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HOLY DAY VS. HOLIDAY

Making Christmas Less Commercial

By Dan Andriacco

One Advent, a religion class in the Catholic grade school where my wife teaches took a poll of the students that asked only one question: “What do you think of when you hear the word *Christmas*?”

The good news is that Jesus won because his name came up most often. Unfortunately, he took only 42 percent of the vote. “Presents” was first runner-up with 25 percent.

It may not be happy news that one quarter of the students in a Catholic school say they think about Christmas presents before they think about Jesus. But the truth is probably worse. I suspect that a healthy portion of the students either played to expectations—answering the way they knew would make their teacher happy—or were more focused on Jesus because the poll was conducted during a religion class.

Whether my hunch is right or not, it’s

easy to see that at least one out of four students missed the point of Christmas. Or did they?

Commercial ritual

Maybe it would be more accurate to say that, like most people in consuming cultures, these students confused the Christian holy day of Christmas with a consumer holiday of

the same name. Alternatives for Simple Living (www.simpleliving.org), a Christian-oriented organization formed in 1973 to protest the commercialization of Christmas, calls the consumer holiday “Consumas.” That name may never catch on, but it’s a helpful way to distinguish two very different seasons.

Christmas and Consumas don’t even occupy the same time period although this isn’t apparent because they do overlap. Christmas is part of a cycle that begins with the First Sunday of Advent and ends only with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The waiting that precedes December 25 and the celebration that continues after it are essential elements of the holy season.

The commercial holiday, on the other hand, officially begins with a mad shopping spree on the Friday after Thanksgiving. Many stores open early so consumers can have more time to spend money, which they do. It’s the biggest shopping day of the year, with almost sacred significance in U.S. culture. How appropriate that a newspaper once headlined its day-after-Thanksgiving shopping coverage with the words, “Shoppers begin their rituals anew!”

But the celebration of the commercial holiday doesn’t really begin there. Christmas sales seem to start earlier and earlier each year, as do the Christmas store displays designed to spark spending. A few years ago, a newspaper story dated November 8 began, “The Christmas season is here, ready or not.” The story, decrying the encroachment on the sacred day-after-Thanksgiving ritual, reported that Macy’s department store had put a mechanical Santa on sale for \$50 the previous August.

But on December 26, Consumas is over, totally. The Christmas sales morph into after-Christmas sales. (At some stores, the last stretch is a “12 Days of Christmas” sale that begins on December 13, reinterpreting the twelve days that traditionally started on December 25 and ended with the coming of the Wise Men on January 6.) Christmas carols on the radio and Christmas specials on television disappear just when, according to the Church calendar, they should be beginning.

Central figures differ

These overlapping Christmas seasons have different heroes. The central figure of the Christian Christmas is Jesus Christ. The central figure of Consumas is Santa Claus. While Jesus gives us love unconditionally, Santa Claus gives us things if we’ve been good. Obviously, there’s a big difference.

Almost everything that Santa Claus brings has to be bought. The whole meaning of Consumas—commercial Christmas—is to sell stuff. By that measure, it’s a tremendously successful holiday.

A whole parade of publications, including such business-oriented ones as *The Wall Street Journal* and *U.S. News & World Report*, have written stories about the longing that many people express for a more spiritual and less commercial Christmas. This is nothing new. One history professor found complaints about the over-commercialization of Christmas as far back as the early 1850s. But it’s harder now to escape the message of commercial Christmas because it’s coming at us from so many different directions through the ubiquitous mass media.

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