I remember how, in earlier years, I would put candles in the windows of my home at Christmas. I just thought that they looked pretty. It was only this fall that I realized I had, in fact, been following a traditional Irish custom.

The Irish, as well as other cultures, place candles in the windows as a symbol that Mary and Joseph are welcome to enter. It is just one of many Christmas customs that we, as Catholics of the Diocese of Yakima, claim as part of our individual cultural heritage. Yet, all of these traditions come together during this holy season of the year, as we unite to celebrate our common Faith, and the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Numerous traditions have become quite common. There’s the Christmas tree (a symbol of life or hope whose Christian rebirth is often credited to the Germans); a visit from St. Nicholas – or Santa (whose roots actually go back to the area now known as Turkey); and the exchange of gifts (which some say derives from the gifts of the Magi). For Hispanic cultures, the posadas, a nine-day celebration leading up to Christmas and the birth of our Lord, are a form of engaging, “watching the light increase,” she explained.

Teresa Drollman of St. Joseph Parish in Wenatchee developed a new form of the traditional Advent wreath which is part of her German heritage. For some 20 years, she and her family lit candles set into a white birch limb that was about three feet long. The family would count the days of Advent and place a corresponding number of candles, up to a maximum of about 33, into the limb. Each day, the family would light one red candle, leading up to a central white candle reserved for Christmas Day.

It was inspiring, “watching the light increase,” she said. It brought to mind the verse from Isaiah 9:2, “The people in darkness have seen a great light.”

Kinderly and Rod Fazzari of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Walla Walla, still practice a version of The Feast of the Seven Fishes, a tradition from Rod’s Sicilian roots. This Christmas Eve custom involves the serving of seven or more fish dishes as a form of abstaining from meat for the Christmas Vigil.

“We only have two fishes: halibut and spaghetti with anchovy sauce,” explained Kimberly.

In keeping with another tradition, the Fazzari family makes “scallili” each Christmas season. This is an intricate, deep-fried cookie with dough wrapped around, symbolizing the Baby Jesus in swaddling clothes, Kimberly said.

Some traditions have remained virtually unchanged for many years.

Roger and Marta Stenzel of Holy Apostles Parish in East Wenatchee continue a Polish tradition that is part of Marta’s heritage. Each year, they purchase rectangular wafers, about three-by-five-inches in size, which are imprinted with a religious image.

“We take a wafer that is blessed (but not consecrated) and share it with each other (family members) to wish each other good fortune and good health,” Roger said.

Mike Wojonoski of St. Paul Cathedral Parish in Yakima, has warm memories of practicing the same tradition when, as a child, he visited his grandfather’s house in Massachusetts. To this day, he still receives a wafer in the mail each Christmas from a relative.

Bishop Joseph Tyson recalls growing up with numerous Christmas traditions from his Germans-from-Russia lineage. One of his memories is of advent calendars.

“Each picture window point(ed) to a saint of the Church or a step on the journey of Jesus coming into the world,” he recalled. Today, there are still religious advent calendars to be found, although many have taken on a more secular theme.

There are also unique traditions surrounding the Christmas crèche.

In the Italian tradition, many additional figures may be added to the standard holy family, shepherds, kings and angels, said Drollman, who purchased an expanded creche set while living in Italy. Extra figures

Continued on page 2
Dear Friends:

Christmas gives us the opportunity to acknowledge that there is more that unites us as a church than divides us in our society – namely – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our feature article notes specific ways that Catholics allow the light of Christ to shine through and animate their specific language and culture. In a world divided by race, nationality and even political ideology, Christmas celebrations can build up the “Culture of Encuentro” – Encounter – called for by our Holy Father Pope Francis. This “Culture of Encuentro” assumes that no one language and no one culture can adequately and fully give voice in praise of a God who comes to us in the most surprising way.

For God comes – not with a mighty army – but with a “strata” of angels – the Greek word for “army.” God comes – not in the capital city of a Rome or a Jerusalem – but in the defeated royal city of David – Bethlehem. God holds court – not with the wealthy and powerful – but with the shepherds of the field: the most outcast of first-century Middle East society. God comes into the world – not in a wealthy palace – but in an animal stable. God comes not as a powerful ruler – but as a vulnerable infant – or, as emeritus Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI succinctly noted, “God comes as a baby.”

Babies are so beautiful and so compelling. They draw out of us human love and tender-ness. This is the preeminent way God wants us to be with Him. He wants to draw us to Him just as an infant draws us out of ourselves – through our prayer, through our worship. This Christmas dynamic lies at the heart of grasping the “Culture of Encuentro” articulated by Pope Francis.

As Bishop, I am keenly aware of the climate of fear that is currently gripping our parishes. For some, it’s the fear of feeling like a foreigner or “stranger” – or, as emeritus Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI succinctly noted, “God comes as a baby.”

Some popular traditions even continue into the new year. For Epiphany, January 6, it’s common for those of Hispanic heritage to serve “la rosca,” said Aragon.

“It’s a special cake that the Mexican ladies make and they put the infant (a small doll) inside of it,” she explained. The cake is sliced and whoever receives the piece of cake with the doll inside is in charge of putting on a gathering for others. Variations may involve putting several dolls inside the cake, or a doll and a bean. In the latter case, the person who receives the doll is “king” or “queen” for the event and the person who receives the bean pays for the next event!

For Karl and Linda Reuss of Our Lady of the Snows Parish in Leavenworth, one of the most special aspects of our varied Christmas traditions in America is that we have the freedom to observe them.

Both Karl, 80, and Linda, 81, lived through World War II in Germany, hearing bombs falling as close as one block away and never knowing when their liberty to practice their Catholic Faith might be compromised. At one point, Linda’s family was evacuated from their home close to Frankfurt to the Black Forest region.

“For me, the beauty of this country is that I can still live my Faith. For a couple of years (in Germany), I was in danger of having it (that freedom) taken away from me,” Karl said.

“Nobody’s going to take that away from us, there or here,” observed Linda.

This Christmas season, let’s celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in unity and gratitude. And perhaps put a candle in the window to show that the light of Faith is still burning bright!
In the Protecting God’s Children® (PGC) program, we suggest that parents and other caring adults should be wary of other adults giving gifts to children – especially without permission. Moreover, we propose that caring adults should refrain from certain gift-giving to help kids learn when to spot bad intentions. All this is fine and good in theory, but assumes that kids will not have … grandparents!

My seven- and nine-year-old boys have some of the greatest grandparents around. They do most everything right: spend tons of time with the boys, often on the floor, playing the boys’ favorite games. They go to great lengths to attend plays, games, parties, and awards ceremonies. But my parents also learned early on what all modern grandparents know: the surest way to a child’s heart is, well, often through a trip to Target’s toy department.

They’re not doing anything wrong, of course (except spoiling my kids), but how can I take seriously the PGC advice to be thoughtful about gift-giving, with grandparents in the picture? Consider how you might respond to grandparents, other members of extended family, or friends who naturally – and with good intentions – tend to “spoil” the kids in your life.

Set ground rules about who gives presents and when. Kids should understand that there are only certain people from whom gifts are appropriate and certain circumstances when gifts are appropriate. As you know, you should talk to children about good and bad touches, under what circumstances and with whom even safe touches are appropriate – when being examined by a doctor, for example. Similarly, you should talk to kids about whom they can accept gifts from and under what circumstances. At our house, for instance, the kids know they cannot accept gifts from friends and others outside the family except on certain well-established holidays. Not only do I hope this will keep them a bit safer from adults with bad intentions, but it also solves the dilemma of friends who want to “gift” toys on play dates.

Gifts should never be a secret. Kids need to learn that presents are never secret, that they must always tell you when they get something from someone. Enforce this rule by keeping your eyes open for items for which you cannot locate the source. Of course, all this gets more difficult as children move into adolescence and some gifts take on a romantic nature originating from dating relationships – but, you’ll want to know about those, as well, won’t you?

Teach kids about proper “thank you’s.” Children need to learn gracious, earnest appreciation for presents – within reason. They need explicit instruction about what family standards are. For example, at our house, the kids must always write a thank-you note that includes one specific reason that the gift made them happy. But kids also need to understand that gifts do not require reciprocation beyond that (or whatever your family practices). After all, legitimate gift-givers do not demand their presents back if not shown appreciation, affection, or any other allegiance. Kids need to learn this for their own protection as well as to develop their own reasoned limits of the role of material kindness in healthy relationships.

Talk to family members. If there comes a time that you think an adult’s gift-giving has an improper ulterior motive, address it directly. Ulterior motives may be many other things than sexual abuse – buying forgiveness, soothing absences, or to make up for a perceived lack of attention. It is usually okay to give presents to make a child happy; it is never okay to give presents to make a child like you. Caring adults – including good grandparents – understand well that often-subtle distinction. (Originally published in 2008)
Plan Now for Santa's Breakfast

The 12th annual Santa's Breakfast, sponsored by the Catholic Daughters of America, is scheduled for Saturday, December 10 at Holy Family Church Gathering Hall in Yakima.

The menu will feature pancakes, eggs, sausage, biscuits and beverages, at a cost of $4 for children age 3 to 12 and $7 for age 13 and over.

The event also will include a raffle, country store, and the opportunity to bring a camera and take photos of children with Santa.

Christmas Collection Needs Your Support

All are invited to support the Annual Christmas Collection for Catholic Charities at all of the Masses on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. This important collection helps fund the charitable works of our Catholic Charities network of Catholic Family & Child Service Agencies, Catholic Charities Housing Services and Saint Vincent Centers across the Diocese of Yakima.

Catholic Charities accomplishes a tremendous amount of good through this collection. Last year, in addition to reaching out with compassion to those who are hungry, homeless, ill, etc., the collection supported a state-wide effort to create a clearly-identified Catholic response for women who find themselves pregnant and in need of our support to choose life and then, to journey with them through and after pregnancy.

Just as Christ’s light comes to us during the darkest time of year, Catholic Charities brings hope to so many of our neighbors during what is often their darkest hour. The Annual Christmas Collection for Catholic Charities is an opportunity for you to shine Christ’s love into the lives of your brothers and sisters who are most in need.

Bishops Issue Letter on Poverty

The Catholic bishops of Washington State have released a letter expressing their concern that poverty is reaching “crisis proportions” and calling on all people to take direct action to address poverty are moral issues and priorities for Catholics and all people of good faith.

The bishops – Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima, Archbishop J. Peter Sartain and Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo of Seattle, and Bishop Thomas Daly of Spokane – met with people from around the state who shared their experiences of poverty in listening sessions held over the past year. “We heard in the past year about individuals who are hungry, homeless, ill, etc., the collection supported a state-wide effort to create a clearly-identified Catholic response for women who find themselves pregnant and in need of our support to choose life and then, to journey with them through and after pregnancy. Just as Christ’s light comes to us during the darkest time of year, Catholic Charities brings hope to so many of our neighbors during what is often their darkest hour. The Annual Christmas Collection for Catholic Charities is an opportunity for you to shine Christ’s love into the lives of your brothers and sisters who are most in need.

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In their letter, the bishops invite those who enjoy the material necessities of life to “stop and look into the face of poverty” and “recognize that the poor are not strangers. They are our sisters and brothers, members of our human family.”

Fall Pilgrimage Visits European Sites

Parishioners from across the Diocese of Yakima joined in an 11-day pilgrimage to Poland and the Czech Republic this fall.

Highlights included sites associated with Pope Saint John Paul II, the Cathedral housing the Black Madonna painting, the convent where St. Faustina of the Divine Mercy devotions had lived, the noted Infant of Prague statue, and the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Spiritual leaders for the October 31 to November 10 trip were Bishop Joseph Tyson; Father Felipe Pulido, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Yakima; and Father Dan Dufner, pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Moses Lake.

“It was all amazing,” observed Roxanne Martinez Harrison of Holy Apostles Parish in East Wenatchee. Traveling on the pilgrimage with her daughter, Marissa, 23, Harrison said that she was especially touched to visit the childhood home of John Paul II outside of Krakow, Poland, to see his shoes and clothing, and to learn more of his history.

And, looking up at the Black Madonna painting in Czestochowa, on the outskirts of Warsaw, Poland, “I really did feel the Holy Spirit’s presence,” she said.

For Ed Carroll, a member of Holy Rosary Parish in Moxee who’s also an active participant at Holy Redeemer Parish in Yakima, the convent where St. Faustina lived had particular significance. (Holy Redeemer Church installed a beautiful Divine Mercy window several years ago.)

In a replica of Faustina’s convent room, in the Warsaw area, the group saw the actual whips and a wire leg wrap that this saint had used in prayerful, sacrificial suffering.

“Carroll also was impressed by the “fantastic” artwork, including statues and a depiction of The Last Supper, which has been chiseled by miners within a salt mine not far from Warsaw.

“It was incredible when you looked at all the churches in the towns,” added Elvia Gonzalez, a member of St. Mary Parish in White Swan. In Prague, for example, “every church seemed to have the huge ceiling, the stained-glass windows, very detailed altars.”

In addition to daily prayers and devotions, the 44-member group attended Mass each day at a different church, she said.

Gonzalez also was struck by the powerful experience of touring the Auschwitz concentration camp, where more than one million people died during World War II.

“They kept their faith,” she noted.

Coming back to the United States soon after our national elections, Harrison felt as though the trip had helped to put everything in perspective for her. Through all she’d seen overseas, she was reminded of “the importance of humanity. We are all individuals (yet) we all bleed the same. We all cry the same,” she said. In addition, “we have to remember Who is truly in control of us all.”