

# Jesus: THE ONLY TRUE CHRISTMAS GIFT

## DEAR FATHER KERPER,

As I get older, I have less and less interest in exchanging gifts at Christmas. I know this traditional Christian practice reminds us of God's gift of His Son to us, but I wish we could somehow move away from gift-giving at Christmas, which has become the center of everything. Am I wrong to question this long-standing Christian tradition?

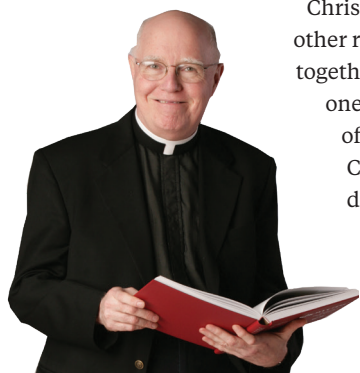


At the risk of being called Scrooge, I dare say that your question and comments about the proper celebration of Christmas deserve careful attention.

You used the phrase “traditional Christian practice.” The word “traditional” usually refers to some practice, object or style that has existed for a long time. But what's a long time? A year? A century? Or thousands of years?

Our relatively short life span narrows our vision of reality, causing us to miss the big picture. As such, we tend to believe “traditions” fall from the sky and never change at all. This happens with Christmas. We assume that our own beloved Christmas traditions “have always been that way.” But this is not at all true.

Christmas, more than any other religious event, has mixed together many ingredients into one gigantic bowl. Some of these come from our Christian faith, but others do not. Moreover, our economic system has reshaped the way we celebrate the “holidays.”



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

To recover the Christian meaning of Christmas, especially gift-giving, we need a proper understanding of “tradition.” This term comes from the Latin word *traditio*, which means “to pass on” or “transmit” something through time. Tradition, then, is not an object like a tree, wreath or mistletoe — not at all. Instead, Christian tradition is the living process by which God transmits Himself to human beings. In other words, Christ is the ultimate tradition — the one who joins together divinity and humanity in a unique manner. This intimate and irreversible union happened invisibly when Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit, conceived Jesus in her womb. But Christmas moves us beyond the invisible to the visible presence of the “Word made flesh.” Here we discover the ultimate “traditional” Christmas gift — Jesus Christ.

Allow a very beautiful portrayal of this true Christmas Gift. It comes from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the monastic reformer of the 12th century.

*“Behold, God the Father has sent down to earth as it were a bag filled with mercy; a bag to be rent open in the passion so that our ransom which is concealed might be poured out; a small bag indeed, but full. It is indeed a small child who is given to us, but in*

*whom dwells all the fulness of the Godhead..”*

St. Bernard graphically identifies God's gift as “a bag filled with mercy.” As we receive this “bag,” God invites us to imitate His life-giving generosity.

For sure, this all sounds very beautiful, but it also seems far removed from the contemporary celebration of Christmas. Three powerful forces account for the trend toward the “godless Christmas.”

First, we must acknowledge that from the mid-17th century until the mid-18th century, many patriotic Americans directly opposed or tried to mute the celebration of Christmas.

### Here are a few facts:

- In 1659, Massachusetts enacted a law called Penalty for Keeping Christmas. It was repealed in 1681. The law included these words: “Celebrating Christmas is a great dishonor of God and offense of others.” For more than 150 years after the law's repeal, most Americans still worked on Christmas Day.
- Though Christmas had become a federal holiday in 1870, employees didn't get paid until 1885.

- Christmas trees finally appeared in the White House in 1920.
- In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower established the custom of having a large national Christmas tree outside the White House.

These little facts show that secularism, now lamented, coexisted with our civic culture for a long time.

The second factor that undermines the proper spiritual celebration of Christmas is its deep and resilient roots in pre-Christian beliefs and rituals. These wild and raucous celebrations coincided with the winter solstice, which occurred around Dec. 25. With the legalization of Christianity in the 4th century, the Church “baptized” Dec. 25, converting the feast of the “sun” into the birthday of the Son of God.

Many practices and ideas from the “old religions” have survived and even thrived. We see this, for example, in the revival of winter solstice celebrations as well as pre-Christian superstitions and nature-based Celtic worship.

The third factor that de-spiritualizes Christmas grows out of the second. How so? Long periods of exhausting commercial activity from Halloween to Christmas Day now weirdly replicate pre-Christian winter celebrations.

Raw numbers tell the story: In 2022, Americans spent more than \$800 billion on Christmas, 30 percent of all retail sales occurred during the “holiday season” and 30 percent of gifts got returned. This contemporary manner of lavish gift-giving wildly departs from Christian practice, once marked by generous simplicity.

Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* created three Christmas ghosts — past, present and future. We now know a little bit more about Christmas Past and we live within Christmas Present. But what about Christmas Future?

In a way, Pope Francis has repeatedly painted a picture of Christmas Future. His Christmas homily of 2018 is especially clear:

*The first person, the greatest wealth, is Jesus Himself. Yet, do we want to stand at His side? Do we draw close to Him? Do we love His poverty? Or do we prefer to remain comfortably ensconced in our own interests and concerns? Above all, do we visit Him where He is to be found, namely in the poor manglers of our world? For that is where He is present. We are called to be a Church that worships Jesus who is poor and that serves Him in the poor. Certainly, it is not easy to leave the comfortable warmth of worldliness to embrace the stark beauty of the grotto of Bethlehem, but let us remember that it is not truly Christmas without the poor. Without the poor, we can celebrate Christmas, but not the birth of Jesus.*

Pope Francis, I suspect, has a pretty good image of Christmas Future: People silently standing beside the manger, ignoring the last Amazon truck as it speeds away. ■



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