



ARE CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS PAGAN?



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † December 2014

By Fr. William Saunders

QUESTION: A fundamentalist friend of mine commented that many of our Christmas decorations are pagan, particularly mistletoe, holly, ivy, laurel and poinsettia plants. Is there any truth to this?

DISCUSSION: Granted, some of our Christian Christmas decorations originated from pagan customs. However, with the evangelization of the pagan peoples by the missionaries, these decorations were baptized, giving them a new Christian meaning. So let's consider the five common Christmas decorations mentioned in the question.

The first four plants are evergreens: mistletoe, holly, ivy and laurel. Whether in a pagan culture or Christian culture, since the most ancient times, evergreens have symbolized eternity and everlasting life. For Christians in particular, the evergreens have the basic symbolism that our Lord is eternal and divine, and that He wants us to share His everlasting life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The mistletoe was regarded as a magical healing plant by the pagan Druids. It was even called All heal. The Christians adapted this plant, and now it is a symbol of Christ, the Divine Healer of all nations.

As far as the kissing associated with mistletoe, an ancient Norse legend relates that Freya, the goddess of love, placed mistletoe in a tree between Heaven and earth, and decided that people who pass underneath it should kiss. The plant then became a sign of love and friendship. While love and friendship are definitely Christian virtues to be practiced, I don't think that random kissing is the intent of the Christmas decoration.

While not known for sure, some sources hold that the pagan Romans sent holly branches as a sign of good wishes at the time of the new year festivals. The early Christians easily saw a more profound symbolism: The prickly, sharp points of the leaves symbolize the crown of thorns in particular and even the nails of the crucifixion, and the red berries symbolize the blood that flowed from our Lords wounds. The holly decoration at Christmas, thereby, reminds us that Christ was born to suffer and die for our sins, which would be washed away with His precious blood. For this reason, in Norway and Sweden, the holly is called Christ-thorn.

Some traditional stories surround the holly tree. For instance, when the Holy Family was fleeing King Herod's soldiers, they took refuge under a holly tree which spread its branches, thick with leaves, to protect them. The sharp, pointed leaves would have driven away any sensible person from searching, thereby safely concealing the Holy Family. For this action, our Blessed Mother blessed the tree and said it would be perpetually green.

Another legend is that the cross was made from holly wood. Because of this connection with our Lords passion and death, the tree was marked thereafter with sharp, pointed leaves and blood-red berries.

In the carol, The Holly and the Ivy, two other symbols of holly are noted: First, the holly blossom is white as the lily flower, reminding us of the purity of Jesus born of His mother Mary; and second, the holly bark, as bitter as any gall, reminds us of the drink offered our Lord as He hung upon the cross.

The Roman god Bacchus, the god of wine, wore ivy in his crown. For this reason, the early Christians did not use ivy inside Church to decorate, but it was used outside as a Christmas decoration. Ivy grows clinging to something, like a wall or a trellis. The vines are rather fragile and can break easily. For Christians, the ivy reminds us that we were weakened due to original sin, and could not save ourselves. Christ came to save us. We must faithfully cling to our Lord, relying on His strength to be holy and to attain salvation.

Finally, the Roman emperors used laurel leaves to form a wreath to be worn on the head as a sign of victory. Such laurel crowns were also awarded to military leaders who were victorious in battle and to athletes who had won contests. The virgins of the goddess Vesta also considered laurel sacred and a sign of virtue.

At Christmas time, laurel reminds us of Christ's victory over sin and death, and our call to holiness. We hope to attain the crown of victory over sin and reign with our Lord in Heaven. St. Paul taught, "You know that while all the runners in the stadium take part in the race, the award goes to one man. In that case, run so as to win! Athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. They do this to win a crown of leaves that withers, but we a crown that is imperishable" (1 Cor 9:24-25). In writing to St. Timothy before the end of his life, St. Paul again used the same imagery: "The time of my dissolution is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on a merited crown awaits me; on that Day, the Lord, just judge that He is, will award it to me and not only to me, but to all who have looked for His appearing with eager longing" (2 Tm 4:7-8).

The poinsettia, a native plant of Central America, is very popular. The bright red leaves symbolize the burning, divine love of our Redeemer. The shape of the cluster of leaves and the contrast of the red with the green also remind one of the star of Bethlehem that shone so brightly the night our Savior was born and then guided the Magi to visit Him.

A popular legend surrounds the poinsettia. Long ago, on Christmas Eve, a little Indian girl in Mexico wanted to bring a gift to present to Baby Jesus, lying in the creche at her Church. Being very poor, she could not buy a gift, as did the other children of the town. So on the way to Church, she gathered some green weeds on the edge of a field. Like the other children, she walked down the aisle of the Church and placed her bouquet at the creche. Suddenly, the green weeds turned a beautiful red, because she had given the most wonderful gift of all, the gift of genuine love. Since then, the poinsettia has been known in Mexico as *flores de la Noche Buena*.

These decorations, while perhaps originating in pagan times, have a much more beautiful meaning for Christians. As we decorate our homes this year, let us look upon them as reminders of the real meaning of Christmas.

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