

„Bei uns ist immer was los!“

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION CUSTOMS / WEIHNACHTSFEIERBRÄUCHE

exchange of gifts: die Bescherung

The exchanging of Christmas presents, which takes a central position in the modern Christmas ritual, is a relatively new feature. Formerly, it was customary to give charitable gifts to the poor on this occasion, and children were given little presents for their singing or playing in processions. Children also received presents from their god-parents (not from their parents), but these were fixed obligations of the godparents and known beforehand. Farm hands and servants received practical gifts, mostly clothes, as part of their regular wages, due at Christmas. So there was no surprise effect and no reciprocity. Only since the

Renaissance, when one began to attach greater importance to the individual, did one begin to exchange presents in the sense that we do it now. And, only in the 19th century, when the rigid social order began to dissolve and the family became more important, did Christmas become the intimate family which it is now. The charitable origin of the Christmas

presents receded into the background, while equality and commercial advertising have turned the exchanging of presents almost into a social obligation.

Along with the Christmas presents, however, the legendary gift bringers took on greater importance, too. Whatever their names and origins,

Christkind, *Weihnachtsmann*, Nikolaus or Santa Claus, they still remind us of the transcendent background of Christmas, lending color, fun, and a little mystery to an old, venerable festival that is now badly in danger of being reduced to just another commercialized holiday.

On Christmas Eve, the entire family exchanges gifts after singing Christmas carols.

It's Christmas Eve, and the children are eagerly awaiting a visit, not from Santa Claus, but from the *Christ Kindlein* (Christ child): Soon a bell tinkles, and a veiled lady dressed in white with a blue sash comes to the door as the herald of *Christ Kindlein*. She enters the room saying: "Gelobt sei Jesus Christus" (Praised be Jesus Christ). She talks to the youngest child and asks him to say a prayer with her, and then she inquires about the conduct of the older children, reprimanding them for any misdeeds during the past year. Finally, she throws nuts on the floor and the children happily scrambled for them. She promises to return again next Christmas, and then disappears.

The parlor is guarded and locked before Christmas Eve. The children can never see it until the Gabenbringer (gift bringer) has come and gone. The Gabenbringer is the German version of our Santa Claus.