

The truth about Santa Claus

Where would we be without Santa Claus?

For a surprising number of people, the answer comes easily: a lot better off. That's a disappointing response, to be sure, and most of us would object to it strongly. Even though he springs from a secular background, Santa is now part of the Christmas scene. And viewed in the right light, he can easily draw people into the true meaning of the season, leading us to thoughts of the incomparable Gift that God gave us on that first Christmas day.

That's the way, at any rate, that G.K. Chesterton saw it. The sentiments of that famed British author of a century ago, who wrote on a dizzying array of subjects, were relayed at this time last year by Father John Dietzen, whose question-and-answer column was distributed by Catholic News Service.

Father Dietzen was replying to a writer who was uneasy with her friends because they intended to tell their children that Santa was just a myth, one eagerly embraced by merchants only because it led to more sales at Christmas time. She was right to be upset, Father Dietzen said, turning to Chesterton to help make his point. He wrote of the way Chesterton remembered Christmas mornings, when his stockings were filled with good things that he had not worked for or even been good for. He accepted the explanation that was given: that a being called Santa Claus, someone of "peculiarly fantastic goodwill," was kindly disposed toward him. Father Dietzen went on to quote Chesterton:

"We believed that a certain benevolent person did give us those toys for nothing. And I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea. Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking. Now I wonder who put the stockings by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void. Once, I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dollars and crackers. Now, I thank him for stars and street faces, and wine and the great sea ..."

Father Dietzen went on to draw the obvious lesson. "Call Santa Claus a myth or what you will," he wrote, "but in his name parents – and all of us who give gifts at

this special time of the year – are putting one another in deeper touch with the “peculiarly fantastic goodwill,” which is the ultimate source of it all. ... I hope your friends reconsider.”

That’s one of my favorite Father Dietzen columns, and I suspect it was one of his as well.

It was also one of his last. After 35 years of answering readers’ queries in the “Question Corner,” Father Dietzen died earlier this year at the age of 83. I counted him as a friend for all of those years and then some, and it occurred to me that the “Santa column” of a year ago would be a fine way to remember him.

John Dietzen was unfailingly conscientious in his priesthood and in his writing, making sure that his readers got the information they sought and that it conformed with church teaching. I know for a fact that his answers went far beyond those that appeared in the column; everyone with a serious question got a personal reply.

That’s one of the things that made Father Dietzen a credit to this profession and a wonderful priest. When he wrote about “a certain benevolent person” of “fantastic goodwill,” he was on perfectly familiar ground.

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