

# DUMBING-DOWN OF CHRISTMAS

If a Martian were to descend on our shores in the month of December, he would no doubt conclude that Christmas is a fun time. What else he would conclude is uncertain, but it is not likely that he would identify the holiday season with the birth of Jesus Christ.

Each year it gets worse. Department store employees are instructed not to say "Merry Christmas," school calendars dub the Christmas vacation the "Winter Holiday," kids sing songs about reindeer, catalogs hawk nativity scenes proclaiming "It's a Girl," Elvis displaces Christ in the manger, "Happy Holidays" becomes the proverbial greeting, the Christmas tree becomes an ersatz religious symbol, cats, bears, mice and dogs—including real ones—are used in crèches, dishes are sold with animals replacing the Holy Family and TV features Charlie Brown.

What gives? The trivialization of Christmas is frequently seen as the consequence of an overly-commercial society. While there is some truth to this, it hardly satisfies as a response.

The dumbing-down of Christmas has more to do with our nervousness over the public expression of religion than the machinations of Madison Avenue. There have always been those who would sell Christmas down the drain for a buck, but only in recent times have we become so panicky over not offending non-Christians that we have literally done a 180 by trashing Christianity itself.

It has become a badge of virtue in some quarters not to publicly celebrate one's own religious heritage. It is virtuous, we are told, to demonstrate tolerance for those who might be offended by a public display of our religion. But what does this say about those who think this way and what

does it say about those whom we seek not offend?

At bottom, those who opt to dumb-down Christmas are basically ashamed to be called Christians. They think this way because they have become convinced that so many nasty things have been done by Christians that they have no reason to publicly celebrate their heritage. In other words, they are badly educated about history and Christianity.

Surely there are pages of Christianity that are full of blood; the same is true of all religions. But must it be said one more time that such chapters in Christianity represent profound departures from what Christianity teaches? Do we stop loving our parents when we learn that they are sinners, too? Doesn't it matter more what the tenets of a religion espouse than what some do in its name?

We must also get over the hopelessly romantic notion that societies untouched by Christianity were essentially a Garden of Eden. No, those who lived closer to nature than we do were neither the egalitarians that some proclaim nor the friendly spirits that they have been made out to be. They raped, beat and killed each other with alacrity.

In a review of Rodney Stark's new book, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Peter Monaghan had this to say: "Christianity offered security, health care, and loving family life. It provided a coherent culture but did not require converts to abandon ethnic ties. It also granted women higher status than the Greco-Roman world as a whole. Christianity forbade abortion and infanticide, while Greco-Romans practiced both commonly, killing many women and girls."

And what does it say about those whom we seek not to offend when we decide to bury the meaning of Christmas? Aren't we really saying that they are so intolerant of our religious customs and traditions that we would rather duck Christmas

than face their wrath? If so, that means they have a problem, and so do we.

There is no need to be “in-your-face” about Christmas. But there is also no need to subvert the meaning of Christmas by submerging our heritage in public. There is a better way: we should encourage people of every faith to make manifest their religion in the public square. That’s what diversity really means. Not to do so is to allow the dumbing-down of Christmas to proceed towards its ultimate end. It’s one thing for Fidel Castro to ban Christmas, quite another for us to participate in its democratic demise.

Merry Christmas from all of us at the Catholic League.