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## Christ's Mass

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For this month I've revised a message that I wrote several years ago. I'm using it again because I think it says something that can bless all of us as we think about it again.

When I wrote this, I had been thinking about the word **Christmas**—what it means to people today, what it used to mean, and what it truly means.

What does Christmas usually mean to people in the USA nowadays? Santa Claus, reindeer, "Jingle Bells," Frosty the Snowman, the Grinch,



Also decorations; giving and getting gifts, especially toys; and a big dinner where everybody eats too much — these are the trimmings and trappings we've loaded onto the celebration of our "Happy Holidays." Oh, yes, and maybe some Christmas music, angels, a baby in a manger, and some shepherds and some wise men—as long as "religion" doesn't get in the way of our having a good time.

Well, what's so bad about Santa Claus and all the rest? What's wrong with giving special gifts to kids and loved ones on this special day of the year? What's wrong with celebrating and having fun?

It's not so much that those things are wrong; it's that they are a distraction. They draw our attention away from Jesus. They keep us from focusing on celebrating our Savior's birth.

The word "Christmas" is derived from an Old English term meaning "Christ's Mass" — literally a solemn Eucharistic worship service to honor and commemorate the birth of Christ, which took place on the holiday — the holy day — that was supposed to be our Lord's birthday. **Christmas** was not the day; it was the worship service. And Christmas day was simply the day on which Christmas — Christ's Mass — took place.

People in those days would not have wished each other a "Merry Christmas" — it would be like saying, "Have a fun time at church this Sunday."

We don't go to church to have fun, we go to worship God in company with other believers; and regularly, in all Christian churches, to remember Christ's suffering, death and resurrection as we share the Eucharistic meal, otherwise known as Holy Communion.

Being merry — having fun — is a trivial, frivolous thing. Worshiping God is serious business that, however enjoyable it might be at times, should never be frivolous.

All the trappings — the tree, the gifts, Santa Claus and all the rest — have gradually been added to the annual Christmas celebration. Many of the additions were well intended. For example, the first decorated "Christmas tree" is generally attributed to Martin Luther, who added candles to indoor trees that were already in use in his time.



The tradition of Santa Claus began as reverence for Saint Nicholas, who was the Bishop of Myra in the 4th century, and who became well known for his generosity to the poor and his protection of children. Various stories about Saint Nicholas led to the use of stockings or shoes filled with goodies as treats for children.

The tradition grew in Europe, especially in the Netherlands, during the Middle Ages. It was given a big boost in America in 1823 by the publication of the poem now called "The Night before Christmas." Artists' work, particularly that of Thomas Nast, and the 1930s Coca Cola Santa by Haddon Sundblom, have helped to make Santa Claus a familiar image in our country and elsewhere..

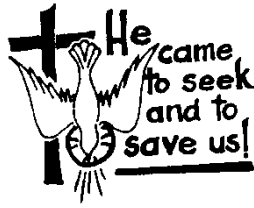


The result is that Christmas has now become a day, and in fact a weeks-long season of the year, when we concentrate on the trappings. If we're young enough, we find delight in the excitement of it. If we're old enough, we find the whole thing a chore that we would just as soon skip. In any case, we tend pretty much to ignore the central element of Christmas — our Lord, Jesus Christ.

What does Christmas really mean? What should it mean to us who call ourselves believers? The true meaning of Christmas is contained in one word — **Immanuel**, which means "God with us."

This is the astonishing, mysterious fact of Christmas — that God the Son, who created all things, laid aside His divinity temporarily and became a helpless human baby, so that He could grow up into a man. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15)

He became one of us — **God with us** — in order to accomplish several things. In His "high priestly prayer" (John 17:4) Jesus said, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do." Part of His work was to train disciples who would establish the Church after His departure. Another part was to provide the teaching that we have in the Gospel records. Another part of it was simply to show us what God is like. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," he said in John 14:9. And part of His work, a critically important part to each of us, was to pay the just penalty for our sins, so that we would not



have to pay it ourselves.

You who are incarcerated know about paying a penalty for your sins. How would it be if someone had said, after you were sentenced, "Don't send him to jail, send me in his place. I'll serve that sentence." Jesus says that, not about earthly punishment (we have to pay the consequences for our actions here), but about eternal punishment — though we all deserve it, we don't have to bear it, because He has already borne it for us.

**Immanuel — God with us.** This is the true meaning of Christmas, and the heart of the Gospel truth. Well, it's the first half of the Gospel truth. The second half is the other side of the coin — the true meaning of Easter — **us with God**. Jesus came, He suffered, He died, He rose again, He ascended to Heaven, and He sent the Holy Spirit, so that we — you and I — could be with Him eternally at the greatest celebration of all, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

Wherever you are this Christmas, whatever else you do, celebrate Christ's Mass in your heart. Let your spirit join with the Holy Spirit in lifting up worship, praise, and thanksgiving to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for sending the Son into the world as **Immanuel—God with us**.

God's Peace and Blessings—

*Brother Roland*

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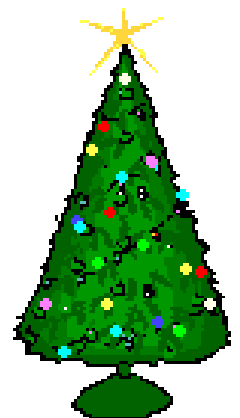
If you have a question about Bible truth or the Christian life, I will gladly share my thoughts with you, and maybe also with the other readers of the "Good News Guide." Write to me. Please note: I do not have Bibles or study materials to send to you.

**Brother Roland, P.O. Box 14, Fayetteville PA 17222**

## How We Kept Christmas

My mother loved Christmas, and so of course we all did. It was the high point of our year, the season around which all else revolved, and the kickoff event of the season was an all-day expedition to find just the right Christmas tree. Mother would plan where to go — we knew the woods well, from berry-picking times — and Daddy, or one of us boys as we got old enough, would drive the old Jeep pickup. We would start out fairly close to the farm, looking in the likely places, and we would try to remember where the

best tree was that we had seen so far. After three or four hours and many miles of sandy woods roads, we would go back and find that best tree again, and cut it down. I remember a few times that the tree wasn't "as nice as last year," but mostly they were fine short-needle pines, symmetrical and full, and just about tall enough to touch the ceiling.



The tree was placed in a big bucket of wet sand, to keep it from drying out. We trimmed it lovingly with lots of colored lights, then ornaments — some were treasures from my parents' newlywed days; others were bought at the dime store, or handmade — and finally hundreds of tinsel "icicles," each one placed individually so it would hang down and look "real." Our tree was always up by mid-December, and stayed up until about January 6th. We didn't know about Epiphany; we just liked having the tree around for a long time. Sometimes we would mix up a batch of homemade eggnog, turn on the tree lights, and just sit and talk.

Mother would spend days making her famous carrot cakes. These were beautifully moist fruitcakes made with grated carrots, flour, raisins, dates, nuts, some candied fruit, wonderful spices, and lots of love. Each cake, in its own give-away aluminum loaf pan, was topped with a folded paper towel and anointed with a few spoonfuls of apricot brandy, then wrapped in colorful Christmas foil. Mother made them in batches of five, and gave them generously to friends, neighbors, family members, and other favored souls. One friend always received two cakes, one for right away, which was shared with his wife, and one that was his to savor sparingly for weeks to come.

Christmas gifts were a problem, as they are still today. Picking just the right gift for a loved one takes either divine guidance or a special talent. This is true whether you have ten dollars to spend for six gifts, as we did in those days, or a handy credit card. I remember one Christmas, when I was about ten years old, finding just the right gift for Daddy — something affordable that I knew he would like. It was a miniature bottle of Old Granddad that was on display in the window of the local liquor store. You can imagine my shock and dismay when the man not only wouldn't sell it to me, but yelled at me and told me to get out of his store!

Not having much money, we often made our gifts, or found them. One Christmas morning brother Bill and I got up very early to go duck hunting. We bagged no ducks that day, but I spotted a present I knew Mother would like. On

an island about a hundred feet from shore was a lovely Florida holly tree. It was a cold day, for Florida, and the water came over the tops of my rubber boots, but I waded out anyway and got Mother a nice branch of holly to decorate her Christmas table.

Ah, yes, Christmas dinner. The main attraction, of course, was the biggest turkey that would fit in our oven — usually around 25 pounds. With stuffing (we always called it "dressing"), potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, two or three vegetables, Mother's angel biscuits, and at least two kinds of homemade pie, it was as fine a meal as anyone could wish for, and we enjoyed it to the very, very full.

And that was Christmas. It was a family time, a time to enjoy being together, to enjoy the pleasures of getting and especially giving gifts, to share a wonderful festive meal. We kept Christmas well, we thought, and enjoyed it tremendously. It makes me sad today to think that we left out the main ingredient — Jesus. Oh, yes, we knew it was His birthday, and we loved to go caroling and sing the wonderful Christmas songs, but "Up on the House Top" was as meaningful to us as "Away In a Manger."



I'm sure there must be many families today like we were — who have a giving, sharing approach to Christmas, and who think they "keep it well," but who leave Jesus out of their celebration. There are many who sing of the Babe in the manger, without recognizing Him as Emmanuel — God with us; who desire "Peace on Earth" without acknowledging the Prince of Peace. I hope they all will come to know, as most of my family has eventually come to know, the Christ of Christmas. Without Him at its center, Christmas is like a glass ornament — pretty on the outside, but hollow, without substance.

May all of your Christmases be filled with the Lord's real presence, whether or not they are filled with fun and food and Christmas presents. God bless.

## Celebrating Christmas

With all of the "baggage" that has been added to "Christ's Mass" over the decades, it's hard to keep Christ at the center of our celebration—but it is important to do that. Enjoy the puzzle.

### Puzzle:

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O H I L S D R E H P E H S V A A J F D F U E K S J V V B F M I R W N
    
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### Words:

ANGELS  
AWAY IN A MANGER  
BELLS  
BETHLEHEM  
CANDLES  
CANDY CANES  
CAROLS  
CHRISTMAS CARDS  
CRANBERRIES  
EGG NOG  
EVERGREEN TREE  
FAMILY GATHERINGS  
FIREPLACE

FOOTBALL GAMES  
FRUIT CAKE  
GINGERBREAD  
GOOD CHEER  
HOLLY  
ICE SKATING  
ICICLES  
**IMMANUEL**  
JINGLE BELLS  
**JOY TO THE WORLD**  
**LAMB OF GOD**  
MISTLETOE  
NEW CLOTHES

O HOLY NIGHT  
ORNAMENTS  
POPCORN  
**PRINCE OF PEACE**  
REINDEER  
RIBBONS  
SANTA CLAUS  
SHEPHERDS  
SHOPPING  
SILENT NIGHT  
SMILING FACES  
SNOW  
**SON OF GOD**

STABLE  
STAR  
STRINGS OF LIGHTS  
THE FIRST NOEL  
TINSEL  
TOYS  
TRADITIONS  
TURKEY AND DRESSING  
WE THREE KINGS  
WHAT CHILD IS THIS?  
WISE MEN  
WRAPPING GIFTS  
WREATH