



## Christmas in the CR

Christmas here in the Czech Republic is amazing, for Christians and non-Christians alike.

In contrast to Christmas in the presumably “Christian” US, no one here argues about the separation of church and state, getting all excited and upset if there’s a nativity scene or reference to God’s love in a government-owned place.

On the contrary! Public schools, public squares, town halls and government buildings are gaily decorated with Christmas carols,

trees, angels and the Baby Jesus. Little towns are competitive about their nativity scenes, lavishing artistic talent and creativity to produce beautiful, unique crèches

in every town square.

Beginning in mid-November, you see posters for Christmas markets, Christmas concerts, Christmas art exhibitions, Christmas craft fairs, and just about everything you can think of for celebrating Christmas, creating anticipation and excitement.

The normally austere and rushed public mood changes. People smile at strangers (definitely not a normal Czech custom!) on the street. Instead of walking fast, head down, in a brisk, business-like way, people stroll arm-in-arm, looking at the decorations and designs.

You really know it’s Christmas when the carp sellers appear on street corners. These men, covered with huge aprons, will sell you a live carp from a big tub of fish at their feet. If you like, they’ll take their big sharp knife or ax and cut off the head of the carp—or you can take it home alive, put it in your bathtub till Christmas and then kill it yourself. Czechs make a schnitzel (fried with breadcrumbs) or the carp and eat it on Christmas, along with fish soup, potato salad and cookies.

And by the way, Christmas is celebrated on the 24th of December, not the 25th. Families gather for dinner, eat, and then, for the most part, go to Midnight Mass.



*Continuous conversion is the process of living as a Christian; sanctification is another term for this process.*

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Before Christmas dinner, the family admires the Christmas tree, sings some carols, has a toast, and tries to guess what's in the wrapped presents under the tree.

According to tradition, **Jesicek** (Baby Jesus) brings the presents, not Santa Claus. There's a definite lack of an American "Santa" presence; in fact, I've not seen a single Santa here since St. Nicholas Day (December 6), a strange child-oriented celebration that includes a devil, St Nicholas, and an angel. Santa



has his moment, then fades away as Jesicek takes over.

After dinner, a designated person, usually the youngest, hands out the presents, making sure that Jesicek is thanked. Everyone admires their gifts, then takes a break till midnight mass. Non-Catholics, atheists, agnostics, Buddhists, and just about anyone may turn up at Mass in one of the many large, ornate cathedrals. The service is breathtakingly beautiful and moving, with a dignity and timelessness that you rarely see in the US.

This kind of Jesus-oriented Christmas is not what you would expect from a country that's been characterized as 70-80% atheist. Numerous polls state that



Czechs, when asked, will classify themselves as **atheists**, a shockingly severe term for a completely godless person, from an Ameri-

continuous conversion  
Sara Tusek, Editor,  
International Leadership Institute

can perspective. If so many Czechs are non-believers, how do you explain the lovely ways they celebrate the birth of Christ? One possibility is that Christianity is so deeply ingrained in the country's history and traditions that it's part of Czech culture, a part so crucial that everyone takes it as a given.

In polls, Czechs may say they are atheists because so few of them go to church, the Church as an institution having been discredited in Czech eyes by its corruption and hypocrisy. Perhaps "atheist" to a Czech means "non-public-church goer."



However, my experience is that many Czechs, in their thinking and their hearts, know quite well that God is real and never question His existence. They simply question the behavior of the Church over the



centuries in Europe, with its legacy of torture, warfare and greed. They don't choose to be identified with such a Church.

Christmas in the Czech Republic has been, since 1990, my favorite Christmas. Instead of using Christmas as a political football, squawking about the

proper use/nonuse of public funds, Czechs just relax and enjoy their beautiful country, fantastic architecture, delicious food, family fun and Christmas traditions.

*Vesele  
vanoce!*

