

„Bei uns ist immer was los!“

## CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION CUSTOMS / WEIHNACHTSFEIERBRÄUCHE

### exchange of gifts: die Bescherung

“Die Bescherung” or gift giving usually happens on Christmas Eve in Germany. In most homes some members attend a church service called “Christmesse”, where the children of the Parish portray the Christmas story, and, when everyone is home again the “Bescherung” gets underway.

In a globalized world, however, even century-old traditions are changing, and customs from far corners of the world travel far. The Swedish *Julklapp* tradition, for example, has become popular in Germany, especially among groups of friends or business colleagues. In Sweden, the gifts are not found under the tree, but shoved into the room after an ominous knocking at the door (*Julklapp* – Christmas knocking), and each family member has to find out which is his. In Germany, sports and other groups of friends or colleagues play games to determine who gets to choose first from the pile of gifts.

### “Julklapp”

That still involves traces of *Julklapp* as Christmas is called by many families in Northern Germany. This is a special kind of surprise rather than a heathen custom, despite its Ancient Nordic origins. On Christmas Eve, the door of the room in which the family is sitting mysteriously opens, just enough for nuts, parcels, and presents to be thrown through the chink as if by magic. When the parcels are opened, they are found to contain an indication that they are meant for someone else. This person may not be the final recipient either. The parcel gets smaller and smaller, passing from hand to hand until it finally does reach the right person. You are not meant to know from whom the gift comes. The present must remain a real surprise if it is to retain its value as bringer of good fortune.

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.

Gifts are exchanged on Christmas Eve. The modern counterpart of America's Santa Claus is the German “Weihnachtsmann” (literally “christmas man”), in whom the figure of St. Nicholas has merged with older, demonic winter figures such as “Knecht Ruprecht,” formerly believed to accompany St. Nicholas. In some South German regions, the “Christkind” (Christ Child, “Kris Kringle”) is the mysterious gift-bringer.

