

SIGNS OF CHRISTMAS

Is it my imagination or is Christmas actually beginning to be recognized by its correct name? The word “Christmas” has been used in newspapers recently, the “holiday tree” is once again being called the Christmas Tree, and some stores are dropping “Happy Holidays.”

While I consider the pendulum swinging back as only proper, I do not intend by that to take away from the importance of holy days observed by other religions. This year, Hanukkah is celebrated during the days of December 16 – 23. I would not mind being wished a “Happy Hanukkah” by one of the Jewish Faith. That expresses their wish for me based on an event that they hold special in their spiritual journey.

Nevertheless, December 25 is the beginning of Christmas for us Christians. Why would we want to call one of our high holy days as, simply, a holiday? Every now and then, I have to remind those of our Faith that it’s “Merry Christmas” and not “Happy Holidays.” We allow ourselves to blend into the culture around us. Sometimes, we even make an effort to do so. Instead of seeing our Faith reflected in the things that surround us, we prefer to go the way of the world with more shallow meanings. Yet, for us Christians, there are signs of Christmas all around us!

We can start with Santa Claus, who has a religious connection. He is different from Father Frost of other countries. Even Befania of Italy, the Christmas Witch that brings gifts on January 6, has a different origin. Note the similarity between “Befania” and “Epiphania,” the Feastday of the Three Kings, which ends the celebration of Christmas. (I would not mind seeing us celebrate Christmas Day strictly in a spiritual way and exchange gifts later on January 6. Besides, everything is on sale by then.)

Santa Claus is called Saint Nick at times. That makes sense, when we recall the real Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. Sometimes, we use the first part of his name (Nick) and at other times, we use the last part (Cholas or Claus). “Saint,” of course, becomes “Santa.” Saint Nicholas, being of the East, would have had a beard. Santa’s bright red color and white trim remind us of the vestures that bishops wore. Even his cap is reminiscent of the soft furry hats that bishops wore years ago. The story is told that Saint Nicholas gave gifts of money to some needy individuals. He did it anonymously at night, by dropping them into the house, like Santa.

Saint Nicholas is the patron of children. But, if there were a difference between Santa Claus and Saint Nicholas, it would be in the question that is asked. The first asks, “What do you want?” The other asks, “What do you need?”

Christian signs of Christmas around us do not stop with Santa Claus. Elves, which appear to be without gender, can remind us of angels, God’s own messengers. Speaking of angels, they were an important part of Christ’s birth, whether at the annunciation to Mary that she would become the mother of the Messiah or at the proclamation to the shepherds that the Christ had been born. The very act of our giving gifts is associated with either the Three Kings or Saint Nicholas. The Three Kings were guided by a star (or, what seemed to them to be a star), which has become very much a part of our decorations during this time. The bright, colorful lights and tinsel appear to transform the world into a place of beauty that is peaceful, joyful, and uplifting to the spirit. And, that is exactly the purpose for which Jesus was born!

The signs of Christmas are all around us.