

# **An Advent Activity: Decorating the Tree with a Christian Message**

**by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.**

In the book *The Everything Christmas Book* [Michelle Bevilacqua and Brandon Toropov, editors, Bob Adams, Inc., 1994, pp. 27-30], we learn that evergreens were long revered by pagan peoples for their ability to stay alive during the cold dark winters. Although Church officials at first attempted to banish greenery, they decided to Christianize the beloved custom. Evergreens came to symbolize Christ, who "by trampling down death by death" gave the gift of everlasting life to the world.

Even though trees were hung with decorations as early as the Roman Saturnalia, this custom did not become part of Christmas until the Middle Ages. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, pine trees were used in Europe as part of the miracle plays performed in front of cathedrals at Christmas time. The plays detailed the birth and fall of humanity, its salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ, and Christ's promise of redemption. The pine trees were decorated with apples to symbolize the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden.

When these plays were later banned by the Roman Catholic Church, the tradition of this Paradise Tree was kept alive in the home. People began decorating the trees with wafers to represent the Roman Catholic Eucharist. Eventually the wafers evolved into cookies, cakes, fruit, and other goodies, which at first were shaped to represent some aspect of the Nativity. As time went on they came to depict whatever the decorator wanted.

The Christmas tree continues to enjoy incredible popularity in Germany. By the 1800's, the Christmas tree had spread to Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Austria. Although the decorated Christmas tree had no broad popularity in colonial America, the tradition followed by German immigrants for years and caught on in the 1830's. It has become almost as beloved in America as it is in Germany.

The trees were originally the means by which presents were displayed on Christmas morning before their owners claimed them. Small toys, candles, and other treats were hung on the boughs until the children would awaken and strip the tree. The first commercial ornaments for Christmas trees were actually hollow, brightly colored containers filled with good things to eat, most often the cornucopia. When the goodies got too heavy for the tree, German glassblowers manufactured the first glass ornaments. The purely decorative elements did not become the main attraction of the Christmas tree for some years.

When Orthodox Christians came to America we, too, adopted the Christmas tree as an integral decoration of the Christmas season. To make the Christmas tree a truer expression of the Nativity let us take a closer look at the Christian significance of the ornaments which we place on the boughs.

Before you begin to decorate your tree, find an example of the following from among your family ornaments. Take out your Bible to read the assigned passages. Then sit down with your children

and read the following section. If you or your children know the accompanying Christmas carols, sing the portion of the carol that is listed.

**THE STAR** that tops our tree represents the star the Wise Men followed. It was an unusual star announcing an unusual event - the coming of the Son of God, who was born without sin, but who would suffer for our sins. Read Matthew 2:1-2. Sing the "Star of Wonder" refrain from "We Three Kings".

**ORNAMENTS SHAPED LIKE BALLS** remind us that our world was created by God. We are to go into the world and preach the Gospel. Read Matthew 28: 19-20. The assorted colors of our ball-shaped ornaments remind us that the Gospel is for **ALL DIFFERENT NATIONS AND ALL RACES** on the earth. Read Acts 17:26. Sing "Joy to the World".

**ANGELS** played three important roles in the Christmas story. [1] The Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was chosen to give birth to the Messiah (Luke 1:26). [2] An angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream to tell him that this baby was special (Matthew 1:20). [3] A choir of angels came to the shepherds to announce the good news. Read Luke 2:13-14. Sing "Angels We Have Heard on High" or "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing".

**CANDLES AND LIGHTS** remind us that Christ came as the "Light of the World." We light candles each time we enter the Church to worship. Read John 8:12.

**BELLS** were sewn on the hem of the garments of the high priest of the Temple. When the people heard the tinkling of the bells they knew that the High Priest was in the holy of holies offering sacrifices for their sins. Jesus offered Himself in sacrifice for our sins. The bell has a tongue. We, too, have a tongue. We are to go preach the Gospel to all nations. Read Mark 16:15-16 or I Corinthians 5:7. Sing "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day". [Editor's Note: The Bishop's vestments often use bells as the buttons. When we hear the bells, we know the Bishop, our "high priest", is present.]

Throughout the Bible we read about **SHEEP** and the **LAMB OF GOD**. Jesus is both the "Good Shepherd" and the "Lamb of God." Read John 1:29.

**CANDY CANES** remind us of the crook that the shepherd uses to bring his sheep back into the flock. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who brings us back to God. Read John 10:11 or Psalm 23. Sing "The First Noel".

*The text for each ornament was adapted from **Christmas in the Orthodox Church: Orthodox Spiritual Resources in Preparation for the Nativity of Christ**, published by the Commission of Religious Education of the Romanian Episcopate of America, [no date].*

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