

Basilica gift shop thrives during holiday season

Black Friday isn't just a lucrative day for shopping malls.

Christmas-minded consumers make the gift shop of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary a must-stop the day after Thanksgiving in Baltimore.

When they enter the Charles Street store, which is located in the historic Sexton's Lodge on the left side of the front of the basilica, shoppers will see a Catholic marketplace. The shop is ushering out many of its Thanksgiving-themed decorations for a pine tree, garland, white lights and poinsettias

"We have every corner utilized," said Angela Gillies, the manager of the shop. "It's more tasteful. It's very elegant."

In order to meet the needs of visitors, Ms. Gillies and her small staff minimize many of the year-round staples, like First Communion gifts, to make room for seasonal merchandise, which tends to be scooped up off the shelves.

The most popular item in the store is often the Nativity scenes from the century-old Fontanini brand. Ms. Gillies said her shop is one of the few authorized dealers of the line of collectors' pieces.

"So many of the visitors are local, and it's not available where they live," Ms. Gillies said. "That's really a big focal point (for shoppers)."

Many people scramble during the holiday season to find "the right card." Often, people are left picking apart the straggler cards that don't touch the right reverent note. Ms. Gillies said the store offers those hard to find, attractive Christmas notes for loved ones.

While many stores are fretting the economic swoon plaguing the country, Ms. Gillies said her shop is thriving thanks to the hundreds of thousands of visitors who flock to

the basilica each year.

“With the economy the way it is, people are looking for something unique that they don’t have,” she said. “They’re trying to find pieces they aren’t going to get elsewhere.”

In fact, she said people did not wait for the post-Thanksgiving rush. The store is seeing an uptick in walk-in traffic now.

“Seventy-five percent of the people are already buying Christmas gifts,” she said.

The gift shop does not sell items through the shop’s Web site, but people can phone orders to 410-727-3565, ext. 44. The shop is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.