

Celebrating Christmas

Adapted from an article by the Rev. Lorenz R. Soneson

Thinking of ways to make the celebration of the Lord's Advent more distinctly religious is an annual challenge to most parents who try to balance the materialistic environment of the Christmas season with the true reason for its commemoration. Some have attempted to eliminate all worldly tradition from their homes, but this can create another set of difficulties. Most children cannot understand why they should be deprived of the treats and benefits their friends enjoy. The fact is, affections can be stirred through the exchange of gifts, stimulating a delight in sharing with the neighbor. The offerings from the Wisemen to the Young Child serve as a basis for cultivating the spirit of giving within youngsters. Even tiny children can be inspired to make a picture of the nativity scene for Grandma, decorate a paper plate with stars, or mold a lamb out of clay. Such presents might well become treasures later on. There are thoughtful people who send anonymous gifts, but such a gesture is usually beyond a child's ability to keep secret.

In spite of tremendous effort year after year, external traditions and customs (some pre-Christian) tend to dominate our thinking. Much that we do to prepare for the holidays has little or no sacred orientation. Take, for example, the Christmas tree. Its part in the event is hard to ignore. Yet the time we put into trimming it seems to have no religious purpose. One busy mother commented recently, "We just throw our tree together and put all our energy into the representation, using special lighting and even music." But it is possible to meet the problem by decorating the tree itself with special, distinctive ornaments. Simply dressed figures such as angels and shepherds can be arranged with deep purpose. One family portrayed the chapters of the work *True Christian Religion*. God the Creator was placed at the top, a symbolic figure of the Lord as pictured in the Book of Revelation. The chapter on Baptism was represented by a baby doll. The Holy Supper was illustrated by play dough bread and an aluminum foil cup for wine. A small, papier-mâché tablet depicted the Decalogue. The whole family soon knew the table of contents of this book of the Writings.

Another year, a family portrayed the Five Churches on their tree. Golden balls and chains adorned the top, followed by silver, copper and iron-colored ornaments near the base. These symbolized the Most Ancient, Ancient, Jewish and Christian Churches with a beautiful rock placed beneath the stand for the New Church. Other successful ideas include decorations depicting the Ten Commandments, the Ten Blessings, or the tree with twelve fruits referred to in Revelation 22. Using glitter, velvet ribbon, and the beautiful supplies available at Christmas, a message can be given in a simple and yet powerful way. Explaining such unusual decorations to curious neighbors might lead to an animated discussion about our beliefs.

A number of New Church families prepare their own tableaux, spending much of December gathering costumes, backgrounds and props. A few have even written their own Christmas plays. It is amazing how much of the world's fine music, art and literature was inspired by this wondrous event. Song and drama have particular power and include everyone, young and old, in a marvelous way.



*EXAMPLE OF
A RELIGIOUS CHRISTMAS TREE*

*TOP - (Celestial degree) Sun, as the LORD,
gold fruit chains, Adam and Eve,
lamb, doves (Conjugal Love 270).*

*MIDDLE - (Spiritual degree) Ark,
palm leaves, lions, silver moons,
grape branches, birds of paradise
(Conjugal Love 270).*

*LOWER - (Natural degree) Bronze stars,
fish, a small serpent, swans
(Conjugal Love 270).*

BASE - Rock - New Church on earth.

Many homes display representations constructed by children out of simple materials from around the house. Such a project need not detract from lovely professionally-made crèche figures. Handmade characters and scenes add greatly to the sphere of rejoicing. And home-designed religious greeting cards have become a delightful expression of love and caring for countless amateur artists. And for those who feel they lack any unusual talents, a personal letter or audiotape makes a warm and intimate gift—to be read or heard in private, a quiet moment on a busy day. Such messages, prepared in advance, can often better express what we want to say than the words we find in the midst of all the excitement.

Another idea adopted by a few parents is the presentation of religious gifts immediately after a Christmas morning worship service. There is a fine variety of books available from the General Church, and offspring can acquire a substantial New Church library by the time they reach adulthood. Inscribed and dated copies of the Writings and collateral literature mean a great deal to young people when they establish their own homes and traditions. Bookmarks, Word covers, Biblical pictures and candles also can be suitable choices for beginning the ritual of gift opening.

In addition to a normal exchange of gifts, tiny and inexpensive presents can be wrapped with slips of paper on which thank you notes are written. These can be stuffed into stockings, hung on the tree or put in a pretty bowl in the center of the dining room table. The “thank you’s” are for exceptional gestures and accomplishments that have happened during the year. They can be exchanged between parent and child, siblings, or the parents themselves. For example, “Thank you for washing the car all summer,” “Thank you for bringing my homework every day when I was sick,” “Thank you for keeping the refrigerator full of good food,” “Thank you for insisting on family worship,” “Thank you for driving me to band practice every Tuesday,” *etc.* A little thought can bring to mind dozens of such memories, many overlooked in the rush of events. It helps to stir affections for the good times a family has enjoyed, as the last days of the year slip away. What better time to count blessings and express appreciation for those we love?

An old, old custom that seems worth keeping is to invite a neighbor or friend to visit on Christmas Day. Including them in the intimate family circle can mean as much to the family as to the guest. Lonely students far from home, foreigners in a strange land, the recently bereaved, childless couples—there are many who would appreciate joining a home festival on this day of days. They usually even enjoy the shaky renditions of Christmas carols, or the family movies, and the host group can grow closer in planning such an invitation.

Christmas is a season, not just a single day. Family projects and secret, home-designed, surprises often outshine presents purchased in a store. By starting early in December, Christmas can become a month-long occasion. Many traditional Christmas customs can be transformed into distinctive celebration through the use of New Church teachings and affection for the Word. Family gatherings, through thoughtful preparation, can bring the real meaning of the Advent into focus, and bring the presence of heaven into our homes this Christmas season.