

IT'S A SEASON OF GIVING, BUT ONLY FOR SOME

CHRISTMAS: THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF WHAT WAS A RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY PERPETRATES A CRUEL HOAX ON THE DISADVANTAGED.

By JORGE R. MANCILLAS

"Ho, Ho, Ho!" What makes Santa Claus laugh? Letters from poor children. That just about sums up the cruel irony of Christmas, the hoax that the commercialization of what once was a religious holiday perpetrates on the disadvantaged.

My first memory of Christmas is the look in the eyes of the three children of one of our neighbors in Ensenada's Colonia Obrera, a working-class neighborhood. While I showed my friend Raul the plastic revolver and cardboard cowboy hat I had gotten "from Santa Claus" and he proudly produced a couple of similar toys, the three barefoot kids stood in front of their cardboard shack, holding a small paper bag of unwrapped candy. They stared at our toys with an expression I could not understand, but it lacerated my heart.

Raul's mother walked to the front of the boys' shanty, holding a gift for Maria, their teen-age sister: a pair of stockings. The parents came out and accepted the gift, calling on their daughter to come out and thank her. I could hear her refusals, and how, as their anger at her discourtesy built, she broke into tears that spoke of shame, humiliation, anger and despair.

I began to understand when I started the first grade. At that time, children of all socioeconomic backgrounds shared the same schools in Ensenada. Having heard the usual pitch about Santa's gifts being a reward for our good behavior, I listened to the more privileged

children, often the brattiest, boast about their booty after Christmas while we looked at the modest returns for our attempts to be "good." What did we do wrong? By the time I was a teen-ager, I knew exactly how Maria had felt.

A few years ago, on Christmas day, Mexican television aired a special program in which people described what they'd had for their Christmas Eve dinner. "Tamales and atole, of course," was the response of the first batch, speaking from in front of their humble dwellings. "That is the traditional Christmas meal," was the common response. But a second group responded, "Turkey, smoked cod, of course, and crayfish for appetizers. And Champagne." It is what everyone has for the Christmas menu, they assured the reporter. The first group had anticipated this response, saying "Those with money eat turkey, smoked fish and lots of good things." The second group had no such awareness. And therein lies the cruelty that Christmas has become: For the underprivileged, it is a well-publicized reminder of their condition.

"For those you love, this Christmas, give them" "The gift of love, this Christmas, is a" The bombardment goes on and the children are the most vulnerable. In the best of cases, we engage in patronizing gestures of "generosity" without stopping to ask why those who need our charity find themselves in that condition, and what we are going to do about

it once the "Christmas spirit" wears off.

What makes Santa Claus laugh? Ask that question this Christmas morning to the children of those who lost their shops during last spring's civil disturbances and who have yet to receive "emergency aid." In previous years, this was their best sales season and a time to rejoice and celebrate. Now, they face bankruptcy and homelessness, thanks to the federal government's "Bah, humbug!" attitude and the indifference of our city's leaders.

Call me Scrooge, but while the existing inequalities continue, I could do without Christmas, the Madison Avenue-driven binge of consumerism that this holiday has become. I could do without the regular sight of a little child standing in front of a storefront window pointing excitedly at the tantalizing display, while the parents watch anxiously, overcome by feelings of impotence and despair.

On the day after Thanksgiving, one of our local newscasts reported on the spending boom at a shopping mall. As the reporter mentioned the traditional exchanges between children and the mall's Santa Claus, he remarked that some were "a little ambitious."

On the screen, a little Latino girl, with marked Indian features and long braids, dressed innocently in raggedy clothes, asked for "a Nintendo and a television set." Santa Claus could not contain his laughter; the reporter chuckled, too, as did the anchors in the studio. The little girl looked confused. On Christmas morning, maybe, she will understand.

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