

## **How St. Francis of Assisi Celebrated Christmas**

### **Introduction...**

Christmas is all over the place... we can't escape Christmas. So we have to ask ourselves, "What does Christmas mean?"

### **Refrain... O Come Let Us Adore Him**

#### **I Our Culture and Christmas...**

Our culture tells us that Christmas is a "Holiday Season" – preferred terms instead of "Christmas".

The "Holiday Season" is about giving gifts to those we love.

The whole story of life is that life is about being happy and fulfilled.

Everyone wants to be happy, and how can you be happy?...

Buy stuff and stay entertained.

The goal of life is being a happy, entertained consumer.

In this context, the "Holiday Season" recognizes that there are some people we love and are close to, so make them happy – show them your love – buy then stuff.

By the way... if you are a really generous soul, maybe make a contribution to Salvation Army – you'll feel better and help other less fortunate folks to have a "Happy Holiday."

This is the secular meaning of Christmas... or rather the "Holiday Season."

It's not a bad meaning... it's just lacking. After all, we all need special times in our lives when we can enjoy the merriment of others and let our light shine thru.

### **Refrain... O Come Let Us Adore Him**

#### **II Christians and Christmas...**

We Christians have another meaning...

*During Christmas Mass one year the priest brought the young children into the Sanctuary... the Sanctuary decorated with lighted evergreen tree, gaily wrapped presents on a table to the side of the altar, and a beautiful hand painted crèche scene with several sheep, angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, wrapped in simple warm cloth, lying in a manger filled with straw.*

*Once the children were seated on the floor in the duly decorated sanctuary, the priest pointed to the back of the Church. In came a red suited, bearded Santa Clause. He quietly walked down the Church aisle, entered the Sanctuary, went over to the crèche scene, knelt before it and said a silent prayer, then left the Sanctuary and the Church.*

That's the meaning of Christmas.

Do we experience Christmas in this way?

Is this how we prepare for Christmas?

Or do we hope just to get safely thru the snarled traffic, the parking hazards,

the rush at the Mall,  
the unending lines at the counter,  
and the challenging obstacle course returning home...  
to get safely thru all of these without losing our patience and calm...

Merry Christmas, ho, ho, ho!

*But watch a child at Christmas.*

They come in joyful wonder to the Christmas tree with its bright, blinking lights and its multicolored hanging bulbs.

They look in awe at the crèche set near this wondrous tree.

They hear the Christmas carols.

They see with glee their colorfully wrapped presents...

Can you ever forget your Christmases as a child...

or the way you enjoyed Christmas when you watched your children or grandchildren on Christmas?

Isn't there a child in each of us waiting to enjoy Christmas?

Growing old does not have to mean growing weary.

Growing old does not have to mean we lose our sense of wonder and joy at life.

This reminds me of those lines from Dr. Zeuss' story of the *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*:

*The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!*

*Now, please don't ask the reason. No one quite knows the reason.*

*It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.*

*It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.*

*But I think that the most likely reason of all*

*May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.*

As we get older do our hearts become "two sizes too small" to enjoy Christmas and lose sight of the real reason for Christmas?

Do we get lost in Christmas preparations?

Do we spiritually prepare for Christmas?

Listen to this Christmas story of St. Francis:

### ***The Story of the Living Creche***

*One winter St. Francis very much wanted to go home for Christmas. Not to Assisi, where he had been born and raised, for Francis knew that world was forever past and lost to him.*

*And now he was on the road all the time, preaching and teaching, with the friars who were his companions*

*But St. Francis still longed for a Christmas gathering with young and old, rich and poor. He wanted everyone gathered around the table for a meal, gathered around Brother Fire for warmth and stories.*

*And if there was any place that was most home to Francis, it was Count Giovanni's little village of Greccio, tucked high up in the mountains and surrounded by thick forests.*

*And so Francis asked his friend Giovanni to help him prepare a different kind of Christmas this one year. Would the Count prepare one of his stables for the celebration of mass on Christmas Eve? Would he bring live animals into the stable for worship? Would he invite the shepherds and woodcutters and farmers from the village of Greccio? And most of all, would he prepare a feeding trough with clean hay? Just any empty manger with a bed of straw. Now, in those days Christmas Mass had always been a most solemn and serious event, done with great pomp. Giovanni wondered why Francis would want the whole village to come to an old stable to celebrate.*

*St. Francis arrived with some of his friars the week before Christmas Eve, and all the preparations were finished. Then he went into the woods to pray. Count Giovanni returned to his castle, and with his wife and children eagerly prepared for Christmas Eve.*

*Finally it was the night before Christmas.*

*As darkness fell, the Count and Countess stood atop the castle tower and looked over the valley. The sky was dark with clouds, and snow was beginning to fall. But then they saw dozens and dozens of lights – burning torches lit by farmers and shepherds and woodcutters – moving from all directions of the valley towards the little stable. The Countess said, "The Magi saw only one star, but we see hundreds of stars burning bright in everyone's heart as they walk towards the stable this night."*

*Since Francis was a Deacon, he sang and preached that night in the stable. Giovanni's children loved to hear Francis sing and speak for his voice was so sweet. Again and again that night he said the word Bethlehem in his own Italian language, "Betleme, Betleme" ("BAIT-lah-may) and the children thought Francis sang as sweetly as a lamb bleated.*

*When the Mass was almost done, Count Giovanni looked at the empty manger again. This time there was a little baby asleep in it! Whether others saw this, Giovanni did not know. But he saw it. And he understood.*

*His friend Francis was awakening the Christ-child who was asleep in the soul. Giovanni knew that Christmas would never again be formal and solemn. Christmas would now be simple and tender.*

*On Christmas Day, St. Francis and the friars shared a meal in Giovanni's Castle. The rich and the poor were there, and Francis knew he was "home for Christmas."*

*And every year Giovanni and his family prepared a manger in their hearts. They emptied their hearts of anger and desire. They opened the door to their hearts for the Christ child. There the Child rested, until he awoke with the family on Christmas day.*

**Commentary...**

*It was St. Francis who created the first living crèche on Christmas Eve in the year 1223 in the little village of Greccio, Italy. That night the animals were brought into the stable, but Francis intentionally left the manger empty. Whether anyone else saw what Count Giovanni saw is uncertain. Giovanni himself told this story. It is recorded in the **Fioretti**, or *The Little flowers of St. Francis*, written by one of the Franciscan Friars.*

Our growing old does not mean we have to grow weary.

Our getting trapped in Christmas preparations does not mean our having to lose the true meaning of Christmas.

Christmas is about the Christ child being born into our hearts once again... a potent reminder that God never abandons us.

God loves us in a special, unique way,  
even if we don't recognize or experience this in the rush of everyday life.

Might I suggest some aids to help us remember the real meaning of Christmas during this Christmas Season?

The real meaning of Christmas is all around us, if we would but pause and take time to look and reflect... and pray a bit.

Look at Christmas preparations through spiritual eyes or with spiritual consciousness...

Look at Christmas decorations...

*The Christmas Tree and Christmas wreaths...* evergreens, reminding us of God's ever-lasting love and care for us, bringing hope into the coldness and winters of our world and our own lives.

*Christmas Lights* – on the Christmas tree, in home windows, decorating our streets... remind us of Christ the Light coming into our darkness on that first Christmas morning.

*Christmas Carols*, whether Christian or secular... remind us of the angels' voices joyfully announcing to the shepherds the Good News of the birth of a Savior. Only Songs could express the joy and happiness of such Good News – so don't ever be afraid or embarrassed to sing (or even hum) Christian Carols, whether at home or in Church. We join with the angels in celebrating God come among us.

*Christmas Meal...* We gather around a table laden with all kinds of goodies, to share with our loved ones, family and friends – to enjoy each other's

company, to linger awhile and not rush off, to be filled with good food and good companionship, with laughter and the joy of each other's presence... This reminds us of the way Jesus spent so much of his time, gathered at meals with his disciples, and also with sinners and social outcasts – sharing with them, loving them, and yes, enjoying them.

*Gift giving...* is a very important part of Christmas.

In our secular world it is probably the most important.

But think... why give gifts?

The gift is an expression of our love, our care, our admiration. That's what's most important.

And we give gifts because Christmas is about our loving God who gives us the greatest gift God can – God's own son – a gift chosen before the world began, brought to us thru Mary, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laying in a manger – God's son, now one of us.

What a gift of love. And that's why we give gifts as Christmas, to express the meaning of Christmas - to express our love.

*Santa Clause... There is no Mrs. Clause... Santa Clause was in reality St. Nicholas, a saintly bishop who was known to love the people he served, and give gifts to many people, especially those in need. What a beautiful example he left us... As we celebrate this Christmas Season try to take a little time to share it with those in need... a sick relative or neighbor, a food pantry, or your favorite charity.*

*Mass on Christmas.... is usually a special occasion for many. Enjoy it –*

*the beautifully decorated Church, the trees and lights,*

*the manger scene, the choir and the Christmas hymns,*

*the Church packed with worshippers,*

*the story of Christmas proclaimed in the Gospel,*

*the song of the angels sung by all – Glory to God in the Highest. Let these sights and sounds and movements fill you with what Christmas is all about.*

*God can deeply touch us with love and joy at times like this.*

*And at communion time, welcome the baby Jesus into the manger of your heart, there to worship him and bring him the gift of yourself, your life, your love, your adoration –*

*and your thanksgiving for gifting you with his very self.*

***Conclusion...***

*Christmas is a time of beauty... try to see and enjoy it.*

*Try to recognize the meaning of the beauty.*

*Beauty is a glimpse of our transcendent God... a glimpse which tears a whole in the fabric of our ordinary lives... and grace pours through that hole.*

*The beauty of Christmas tears a whole in the fabric of our ordinary lives... and God's graciousness pours through that hole.*

*Try to remember the true meaning of Christmas beauty... use the many markers or practices of Christmas to remind you of that meaning and that beauty.*

*As we come to this Eucharist today,*

*continue to thank and praise God for God's love for us and goodness to us.*

*At Communion, invite Jesus into your hearts, to abide in the manger of your heart where you can thank Him and love Him.*

*Let us bow our heads and pray...*

*Jesus, come to us today, abide with us this day.*

*In this Christmas Season help us to remember the real meaning of Christmas... and to appreciate your beauty and graciousness pouring through.*

*You Gift us with yourself...*

*Help us to give you the gift of ourselves and our world, and to gift others with our love and care... Amen.*

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*From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.*

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