

**PRAY** Jesus, we are surrounded by people and events that invite us to open our hearts to you. Help us to recognize your presence among us, especially through the practices and traditions of this season. Amen.

By Laura Holt

**Christmas** is loaded with traditions. Traditional traditions, yes, but most families also have their share of odd or uncommon ones. Maybe you have a family holiday movie-thon. Maybe you decorate the tree with your siblings. Maybe you even dress up as Santa and wave at people from your rooftop as a way to get into the spirit.

Whatever the tradition is, I'll bet it makes you smile. That's the thing about traditions, they have this habit of being especially heartwarming, no matter where they fall on the common to out-there scale.

My family has a few of the more 'normal' traditions. Decorating our tree together, inviting friends over to chit-chat and eat Christmas cookies, and attending Mass on Christmas Eve are all things we celebrate traditionally. And it's from that last one, going to Mass, that our special tradition was born.

**Four years old.** That's the first Christmas service I can recall. My twin sister Erin and I were all dolled up in green Christmas dresses, our hair brushed out nice and feet strapped into uncomfortable shoes that squeaked. As we slid into a pew with our parents, the whole church seemed so colorful and shimmery. It felt to me much more like a party than Mass, which normally did not interest my little mind. There was this buzzing excitement in the air.

2nd Sunday of Advent



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# SPiRIT

It's A

# Tradition

The Mass was the same as usual except for a Christmas carol or two thrown in. The similarities ended when the priest began his homily. He asked us kids to sit with him, way up in front.

This priest was just visiting our parish and had brought a 'surprise' for us tykes. We all gathered around him, and he told us the Christmas story. I hung way back with my sister, though. We were shy around all the older kids.

**When his story wrapped up,** Father stood, smiling, and revealed his big surprise—a bowl filled with candy.

I remember one little girl literally yelling as she launched herself at it. Through all the squeals and cries of the mad rush forward, kids pushing each other aside to get some, I was timid and confused. Absolutely everybody was watching, some of them laughing, and it made me shy.

When I finally got a chance to approach, all the other children had had their fill. Erin and I walked forward together, grinning, expectant.

When we got to the priest, all I could see was the shiny bottom of the empty bowl. Every single piece of candy was gone. My sister and I were the only two kids in the whole church left empty-handed.



Not getting any candy on Christmas. It's like a cliché a thousand times over, and my sister and I felt horrible. As the priest did his best to explain to two crestfallen toddlers that he just couldn't make candy appear out of thin air, we wobbled back to our parents, eyes filling with tears.

But this priest was pretty good at thinking on his feet. As my sister and I slid miserably into our seats, he busied himself momentarily with the little nativity scene set up near the altar. He turned around and beckoned us back.



Laura, Erin and family in costume for the holiday parade.

It took a little coaxing from our parents but eventually Erin and I trotted back to him. Grinning as if he had another surprise up one of his big ol' priestly sleeves, he leaned forward and gestured for us to move nearer. As we did, we saw he was holding something in his hands. Erin and I looked down, hoping that maybe he had learned how to make candy appear out of thin air. Instead, in his hands was the statuette of baby Jesus.

"Do you know what this is?"

We thought we had an idea, but we both shook our heads anyway.

"This," he said, "is the baby Jesus. He's the reason we celebrate Christmas."

He put the tiny manger in Erin's hands, and the little Jesus in mine. The statuette had his arms open, reaching out to us.

"This is something very special, none of the other kids got anything like this. I want you to keep this somewhere safe, and set it out every Christmas."

He smiled widely, and ushered us back towards our seats.

"Merry Christmas!"

## I didn't feel the impact

of that event back then. I was too young to understand what a spiritual experience was. I was just pleased not to be the only kid left empty-handed. But the moment sticks with me today. From it sprouted a whole new family tradition for us, the tradition of setting the manger on the mantel, right between the tissue paper and glue angels and some recycled tinsel. We have never had a full nativity scene, just the lone statue of Jesus up there, and the story that tags along.



It's not our most bizarre Christmas tradition. For the past two years we have dressed up as footmen, in costumes complete with Christmas light accents for a holiday parade. But it's the story that makes putting the baby Jesus on our mantel one of our most important and celebrated annual events in our house.

## SUNDAY GOSPEL

2nd Sunday of Advent

### A clear path for God's coming.

**MARK:** Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

**NARRATOR 1:** In Isaiah the prophet, it is written:

**ISAIAH:** I send my messenger before you to prepare your way: a herald's voice in the desert, crying, "Make ready the way for God's coming; clear God a straight path."

**NARRATOR 2:** Thus, John the Baptizer appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance which leads to the forgiveness of sins.

**NARRATOR 1:** All the Judean country-side and the people of Jerusalem went out to him at the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.

**NARRATOR 2:** John was clothed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt

around his waist. His food was grasshoppers and wild honey. He preached, saying:

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:** One more powerful than I will come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water; the one who is coming will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1.1-8

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What do Christians celebrate on Christmas?
- 2 What family traditions keep the meaning of Christmas alive for you?
- 3 What makes Christmas a religious rather than a cultural holiday for you?
- 4 Why do the Buddhist traditions seem more cultural than religious to Kate Maruyama?
- 5 Who is John the Baptist and how does he prepare the way for Jesus?
- 6 What do you say for yourself about your faith?

# IT'S A TRADITION?

By Kate Maruyama

**I don't really have a religion.** I guess I'm a Buddhist, but I don't know if I would call it a religion.

"Japanese" is a better way to describe who I am. I celebrate traditional holidays and festivals with my friends and family. But I don't think of these activities as religious the way our ancestors used to. Now it is mostly just what we do.

Maybe it's more important to adults than it is to people our age. Like, my grandma goes to the temple occasionally to pray for something. Well, I guess I go sometimes too. Before a big test or at the start of some other big goal, I'll sometimes go to the temple and buy a good luck amulet. And of course, I've been to temples on field trips before. But, I am not sure that counts. It was for history class.

At holidays we'll go to the temple as a family. But that's less religion and more what we do on this day.

At New Years, it's tradition to visit a shrine and pray for the upcoming year. Most people I know go. It's not so interesting—just throw money in, clap your hands, say a short prayer, and buy an amulet or your fortune for the year and you're done. And of course we get gifts at New Years too!

When my cousin was born, our whole family went to the temple together for a naming ceremony. And we went again when she turned 3, 5 and 7—important ages in Buddhism. We went when I was those ages, too. I got dressed up in a kimono, got my picture taken, and visited a temple. When I turn 20, we'll go again. That's when I become an adult.

Is Obon a religious holiday? On Obon, we believe that family members

who passed away can return to earth for a couple days. Like New Years, family gets together, eats special foods, watches fireworks, and goes to a festival. Then at the end, there is a ceremony. We put candles in small paper boats and set them in the ocean. These boats



guide our ancestors' spirits safely back to heaven.

But, I'm not sure that is the main point of Obon really. The festivals for special days like these are fun. There's lots of good food to buy, you can see your friends, play festival games, hear the music.

These festivals were originally religious celebrations. My grandfather tells me about it sometimes, but I'm not so interested in that part. To my friends and me, it's just fun, seasonal events.

My friend's father died a year ago. And she is always very attentive to the family altar, or Butsudan. Her family always makes sure there are fresh flowers, rice, and his favorite foods set out. She can even chant the sutras. We have a Butsudan, too. I think my mother still sets stuff out for our ancestors. I used to enjoy helping put out the sake as my mom lit incense. But I haven't done it in a long time. Some of my friends who live in newer places don't even have a Butsudan anymore.

I guess, if you make me think about it, there are lots of things that could be considered religious. But honestly, these are just everyday things for me. I'm Japanese and it is part of my culture to do these things. I am not quite sure that makes it my religion. It depends on the person I guess. We don't really talk about it that much.



Photos/Kate Maruyama

# Why traditions?

Putting the baby Jesus in his crib on their mantel has become a family tradition for Laura Holt's family. The baby Jesus the priest gives the twins comes from a manger scene or crèche. During the Christmas season most parishes have the tradition of setting up a manger scene to help people remember the story of Jesus' birth. The crèche is a tradition St. Francis of Assisi started back in the 1400s as a way for illiterate people to learn the Christmas story.

In Central and South America the conquering Spanish brought both armies and disease in the 1500s that caused 90% of the native peoples to die. With the Spanish came missionaries that preached the gospels to surviving people such as Juan Diego, on whose tilma we see the image of the holy woman he encounters on a hill where Mexico City is today.

Our Lady of Guadalupe promises to hear the prayers of poor and nearly destroyed Indian peoples like Juan. The tradition of enacting the story of Juan meeting the Lady takes place in Hispanic parishes every December 12.

Rituals form around actions, symbols, and stories that are so sacred and so important people want to repeat them and take strength and meaning from them. However, many Christians may grow up taking part in rituals whose full meaning they don't understand. As Kate Maruyama does, they may participate with their families in rituals without knowing the stories that give rituals meaning.



Mexican Catholics act out the story of Juan Diego and the Lady.



Photo: Dave Hiseck/The Catholic Spirit

The tradition of La Posada comes out of Hispanic culture, which understands God walking with them and strengthening them in their struggles. La Posada takes place before Christmas. Two people dress up as Mary and Joseph. Then many people walk with Mary and Joseph from house to house, looking for a place to stay. They get turned away from several houses until at a preplanned house, a family takes them in and serves refreshments to all the people who come with them.

La Posada celebrates God's presence in a poor young pregnant girl. Among people who try to immigrate over U.S. borders to find a better life, who want to migrate out of poverty, this tradition celebrates God coming to dwell among those for whom the world doesn't want to make room.

The eucharist is a tradition that begins with Jesus at his last supper with his friends. He tells them to bless, break, and share bread to remember his love for them. Jesus tells his friends to bless and share a cup of wine to remember his love poured out for them.

Through the centuries Christians have gathered to do as Jesus asked. In every eucharist Christians become what they celebrate; they receive the Body of Christ and become the Body of Christ. The sacramental traditions of the Catholic Church continue to remember and celebrate Jesus' healing, forgiving actions among us.

New traditions arise. The pope usually kisses the ground when he arrives in a new country. Families join walks for breast cancer on Mother's Day or other walks for good causes. It's the stories behind the traditions that give them meaning.

## FAITH in ACTION

- 1 What special Christmas traditions does your family have?
- 2 What Advent or Christmas traditions do you experience that you don't understand? Research their origins by talking with a grandparent or reading in a Catholic encyclopedia or searching online.
- 3 What customs or traditions have you experienced among people of other religions?
- 4 What is a tradition you would like to start in your family, such as alternative gifts or an Advent wreath and prayer time?
- 5 What do you like about Christmas Mass?