Sinterklass

By Chaplain Doug Vrieland

Happy belated Sinterklaas Dag! Perhaps I need to explain.

Sinterklaas Dag is a holiday celebrated in the Netherlands and Belgium on Dec. 6, the feast of St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas is the patron saint of children, Sailors (does the Navy know this?) and the city of Amsterdam.

The history of this celebration goes back to the Middle Ages when the Netherlands was a part of Spain. Sinterklaas, otherwise known as "Saint Nicholas," is an elderly man with white hair and full beard dressed in the traditional costume of a Catholic bishop.

He arrives every year with his helper, Zwart Piet ("Black Peter") from Spain on a steamboat sometime in mid-November. On the night of Dec. 5, Dutch children put their wooden shoes next to the fireplace with some hay or a carrot in it for Sinterklaas' horse.

On the morning of Dec. 6 the children wake up and find candy or a small present in their shoes. There are also larger gifts for the children who have been good over the last year, left by Zwart Piet. Naughty children receive a roe, a chimney-sweep's broom often used for spanking children, or in some variations of the story they are put into Zwart Piet's bag and taken back to Spain.

The connections the American tradition of Santa Claus is obvious.

So why do I bring all this up, other than the fact that, as you can see by my name at the top of this article, I happen to be of Dutch ethnic background? I write about this because I think there is something we can learn from this old tradition.

For the Dutch, the whole gift-giving part of Christmas was separate from the religious celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The celebration of Sinterklaas Dag three weeks before Christmas frees people up to put their complete focus on the religious meaning of the holiday ("holy day") on Dec. 25.

Ironically, it was the Calvinists during the period of the Protestant Reformation (my spiritual ancestors) who did away with this holiday as being too "Catholic" with its focus on a Saint, and began to connect the practice of giving gifts to the coming of the Christ child.

In recent years, there seems to have been an intentional effort to downplay the word "Christmas" in the public arena.

Retail merchants have replaced their "Merry Christmas" signs with the more generic "Happy Holidays."

I find it ironic that in America, where the predominate religion is Christianity, the retailers no longer wish their customers "Merry Christmas" while here in Japan, where there are very few Christians, there are signs all over the place that say "Merry Christmas."

Many of us who embrace Christianity are understandably unhappy with the recent trend to "take Christ out of Christmas."

Many of us (I include myself here) refuse to go along with the idea that wishing someone a "Merry Christmas" is somehow offensive. After all, Christmas is Dec. 25. What's wrong with wishing someone—whatever their faith tradition—a merry day on that particular day?

But maybe those who are opposed to the expression "Merry Christmas" are doing Christians a favor.

Perhaps they are reminding us that Christmas is, at heart, a religious celebration.

Perhaps it is a good idea to separate the giving of gifts from the celebration of the birth of the Christian savior.

When you think about it, the commercial extravaganza that gift giving has turned into has little to do with the humility, poverty, and homelessness of the baby in Bethlehem's manger.

Maybe we need to celebrate "Santa Clause Day" and Christmas on separate days.

Happy Santa Claus Day to all. A Blessed Christmas to those of you who celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

Kamakura monks visit CFAY

Buddist monks from Kamakura Engakuji were welcomed onboard CFAY by Commanding Officer Capt. David Owen Dec. 5 to pay homage and pray to a fellow monk who made the area his home and his temple " Hakusen-An" almost 700 years ago. The monks visited a memorial plaque dedicated to a famous Japanese Zen Priest, Muso Soseki Kokushi and his hermitage nestled into the hillside near the Japanese Dispensary.

Photo by Yuji Kawabe

Cut and save

Emergency Information

Commander Fleet Activites Yokosuka (CFAY) and Negishi and Ikego Housing Detachment residents are advised to stay tuned to the following mediums for emergency information:

- CFAY Web Site: http://www.cnic.navy.mil/yokosuka
- CFAY Facebook page: http://www.Facebook.com/cfayokosuka
- CFAY Twitter page: http://twitter.com/cfay_yokosuka
- CFAY base Channel 15
- Eagle 810 AM Radio station
- A recorded weather message can be obtained by calling 243-5155.

The information provided will include but is not limited to notification of actions to take for severe weather and the unexpected or early dismissal of schools.

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