

The Two Christmases

By THOMAS STORCK

As Christmas approaches we might profitably ask ourselves which culture we live in to discover which Christmas we will celebrate. What do I mean? Let's begin by considering the idea of "culture." By "culture" I mean a set of customs or a way of living. We often don't realize that many of the things we take for granted as givens are determined culturally, not naturally. An example is how many meals a day we eat and at what hours. Cultures dictate both things indifferent in themselves, such as mealtimes, as well as matters having moral significance, such as courtship and marriage customs.

Cultures reflect the beliefs about God, man, and nature of the people who create them. But once a culture has started it also shapes the beliefs of those living in it. This can be good since a culture does much subconscious education of the young. Thus a Catholic culture teaches Catholic values and is a valuable supplement to the formal teaching done by parents, teachers, and priests.

Everyone without exception has a culture. In the English-speaking United States the culture originally was Protestant, but for a long time its theological content has been affected by indifferentism, and lately by a large amount of pure hedonism and post-Christian paganism. Obviously Catholics cannot accept the ideas and ideologies behind the dominant American culture, but need we accept the culture itself?

An example will help clarify this. On Dec. 25th a holiday called Christmas will occur, the climax of a season of merrymaking and good cheer which began shortly after Thanksgiving. For adults the main emphasis will be on good cheer and fellowship, for children on receiving gifts. This is a holiday of the dominant American culture. Curiously, on that same day, Dec.

25th, a Catholic religious holiday, also called Christmas, will take place. It will begin a 12-day period of rejoicing and good fellowship over God's Incarnation, and it will follow a four-week period of expectant preparation called Advent. Now these two festivals, one secular American, one Catholic, have really little in common. Yet many people do not understand this, and seek to express the Catholic truth of Christmas via an alien celebration. Why is it so hard to recognize that the general American Christmas is inimical to a real celebration of Catholic Christmas? (See C. S. Lewis' essay, "Xmas and Christmas," in *God in the Dock* for more on this.)

If we lived in a land with customs of an entirely different origin from ours, such as India, we would soon see that to celebrate the cultural holidays would be to give recognition and expression to beliefs other than, and opposed to, ours. Yet because the dominant American cultural holidays were originally often Catholic feasts, and generally have kept the same names, we fail to see that they too are alien to us. Only Catholic culture can express Catholic truth. The corrupt degenerations resemble the original enough that the unwary can mistake them, although they would never have been fooled by something of wholly different origin.

What can we Catholics do, living as we must in the midst of a foreign culture? We must try to regain and develop our own Catholic culture. The home is the logical place to begin. The Liturgical Press (Collegeville, Minn., 56321) publishes an entire series of books showing how to adapt genuine Catholic customs to our present-day home life. The series includes such titles as *Family Advent Customs*, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, *My Nameday — Come for Dessert*, and others. Together

they give a fairly complete program for observing the Church year, as well as encouragement and advice on how to begin. For example, they suggest that to recapture a Catholic sense of Christmas a true Advent must first be kept.

"The simplest way (to begin) is by keeping Advent. Children love to anticipate. When there are empty mangers to fill with straws of small sacrifices, when the Mary-Candle is a daily reminder on the dinner table, when Advent hymns are sung in the candlelight of a graceful Advent wreath, children are not anxious to celebrate Christmas before time. That would offend their sense of honor. Older children who make Nativity sets, cut Old Testament symbols to decorate a Jesse tree, or prepare costumes for a Christmas play will find Advent all too short a time to prepare for the coming of Christ the King" (Helen McLoughlin, *Christmas to Candlemas in a Catholic Home*, pp. 5-6).

Though we should begin our revival of Catholic culture in the home, why end there? In Catholic parts of this country, or wherever a few Catholic families live near each other, there is no reason why Catholic culture cannot publicly show itself. Indeed, many of the suggestions in the above books are for neighborhoods, parishes, or groups of families.

"Where two or three families who are trying to live with the Church are close by, this beautiful custom (of Las Posadas) is worked out in a more dramatic way. As soon as it is dusk, one couple or a

boy and girl of high school age dress as Mary and Joseph. Carrying lanterns, they lead the procession from house to house, knocking on each door and inquiring for room. The same answer is heard, 'No room in the inn.' At the last 'inn' the innkeeper offers his stable (the garage) to the holy couple, and the procession follows Mary and Joseph to the door. Joseph enters, sees that there is straw and a manger, and beckons Mary to come. Before the 'live' Bethlehem scene, all stand while one person reads the Gospel from the Midnight Mass" (Elsa Chaney, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, pp. 48-50).

These suggestions might seem fanciful to some, but really have we any choice but to try? We must live according to some culture, and if we want to live fully Catholic lives, then that culture must be a Catholic one.

(Thomas Storck is the librarian and an instructor of history at Christendom College, Front Royal, Va.)

GOD SCIENCE ENEMIES?

"THE APPLE OF KNOWLEDGE"

by Stephen Foglein, M.S.
165 pp. \$5.95 postpaid. A critical examination of the atheist dogmas in science. "I'm so happy that finally someone has been able to put into words all I have thought about God and science."

A university student. A strong antidote for today's atheist education. Very readable.

ATLAS BOOKS, Box 844
Mountain View, CA 94042.

THE WANDERER

December 22, 1983