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By María de Lourdes Ruiz Scaperlanda

Celebrating Christmas With Hispanic Eyes

Every year of his adult life until his death at the age of 95, my Cuban grandfather Alipio Páez set up a Nativity scene or nacimiento that could easily compete with the elaborate window displays put on by Macy's.

Not satisfied with presenting just the figurines of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the cast of usual characters, Alipio would turn the living room of his small house into the whole town of Bethlehem. This was not "just" the Bethlehem described in the Gospels, but a Caribbean-style Bethlehem -- with abundant palm trees, rivers, houses on the hills, tall blooming trees, all set up on papier-mâché mountains painted in shades of green and brown. My meticulous grandfather even had plastic pigs and cows to keep the miniature sheep and their shepherds company.

No matter what new addition he came up with, Alipio's Bethlehem always centered on the glorious crèche, the physical place where the deepest and most complicated elements of Christian theology became flesh. My earliest Christmas memories all center on that humble stable, where the mystery and wonder of the word "Incarnation" came to life for me. The virgin birth. The Son of God conceived in Mary's womb. A baby in Mary's arms, both true God and true man. Even as a child, I understood the unspoken truth that the colorful Christmas tree was meant to take a back seat to the stunning Bethlehem scene.

By bringing his own world of pigs and palm trees to Bethlehem Alipio was not saying that the biblical details of the Christmas story were unimportant to him. It was entirely the opposite. By bringing to life the surroundings of the story beyond the historical pesebre, the humble crèche, my grandfather emphasized the central truth -- the actual point -- of the story! God so loved the world that He came to be one with each of us, right where we are.

Like Alipio's beautiful nacimiento, Christmas traditions for Hispanics are often a gentle incarnation of the sacred within the ordinary. Through traditions that inspire all the senses -- with songs and sights and delicious smells -- Hispanics bring to life and celebrate the familiar birth story of Jesusito, reminding us what's most important about the Christmas season.

You don't need a national survey to tell you that 70 percent of the Hispanics in the U.S. identify themselves as Catholic. For Hispanics, even new arrivals with little or no catechetical formation, being Catholic is intrinsic and often indistinguishable from our culture. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than throughout the Christmas season, when some Spanish-speaking countries even today declare feasts such as December 8, the Immaculate Conception, as national holidays.

Obviously, each Spanish-speaking country has its own unique, individual Christmas customs. Yet while the specific flavor may change from country to country, there are a number of important traditions common to all of Latin America.

Family, Food and Mass

As it is true in most cultures, family is central to the Christmas celebration. Yet it is important to remember that, for Hispanics, the term family is parallel to what is often referred to as "extended" family -- including grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, godparents. When Hispanics speak of family, there is no distinction between "immediate" and "extended."

For most Hispanics, the traditional festive Christmas dinner takes place on Christmas Eve, or la Noche Buena, which literally means the Good Night. While the menu may differ from one Latin America tradition to the next, it is on Christmas Eve that the whole family gathers (cousins and friends included!) for a large and extended meal. As a symbol of respect, grandparents are often the ones who bless the food and the gathering, and they often include invocations remembering family members who have died.

The meal is worked around the Misa del gallo, the traditional name given to Midnight Mass because of the roosters that often announce the end to the late night liturgy. Although my own ethnically blended family gathers before Midnight Mass for dinner, the traditional meal for Hispanics on Noche Buena comes after Mass. Or as my grandmother used to remind us, from la Misa to la mesa -- from breaking bread at Mass to breaking bread at the dinner table.

You can see why the Noche Buena celebration is often an all-night affair!

Another Noche Buena

Did you know that la flor de Noche Buena is also the Mexican name of the flower that English-speakers call poinsettia? The plant was originally discovered in Taxco and the valleys surrounding Cuernavaca, and it is believed that the Aztecs brought it from the tropical

climate of Cuernavaca to the highlands for cultivation in special nurseries. Later on, the Spanish Franciscan priests posted to the Taxco area used the plants to decorate their Christian nativity scenes, and thus was born its link to the Christmas season.

The English name of the plant is connected to its greatest promoter in the U.S. -- Joel Roberto Poinsett (1770-1851), the U.S. ambassador serving in Mexico following Mexico's Independence from Spain.

The 12 Days of Christmas

When I first learned in English the "Twelve Days of Christmas" song, I had no idea what a partridge or a pear tree looked like, but the notion of celebrating for 12 days following Christmas Day was not new to me. The idea of taking down the Christmas tree on December 26 is unthinkable in a culture where, traditionally, children don't receive presents until January 6, when los tres reyes magos, the three wise kings or wisemen, deliver them!

I remember as a child every January 5 excitedly collecting grass and carefully placing it in a shoebox by the Christmas tree for the camels to eat. Some Hispanic traditions for the feast of los tres reyes include neighborhood parades with people dressed as the three kings. In Mexico, it's traditional to do a Three Kings Cake called the Rosca de los Tres Reyes. And, always, the lights, the nativity scene and the holy days continue until January 6.

For Hispanics living in the U.S., it's difficult to continue this tradition of giving presents only on Epiphany, boldly ignoring both Santa Claus and Target. But celebrating January 6 remains central to the Hispanic tradition.

Music and Prayers

Hispanics often host posadas, pastorelas and novenarias in their homes on the days preceding December 25. While all these traditions are centered on prayers, they are also full of fiesta -- with food, lots of music, various costumes and even piñatas.

A Mexican tradition that has been widely adopted across the U.S. is las posadas, where a group of carolers -- often children dressed as the Holy Family -- reenact the story of Mary and Joseph searching for a place to spend the night. Each night of las posadas ends with a party at the home visited. The nightly celebration includes novena prayers and takes place from December 16 to December 24.

Even the most secular Spanish aguinaldos, or traditional Christmas carols, often blend ethnic elements with "religious" lyrics about the Nativity story. For example, a Caribbean song

may place a jíbaro, someone who lives in the country, playing his maracas as he walks with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

A Main Attraction

Principal to the Christmas season is the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12. It is common to honor la virgencita, the Virgin of Guadalupe, with home altars and images. And the family celebrates the December feast all day long: singing las mañanitas to Mary at sunrise (usually gathered at church), attending Mass and a family meal in the evening.

This Marian feast is a fun-filled fiesta and a major celebration for Hispanics. It often includes a procession through the streets, ethnic dances, reenactments of Juan Diego's encounters with Our Lady, and always, a lovely, colorful altar overflowing the image of Guadalupe with roses. TP

Integrating Hispanic Traditions into Your Parish

- 1.** Make the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe a celebration for everyone, not only for Hispanics. Invite the entire parish to attend the traditional mañanitas on the morning of December 12 as well as the Mass in honor of Our Lady. She is the patron of ALL the Americas!
- 2.** Ask the leaders in your Hispanic community about the Christmas traditions specific to their own country or ethnicity -- and encourage them to organize even a simplified version at your parish. In our hometown, for example, the community celebrates both the Colombian tradition of a Novena de Aguinaldos, and the Mexican tradition of las Posadas, with prayer gatherings at each other's homes.
- 3.** Consider celebrating a bilingual Misa del gallo or Midnight Mass, incorporating Latin American music and dance into the liturgy.
- 4.** Invite the Hispanic community to add their own ethnic "flavor" to your parish's main nativity scene. Host a parish-wide Nativity Open House featuring nativity sets from the countries and ethnic traditions that represent your parishioners.
- 5.** Celebrate Epiphany with a final "Christmas pageant" where children dressed as the three wise men bring presents to baby Jesus -- followed by a party and piñata for the children. Invite families to bring dry foods to share with the local food pantry, which will surely need it in January!

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