about this Saint? We have little, but important information on him. He lived in the fourth century and grew up in a wealthy family of Patara, which was then part of the Roman Empire. He inherited a great sum of money. We know that he lived during the time of Constantine the Great (306-337). He was the Bishop of Myra in Anatolia and he participated in the Council of Nicaea in 325. In fact, his name can be found on a list dating to 515 circa, and on one dated 713. Further information on his life can be found in sources that were written many centuries after his death, which occurred between 335 and 337. It is difficult to determine the historical accuracy of some of these accounts.

However, there is one historical event that is certain, and best shows the charity that marked the Saint's actions. It is the episode that made him known for being a kind and charitable man who helped others, and eventually made him the bringer of presents, as he is known.

It is said that after being orphaned at a young age and before he was ordained a bishop, he met a noble family that had lost its wealth. There were daughters in the family that were of marriage age, but due to their poverty, no one came near them. To solve the problem, the father decided to prostitute them. Nicholas found out about the man's intentions and intervened to save the honour of the young women. Without being seen, he threw a cloth containing some gold coins into the family window. According to another tradition, it was a golden ball, as the Saint is depicted in some images and statues. The man was able to afford the dowry to marry off one of his daughters with that money. Nicholas then did the same thing a second time, and another sister was married. The father wanted to know the identity of the generous benefactor and began to wait for him in the hopes of meeting him. Nicholas came a third time at nighttime, quickly threw the gold coins through the window and left. The man however, noticed the gift, and was able to catch up with Nicholas. He understood that he had been the secret benefactor. The Saint made him promise not to reveal his identity to anyone until after his death. This episode is the origin of the tradition of exchanging gifts on 6 December, a tradition that is shared by many countries, as devotion to Nicholas is popular across Christianity. He is venerated by Catholics, Orthodox and even Protestants. There are many churches dedicated to him in Russia, where devotion to him is unrivalled.

According to tradition, Saint Nicholas arrives on the night of 5 December

on his horse, accompanied by a servant who punishes naughty children. He visits homes, bringing gifts and sweets, which he leaves near the chimney, in a shoe or in front of the door, which explains the tradition of leaving stockings and shoes outside windows and doors.

He is the Patron Saint of several cities and countries, including Bari, Amsterdam, Lorraine, Russia and Greece. He is Patron Saint of sailors, fishers, glass makers, children, unmarried young women, students and victims of miscarriages of justice.

His relics are kept in the Basilica dedicated to him, and in the Church of Saint Nicholas at the Lido di Venezia.



THERESE OF LISIEUX: HER COMPLETE CONVERSION ON CHRISTMAS 1888

Before she became a Saint and a Doctor of the Church, as she is universally known, Therese was a coddled and sensitive child. The change in her life began to manifest itself on Christmas 1886. She turned 14 on 2 January, the following year.

That Christmas was a very important day for her. In later years, she described it as her "complete conversion". The change was indeed, clear cut. She was a child who cried easily over nothing, so much so that they used to say her: "You cry so much during your childhood, you will no longer have tears to shed later on"! (Ms A) She herself recounted these words out of obedience, in her manuscript, *Story of a Soul*, one year before her death in 1897. "God would have to work a little miracle to make me grow up in an instant, and this miracle He performed on that unforgettable Christmas day. On that luminous night which sheds such light on the delights of the Holy Trinity Jesus, the gentle, little Child of only one hour, changed the night of my soul into rays of light. On that night when He made Himself subject to weakness and suffering for love of me, He made me strong and courageous, arming me with His weapons. Since that night I have never been defeated in any combat, but rather walked from victory to victory, beginning, so to speak, "to run as a giant"! It is obvious that Therese would not have "invented" the Little Way of spiritual infancy, had she not left behind the whims and tantrums of her childhood. That transition was decisive for her life, as she entered the Monastery of the Discalced Carmelites of Lisieux on 9 April 1888, some 15 months after her Christmas conversion.

She had not had an easy childhood from a health point of view. Her difficulties began when she was born, on 2 January 1873. By the time she was 15 days old, she was about to die from acute enteritis. When she was three months old, her mother was forced to entrust her to a wet nurse because she had a breast tumour. Therese soon became the favourite in the family and was coddled and spoiled. Unfortunately, the premature death of her mother, Zélie, in August 1877, unsettled the serenity of the Martin family. It was a terrible trauma for Therese who, became quiet, highly sensitive and shy. Having to raise five daughters, her father agreed to move closer to his wife's brother, Isidore Guérin, who was a pharmacist. The family moved into rental accommodation in Les Buissonnets. Therese found the atmosphere warm, but she described the five years she attended a school run by the Benedictines, as the "saddest years in my life". The departure of her sister, Pauline, for the Carmel, opened the inner wound further, as she felt she was losing a second mother. But the difficulties in her life were not over yet. When she was ten years old, she became gravely ill with hallucinations, tremors and anorexia. She was unable to recover her

health until 13 May 1883, when a statue of the Virgin Mary she kept by her bedside, smiled at her, and she was healed.

It was in the house in Buissonnet on Christmas 1886 that Therese left her childhood behind, as she writes in "Story of a Soul": "We had come back from Midnight Mass where I had the happiness of receiving the strong and powerful God. Upon arriving at Les Buissonnets, I used to love to take my shoes from the chimney corner and examine the presents in them; this old custom had given us so much joy in our youth that Céline wanted to continue treating me as a baby since I was the youngest in the family. Papa had always loved to see my happiness and listen to my cries of delight as I drew each surprise from the magic shoes, and my dear King's gaiety increased my own happiness very much. However, Jesus desired to show me that I was to give up the defects of my childhood and so He withdrew its innocent pleasures. He permitted Papa, tired out after the Midnight Mass, to experience annoyance when seeing my shoes at the fireplace, and that he speak those words which pierced my heart: "Well, fortunately, this will be the last year!" I was going upstairs, at the time, to remove my hat, and Céline, knowing how sensitive I was and seeing the tears already glistening in my eyes, wanted to cry too, for she loved me very much and understood my grief. She said, "Oh, Thérèse, don't go downstairs; it would cause you too much grief to look at your slippers right now! But Thérèse was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart! Forcing back my tears, I descended the stairs rapidly; controlling the poundings of my heart, I took my slippers and placed them in front of Papa, and withdrew all the objects joyfully. I had the happy appearance of a Queen. Having regained his own cheerfulness, Papa was laughing; Céline believed it was all a dream! Fortunately, it was a sweet reality; Thérèse had discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half, and she was to preserve it forever!"

Christmas 1886 was unlike any other Christmas for her, as it was the true birth of Jesus in her life.



CHRISTMAS IN LITERATURE

ADESTE FIDELES: A HYMN TO PARTICIPATE IN THE JOY OF THE NEWBORN BABY

No hymn can touch the hearts of all and evoke a Christmas atmosphere like *Adeste Fideles*. Its notes and the sound of a choir that sings this famous Christmas carol, are moving and make us relive the mystery of the Holy Night. Its majestic music helps us perceive that something truly important and unfathomable took place in that Grotto in Bethlehem.

The hymn's verses refer to the Bible account of the shepherds, who set on a journey to adore the Newborn in Bethlehem. The words retrace the spiritual journey of those men who felt spurred to participate in the birth of Jesus, to receive his light and his blessing. It is an ode to life and to the Incarnation of the Son of God, whose glory is sung on earth and in heaven, and an invitation to adore him.

Despite its fame, we do not know who wrote *Adeste Fideles*, or better, there is not enough information to fully determine its origins.

The hymn was known for centuries, and tradition links it to Saint Bonaventure. However, all we know for sure is the name of the copyist: Francis Wade ((1711-1786). He was a Catholic Englishman living in exile. He had sought refuge in France after the failure of the insurrection that tried to bring James II back to the throne.

In France, Wade began to teach at English College in Douai, and dedicated his time to composing sacred music, living off his earnings by transcribing texts and religious hymns. This is how he came to transcribe

Adeste Fideles, which was published in *Cantus diversi*, in 1751, making it known all over the world. Wade is said to have taken the words from a popular Irish musical theme, and then put it at the disposal of a choir in Douai. Others claim that he is the author. Wade's text was made up of only four verses. Through the centuries, it was modified by other copyists who added to it. French Bishop Étienne-Jean-François Borderies (1764-1832), had the most influence over it. In 1794, while he was living in exile because he had refused to accept the civil Constitution of the clergy, he added the second, third and fourth verse of *Adeste Fideles*. The verses attributed to Wade followed the Bishops' verses. The Bishop did not make the changes to be petty, but rather to give full consonance to the musical rhythm, like in Wade's first verse. The lyrics as we know them today have eight verses, of which the fifth, sixth and seventh were transcribed by Wade, while the second, third and fourth were composed by Bishop Borderies. The author of the eighth verse is unknown.

After all, not even the musical notes of Wade's choir were the ones we know today, but rather the music composed by Samuel Webbe. In 1782 he met Wade to discuss the hymn's harmony with the text, and he modulated the rhythm.

Adeste Fideles was later translated into many languages. The first documented one is in English with the title, *O Come All ye Faithful*. It dates back to 1789 and was interpreted by Fr. Frederick Oakeley. In Italian, the hymn is entitled *Venite, fedeli*.

Each language into which the hymn has been translated, adapted it to its needs and interpretation, while leaving its spirit intact.

The following is the Latin version of the hymn that is still sung today:

The image shows a page of a musical score for the hymn "Adeste fideles". The title "Adeste fideles" is written in a decorative, cursive font at the top. Below the title, there is a subtitle in Latin: "(Dies festi, nocte, die Christi)" and "In quatuor choris capella". The score is written for four voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and includes a basso continuo line. The lyrics are in Latin and are written below the musical staves. The score is published by "© 2007 by arrangement, Verlag, Schott Music".

*Adeste fideles laeti triumphantes,
Venite, venite in Bethlehem.
Natum videte Regem Angelorum:
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus,
venite adoremus, Dominum.
Engrege relicto, humiles ad cunas,
vocati pastores adproperant.
Et nos ovanti gradu festinemus.
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus,
venite adoremus, Dominum.
Aeterni Parentis splendorem aeternum,
velatum sub carne videbimus,
Deum infantem pannis involutum.
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus,
venite adoremus, Dominum.
Pro nobis egenum et foeno cubantem
piis foveamus amplexibus;
sic nos amantem quis non redamaret?
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus,
venite adoremus, Dominum.*

THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL: A CHRISTMAS FAIRYTALE BY ANDERSEN

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, *The Little Match Girl* (Den Lille Pige Med Svovlstikkerne), begins on a bitterly cold and snowy night on the last day of the year. Written in 1845, it is a children's story that adults re-

member for its tragic ending, a fairy tale that leaves one speechless, with mixed feelings that stir emotions and indignation, anger and tenderness. Let us look at it from the perspective of Christmas, the Incarna-



tion of the Son of God. The very fact that it takes place on New Year's Eve makes it part of the Christmas Season.

The girl in the fairy tale, who is not even given a name by the author, is the symbol of an exploited, oppressed and ignored childhood. It is clear that Andersen's fairy tale denounces the conditions of children from poor families in the mid-1800s. They were forced to work or beg for alms to bring home a piece of daily bread. The fate of children at the time, but also of many children in many countries in the world today, was without any hope: they were the object of exploitation. They were without rights, including the right to play, which was replaced by work duties and begging or crime, children who were forced to be adults before their time, whose lives did not end well even in fairytales.

The cold to which Andersen refers at the beginning of the fairy tale is none other than the bitter cold of poverty, and authentic misery. It represents the climate without affection, attention or care, that children were subjected to. Winter is not just an atmospheric fact, but the expression of the cold that surrounds children, who are neglected by the world of adults to the point that one does not notice them even when passing by them, as happened with the match girl. The darker the sky became, the more alone she was, because people were returning home to celebrate New Year's Eve. But the girl did not have a welcoming home. She had to sell matches, and had not sold even one matchbox. She is afraid that her father will scold her and beat her on her return. She thus decides to sit on a street corner. But the cold is merciless, and because she had no shoes or anything resembling them, her feet began to turn blue. Her hands began to freeze too. As she sits alone in that corner, she sees lights through the windows of peoples' homes, and smells roast goose cooking, a remarkable contrast from the description of her home: barely a shelter, bitterly cold, so unlike the abundance in homes where roast goose is cooked.

And yet, symbolically, the match girl is not alone on that night. She is accompanied by the orphan Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, two characters from novels by Charles Dickens. Through them, the English author denounces the exploitation of childhood, also at the hand of parents. He wants to shake up society so that it may take care of the many abandoned and oppressed, who lacking education or support, barely make it to adulthood or turn to crime.

The same cry of disdain affected Andersen too. He entrusted it to the unnamed match girl, who in a story without time or space, and therefore universal. He wanted his contemporaries to understand the tragic conditions of children. This fairy tale remains impressed on people from the first time they read it. The tragic death of the protagonist is unacceptable. Unfortunately, the reader carries within themselves the cold that she feels, a coldness that has the flavour of social criticism, an invitation to intervene. The tears that children can hardly contain for what happens to the match girl should make us think. Above all, the tears should not be shed for the match girl, but for all those who are part of her world. They are the ones who did not mitigate the cold that made her shiver, who did not have the mercy to open their doors and put her in front of

the fireplace, who did not have the courage to stop and ask her what she was doing. In fact, the fairy tale creates the image of a town, that was almost deserted. Little by little, everyone retreated into the comforts of the family home, while outside, someone was dying. But no one cared.

And so the match girl turns to the only thing she has: the matches, which carry the warmth of hope. Like Dickens' A Christmas Carol, in this fairy tale, the main character sees a sequence of scenes, but not because of the spirit of Christmas past, present and future, but rather by lighting a simple match.

Tired and almost frozen and famished, she lights a match for warmth, and sees a stove whose warmth melts away the cold from her feet. But the fire of the match is fleeting and the stove disappears. She then lights another match, and suddenly, she is in a warm home, with a laden table and roast goose ready to be eaten, but this time too the flame burns out. As she lights the third match, she sees a decorated Christmas tree with many lit candles that rise up to Heaven and become stars. One of them falls and she is reminded of her grandmother, the only person who had ever loved her, who used to tell her that when a star falls, a soul goes up to the Lord.

She lights another match and she thinks she can see her grandmother, who had passed away. To prevent the image from disappearing, she strikes all the matches and asks her grandmother to take her with her. Her grandmother then takes the girl in her arms, and in the light she joyfully takes her with her to Heaven, where there is no cold, hunger or suffering.

The next day, two people passing by find the girl dead from the cold, with rosy cheeks and a smile on her lips. She was happy to be with God. Some people suggest that this fairy tale was inspired by the true story of Andersen's mother, Anne Marie Andersdatter, who was a poor and illiterate woman whose parents sent out to beg for alms through the streets. The fairytale, set on a winter's evening in a neighbourhood in which people do not see the suffering and need of others, is a cause for reflection. The ending is heart wrenching, but at Christmas, it can be seen from a different perspective. The Incarnation of the Son of God shows the world that he is present in that poor girl. His Face is reflected in one of the most fragile creatures, because he wants to knock on the doors of hearts. The mercy of God, who reaches down towards the needy is in opposition to the closure and indifference of people. No one is abandoned. All creatures are precious to God, and he has a plan of happiness for everyone. In the perspective of Providence, the girl was never alone. The Lord watched over her from on high, as did her guardian angel. She was also under the protection of her deceased loved ones, especially her grandmother, who had a major role in leading her to that joy without end, which makes past suffering just a distant memory. The request of salvation of the little girl is accepted through her grandmother's intercession. God's justice intervenes to remedy the damage caused by human selfishness, and what is failure on earth is happiness in Heaven.

PAUL CLAUDEL'S CONVERSION ON CHRISTMAS EVE

From Indifference and boredom to the wonder of joy

"In an instant, my heart was touched, and I believed". Paul Claudel (1868-1955) used these words to describe his conversion on Christmas Eve of 1886. Indeed, Christmas is not only part of a large body of literature and a reason for inspiration, but also an opportunity for artists and authors to reflect on their own lives, and open themselves up to God's mercy. It happened to Claudel, one of France's most celebrated poets. He was 18 years old when he entered the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, to attend a solemn Christmas Mass, but without much conviction. At that time, his interest in religion was only and exclusively to find inspiration for his writing. He entered the Cathedral perhaps out of boredom, perhaps to pass some

time watching Mass unfold, with hymns, incense, organ music. But Baby Jesus was waiting there to change his life. In *Contacts et Circonstances*, published in 1940, Paul Claudel recounts the mystical experience that led him back to the faith on 25 December 1886.

Despite the fact that there were priests among his ancestors, he and his parents were completely indifferent to faith and were inspired by materialist atheism. Therefore, when he attended Mass, he did so with lukewarm pleasure. Claudel said he returned for Vespers because he had nothing better to do. It was then that the Lord was waiting for him. "I remember the children's choir with their white robes and the students of the minor seminary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet who were assisting them. They were singing what I later found out was the Magnificat. I was standing near the second pillar at the entrance to the chancel, to the right, on the side of the sacristy".

It was then that the event that completely changed his life took place: the grace of conversion. As he said, "I believed with such a strength of adherence, with such an uplifting of my entire being, with such powerful conviction, with such a certainty leaving no room for any kind of doubt, that since then all the books, all the arguments, all the incidents and accidents of a busy life have been unable to shake my faith, nor indeed to affect it in any way. I suddenly perceived the piercing feeling of innocence, the eternal infancy of God", an indescribable revelation. It is the grace of Jesus' birth, which moves all men and women and never leaves one indifferent".

With the passing of years, his memory remained alive and incisive: "Seeking to reconstruct the moments which followed this extraordinary instant – as I have often done – I have rediscovered the following elements that, however, form one single flash of lightning, one single weapon used by Divine Providence to finally succeed in opening the heart of his poor desperate son: "How happy are the persons who believe!" But was it true? It was really true! God exists, He is here. He is someone, a personal



being like me. He loves me, He calls me. Tears and sobs had sprung up, while my emotion had grown even greater due to the sound of the tender melody of 'Adeste, fideles'".

Touching Claudel's heart, grace made him understand the infinite love of God, who reaches towards sinners and is not afraid of being rejected and distanced. Gregorian chants and the Word of God shook his soul, and that Christmas marked his life forever. The very evening of his conversion, he returned home and started reading the Bible. He recalled those moments like this: "I knew the history of Christ only through Renan's hand, by giving implicit credence to this impostor, I did not even know that Jesus Christ had ever claimed to be the Son of God. Every word, every line refuted with a majestic

simplicity the impudent assertions of the apostate and unsealed my eyes. It is true – I confess it with the Roman centurion – that Jesus was the Son of God. It was to me, Paul, who he turned and promised his love. But, at the same time, if I did not follow him, he left me damnation as the only other alternative. Ah, I did not need to have explained what hell was: I had already done my time there. Those few hours were enough to make me understand that Hell is anywhere there is not Christ. What did I care about the rest of the world, in front of this new and prodigious Being that had been revealed to me"?

From that time onwards, Christ became everything to Paul Claudel. The conversion led him to face a spiritual debate with his old self, who did not want to give up the life he was living. And the fight lasted four years. In fact, he resisted grace until 1890, when he went to confession with Fr. Ménard, and found peace. On 25 December 1890, he received his First Holy Communion in Notre Dame Cathedral, after many years of being away from the Sacraments.

Which struggles did he have to face in this tough battle? He explained that his family was an obstacle to the faith and did not foster faith: "Shall I admit that the thought of announcing my conversion to everyone, of telling my parents that I wished to abstain on Fridays, of proclaiming myself one of those much derided Catholics, threw me into fits of cold perspiration, and that at times I grew indignant at the powers that captivated me? Still there was no escape from the firm grip of God".

It was an admission that he had let himself be won over by Christ and his grace. Christmas had fostered the birth of that Jesus in him, whom he had forgotten and considered a mythical person to be studied, not to know and to love.

He experienced that the Lord arrives when one least expects it, with a gentle touch, but sometimes with a firm gesture, to knock on the doors of our hearts, without ever interfering with the freedom of creatures.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL, BY CHARLES DICKENS, AND THE REDEMPTION OF SCROOGE

With the birth of Jesus, no one is without hope. Millions of children and adults remember Ebenezer Scrooge, the elderly English banker closed in on himself, miserly, filled with misanthropy, insufferable, and above all, extremely, stingy. He is the main character of *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens, who is visited by three spirits in turn. The literary masterpiece, written in 1843, is a fairy tale for everyone. Set in England at the time of the Industrial Revolution, the story takes place on Christmas Eve, and demonstrates that everyone has the possibility of redeeming themselves. One just needs to want to do so.

From a lay perspective, Dickens wanted to make his voice heard, regarding the exploitation and abandonment of children, who were being robbed of a future, and the possibility of redemption. Every day, he saw child labour, illiteracy, the failure of the education system, poverty and delinquency resulting from marginalization. He was a witness to the Hungry Forties in disreputable and unhealthy neighbourhoods, where poor people died in winter because of the cold and hunger, and broke their backs working in factories, in which there were no limitations on work hours and no rights. There was a big divide in English society of the time. But the same could be said about many similar situations afflicting our world today, which is why *A Christmas Carol* is still relevant. The author became the voice of those who did not have one, and he put his trust in society's marginalized and excluded people, in the hope that at least at Christmas, they could change their destiny and celebrate with family, free from the slavery of profit.

The story has elements that identify with Christian Christmas. Firstly, the possibility of changing one's destiny, of converting, of sharply changing one's own life. But also the denouncement of the exploitation of minors and illiteracy and many of man's injustices and the spirit of Christmas, which reveals how much Jesus' birth has impacted human existence, offering salvation and giving importance to certain values. This is why a little part of Scrooge – who inspired Walt Disney to create Scrooge McDuck, known as Uncle Scrooge – could also be within us. This should lead all of us to reflect and understand that, when everyone does their part, together we can achieve social change and improve the conditions of many people who are rejected. All this is possible, and all that is required is to want it, especially on Christmas Day.

A Christmas Carol begins with Scrooge receiving a visit from the ghost of his friend and associate, Jacob Marley, whose life was also marked by avarice and selfishness. He warns him that on Christmas Eve, he will be visited by three spirits: the Ghost of Christmas past, the Ghost of Christmas present and the Ghost of Christmas future. It will be the stingy man's last chance to look within himself and change his life, before it is too late. Although the spirits instil terror, they are a blessing for Scrooge because they give him the opportunity to be redeemed. It is not by chance that this takes place on Christmas Eve, when it is easier to open up to conversion -- an auspicious time. The three spirits also provide an opportunity to reflect on the past, the present and the future.

The first one to approach Scrooge is the spirit of Christmas past. Like scenes from a movie, he shows him how he has lived his life and how he had slowly hardened his heart against affection and the need of others, isolating himself in his selfishness, becoming insensitive and cold. However, it is not with the arrival of this spirit that Scrooge, knowing that the past cannot be changed, decides to change his life.

The next spirit to visit Scrooge is the spirit of Christmas present, who shows him his current situation. He is shown his nephew, Fred, having Christmas supper with his family. The elderly man sees that his nephew defends him, when he is criticized by his family. The spirit also shows him the tragic situation of Bob Cratchit and his family. He works as a bookkeeper for Scrooge, who underpays him, exploits and mistreats him. He represents all the employees who are unfairly paid for their work, carried out in sub-human conditions. Bob is extremely distressed because he cannot afford to buy medicine for his son Tim, who is ill. It is during the visit of this spirit that Scrooge begins to doubt himself and to feel uncomfortable with his conscience.

Lastly, the third spirit, the one of Christmas past, shows Scrooge his death, and the destiny that awaits him if he perseveres and does not change his life. The spirit tells him that no one will cry at his death, and that it will be ignored or seen as a liberation. The protagonist is also shown that Tim has died because he could not afford to be treated. It is after seeing this vision that Scrooge finds the strength to come back into himself and begin his conversion. Injustice, oppression and inequality lead him to a self-examination. The spirit of Christmas future achieves this by showing him what would happen to him -- his desperate death alone and the tragic death of Tim. Scrooge finally puts an end to all this and the prediction is not fulfilled because he opens his heart to others. His ego is no longer his focus, and he opens out to his brothers and sisters – a happy ending. A similar outcome could also be achieved in each of our lives if we were to welcome the poor, not only in material goods, but also those who lack affection, company and attention. Christmas recovers its Christian dimension, which becomes the scenario for an epochal change, a passing from death to life, a refined plan of grace that unconsciously whispers to consciences.



DOSTOEVSKY'S STORY ABOUT ABANDONED CHILDHOOD

When Jesus calls for celebration

Every year Jesus organizes a Christmas party for children who do not have a Christmas tree. Russian author Fyodor Michajlovič Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was convinced of this. In his story, *The Beggar Boy at Christ's Christmas Tree*, also known as, *The Heavenly Christmas Tree*, published in *A Writer's Diary* in 1876, is about the tragedy of abandoned children, orphans forced to live in misery on the streets of the world. The story takes place in a big city in the Russian Empire, perhaps Saint Petersburg, on Christmas Eve and begins with the description of a boy who is about six years old who looks after a sort of underground cave, perhaps a cellar. He entertains himself while sitting on a trunk, watching the warm vapours leave his mouth. His hunger is almost equal to the bitter cold he feels. He sees his mother on one side of the room, lying down on a straw bed. On the other side of the cellar is an old woman, who had worked as a nanny, who suffers from rheumatism. On another side he sees a drunken man sleeping. He tries to wake his mother up ten times, but she does not wake up. He touches her face, which is so cold to the touch, that it frightens him.

He then tries to go outside to look for something to eat. When he steps outside, he sees that the city is filled with lights because Christmas is approaching. He roams the streets, but it is terribly cold and he is only wearing a shirt. He runs into a policeman, but the man pretends he does not see him. He stops to look inside the window of a house and sees a tree as tall as the ceiling:

It is a Christmas tree. There are dozens of lights, golden paper, apples and dolls and toy horses. He can see many children in the room, all of them laughing and having fun in their nice clothing. He no longer feels the pain in his hands and feet due to the biting cold. Suddenly, though, he feels a great pain in his fingers, as he is starting to get frostbite. He cries and goes to another window. He catches sight of a table laden with sweets and a tree beside it. Four wealthy women are sitting at a

table and some men enter the room. He too enters and finds himself in front of a woman, who stands up to give him a coin, and sends him back outside.

The coin falls from his hand because his fingers are frozen. He is unable to pick it up. He continues to roam through the city, but his hands continue to be in pain. He notices many people in front of a shop window. He sees three dolls dressed in red and gold dresses, an old man that seems to be playing the violin and others who move their heads to the rhythm of the music he is playing. He thinks they are real, but soon understands that they are dolls and starts to laugh. As he is admiring the

toy shop window, he feels himself being pulled by his shirt and falls. A naughty boy has shoved him. He stands up again and starts to run away out of fear but he does not know where to go, and hides behind an alley beside a stack of wood. He is afraid but he thinks he will be safe there. All of a sudden, he feels a sensation of warmth. His hands and feet no longer hurt. He is about to fall asleep and tells himself that he will rest for a while and then go back to see the dolls. He then hears his mother's song and a voice that tells him to go look at the Christmas tree. At first he thinks it is his mother, but it is not her calling. He feels better now. He sees many children around him to whom he wants to talk about the dolls in the shop window. He hears himself being called again. Someone bends down and wraps him up, he reaches out his hand and finds himself in a place filled with light and a Christmas tree. He does not know where he is, but there are many children around him. They kiss him. He sees his mother, who looks at him and smiles with joy. He understands that those children were like him, some of whom had died from the cold, like little angels. They are now in the house of Jesus and he is with them and blesses them and their mothers.

The mothers of the children are with them too, each of them recognizes their own child. The children recognize them and run towards them, kissing them and drying their tears as they beg them not to cry because they are there too.

In the icy morning of Christmas, a caretaker finds the boy's body hidden behind the stack of wood. He had died from the cold. The mother is

found in the cellar. She had died before him. Both were now happy in the Lord's house.

A child died because of the indifference of a city, closed in on itself and in its opulence, that does not take care of those in need and does not even worry about children who are abandoned, alone on the streets. And yet the boy who is unnamed and is a universal figure, meets three people. The policeman pretends he doesn't see him, the woman gives him a coin to get rid of him and sends him back outside, and the

naughty boy shoves him. Three attitudes that create an insurmountable wall between the needs of the boy, who is literally freezing, and the indifference of those who are doing well. Three people who, instead of becoming good Samaritans, act like Pontius Pilate and wash their hands of him. Not even Christmas Eve opens their hearts to others. And what if that boy had been Jesus, born in a cellar, surrounded by his Mother and a midwife he did not need? And what if that stack of wood had been the wood of the Cross on which Jesus died and was risen for eternity? What would happen to those who had closed their hearts? Christ died for them too.



“SPES NON CONFUNDIT”: THE JOYFUL MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS IN A VATICAN PHILATELIC EMISSION

Among the recurrent philatelic emissions of the Vatican, Christmas is special, not only because it is a tradition that is particularly dear to the public, but also because of the universality of the message of hope and salvation that make it a source of inexhaustible reflection.

Stamps are undoubtedly accessible to everyone, with a consolidated tradition of collectors that ensures their preservation in time, and makes them a privileged means of communication, still today, thanks to their wide spread availability. One could say that each philatelic issue, with its dual role of postage value and documentary value, has a message not only for its immediate use, but also one that can be passed on to future generations.

With such a premise, it is easy to grasp how much care goes into making Christmas issues: “The depiction of Jesus’ birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God”, Pope Francis wrote at the start of his Apostolic Letter, *Admirabile Signum*, dedicated to the importance of the nativity scene. And precisely like the nativity scene, which is “mobile” and is set up each year, philately also promptly proposes its own variations on the theme, challenging if necessary, the essential nature of the reduced dimensions of the stamp. This year in particular, the Christmas season will mark the beginning of the Jubilee, an important event which will be the focus of all Christianity. It was thus not imaginable to separate the two events, which in addition to coinciding in time, share a profound meaning, even “dutiful”, with the Catechism of the Catholic Church: Hope.

The new issue of Christmas stamps, illustrated by the artist, Daniela Longo, has elements of the iconography, traditionally linked to Christmas (the angel with the cartouche of the “Gloria”, with the ever-relevant hope of “peace on earth”), but rich in symbolism: the flowering trunk and the manger on which Baby Jesus is lain are symbols of the “seed of Jesse”, that is, the lineage from which Christ would be born, according to the prophet Isaiah, and the altar on which the “eucharistic food” is placed, according to the Patristic Exegesis. In order to better understand the profound meaning of this type of representation, Pope Francis’ words come to our aid: “Hay became the first bed of the One who would reveal himself as “the bread come down from heaven” (Jn 6:41) Saint Augustine, with other Church Fathers, was impressed by this symbolism: “Laid in a manger, he became our food” (*Admirabile Signum*).

Both images refer to nighttime and the representation of the starry sky, in which the figure of Christ, “Light of the world”, stands out. according to a tradition embedded in Sacred Scriptures, which links the birth of Jesus to light. Suffice it to think of the prophecy of Malachi dating back to the fifth century B.C. (“the sun of justice will arise and health will be in his wings”), or that of Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, a few months before Jesus was born (“the sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness”), to mention two examples that are chronologically very distant from one another, demonstrating that the Old and the New Testament both echo the Incarnation of God and other

messages of hope. Another, more contemporary, connection between traditional “nighttime” iconography of the Nativity and the “shiny” revelation of God made man, comes from one of Pope Francis’ reflections “...a starry sky wrapped in the darkness and silence of night. We represent this not only out of fidelity to the Gospel accounts, but also for its symbolic value. We can think of all those times in our lives when we have experienced the darkness of night. Yet even then, God does not abandon us” (*Admirabile Signum*).

The intrinsic bond between the Christmas spirit and the opening of the Holy Year is governed by the Pauline concept of “hope that does not disappoint” (imprinted on the cartouche above the blessing Child), a principle indissolubly linked to the history of salvation, so dear to Pope Francis, that he mentions it in the Bull of Indiction for the Holy Year, and included it in a homily he delivered when he was a Bishop in Argentina, the words of which seem to lay the foundations for a future Jubilee: “God chose his people and began to journey with them (...) he made them a promise (...) he sowed hope in their hearts (...), he gave his people this hope that does not disappoint”, He continued, “The ‘Christmas spirit’ is manifested this way: a promise that generates hope...” (“Homilies and speeches of Buenos Aires 1999-2013).

The official logo of the Jubilee, in this issue, completes and strengthens the significance: Think of the words Pope Francis said at the time about the artistic representations of the joyful mystery of the birth of the Lord, which already anticipated the profound meaning of the motto of the Jubilee, “Pilgrims of Hope”: “As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman”.

Federico Sgarbossa
Post and Philately Service



THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS IN THE INGENIOUS GENTLEMAN DON QUIXOTE OF LA MANCHA, BY MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

The star that guides life

How is Christmas interpreted in Miguel de Cervantes' masterpiece, titled *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*? We would be disappointed if we were to look up the words "Nochebuena, Navidad, Belén, cometa (Christmas Eve, Christmas, nativity scene, guiding star). However, the author refers to the mystery of Christmas nine times, both directly, when he recalls its mystery, and indirectly. Let us start from the first part of the 1605 edition, in which it is mentioned twice in a direct way, when he recalls Christmas eve and the Nativity. He also quotes some Gospel verses that refer to the birth of Jesus.

In Chapter 12, the author describes a scene in which he is with some goat herders when he meets a man named Peter, who says that the famous student, Chrysostom, had died that morning because of his love for the shepherdess, Marcela. Peter adds that they should go to the young man's burial. All the herders agree to go, except for one, who had to stay back and look after the goats:

"I forgot to say that Chrysostom, who is dead, was a great man for writing verses, so much so that he made carols for Christmas Eve, and plays for Corpus Christi, which the young men of our village acted, and all said they were excellent".

Another reference to Christmas can be found in Chapter 37, in which the story of Princess Micomicona and other pleasant adventures continue:

"The first good news the world and mankind received was that which the angels announced on the night that was our day, when they sang in the air, 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good-will;' and the salutation which the great Master of heaven and earth taught his disciples and chosen followers when they entered any house, was

to say, 'Peace be on this house'".

Cervantes mentions the Nativity in a direct way seven more times. He describes the star that led the Magi to the grotto in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. In the First Part of the book, in chapter 2, on the first sally that the ingenious Don Quixote made from home, Cervantes writes: "Writers there are who say the first adventure he met with was that of Puerto Lapice; others say it was that of the windmills; but what I have



ascertained on this point, and what I have found written in the annals of La Mancha, is that he was on the road all day, and towards nightfall his hack and he found themselves dead tired and hungry, when, looking all around to see if he could discover any castle or shepherd's shanty where he might refresh himself and relieve his sore wants, he perceived not far out of his road an inn, which was as welcome as a star guiding him to the portals, if not the palaces, of his redemption; and quickening his pace he reached it just as night was setting in".

In Chapter 43, which tells of the pleasant story of muleteer, together with other strange things that came to pass in the inn, Cervantes mentions a star to which he looks as he journeys along the paths of life, certain that it will lead him to his desired destination:

"Ah me, Love's mariner am I
On Love's deep ocean sailing;
I know not where the haven lies,
I dare not hope to gain it.
One solitary distant star
Is all I have to guide me,
A brighter orb than those of old
That Palinurus lighted.
And vaguely drifting am I borne,
I know not where it leads me;
I fix my gaze on it alone,
Of all beside it heedless.
But over-cautious prudery,
And coyness cold and cruel,
When most I need it, these, like clouds,
Its longed-for light refuse me.
Bright star, goal of my yearning eyes
As thou above me beamest,
When thou shalt hide thee from my sight
I'll know that death is near me".

In the Second Part, starting from the Prologue, Cervantes refers to the star that leads towards the heavens:

"Those the soldier shows on his face and breast are stars that direct others to the heaven of honour and ambition of merited praise; and moreover it is to be observed that it is not with grey hairs that one writes, but with the understanding, and that commonly improves with years".

In chapter 16, Of what happened to the ingenious gentleman in the inn

which he took to be a castle, Cervantes alludes to the star that we are all called to follow:

"I say that the poet by nature who calls in art to his aid will be a far better poet, and will surpass him who tries to be one relying upon his knowledge of art alone. The reason is, that art does not surpass nature, but only brings it to perfection; and thus, nature combined with art, and art with nature, will produce a perfect poet. To bring my argument to a close, I would say then, gentle sir, let your son go on as his star leads him, for being so studious as he seems to be, and having already successfully surmounted the first step of the sciences, which is that of the languages, with their help he will by his own exertions reach the summit of polite literature, which so well becomes an independent gentleman, and adorns, honours, and distinguishes him, as much as the mitre does the bishop, or the gown the learned counsellor".

Cervantes alludes to the star again in chapter 32 on What befell Don Quixote's party at the inn:

"Some travel the broad field of arrogant ambition, others use base and groveling adulation, still others use deceitful hypocrisy, and others use the path of true religion. But I, led by my star, have taken the narrow path of knighthood, and in doing so I scorn wealth, but not honor. I've satisfied grievances, righted wrongs, punished impudence, conquered giants, and trampled monsters. I'm in love, only because it's required for knights errant to be in love; and although I'm in love, I'm not one of those depraved lovers, but rather of the Platonic kind. My intentions are always directed toward meritorious ends, to do good to all and ill to none. If the person who understands this in this way and labors toward these goals, if the person who does this deserves to be called a fool, let your highnesses, the duke and duchess, declare me to be one".

Still in chapter 32, Cervantes mentions the guiding star as a reference point for direction:

"It's quite obvious," responded the duchess, "that you've learned to be courteous in the school of courtesy itself. It's quite evident, I mean, that you've been nurtured at the side of don Quixote, who doubtless is the cream of politeness and the flower of ceremonies, or 'cirimonies' as you say. Blessings on such a master and such a servant—the one, because he's the pole-star of knight errantry, and the other, because he's the star of squirely faithfulness. Stand up, Sancho, my friend, in return for your courtesy, I'll make sure that the duke, my lord, bestows the favor of a government on you as soon as he can".

And lastly, Cervantes mentions the star as a reference point for travellers in chapter 61, in which is related the unfortunate adventure that Don

Quixote fell in when he fell out with certain heartless Yanguesans:
“Welcome to our city, mirror, lantern, and north star of knight errantry,
and everything else that goes along with it. Welcome, I say, to the valiant
don Quixote de La Mancha, not the false, not the fictional, not the

apocryphal one written about in false histories, but rather the true, real,
and faithful one described to us by Cide Hamete Benengeli, the flower
of historians”.



CHRISTMAS AT THE THEATRE

The weather is still pleasant and calls for long walks in leisurely moments, away from daily life commitments. As I was walking, I thought about the fact that it will soon be Christmas; a look at shop windows, and here and there, the signs are already visible.

Billboards along the streets advertise Christmas shows, some in big and famous theatres, others in more modest, but not less important venues, like parishes and recreational centres.

Do you go to the theatre? I am sure you do.

At the theatre, one has the opportunity to take an active role in a story, to travel through different times in history, to experience contrasting feelings. Today, we are used to so many images, to so many plots provided by television portals, that it is almost difficult to choose. Among the many proposals, there is the theatre: two live hours, more or less. A preparation, which, if done seriously, requires many hours of work from writers, director and actors.

To be effective, theatre has to be worked at; to be credible it has to be lived.

When one approaches art, one thinks only of its pleasure, but in reality, from a wider perspective, theatre involves spectators in its plot and in its emotions, and sometimes becomes the spark for a change, a renewal.

At Christmastime, one can breathe the air of real love, an air of newness,

an air of serenity; one is more easily inspired. So why not choose to spend some time at the theatre?

How many Christmas plays do you know? There are a number of good ones. Some are on Christmas, others are stories with Holy Christmas as a background. On television, good Christmas movies gained their space over the years. And probably, we need the tenderness of those stories that tell of beautiful feelings and reassure us.

Let's return to the theatre. I could make a list of the most popular choices, but I will try to give you only some indications from my experience through the years.

The most popular? It is definitely the celebration of the Nativity that Saint Francis celebrated in Greccio, on Christmas Day, three years before he died. An inspiration of faith for generations of men and women, of portraying real images and bringing them into everyone's lives.

The inspiration arose from Saint Francis' desire to replicate the images he had seen in Bethlehem and recreate the scene of the Nativity of Jesus, recreate the atmosphere of that night that changed the history of the world. The living nativity scene, thus, became the first example of a theatrical representation with short scenes, real sets and participants in costume, like a *tableau vivant*. After all, it is well-known that the *Laudes Creaturarum*, also known as the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, was composed by Saint Francis sometime around 1224. It is the oldest poetic text in Italian literature of which the author is known. It praises God and his creatures. And that first inspiration of faith became an inspiration in painting: The nativity scene in Greccio, painted by Giotto, is the 13th of 28 scenes in a series of frescoes that depict the life story of Saint Francis, in the Upper Basilica of Assisi.

Let's return to the more theatrical aspects. If I were to ask you which is the most celebrated script on Christmas, at the amateur and professional level, I am sure that you would answer: "Natale in casa Cupiello", by Eduardo De Filippo. The great Eduardo De Filippo, the most represented in Italy.

Eduardo was the son of Luisa De Filippo, a seamstress who worked for the theatre, and Eduardo Scarpetta. He was also the brother of two famous actors of Neapolitan theatre: Titina and Peppino. They were generations of excellence in the theatre world, whose successors are performing today. The first time the comedy was performed was in Naples' Kursaal Theatre on 25 December 1931, by the "Teatro Umoristico I De Filippo" Company, in which the three De Filippo siblings played together. The play is still performed to this day, and it is not difficult to find it in theatres, even contemporary ones.

But what attracts so many people from different social standings and different ages? It is man, it is the artist who puts his own personal life experience into his words, who expresses the tangible reality of the territory and the time in which he writes, thus making himself credible. And it is this aspect that is chiefly transmitted to the public, and the reason why it is perceived as being close to the daily life of people.



"Eduardo's Christmas", despite evoking traditions with the classic Christmas lunch, in reality, revolves around the drama of jealousy, amid tragic comic scenes. The protagonist is Luca Cupiello, a man who seems to belong to no particular era, who loves the nativity scene and passionately dedicates a great deal of time to it, away in his own world that seems to exclude the tragic family events that surround him. A difficult reality is presented: poverty, cold, low quality coffee, Concetta's slippers made with an old pair of shoes that belonged to her husband, an idle son. Everything seems bitter and resigned. The dialogues call for reflection and express a comic timing that invites spectators to read between the lines. The nativity scene, the true protagonist of the story, is a metaphor used by Eduardo, and expressed by the protagonist Luca, that refers to the need to recover a long-gone serenity and a safe shelter in which one can feel present and alive.

Everything starts when Luca wakes up on the morning of 23 December. Luca wants to set up the nativity scene, but the mood is not peaceful. The characters in the story are: Luca Cupiello, Lucariello, the protagonist and head of the Cupiello family; Concetta, Luca's wife; Tommasino, Nenillo, the second son of Luca and Concetta; Ninuccia, Luca and Concetta's first daughter; Nicolino, Ninuccia's husband, a rich merchant; Vittorio, Ninuccia's lover; Pasqualino, Luca's brother and flatmate.

All that's left to do is to identify a bit with the characters, allowing oneself to follow the dynamic and let reflections arise. Although it is set in the past, it has themes and developments that are still relevant today. And it is because of this aspect that I think Eduardo's work is on the higher cultural ground of theatre. He knows how to read souls through the ages. It will certainly be worthwhile to see the work of the great Eduardo, making sure to find a performance with a good cast and with Neapolitan origins, to better enjoy, not only the script, but also the spirit that distinguishes it.

Another Christmas play that is still very popular today is, A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens, a fairytale with profound truths.

A Christmas Carol (original title was A Christmas Carol. In Prose, Being a Ghost-Story of Christmas) is a story about ghosts by Charles Dickens, published in London in 1843.

There have been many film and theatre adaptations of A Christmas

Carol, and Dickens wrote the first one himself, for the theatre. From a critics' point of view, the plot of A Christmas Carol, is considered a moral story, which has roots in sacred medieval productions, for its simple religious symbolism and melodramatic images. Perhaps more well known, are the film adaptations that are part of television reruns at Christmas. Structurally it is a drama in five acts. Do not fear, the first act is part of theatrical writing. There are many "philosophies" that revolve around this concept, but we will not mention them here. Suffice it to know that the five acts do not refer to "length" or "heaviness" ... if you will, it may also seem a unique simple and even brief act, like in any theatre piece. But let's return to our story. The story takes place at night on Christmas Eve, in a small English town. The protagonist of the story is Ebenezer Scrooge, an elderly, stingy man, indifferent and selfish towards his friends and the poor. Upon his return home, Scrooge is visited by the three ghosts of Christmas: past, present and future. They will succeed in leading Scrooge to feel regret and take responsibility for his mistakes, and let the spirit of Christmas enter, making him undergo a radical change. All writers are affected by the time to which they belong. Just like Eduardo, senator for life, never abandoned his political and social commitment in the Senate and on the stage, and to minors in prisons, so Dickens' story reflects English society of the time, as it discovers Christmas traditions. Dickens' visit to Field Lane Ragged School, an institution for street children in London, had a profound effect on him.

Saint Francis of Assisi, Eduardo De Filippo, Charles Dickens: three men, three different life experiences, three infusions into art, who involve us as humans in the beauty and greatness of the culture to which they belong. Allow me to identify a common denominator among these three figures that are so different: a gaze towards the poor, towards life's difficulties, towards the need to cultivate good sentiments and the virtues of our soul. Live culture, art and theatre.

Happy Christmas to you and to your families.

Carla Sanna



Natale del Signore Gesù 2024

Su tutti i Bambini e i Ragazzi
del Governatorato della Città del Vaticano
scenda la Benedizione di Gesù Bambino di Praga

*I Padri Carmelitani del
Santuario di Arenzano*



*"Più voi mi onorerete
piu' lo vi favoriro' "*

