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Christmas in the U.S.A.

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

On an early November day my kids did not have class. It was parent-teacher conference day. After a rainy day at home with dad, all homework was done and all indoor games had been played. An early evening dancing session with the kids was pretty much over too and it was time to relax.

Zapping through the television channels to find a movie suited for their age range—not so easy a task—the girls found one that called their attention. It was one of those Santa and spirit-of-Christmas movies. My very perceptive eight year-old said, “Mom, it’s not even Thanksgiving yet!” It turns out some “family” channel—others soon to follow—has established a “countdown to the 25 days of Christmas,” which started running holiday-themed movies in early November with plenty of holiday merchandise commercials in the middle. I am sure prospects of another dismal holiday sales season have everything to do with it.

My daughter’s comments brought back memories of my very first Christmas in the United States many years ago. I came as a chaperone for a group of high school students and was hosted several months by a very nice, very gracious parish family. Coming from Spain, I found it amusing when the day after Thanksgiving—a new holiday for me—they started pulling out boxes of Christmas lights and decorations and spent the weekend decorating the Christmas tree and the outside of the house. It was not even December yet! I remember thinking “Americans sure like to plan ahead.”

As I readied myself for what I thought it would be two full months worth of Christmas celebrations, I couldn’t help but compare that to my parents’ home, where we would always rush the week of Christmas to set up the Nativity scene at a side table in the living room. Sometimes there was even a tree.

The real surprise came when the very day after Christmas Day, all Christmas decorations started coming down. By mid-afternoon, the tree was on the curbside. I was completely puzzled. “Christmas is over,” they explained. “But it is not over, it just started!” I said. They look at me all amused as I tried to explain in my then broken English that where I came from Christmas celebrations actually start on December 24, la Nochebuena, and ends with the feast of the Epiphany, los Reyes Magos, on January 6. To me all the early decorations were a preparation and now it was time to celebrate. Jesus was just born! It couldn’t possibly be over. There was no time for contemplation of the mystery! Just so I did not feel too homesick, my “American mom and dad” decided to leave a small nativity scene out for a few extra days.

Neither food or language, nor different work schedules and new traditions had caused as much a cultural shock as the realization of how differently we celebrated Christmas, even though we were both Catholic families.

This is perhaps one of the best examples of how, sometimes, being culturally Catholic helps not to lose focus. Sometimes, people who come from traditionally Catholic countries may not have as much formal religious education as it would be desirable in a country where to be Catholic is to swim against the current. However, “cultural Catholics” can help us with their traditions, most of them from the liturgical calendar, to return celebrations to proper time and meaning.

In the Mexican tradition, for example, we do not even think of Christmas until after la Inmaculada and la Guadalupe. Only after that we can start Las Posadas, right until the very night of Christmas Eve. We invite you to sing with us lullabies to the Baby Jesus on Christmas Night and Christmas Day; to celebrate the joy of family (extended family, that is) and the mystery of God made man; to rediscover that Christmas is not a day but a season; and, perhaps, in the tradition of the Three Wise Men who brought gold, incense and myrrh to the Baby Jesus, even a small piece of candy or some little toy may also mysteriously start appearing on January 6 by the side of the children’s bed or the nativity scene in U.S. households.

Whatever we do, let us all remember to keep Christ in Christmas. ¡Feliz Navidad;
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Mar Muñoz-Visoso is assistant director of media relations at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops