



I'll be green for Christmas

Let's not only be green when summer's here but also during the most wonderful time of the year.

THE ANTICIPATION WAS OVER, THE GIFTS ALL OPENED, and nothing left to do except take it all in. Even when I was little, it was one of my favorite moments of Christmas. I'd sit with my loot sorted next to me and survey the living room while peeling the customary orange from my stocking. Red, green, and patterned wrapping paper covered the floor, and the cats, high on new catnip, would be attacking a bow under the tree.

I loved getting the orange, along with an apple and nuts (and chocolate, of course) in my stocking. It felt so *Little House on the Prairie*, as if these were exotic fruits, a special treat savored in the middle of the winter and not an ordinary

purchase at the grocery store. I imagined Pa trekking home from town with brown paper packages—one each for Ma and us girls—getting caught in the blizzard and having to eat our special Christmas treat to survive. Ah, those were the days!

It's not that I wanted to give up the Nintendo, books, and whatever other toys I got for this frontier fantasy. But at some age I started to see the effect of all my gifts. Eventually my moment of Christmas bliss was over, and we would have to stuff trash bag after trash bag with packages and shiny wrapping paper. According to use-less-stuff.com, Americans produce 25 percent more waste from Thanksgiving to New Year's, amounting to 25 million tons of extra trash.

Is this any way to celebrate Christ's birth?

By MEGAN SWEAS, associate editor of U.S. CATHOLIC.

Christmas is about celebrating the incarnation: God became human, sanctifying our lives on earth. In becoming human, God also became part of all of creation. As Elizabeth Johnson wrote in the April 2010 issue of U.S. CATHOLIC: “By becoming flesh the Word of God confers blessing on the whole of earthly reality in its material dimension, and beyond that, on the cosmos in which the Earth exists. . . . In place of spiritual contempt for the world, we ally ourselves with the living God by loving the whole natural world, part of the flesh that the Word became.”

69%

of U.S. CATHOLIC readers surveyed worry somewhat to a lot about the environmental impact of Christmas.

If we understand Jesus to be sanctifying all of creation, we should reevaluate our celebrations of his birthday and make them look more like Earth Day.

DOES THAT MEAN THAT WE SHOULD become Grinches (he was green after all) and steal all the presents, decorations, and food from little Cindy Lou and the other Whos?

On one hand, I love Christmas. I love setting up nativity scenes and going to Midnight Mass, but I’m also not above turning the radio to the station that plays non-religious Christmas carols 24/7 and singing along. I love the lights, the tree, the good food, and the presents. I hate shopping 11 months a year, but I have to go to the mall at Christmas time. And I don’t want families to stop traveling across the country to see each other.

On the other hand, Whoville still

celebrates Christmas without all these extras anyway. Christmas is about more than gifts and parties, the Grinch learns. This is also the message we hear every year from those fighting the “war on Christmas.” Much like the Christmas warriors, I am proposing that we put “Christ back into Christmas.” I just want to do so by taking Christ—and ourselves along with him—out of Walmart rather than insisting that he be in there.

SO WHAT’S A CHRISTMAS-LOVING tree-hugger like me supposed to do? Cut down a tree, to start. Cutting our own tree is another of my favorite Christmas memories, and natural trees are better than fake ones, which are made with toxic chemicals, are shipped from China, and eventually end up in landfills.

According to Earth911, one tree can absorb more than a ton of carbon dioxide over its lifetime, and the National Christmas Tree Association says 40 to 45 million are planted each year (best if grown organically). Ninety-three percent of Americans recycle their trees into mulch, and more families are buying live trees that they can plant in the backyard after Christmas.

Lights and decorations? Go for tasteful, not tacky. As a young person without many Christmas decorations, every year I’m tempted to buy 100 plastic ornaments for \$10, but then I remember that they don’t actually look that good. I’d rather buy a few quality items—like fair trade nativity sets from around the world—than kitschy plastic reindeer.

And do you really need to blow out the entire electrical grid with a Las Vegas-scale light display? Lights are fun, though, so here’s another idea to lessen your energy consumption: Turn off all the other electronic gadgets—the games, computers, and TVs that keep

everyone in their own rooms—and spend some quality time together around your pretty tree covered in environmentally friendly LED lights and fair trade ornaments.

GIFTS ARE PROBABLY THE HARDEST part of going green at Christmas-time. Our consumption of more and more “stuff” is driving environmental destruction, and it hardly reflects an appreciation of God’s gifts to us or the dignity of humans halfway around the globe.

We often hear the call to spend more to jumpstart the economy, but that solution only jumpstarts an unsustainable and unjust economy. While the Walmart business model makes for cheap presents (even cheaper on Black Friday), it relies on cheap labor abroad and at home; cheap natural resources, especially oil for production and shipping; and high volume of sales. Our insatiable demand for more drives the supply, but in this finite world the supply is not endless.

Since Christmas is a time when we put a lot of money into our economy, it’s a good time to support more sustainable economic models, such as buying locally or choosing fair trade products.

Still, I don’t have to explain all that to a 5-year-old whining for a particular toy. I can’t even stem the giving in my family of all adults. I’m not alone. Family spirituality writer Susan Vogt reports on her website (susanvogt.net) that her family wasn’t terribly enthusiastic about their experimental “nothing new” Christmas. Still, they did come up with a variety of alternative gifts: crafts (just don’t count on receiving anything crafty from me!), homemade cookies and candies, tickets to an event, favors, time, and charitable donations.

Another option is to limit gifts to immediate family or do a gift exchange

with relatives so that each person has to buy only one gift. Last year I decided to do all my shopping in one day, except for a few online purchases. By limiting my mall exposure, I found that I wasn't as tempted by stuff I just needed to include in my own letter to Santa.

How to wrap these gifts is my next step to greening Christmas. This year I'm buying reusable fabric gift bags—I'm not crafty enough to make them myself or decorate brown paper bags or old newspaper, though those are options, too.

The biggest way my family has tried to green up our act at the holidays is to buy an organic, free-range turkey for Christmas dinner rather than a turkey bred for breasts so big that it can't stand, fly, or even mate. Potatoes, carrots, onions, and other vegetables—not to mention apples and pumpkin for pie—can be found locally in Chicago even in December, and they're much better than produce trucked an average of 1,500 miles from farm to shelf.

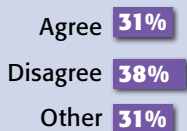
If food is more expensive and tastier, you might think twice about wasting it, too. Every year 28 billion pounds of edible food is wasted, according to *use-less-stuff.com*. Eating your leftovers might be the most enjoyable way to go green. I don't care if you've eaten turkey five days in a row.

AS MUCH AS I ADMIRE THEIR PIONEER spirit, I don't want to go back to the *Little House on the Prairie* way of life. I'm an environmentalist because for the most part I like our society and want to preserve it—including our festive celebration of Christmas.

The question is whether we can find a happy medium that is sustainable and fair to all. There is no better place to start than turning the most wasteful time of the year back into the most wonderful time of the year. **USC**

AND THE SURVEY SAYS...

1. Christmas should be about celebrating. Leave the sacrifice for Lent.

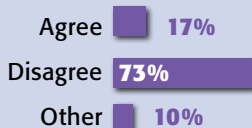


Representative of "other":
"Protecting the environment is not a sacrifice; it is a way of life."

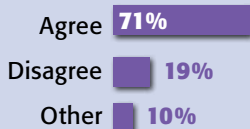
2. I worry about the environmental impact of Christmas:



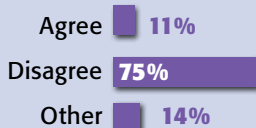
3. I try to be environmentally friendly for the rest of the year but splurge at the holidays.



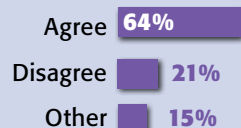
4. Greening Christmas would make it more spiritually fulfilling and focused on faith.



5. My family would revolt at Christmas if I tried to make it greener by buying fewer gifts.



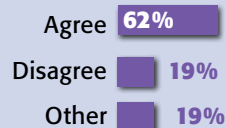
6. I think that finding gifts for those I love is a wonderful way to celebrate God's love become human at Christmastime.



7. To make Christmas greener this year, I'd be willing to:



8. Catholics should make it priority to be green in their Christmas celebrations, even if it means spending more for less.



Results are based on survey responses from 138 USCATHOLIC.ORG visitors. A representative selection of their comments follow in *Feedback*.

feedback

Even if it's wasteful, at Christmas I couldn't give up...

One roll of new wrapping paper.

*Arlene Marrinan
Morrisville, Vt.*

Lights in our windows. The lights are so bright and festive in the dark month of December here in Michigan.

*Kelly Gauthier
Ann Arbor, Mich.*

A Christmas tree. I am allergic to real ones and so have two "everlasting" trees.

*Bernadette Kunkemoeller
Gales Ferry, Conn.*

Beautiful ribbons for wrapping. I can do brown paper or newspaper, but I love the ribbons.

*Karen Sjoberg
Grand Junction, Colo.*

Christmas cookies.

*Larry Huber
Harleysville Pa.*

Eating Christmas cookies.

*Kathy O'Keefe
Omaha, Neb.*

Wrapping gifts.

*Colleen Flack
Spencer, Ohio*

Special food items like lox and bagels on Christmas morning and a turkey dinner in the afternoon.

*Megan Richard
Steamboat Springs, Colo.*

Some foods that aren't locally available.

*Name withheld
Twin Lake, Mich.*

Holiday specials on TV.

*Natalie Loftin
Savannah, Ga.*

Flying to visit family.

*Kristi Neumayer Jenkins
Cape Coral, Fla.*

"Gathering with family around the dinner table, with good conversation and laughter, is the best gift of all."

Christmas lights and sending people Christmas cards the old-fashioned way.

*Margie Skelly
Chicago, Ill.*

The parts of the Christmas celebration that I would dispense with are...

Expensive gift-giving to impress the recipient. Being truly present for loved ones is more important than tokens.

*Joseph Holmberg
Lebanon, Ore.*

The obligatory, useless gift exchanges.

*Pat Brown
Aliquippa, Pa.*

Giant inflatable yard ornaments.

*Name withheld
Chicago, Ill.*

Buying wrapping paper. We'll find some other way to make gifts festive.

*Linda Hermann
Talking Rock, Ga.*

Christmas cards—I haven't sent one in nine years.

*Mary Carroll
Smithtown, N.Y.*

People wishing a "Happy Holiday" instead of "Merry Christmas," holiday music on the radio 24/7, Salvation Army bell-ringers, and Christmas ads before Thanksgiving.

*Deb Gleason
Webster, N.Y.*

Santa Claus. He's too commercial and children do not get the true meaning of Christmas.

*Camille Baumann
Annapolis, Md.*

The parties, which are mostly an excuse to drink.

*Howard Platz
Hayesville, N.C.*

Christmas is one of the most beautiful times of the year. Why would I want to dispense with any of the traditions?

*Alphonse Wunsch
The Villages, Fla.*

The reason I rein in my Christmas celebrating is...

Over the years it just became too much.

*Deacon Thomas J. Evrard
Long Beach, N.Y.*

In a large family Christmas can get out of hand quickly.

*Tanya Monsour Stager
Ft. Mitchell, Ky.*

I have less to give this year.

*Name withheld
Omaha, Neb.*

I want to set a good example for the grandchildren.

*Joyce Athmann
South St. Paul, Minn.*

The reason I do not rein in my Christmas celebrating is...

It's the only time of year when my family goes "whole hog." We're pretty conservative the rest of the year.

*Marla J. Lawrence
Albany, Ore.*

Our children are far from home most of the year, and we only really get to give them things at Christmas time.

*Sherry Fischer
Spokane, Wash.*

You cannot “rein in” celebrating the birth of Jesus.

*Ardel Nelson
Sacramento, Calif.*

It is a feast, and feast days should be celebrated. Traditions and gift-giving around Christmas time bring joy to others.

*Beth Winkel
Green Bay, Wis.*

The best alternative gift I've ever given or received was...

A beautiful little nativity scene from a co-worker that was made in Peru, her native land. I have been collecting nativity scenes from other countries ever since.

*Kim Hagerty
Chicago, Ill.*

An annual pre-Christmas brunch, lovingly made and served by a very good friend, who takes great delight in it.

*Joan Krebs
Glenview, Ill.*

My mother's grease-spattered, worn-out apple crisp recipe that my sister had framed for me.

*Kriss Auger
North Kingstown, R.I.*

Scarves that I knitted and gave along
with a poem I'd written. My mom and
sisters all cried and still treasure them.

*Louise Gillmore
Salem, Wis.*

Framed copies of a picture I'd taken of
my dad and brother together.

Elizabeth Warren
Joelton, Tenn.

Last year I gave my mother a jar filled with colorful paper. Each had a memory or a compliment on it.

*Susan Vogt
Covington, Ky.*

A phone call from an Iraqi family my church sponsored as refugees.

Paul Amrhein
Richmond, Va.

General Comments

Gathering with family around the dinner table, with good conversation and laughter, is the best gift of all.

M. C. Hummel
St. Louis, Mo.

I do think that people end up spending too much in many parts of the country, but we are a farming community who has always had to “save the tin foil” and be self-reliant. Many of the suggestions that show up to help people deal with the economy and be “green” are things that we grew up doing and continue doing (and my grown children are also doing). It has made the current economy less stressful and noticable for us.

*Pam Konz
Adrian, Minn.*

It's much more sustainable to focus on creative re-use ideas than buying a lot of new "green" products.

*Name withheld
Jacksonville, Fla.*

[illegible]

SOUND OFF

Sounding Board surveys are online!

This month tell us if you have a welcoming parish at ***uscatholic.org/hospitality***

A sense of community and hospitality is central to the Mass/worship experience.



☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Other

And it's not too late to share your thoughts on the dialogue between faith and science at ***uscatholic.org/faithandscience***

Make your voice heard at *uscatholic.org*