

The reinvention of Christmas

(15 Dec. 2000)

Focusing on a few icicles, the local television stations rushed to make the little bit of winter that visited us earlier this week into a Christmas card scene, reminding us of how imagination plays a part in this holiday.

All celebrations are, of course, constructed by the imagination. To mark a particular occasion, societies invent rituals that in time become accepted traditions.

Some holidays are connected to nature. Christmas, for example, is linked to the winter solstice, the beginning of the end of winter, after which the days begin to get longer, hence the ancient Roman celebration of the Invincible Sun deity.

As Christians came to dominate the Roman empire, they replaced this holiday with the feast of the birth of Christ, “the sun of righteousness.”

At first, Christians celebrated only Easter, in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus, and Pentecost, the feast of the formation of the church through the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Later, Christians in the eastern part of the Roman Empire commemorated both the birth of Jesus and the Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the world, on Jan. 6. By the fourth century, Christians in Rome moved the observance of Jesus’ birth to December.

The religious observance of Nativity, however, did not eliminate all the feasting associated with the winter solstice, and for centuries church leaders complained about the drinking and street partying at Christmas.

In reaction to this, some groups, such as the Puritan settlers in New England, abolished Christmas. The holiday came back, nonetheless, and the bacchanalia was politely moved to New Year’s Day.

Christmas became largely a church and family celebration, with a special family dinner marking the day. And even all the modern commercial gift-giving hoopla is linked to personal relationships.

This private character of Christmas delayed its becoming an official national holiday in the United States until 1865. And it would take the rest of the 19th century for Christmas to become more important publicly than Thanksgiving.

During that time, America experienced the rise of urbanization and industrialization — processes that also are related to the prominence of the nuclear family, a salient theme in the Nativity story.

Interestingly, the increased popularity of Christmas followed the appearance in 1843 and the subsequent rise in popularity in the United States of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," a story centered on the nuclear family.

Rich in many ways, this Christmas classic pits the Cratchits, a family bound by domestic affection, against the impersonal outside world, symbolized by Ebenezer Scrooge. Eventually, the heartless Scrooge gives in to "the spirit of Christmas" and thereby becomes a part of the Cratchit family.

Along with family issues, gender also plays an important part in the Catholic Christmas tradition. Mary's humility is emphasized in the Annunciation and Nativity stories. The conventional image of Mary in the manger scene displays those same attitudes.

Francis of Assisi, an Italian saint, is credited with devising the scene in the 13th century as a part of the Christmas traditions.

Thereafter, his Franciscan followers promoted the humble and innocent roles for women within the family.

St. Francis' Christmas tradition also promoted the cult of the Christ child, and modern secular Christmas literature focuses on children. In "A Christmas Carol," for example, Tiny Tim is at the center of the story.

"Christmas is, after all, about children," we are often reminded today in a reflection of the modern family, with its own cult of the child.

Originally, however, the birth of Christ signaled the arrival of the Messiah. Christmas, then, was about the advent of light to those who live in darkness, about freedom and salvation, about turning upside down the values of this world.

But, alas, our modern Christmas has moved away from that. Indeed, our Christmas has been reinvented.