



continuous conversion

CHRISTMAS AROUND THE WORLD

by Sara Tusek

December is a special month for many reasons, one of which is the celebration of Christmas. This religious holiday has diverse expressions in countries around the world. Here's a brief look at the many ways of celebrating Christmas.

HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

The first Christian church official to propose special activities for the pre-Christmas period was Perpetuus, bishop of Tours, in 490.

To help his flock prepare for the holiday, he advocated fasting every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from Martinmas (November 11) to Christmas Eve. This practice, which mirrored Lent, spread slowly throughout France, Spain, and Germany, and became known as Advent.

ADVENT

Roman attention to the Advent season trailed Perpetuus by about 100 years, and it took a radically different tone. While much of Western Europe, and at least portions of the Christian East, fasted, Roman Christians celebrated. Perhaps it seemed odd to them to approach Christ's birth as somberly as they did his death.

By the eleventh century, though, Rome had come around, and Advent meant no feasts, no recreational travel, no marital relations, and no weddings. (These prohibitions were dropped in recent centuries. Sometime

in all of this, the start date for Western Advent slid back two weeks, to the Sunday closest to St. Andrew's Day (November 30). As a result, Advent can last anywhere from 22 to 28 days, though for the sake of year-to-year consistency, Advent calendars start with December 1.

In the Orthodox church, Advent still includes fasting, and in most places it lasts from November 15 to December 24. The Armenian Orthodox church is an exception; its members fast for three of the seven weeks between November 15 (St. Philip's Day) and January 6 (Epiphany).

ST. BARBARA'S DAY

St. Barbara's Day, December 4, signals the beginning of the Christmas season in Syria, Lebanon, and parts of France and Germany. Some Middle Eastern customs for the day resemble American Halloween: children dress up in frightening costumes and go door-to-door collecting candy and other small gifts. This activity has no relationship to the story of St. Barbara, which states that her father locked her in a tower, killed her for her Christian faith, and was then struck by lightning. In any event, historians now doubt that St. Barbara even existed.

ST. NICHOLAS' DAY

St. Nicholas' Day, December 6, inaugurates the Christmas festivities in Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany. On the night of December 5, St. Nicholas—accompanied by helpers with

black faces—brings gifts for good children, who set out shoes or stockings for him to fill.

The Dutch make the biggest production of Nick's arrival, gathering to watch his ship land in Amsterdam, then seeing him off on his flying, white horse. In America, St. Nicholas arrives via the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and doesn't deliver his gifts until December 24 or 25.

ST. LUCY'S DAY

Swedes wait until St. Lucy's Day, December 13, to commence Christmas observances. Lucy, who supposedly died in Italy in 304, became a Scandinavian favorite when that region converted to Christianity, beginning in the eleventh century. Lucy's name comes from the Latin word for "light," but, before sixteenth-century calendar reforms, her feast day fell on December 21—the shortest day of the year. Her annual remembrance involves a girl from each household wearing a wreath of lingonberry leaves and lit candles on her head and making an early breakfast for the family.



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THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The decorated Christmas tree can be traced back to the ancient Romans who decorated trees with small pieces of metal during Saturnalia, a winter festival in honor of Saturnus, the god of agriculture.

An evergreen, the "Paradise tree," was decorated with apples as a symbol of the feast of Adam and Eve held on December 24th during the middle ages. Christmas trees were sold in Alsace in 1531. (Alsace was at that time a part of Germany; today it is part of France.)

The trees were sold at local markets and set up in homes undecorated. In the Ammerschweier in Alsace, there was an ordinance that stated no person "shall have for Christmas more than one bush of more than eight shoe lengths."

Sixteenth century folklore credited Martin Luther as being the first to decorate an indoor tree. After a walk through a forest of evergreens with shining stars overhead, Luther is said to have tried to describe the experience to his family, and showed them by bringing a tree into their home and decorating it with candles.

The oldest record of a decorated Christmas tree came from a 1605 diary found in Strasburg, France (Germany in 1605). The tree was decorated with paper roses, apples and candies.



White House Photo by Tina Hager

In Austria & Germany during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the tops of evergreens were cut and hung upside down in a living room corner. They were decorated with apples, nuts and strips of red paper.

One of the first records of Christmas trees in America dates back to the Moravian Church's settlement in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in Christmas, 1747. Actual trees were not decorated, but wooden pyramids covered with evergreen branches were decorated with candles.

During the American War of Independence, Hessian troops from Germany set up Christmas trees. An early account tells of a Christmas tree set up by American soldiers at Fort Dearborn, Illinois, the site of Chicago in 1804.

In 1834, Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, was credited with bringing the first Christmas tree to Windsor Castle for the Royal Family, although some historians state that, in actuality, Queen Charlotte, Victoria's grandmother, recalled that a Christmas tree was in the Queen's lodge at Windsor on Christmas Day in 1800.

Charles Minnegrode introduced the custom of decorating trees in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1842. By 1850, the Christmas tree had become fashionable in the eastern states. Until this time, it had been considered a quaint foreign custom. Mark Carr brought trees from the Catskills to the streets of New York in 1851, and opened the first retail Christmas tree lot in the United States.

In 1856, Franklin Pierce was the first president to introduce the Christmas tree to the White House for a group of Washington Sunday School children. The first national Christmas Tree was lighted in the year, 1923, on the White House lawn by President Calvin Coolidge.

(information from Christianitytoday.com and vermontchristmastrees.org)

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The Legend of the Pine Tree

When the Holy family was pursued by Herod's soldiers, many plants offered them shelter. One such plant was the Pine Tree. When Mary was too weary to travel longer the family stopped at the edge of a forest to rest. A gnarled old pine which had grown hollow with its years invited them to rest within its trunk--then it closed its branches down and kept them safe until the soldiers had passed. Upon leaving, the Christ Child blessed the pine and the imprint of his little hand was left forever in the tree's fruit--the pine cone. If a cone is cut lengthwise the hand may still be seen.