

THIRD SUNDY OF ADVENT



PASTOR'S CORNER



What has Santa Claus to do with Christmas? This is the title of a thought-provoking reflection I recently received:

The skies are growing darker. The air is crisp, even biting, and the magic of Christmastime is in the air—almost, anyway. But this time of year, there's also a less joyful air among committed Catholics. Often, I've observed—and in all honesty, fostered—an antagonistic attitude toward all these bubbles of "Holiday Cheer" rolling up after Halloween. All this is really the junk of a secular world's Consumer Christmas, we might complain, not a true marking of the birth of our Savior. There's something real about that sentiment. The Christmas of the world is driven a lot more by the Almighty Dollar than the Almighty God. And anyone over 10 years old can see it gets worse every year. Decorations go up in stores before the leaves turn orange. The TV blares advertisements full of some mix of good vibes and outright greed. And somewhere, someone is furling their brow at "Merry Christmas", ready to *kindly inform you that "Happy Holidays" is more appropriate.*

So, we cast biting glances at the houses with Christmas lights up before Advent. Or we mutter how the Christmas music on the radio was made by—horror of horrors—nonbelievers. We moan bitterly about red coffee cups and just *wish that people would quietly get back inside their dark and barren houses until December, like they did when we were a proper country!* This antagonism, while understandable, misunderstands the nature of our feasts. *"Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" can be just as much an ingredient in a holy feast as "Oh Holy Night."* Music and fellowship, presents and pretty lights, cookies and sugarplums—these are the things that make a feast, no less than Mass and incense and worn out prie-dieux. Our festivals are embodied celebrations, and so they naturally include all the God-given joys of our bodies. *What the festivals are celebrating, and whether they are ultimately good for us, will depend more on the spiritual rituals and reasons for the seasons. But these high things are the leaven—not the dough.*

The Church Fathers knew this. Their feasts were embodied just as they were spiritual. Ascending to the loftiest heights of doctrine and worship, they nevertheless lived among a Christian people eager to baptize the cultural mores of the Roman Empire into the new Christian festival. Their liturgical calendar was Incarnational. And the entire person, individual and societal, was transformed by it. Processions closed down the streets. Slaves were commanded to rest. And tables were full, as far as able, with sweetness and melody. The Christian Grinch might note that this sounds very *unlike our secular lead-up to Christmas. Traffic piles up; it doesn't disperse for the Eucharist. Our bosses demand longer hours to keep up with demand; they're unwilling to risk profits for quiet contemplation of a poor manger. And while our tables are full, within minutes so will our bellies be; and yet, we will keep eating. But after all, is it not true that we all want our Christmas to mean something? We want it to mean what it ought to mean, for us and our loved ones. Thanks be to God, the task is over halfway done already, and not by you! Our Christian heritage, weakened as it is, is yet strong enough that December 25th transforms our whole society into a sparkling, musical, and sugary winter wonderland. It forcefully presents itself, to the smallest babe and wisest man, as a great occasion. All that is left to us is to remember why it is so.*

Fr. Slawek

