

Christmas in the Philippines

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The Philippines is the only nation in Asia where the majority of people are Christian. Since Spanish colonizers brought the Christian religion to the Philippines hundreds of years ago, most Filipino Christians are, like the Spanish, Roman Catholic. The Philippines has been called the “land of fiestas.” For many Filipinos, Christmas is the most joyous fiesta of the year.

ROOSTER MASSES

In the Philippines the Christmas season begins on December 16 with the first of nine early morning church services called the Misa de Gallo, or “rooster’s mass.” Known as Simbang Gabi in the Tagalog language spoken by many Filipinos, these services take place every day between December 16 and December 24. A festive rather than solemn mood pervades these observances in spite of the fact that the masses begin at four in the morning. At that early hour church bells ring, marching bands play, and fireworks explode, rousing anyone who is still in bed and reminding everyone to attend mass. In small towns the priest himself may knock on doors, calling parishioners for this early morning service. These services are well attended, since many Filipinos see them as an essential element of their Christmas celebrations. To many who attend, the socializing that takes place after the service is as important as the mass itself. Vendors sell breakfast foods outside, and people stop to chat with friends and neighbors in the fresh, early morning air.

CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Many Filipinos enjoy singing Christmas carols. Caroling often begins in earnest on December 16. Bands of young people and adults take to the streets, singing Filipino carols as well as a smattering of English carols they have come to know. Filipino custom encourages people to reward carolers with money or sweets. Some people carol as a way of raising money for civic organizations. Youngsters often want to keep the coins and treats for themselves, however. Others carol simply for the fun of it.

In some parts of the Philippines groups of folk performers, called Pastores, offer free entertainment on the nights before Christmas. Pastores means “shepherds” in Spanish. This Filipino custom comes from an old Spanish custom of the same name. Dressed in folk costumes, the performers sing Christmas carols and other traditional Filipino songs. Sometimes they act out scenes from the Nativity story as well.

DECORATIONS

Decorating the home is an important part of the Christmas celebration in the Philippines. The most cherished Christmas decoration is the parol, a star-shaped lantern. Many families make their own. Children often learn how to make star lanterns in school by covering a bamboo frame with colored rice paper or cellophane. Tassels or streamers are usually attached to each of the five points on the star. In the old days people illuminated these lanterns by placing a candle within them. Nowadays an electric light is often deemed safer.

Many cities sponsor parol competitions in the days before Christ-mas. Judges award prizes to the most beautiful homemade lanterns. In the city of San Fernando, the lantern competition has become a spectacle that draws crowds from the surrounding areas. Each year the lanterns entered in the competition have grown in size. Many now have to be carried on flatbed trucks.

Other Christmas decorations include candles, wreaths, Christmas trees, Nativity scenes, and Christmas cards. Cards may be displayed by attaching them to a red or green ribbon which is then strung across the room. Filipinos also incorporate fresh flowers into their Christmas decorations. Flowers are readily available in the month of December due to the country's warm climate. During the holiday season Christmas decorations festoon shops, streets, and plazas as well as homes. Electric light displays, star lanterns, Christmas trees, and scenes from the Nativity story all appear in these public displays.

CHRISTMAS TREES

Many Filipino families have adopted the European custom of decorating their homes with a Christmas tree. In the Philippines Christmas trees are as likely to be found on a porch or balcony as they are in the living room. Since pine trees are quite expensive in the Philippines, some families buy an artificial tree instead. Others use palm trees, or make an artificial tree out of twigs and branches or out of cardboard. Filipinos decorate their trees with miniature star lanterns, bamboo or wood carvings, candies, ribbons, shells, and tiny boxes wrapped like Christmas gifts.

NATIVITY SCENES

Nativity scenes are another important element of Filipino Christmas decorations. In past times Nativity scenes were principally found in churches and were made to be life sized. Nowadays these scenes may be smaller. They usually appear for the first time in churches on December 16. Nativity scenes may be found in Filipino homes as well. Filipinos call the Nativity scene a belén, the Spanish word for Bethlehem. Like the people of many other nations, Filipinos place the infant Jesus figurine in his Nativity scene crib on the evening of December 24.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Filipinos prepare for Christmas Eve by giving their homes a thorough cleaning. Those who can afford it also buy new clothes, which they wear for the first time to Midnight Mass or to Christmas morning mass. Families also stock up on special holiday foods, since extensive visiting takes place over the holiday season.

Christmas Eve is a family affair in the Philippines. Often the extended family will gather at one of the grandparents' homes early in the evening. Filipinos are famous for their hospitality so distant relatives and even friends of relatives are often welcome at this event. Very small children may be left at home to nap while most of the family attends Midnight Mass. Large numbers of people attend mass on this evening, so many people arrive early, hoping to secure a seat. Churches are often filled by 10:00 p.m.

After the mass most people return home for a bountiful Christmas Eve banquet. Hosts and hostesses of large gatherings may have prepared as many as fifteen or twenty different dishes for guests to choose from. These may include arroz caldo (chicken and rice soup), lumpia (spring rolls), rellenong manok (boned stuffed chicken), rel-lenong bangus (boned stuffed milkfish), and calamay

(coconut rice pudding). Bands of carolers may arrive at the door during this festive meal, as well as neighbors and friends who stop by to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. Children sometimes sing, dance, or perform a little play for the adults. The party continues until four or five in the morning. Afterwards, bed rolls are spread out for the many house-guests who stay the night.

CHRISTMAS GIFTS

Some people exchange Christmas gifts during the Christmas Eve party. Others wait until Christmas Day. As a rule, gifts are simple in the Philippines and often include homemade foods or useful items, such as new clothes. Although Santa Claus is known in the Philippines, he does not act as a gift bringer there. Most Filipino children know that their presents come from Mom, Dad, and the grandparents.

CHRISTMAS DAY

Those who did not attend Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve often begin the day by attending Christmas morning mass. More family visits take place on Christmas Day. Families may call on aunts, uncles, godparents, and grandparents. The children usually receive a small trinket at each house, so they eagerly agree to these rounds of visits. It is especially important that children visit their godparents on Christmas Day. Sometimes the children perform a song, dance, or skit for their godparents. The godparents, in turn, offer a gift to each godchild.

Filipinos sit down to another lavish meal on Christmas Day. Christmas dinner, which usually takes place around midday, frequently features lechon, roast suckling pig. Options for those who cannot afford a suckling pig include ham and lenong manok, stuffed chicken. Flan, a caramel-flavored custard, is often served for dessert.

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Filipinos celebrate throughout the entire Twelve Days of Christmas, the days between Christmas and Epiphany. Performances, parties, exhibitions, and entertainments of all kinds take place during these days.

HOLY INNOCENTS' DAY

Filipinos observe December 28, Holy Innocents' Day, by playing practical jokes on one another. According to custom one cannot complain if one is fooled by a friend. In addition, anyone who succeeds in borrowing something on this day is not expected to give it back.

NEW YEAR

Filipinos often celebrate New Year's Eve at parties, discos, and balls. Many sport the paper party hats sold by countless roadside vendors in the preceding days. Polka-dotted clothes are also popular on New Year's Eve, since Filipino folklore teaches that anything round brings good luck for the new year. Filipinos celebrate New Year's Eve by making noise. Those who cannot lay their hands on firecrackers will beat on pots and pans. The noisemaking comes to a head at midnight. After midnight, many settle down to a large meal. The menu often includes stuffed peppers, ham, and sweets. Cooks try to place as many round foods as possible on the table. Many Filipinos make sure to have grapes in the house on New Year's Eve. Following an old Spanish custom, they pop one grape into their mouth for each of the twelve chimes of the clock as it rings in the new year. Doing so ensures that they will have a sweet new year. Many also turn on every light in their home at midnight. According to Filipino folk belief, this will bring about a bright new year. Another folk belief teaches that those who stay home all day on New Year's Day will spend much time with their loved ones in the coming year. Many people take this advice and spend January 1 at home with their families.

EPIPHANY

Epiphany, January 6, signals the end of the Christmas season. In order to bring the holiday season to a close a little more quickly, however, the holiday is often observed on the first Sunday of January. Some families follow the Spanish custom of putting the children's shoes near a door or window on Epiphany Eve, so that the Wise Men, or Magi, can fill them with candies and trinkets. Others distribute candies and trinkets to the children themselves. Many towns sponsor parades that reenact the Three King's journey to Bethlehem. Riding on horseback in splendid costumes, the kindly kings often toss coins and sweets to the children who have come to see the parade. Churches, too, offer similar pageants portraying the arrival of the Three Kings at the manger in Bethlehem.

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