



BOLIVIA

Christmas in Bolivia

by Céline Trudeau, M.I.C.

Christmas is one of the most popular festivals for the Indians of the region of Potosi. It is the highlight of the whole year, brightening their drab, laborious existence, and allowing them to give full vent to their creative imagination.

In nearly every home, however humble, a Crib is set up, where the figures of shepherds, kings, and angels vie in paying homage to the divine Child. A rudimentary backdrop to the Nativity scene usually represents sheep, goats, llamas, and mountain lions. In the centre, on an elevation, the figure of the *Nino* (Child) is enthroned in the midst of greenery, toys, and gifts of every description.

Under the altar are aligned rows of cans in which the Indians have planted *trigo* (wheat). Hence the name given these singular decorations — *triguitos del Nino* — the Christ Child's Wheaties! The day is one of family rejoicing when all sing, dance, eat and drink to their heart's content.

Absent relatives are invited to return home on Christmas Eve so that the whole family may rejoice to-

In each village a team of dancers celebrates the birth of Christ.



**In the name of the
Missionary Sisters
of the Immaculate Conception,
the world over,
we wish you and yours
a Merry Christmas.**

**We keep in grateful
remembrance
your friendship
and service in Christ
during the past year.**

gether. When all have assembled, they leave in procession for the parish church, ablaze with light. Each family carries its own figure of the Christ Child, cradled in a tiny Crib, and laid before the altar during Mass. Afterwards, the faithful proceed to the sacristy to have their *Ninos* blessed by their pastor.

Musicians playing their liveliest tunes accompany family corteges home, in the wee small hours. Savoury *picana*, a Bolivian stew spiced with wine, is served by bustling housewives. Beverages are then passed around while the company sings old familiar songs. Nobody goes to bed. This is the good night among all nights, surely not a night to sleep away! Every moment must be enjoyed.

Next item on the Christmas programme is the traditional dance in front of the Crib. Couples dance in a sedate manner, holding hands and singing carols. Then each member of the family performs a solo in front of the Crib, while the others applaud. At a given signal, women throw scarves around the necks of their men folk and lead them to the Crib for a few minutes of silent prayer.



Each family carries its own tiny figure of the Christ Child to church.

Throughout this joyful octave, groups of children roam the streets, singing carols accompanied on *pajarillos*. These are crude musical instruments made out of tin cans into which little pipes filled with water have been inserted.

In these regions, dancing marks all Christmas festivities. Bolivian Indians cannot imagine a more suitable way to honour the Christ Child than by dancing in his honour. These Christmas dances reveal their simple faith. Surely, the *Nino* must tenderly smile down upon these mountain people who have taken to heart the admonition of Psalm 149: "Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with timbrel and lyre."

OUR FATHER, WE SING YOUR PRAISE WITH ALL THE VOICES OF OUR WORLD

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FOR YOU ARE OUR GOD TODAY. AND EVERY DAY, FOREVER AND EVER.

MISSIONARY SISTERS OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
 Box 157, Laval Branch, P.O.
 Laval, P.Q., CANADA
 H7N 4Z4

Bits out of mission life

BANGA, MALAWI

On Christmas Eve, about 100 persons from the neighbourhood gathered in the school hall to celebrate the anniversary of Christ's birth. Film strips explaining the Bible story were shown followed by prayer sharing. Afterwards, the chapel was crowded with worshippers for Midnight Mass. On December 25, six little ones made their First Holy Communion.

In the afternoon, we left for a plantation settlement to distribute modest Christmas gifts among some fifty families. Mr. Mahachi, the officer in charge, was proud and happy to preside over the distribution of sugar, biscuits, goodies, soap, cards, etc. to those who were destitute. The distribution over, we gave a short talk on the true meaning of Christmas. Thanks to the generosity of Sr. Therese Deziel's Canadian friends, every baby carried on its mother's back received a pretty white dress and a pair of woolen booties. Before we left, we inquired whether the officer in charge knew of any children suffering from rickets or other diseases. Three tiny tots, as thin as rakes, were brought in. Each was given a portion of powdered milk and we invited the parents to come for more at our dispensary.

On December 26, our house overflowed with callers. Each person received some powdered milk and small portions of corn flour. Some were in pitiful condition. A mother who seemed to be on the verge of starvation herself brought an emaciated little boy: He was aptly called Mzugo which means "difficulty". His weakness was such that he could hardly sit up, although he was three years old. A cup of sweetened milk brought a wan smile to his puny face. As these people do not live at a too great distance, we will be able to help them out regularly. The mother who had once been a catechumen, had neglected coming to church for a long time. Perhaps she could be encouraged to come back.

On December 27, we had a small boy suffering from malnutrition and rickets admitted to the government hospital. He was so weak that he was

unable to walk. Let us hope that this is only a beginning, and that the hospital authorities will take it upon themselves to relieve the poor living on this plantation. If only we had the time, we could visit every one of the 500 families living there... On December 28, we gave filmstrips on the Nativity to about 200 people working on the rice scheme. For the most part, it was the first time these people had heard about Christ Jesus and His love for mankind.

MZUZU, MALAWI

On the evening of December 15, our students and a group of guests assembled here to participate in a celebration in preparation for Christmas. Two appropriate plays were presented by our students. Africans having an innate gift for dramatic art, the plays were a great success. Next on the programme were carols sung and accompanied by the student choir and band conducted by Sister Denise Duhamel.

The theme chosen for this celebration was "Joy". Together we went over all the joys for which we should be grateful. Joys abounding in every human life: joys of the mother cradling her child in her arms; joys of friendship; joys found in the performance of daily tasks; joys of leisure; joys of meeting again after a long absence; joys of fidelity in Christ's service; joys of the sinner who is pardoned...

Advent is a joyous season. Christ, Joy of the World, is coming. We are looking forward to his birth. This celebration which cost me quite a lot of work and of careful planning was my first experience in organizing such meetings. I feel very happy to be in charge of the school pastoral activities.

Marie Leclair, M.I.C.

HAITI

In Cap Haitien, our senior students worked hard to make Christmas a festival of joy for the destitute children of the neighbourhood. Those

who were more advanced in sewing classes made fifty dresses to be presented to fifty of the poorest little girls. Others, less expert, made blouses, jeans, underwear or other useful articles. Our devoted pastor had a windfall when a local shop offered him several yards of good material to be made into clothes. He hastened to turn the gift over to our students. The whole idea was one of sharing, an idea dear to Haitians. Even the very poor will not hesitate to share the little they have with those who have still less. The girls who could not sew also did their share. They visited the aged at the communal refuge, and the handicapped children at Justinian Hospital. Folk dances, Christmas carols, merry songs brightened the day for these poor people. Goodies bought out of the students' scant savings were also distributed. Their good action reminded me of the Gospel story about the widow's mite.

Lucette Gilbert, M.I.C.

TSARAMASAY, MADAGASCAR

Twice a week, I spend part of the day with some young people preparing to assume duty as future catechists. They are all volunteers. I am very happy to help initiate them into their difficult task of preparing the children for their First Communion or their Confirmation. It does one good to see how eager they are to become genuine apostles, although none of them have had much chance to study catechetics before. As priests are all too few to cope with the ministry, these youthful apostles will be able to do much good. We lately had an impressive ceremony in our parish church. Our guests of honour on this occasion were the sick, the handicapped, and the aged. They occupied special seats right in front of the altar. For our part, we saw to conveying six aged women who were blind to the parish church on time for the ceremony. A procession around the church came first. Then we had the Eucharistic Celebration. Afterwards the priest gave Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed by the blessing of the sick as is done at Lourdes. Our dear sick and handicapped people went away feeling very happy and important for once in their lives.

Marie Odila Plante, M.I.C.

Story of the Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath probably originated during the Renaissance in the Middle European countries, present-day Austria and Hungary. The making of the wreath was a family affair. Evergreen boughs and cones from the forests, grain from the fields, nuts, fruits, and berries were gathered. On the first Sunday of Advent, the family prepared the wreath from the above materials. They then placed a purple candle signifying the "waiting period" in the finished wreath, lighted the candle, read the Scriptures, offered prayers and sang hymns. On the second Sunday, they placed another purple candle in the wreath and lighted both. Again the Scriptures were read, prayers offered and hymns sung. On the third Sunday, a pink candle was placed in the wreath and the three candles were lighted. Scripture reading, prayer, and hymns followed. On the fourth Sunday, a purple candle was placed in the wreath and all four were lighted.

This period of spiritual preparation reached a climax on Christmas morning. The family replaced the purple and pink candles with four bright red candles signifying great joy. In the centre a tall white candle signifying the Christ Child, was lighted. The white candle was then used to light each of the red candles. Once again the family read the Scriptures, offered prayers, and sang Christmas carols.

The use of the Advent wreath today teaches the family the true meaning of Christmas. When the family completes the lighting of the candles on Christmas morning, they have prepared heart, mind, and soul for the great religious event — the birth of the Christ Child. In this way, Christmas means more than gifts, Santa, and bright lights on trees.

Origin of the Christmas Tree

Contrary to popular belief, the use of Christmas trees did not originate in Germany. Traces of this custom have been found in ancient Rome and in Greece where trees and twigs were decorated at festivals occurring about the same time of the year as Christmas.

In Christian practice, several reference works give credit for the Christmas tree to the Druids, philosopher priests of ancient religious cults in France, Britain, and Ireland. For the end-of-the-year festival of Tyr, god of the sun, of war, and of justice, the Druids piled spruce and fir trees atop a hill. They then put a flaming torch to the resinous wood and rolled the festive fireballs down the slope. At this signal, the crowds watching from below, began feasting and drinking.

Historical records show that Germany first began to observe the custom of the Christmas tree around the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Artisans used to set up small fir trees decked with apples, nuts, and paper flowers. From the Renaissance era, the custom blossomed into the candle-decked Christmas tree of nationwide then worldwide fame, celebrated in many carols and poems.

Special Christmas trees upon which are secured sheaves of grain, suet, and apples for the birds are still main features of all Danish, Finnish, and Norwegian celebrations at Christmas. It is believed that if large numbers of birds visit the trees, this foretells a bountiful harvest.

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