Christmas in France

By Msgr. Marcel Murie

In France when I was a boy, Christmas was celebrated quite differently from what I saw when I came to America. My home town had a population of about 50,000 people, most of them Catholics and a large number of practical ones.

Christmas was first of all a religious feast. It was also a feast for the small children, for until you were 9 or 10 years old, you received small presents at Christmas.

The presents were placed near a chimney where the small children would find them when they woke up on Christmas morning. They were told that "Pere Noel" had brought the presents. We did not know about the American "Santa Claus." The feast of St. Nicholas was observed on December 6 and we learned the legends about him and observed the day as a religious feast.

For adults and the older children, Christmas was most of all a religious day. That is, for the practical Catholics it was a religious event, for others it was just another holiday.

Erecting the Crib

As an altar boy, I would go to church during the week before Christmas to help the assistant pastor erect the Christmas crib in the parish church. It usually was an elaborately decorated crib, covering one of the side chapels in the church. This is where we had the Christmas trees, with rocks and plants and moss, trying to re-create a Palestinian landscape or the hills of Bethlehem.

Christmas eve was spent with the family, waiting for the time to go to church for the midnight Mass. It was a solemn Mass with deacon and subdeacon and a large well-trained choir to provide the special music.

We had four priests in our parish and one of these was a good musician and in charge of the choir. The choir had been rehearsing the Christmas Mass for several weeks and I remember the singing was beautiful. There were even men playing the violin for the occasion.

This was before 1920 or '21 when Rome forbade orchestras and violins in church. The people were disappointed at this ruling because they were pleased with the festive atmosphere which the instruments achieved. Now it can be done again as the rules have changed.

Exactly at midnight, one of the cantors intoned the "Minuit, Christiens, c'est l'heure solennelle, quand l'Homme Dieu descendit parmi nous."

At Communion time, most of the people received Communion. It was about 2 o'clock when we returned home, or maybe a bit later if you were an altar boy and the celebrant of the Midnight Mass wanted you to serve the other two low Masses which followed the first one. Only a small number of people remained in church for these two low Masses.

"Reveillon"

Back at home, there was a "reveillon" or small meal before going to bed.

In the morning, many returned to church for the partial Mass at 10 a.m. and in the afternoon for Vespers at 2 p.m. and Benediction. These vesper services were a regular feature on Sundays and holy days of obligation, and they were well attended at that time. They are rarely held any more because of poor attendance.

Since Christmas was both a religious and family feast, there might be some close relatives or friends invited for supper. But I do not remember people exchanging the greeting "Merry Christmas" or "Joyeux Noel." Even now, when I send Christmas greetings to my relatives and friends in France, they send back a card saying "Happy New Year."

New Year's Day

New Year's day was a secular feast when you visited friends and wished them "une Bonne et Heureuse Annee." The day was not then a holy day of obligation although many people went to church on that day.

I don't know how the French people celebrate Christmas today, no doubt World War II changed many things and the American influence has been felt in France as elsewhere in Europe.

However the day is celebrated, we should not forget that the purpose of Christ in becoming Man was to show the way to Heaven. For the people who believe in Him and practice their religion, Christmas will always be a happy feast, when Christ came down among us to manifest His love for all men, that we may love Him and make our fellowmen happy by loving them in true charity.

But for those who think nothing of Christ, who have not accepted his message of love, who still refuse to love their fellowmen as Christ loved us, then Christmas has no real meaning.

Whether we say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy New Year" let us make it meaningful, let us have some spiritual motivation with it. Let us keep in mind that Christ is the One Who made possible our happiness in this world and in the world to come.