

Memoirs of Christmas in Spain

By Joseph Parish



In keeping with my personal challenge of implementing numerous Christmas articles, ultimately leading up to, and ending on Christmas day, I continue with another in my continuing series. During the turbulent 60's, I was stationed in the beautiful country of Spain compliments of the United States Air Force. I always say, that at Christmas time this was one of the finest countries I could have visited or resided in. The Spanish people take their holidays seriously, and I would naturally get enmeshed in the charm and glamor exhibited by the annual festivities. Everywhere I went there were highlights of the occasion to view and traditional echoes of joyous sounds to condition me into the upcoming, delightful holiday mode. As I accomplished an informal stroll down the many major avenues comprising Madrid, it revealed to me a multiple of nativity scenes celebrating the occasion, many of these consisted of live performers acting out the roles. Everywhere I glanced throughout the city, I was reminded that the activities I was witnessing were of a religious undertaking.

I perceived that the annual pastime of celebration commonly began several weeks prior to celebrating Christmas activities, and it would slowly proceed to the celebrated day. I promptly discovered that being a Catholic country, when Christmas eve arrived there were only two localities where the population gathered. One whereabouts, was naturally the church for the midnight Christmas mass, while the other was the “La Misa Del Gallo” or in English the Mass of the Rooster. The mass of the rooster or otherwise known as the Shepard’s mass, is very popular in most Spanish countries, but has seen a great revival within the modern culture of Spain. The annual observance launches with the lighting of the oil lamps within each home, and is followed up with the usual midnight Christmas mass held in the church. I felt as a pampered child with a sight to behold, as I promenaded from one street to the next, surveying with astonishment at the assorted oil lamps exhibiting brightly lit windows in each home. Although I am not of the Catholic faith, I elected to assemble at the church for the mass. Just being in the Churches of Spain has been a tremendous emotional and spiritual boast. It was similar to an imaginary voyage, where I was part of a spiritual awakening. I was fascinated with all the elaborate garments being displayed and the procession which took place. Regardless of my religion, it was worth watching.

At midnight on Christmas eve all activities reached an immediate halt amid the church bells unremitting rang, signifying that all families should cease what they are undertaking and attend the Mass of the Rooster. This special activity is in honor of the common rooster, who it is said only, “crowed” at the stroke of midnight on the day that Jesus was born. This noteworthy ceremony is especially highlighted by the beauty which is extended from the candlelight services I saw at the monastery of Montserrat, near the Barcelona mountains.

Christmas Eve is traditionally known in Spain as “Nochebuena”. Food is one of the predominant cornerstones of “Nochebuena”. Translated from Spanish, the name signifies “Good night” and is a unique Christmas eve celebration within the Spanish culture. This activity normally takes place after the annual midnight Christmas mass. I found that some of the Spanish families have assumed the more modern lines of consuming their holiday meals prior to appearing at the midnight mass. I was repeatedly encouraged by my Spanish acquaintances to spend some quality time bonding with them in their holiday meal, with most still adhering to the traditional Christmas eve dining protocol. We in America, as a rule, have our celebration banquet on Christmas day, but in Spain, “Nochebuena” ceremonial dinners are their most sizable meal of the holiday. Here I saw a table spread with assorted meats, roasts, pork, seafood, mixed soups, and all the holiday trimmings. Everything I needed to make me gain weight and feel stuffed. I found that the precise menu options varied according to where in Spain I was celebrating. Some areas I was afforded Turkey stuffed with truffles, or perhaps I indulged in a meal at one location composed of a young roasted hen. In Galicia, which is near water the meal I once ate consisted of seafood, such as shellfish, mollusks, crabs and even

lobster. Being a seafood lover that was one of my all-time favorites. I found it interesting that many people will eat meat on Christmas eve and have seafood on Christmas day.

I cannot overlook the delectable desserts and tasty sweets which Spain is famous for. Again, I made a “Pig” of myself with such popular deserts as “mazapán” which is made from sugar, almonds, eggs, “turrón” created from toasted almonds and honey and even a treat of “polvorones” made from butter, flour, and sugar. I willingly indulged in assorted wines as they were freely served through the course of the festivities. I found that time was of no consequence, since family and friends remained awake all night talking about the good times we experienced in the past or of our future plans. For me it was a time to awaken long forgotten dreams. Prior to the establishment of “Nochebuena”, the village children would take part in singing carols around their nearby neighbors in the hopes of receiving some money. I enjoyed the caroling which is still a popular pastime for the Spanish on this holiday.

The exciting time comes after the midnight mass is completed and the people traditionally stroll along the busy streets carrying lit torches, playing classical guitars, tambourines and small drums. One Spanish friend told me that, this is a good night and should not be wasted by sleeping. How true it was.

After the 25th is over the pious celebrations do not stop, for as December 28th, approached, I encountered the “Day of the Innocent Saints.” I found that this fun Spanish activity was similar to our April Fool’s Day where the people will try to trick one another. On this day, I encountered many unbelievable tales being told by my friends, as this was a time of silly stories and preposterous tales, with all of us trying the best we could to convince our friends that the stories were real. These activities were not restricted merely to the people themselves, but extend to the newspapers and even the TV stations. As we sat there in the living room relating tales, we could see on the news channel the announcer doing the same things that my friends and I were comically indulged in. If I actually were to trick my friend, then I would call the person an ‘innocent’. December 28th is traditionally the day when people in Spain remember all the babies, which were killed under the orders of King Herod as he was attempting to locate and kill baby Jesus.

When I visited other areas of Spain, I discover more interesting cultures and customs related to Christmas. I found that Christmas eve in the Basque country of northern Spain, saw the village children anxiously awaiting their presents to be delivered by “Olentzero”, who was portrayed as a big, overweight magical man, dressed as a Basque farmer, who wore a beret and smokes a pipe. In Catalonia, Spain, I was alarmed that there was a Christmas character named “Tió de Nadal” or the Christmas log. The locals call him the “pooping log”. This log which I saw was a small hollow log which is propped up on two supporting legs complimented with a painted smile on one end. Beginning on December 8th, the Spanish families will furnish the log with some fragments of food to “eat” and perhaps a blanket to

provide warmth to it. When Christmas Day arrives, the log gives small gifts to the children. Humorously, I noticed that the children would sing songs to the log and would hit it with heavy sticks to assist its digestion, ultimately causing it to give forth nuts, sweets and dried fruits. As soon as a clove of garlic falls from the beaten log, there are no more treats for the year. Another strange and comical tradition of the Catalonia area is known as the "Poo-er". Yes, you guessed it, this is a figure of a peasant going to the toilet. The figure is a Catalonia peasant in the traditional red cap squatting with their pants down. Each year new versions are introduced with the faces of a politician or of famous celebrities.

Since I am a retired military person, I can fly anywhere in the world free of charge. My wife and I are planning a trip back to Spain in the future to enjoy what the country has to offer. I could go on and on about the traditional Christmas customs which take place in the various sections of Spain, however, in concluding, all I can say is that you really need to experience this fun filled holiday in person. The country of Spain has a lot to offer the visitor throughout the year, but when the Christmas holiday arrives, you won't want to spend it in any other country.