

FAITH TRADITIONS



AP photo

Pope Francis waves as he arrives for his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Wednesday. Pope Francis has been selected by Time magazine as the Person of the Year. In only his first year, the Pope was selected by the magazine's editors as the person who had the greatest impact on the world, for good or bad, during 2013.

POPE'S MESSAGE INSPIRES SELF-REFLECTION THIS CHRISTMAS

Pope Francis left his post as "Bishop of the Slums" in Argentina but has not deterred from his mission. Before assuming the papacy and becoming Time Magazine's "Person of the Year," Padre Mario Bergoglio led the "slum priests," a group of Catholic leaders who risked all in the Buenos Aires villas where they combated poverty, crime and drugs by spreading good works and the gospel. Now that Bergoglio is the newly elected Pope Francis I, he is bringing the message of the slum priests to the rest of the world to remind Catholics and other Christians to care for the "least of these." In his message released at the end of November, just days before many Americans scurried off to the malls for Black Friday, the pope gave an exhortation called the "The Joy of the Gospel," in which he reinforced the notion of the church's role in defending the dispossessed. It seems timely that Pope Francis pointed out the dangers of consumption and the abuses of capitalism when many of us are gearing up for the most consumer-driven holiday of the year. His remarks on global capitalism have raised some ire in certain circles here in the United States, but deserve a closer look in the context of the season.



Charity Carney

Christmas has evolved into an event that in many ways centers on gift-giving rather than religion. Before the 19th century, Americans did not give with as much gusto — that came later with the rise of industry and capitalist ventures. People in the early 1800s stuck to giving kids homemade items (like knitted clothes or toys carved out of wood) and maybe some candy purchased from a local merchant. As consumerism grew, the types of gifts changed and more people bought luxuries like books and dolls and "gimcracks," little knickknacks that really served no purpose at all (like grammy's mantle of stuff that you had to dust around). F. W. Woolworth took advantage of the growing popularity of Christmas and started stocking decorations in his store. Some firm that imported from Germany asked Woolworth to display some glass balls for them. He did not think they would do very well, but within two days they were gone and he had to order more to satisfy the demand for these odd tree ornaments. We really owe a lot of our current Christmas traditions to merchants like Woolworth and

19th century consumers.

In the 20th century, the public display of consumption grew and today the holidays involve an increasingly expensive ritual of purchasing and gift-giving. In the 1990s, on average Americans put 4 percent of their annual income into Christmas presents. The glass balls once displayed at Woolworths now number in the hundreds on our Christmas trees and are accompanied by strings upon strings of lights and so many presents that we forget how many we've actually wrapped and which one goes to which friend or relative.

When he received his title as head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis made clear that he desired "a poor Church, and for the poor." This emphasis on the less fortunate has filtered in to his recent remarks on the state of religion and the problems of capitalism. "Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life," the pope explains, "today we also have to say 'Thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality." Looking at the growing impact of consumerism on the Christian holiday of Christmas, it's difficult to ignore the pope's critique. As Christmas quickly approaches and we hurry to the malls or su-

perstores to empty our wallets fill up our carts, his words may serve as a reminder to focus less on the glass balls, gimcracks, and lists for Santa and more on our actions toward the less fortunate. If your faith celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, even if you are not Catholic, the notion of caring for the poor should not be a foreign concept. And if you do not celebrate Christmas or have a particular belief system, we can all take time to reflect on our shared humanity this holiday season and give a little extra to someone who needs it.

Sources: John Cassidy, "Pope Francis's Challenge to Global Capitalism," *New Yorker*, Dec. 4, 2013; Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Paul Valley, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

Dr. Charity Carney is a course mentor with Western Governors University. She received her Ph.D. in history from the University of Alabama with a focus in religion, Southern and gender history. To request the historical study of a local church, temple or spiritual community, email news@daily sentinel.com with a brief description of known information about the religious organization.

Christmas in heaven

Taking comfort that those we love are with Christ

Just two weeks before Christmas and throughout the Wier house, lots of creatures are stirring, just not a mouse. The stockings are hung by the chimney with care in hopes our grown children soon will be here. No little ones are nestled all snug in their beds, since they all grew up and moved out instead. So this mamma in her kerchief and dad is in his cap, are waiting for their homecoming with cats in our laps.



Kim Wier

Christmas as an empty-nester is certainly not what it used to be. Instead of hiding gifts, baking cookies and making holiday crafts, we are group-texting trying to arrange work and travel schedules so the whole family will be in one place at least for a day. As much as I loved the days when all our kids were little, I refuse to be that mom who misses the opportunities of the moment longing for the good old days. We might not be able to tuck our children into bed so visions of sugar-plums can dance in their heads, but we can enjoy new traditions. For instance, we don't have to stay up until 3 a.m. putting together "Santa surprises." And these days, we don't have to get up with the sunrise Christmas morning. It seems 20-somethings consider sleeping in a gift.

Having grown kids around the tree isn't our biggest change this year; rather, it is who is not gathered with us that is the biggest difference. This year, we will be missing grandpa John, perhaps the biggest kid of all when it comes to Christmas. My dad loved the holidays. Nothing made him happier than the whole family being together. He loved to give gifts, drink eggnog, laugh at family antics and enjoy the feasting. He embraced Christmas with gusto and loved being at the center of it all. This will be our first Christmas without him, and his big presence will be greatly missed.

In true form however, my dad had done all his Christmas shopping early. Even more importantly, he had saved all the well-used gift bags he has been collecting and reusing for a decade. We teased him every year as we re-opened bags we had opened many times before. Used bags were his "thing" and had become tradition. This year it will continue in his honor. While he won't be around the tree with us, his presence will be felt as we pass out the gifts he chose wrapped one last time in grandpa's special bags.

As we will be missing him, we are confident that we have not had our last Christmas together. We have just had our last Christmas together here. My daddy is saving us a place for a day in the future when we will all celebrate and honor Jesus, not around a tree, but face-to-face. For now, he is already enjoying the best holiday he could ever imagine. I am reminded of this by a poem that a dear friend sent many years ago when we faced another Christmas without our dear grandpa Cliff. While those we love who also loved the Lord Jesus Christ are not with us, they are celebrating all the same. They themselves might have shared with us what this poem titled "My First Christmas in Heaven" conveys as we await our reunion. Might they also say,

"I see the countless Christmas trees around the world below, with tiny lights, like Heaven's stars, reflecting on the snow. The sight is so spectacular, please wipe away the tear, for I am spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.

I hear the many Christmas songs that people hold so dear, but the sounds of music can't compare with the Christmas choir up here. I have no words to tell you, the joy their voices bring, for it is beyond description, to hear the angels sing.

I know how much you miss me. I see the pain inside your heart. But I am not so far away. We really aren't apart. So be happy for me, dear ones; you know I hold you dear. And be glad I'm spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.

I sent you each a special gift, from my heavenly home above. I sent you each a memory of my undying love.

After all, love is a gift more precious than pure gold. It was always most important in the stories Jesus told. Please love and keep each other as my Father said to do. I can't count the blessing or love He has for each of you.

So have a Merry Christmas and wipe away that tear. Remember, I am spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year." (Unknown Author)

Life on this earth is temporary for all of us. Perhaps the greatest way to celebrate is to embrace the here and now even while we look ahead to that joyous day when we also spend our first and forever Christmas in heaven.

Kim Wier is an author and speaker, and hosts a weekly radio talk program on KSBH in Houston.

CHURCH NOTES

Bethlehem Baptist Church of Chireno will host their annual choir program at 3 p.m. Sunday. For information, call Annie Flemon at 936-564-3010.

First Baptist Church in Center will be hosting the Joy Seekers Conference for Women at 8:30 a.m. Feb. 15, 2014. The conference will feature a message by Sheri Rose Shepherd, award-winning author, speaker and Bible Life Coach. Lunch will be provided. Registration is \$30. T-shirts are available for an extra \$10. For more information, or to register, call 936-598-5605.

First Christian Church of Nacogdoches will have a presentation on display entitled "Love Revealed — A Walk-Through Christmas," from 6 to 8 p.m. Dec. 20 and 21. The show will feature actors,

a silhouette nativity and live music.

Goyens Hill Baptist Church will be hosting Robert Wilburn and the Damascus Road Gospel Band, playing ole time gospel music at 10 a.m. Sunday. For information, call Pastor Dale Allen at 936-371-9779.

Grayland Baptist Church will host two upcoming events:
 ■ A musician appreciation service at 11 a.m. Sunday. The speaker will be the Rev. Anson Lawson of Salem Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. For information, call 936-564-7244.
 ■ Annual Usher Day at 3 p.m. Jan. 15, 2014. Grayland will be hosting a guest speaker, the Rev. Drayton Garner, pastor of Sand Hill Baptist Church. For information, call 936-564-5164.

Harvest Point Church will feature

Pastor Lee McDowell's message "The Works of Your Father," on Sunday. The message will discuss what it means to belong to the Heavenly Father. Following worship, the Better Than Ever Bunch, for ages 50 and older, will have their Christmas fellowship. Bible studies for all ages begin at 9:15 a.m., followed by worship at 10:30 a.m.

Lilly Grove Baptist Church will host three upcoming events:
 ■ The holiday dinner has been rescheduled for 11 a.m. Sunday.
 ■ The participatory Christmas drama "His Very Own Star," is Sunday, followed by Gene Russell's message "What Faith Is" from Philippians 3:7-9.
 ■ The third Sunday Sing will be at 6 p.m. Sunday. All are invited.

Live Oak Baptist Church will host

the NJC Fall Concert at 6:30 p.m. today. Pastor Keith Warner will present the theme, "Sharing His Inspirational News with Everyone," from Matthew 5:16.

Vineyard Church Nacogdoches will feature the life lesson "Let's Put the 'X' Back in 'Xmas' — Missing the Point about Christmas," by Jim Miller on Sunday. A complimentary continental breakfast will be at 10 a.m. followed by worship at 10:30 and Kid's Hour at 11 a.m. For more information, call 936-564-4600.

Deadline for church announcements is noon Wednesday for Saturday publication. Mail information to The Daily Sentinel, P.O. Box 630068, Nacogdoches, Texas 75963; bring it by our office, at 4920 Colonial Drive; fax: 936-560-4267; or email: news@daily sentinel.com.