Have an *Authentic* Christmas!

by

Krin Van Tatenhove

THE CHRISTMAS PLEDGE

Believing in the beauty and simplicity of Christmas, I commit myself to the following:

1. To remember those people who truly need my gifts.
2. To express my love for family and friends in more direct ways than presents.
3. To rededicate myself to the spiritual growth of my family.
4. To examine my holiday activities in light of the true spirit of Christmas.
5. To initiate one act of peacemaking within my circle of family and friends.

-from ***Unplug the Christmas Machine***

PREFACE

I love words—their origins and meanings. For instance, I love the word *authentic*. Webster defines it as *true to character, worthy of acceptance, not false or imitation.*

I love authentic Mexican or Thai food, authentic music and customs from other cultures, authentic voices from history spoken through diaries and letters. I love it when I walk into a body of Christians and experience the authentic love and grace of Jesus Christ that transcends religion.

In this spirit, I want to wish you and your loved ones a very *authentic* Christmas!

You might flinch at that statement. If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you have already heard numerous preachers call for a more Christ-centered Christmas. Christian retailers make big money on the slogan *Jesus is the Reason for the Season*. Even as you saw the title of this booklet, you may have said to yourself, "Uh-oh, another sermon about how I'm *supposed* to celebrate Christmas. Been there. Done that."

My purpose is positive. It is my hope that by reading these pages, you will experience your most

blessed Christmas ever. I hope you will fall even deeper in love with Jesus. I pray that in understanding what I mean by "authentic," you will be stirred to witness for Him in a new way this season of the nativity. And if these truths are familiar, remember this—the essence of the Gospel, unchanged, has been preached on our planet for 2,000 years.

This booklet is practical. Its format is simple. The first two sections help you remember the meaning of Christmas in its original historical and Biblical contexts. The final section gives you ways to act on this new and/or deepened perspective. This is where the blessing will be yours—if you choose to act on your new knowledge.

Have an authentic Christmas!

SECTION ONE: REMEMBER: THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS IS *ALTERNATIVE*

When you think of the word *alternative*, what comes to mind? Maybe it's *alternative* music—with body-pierced, tattooed fans pumping their fists in the air. Or an *alternative* candidate for election—someone outside the standard Republican/Democrat choices. Or *alternative*

medicine, practiced by people who dispense homeopathic remedies. Or an *alternative* community, leftover hippies living in a commune.

You may not sport a tattoo, vote for Ralph Nader, have a single herb in your medicine cabinet, or ever visit a commune, but the word *alternative* remains the same. It points to an option you can choose for a uniquely different experience.

That's what Christmas was meant to be: a unique, counter-culture experience. To understand this fully, we need to do some time traveling.

Let's start with another word. *Solstice*. The Webster definition is: *either of the two times in a twelve-month period at which the sun reaches an extreme north or south position.*

Summer solstice, which is the longest day of the year, comes at the end of June. It marks the beginning of shorter days, with the promise of fall and blessed coolness on the horizon. Living in the desert as I do, that first step towards autumn makes me want to jump up and shout *alleluia!* I can face the brutal heat of summer; it will not last!

Winter solstice, near the end of December, is the shortest day of the year. It marks the onset of more light, more warmth, and the promise of spring. The Romans called the winter solstice *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. If you've ever lived in a frigid northern climate, you know how it feels to turn the corner towards spring!

Now imagine what the winter solstice meant to people before gas heating, hot water, and all the

amenities we take for granted. It was literally a party! People have celebrated a mid-winter solstice festival for over 4,000 years. Let’s visit a few examples of these celebrations.

BABYLONIA: In this ancient civilization, winter solstice was a New Year’s bash. Babylonians worshipped many gods, the chief being Marduk. They believed that in order for days to grow longer, Marduk had to battle the monsters of darkness and chaos. The people assisted him by celebrating Zagmuk, a New Year's festival that lasted 12 days. The reigning king went to the temple of Marduk and swore his faithfulness, where, according to tradition, he had to die and join Marduk in the cosmic battle. In order to spare their king, the Babylonians crowned a "mock" king. They chose a criminal, dressed him in royal clothes, and gave him all the respect and privileges of royalty. They would then sacrifice this mock king to help Marduk defeat the monsters of darkness.

ROME: For the Romans, winter solstice meant the festival called Saturnalia in honor of their god, Saturn. It included masquerades in the streets, feasts, visiting friends, and the exchange of good-luck gifts called strenae (lucky fruits). Romans decked their halls with garlands of laurel, and set up green trees lit with candles. People kept their lamps burning to ward off the spirits of darkness. Priests decorated temples with evergreens symbolizing life's continuity. Citizens with masked or blackened faces danced through the streets. It was a hedonistic time, when food and drink were plentiful. In addition, members of the upper classes often celebrated the birthday of Mithra, the “god of the unconquerable sun.” This festival took place on December 25.

SCANDINAVIA: During winter the sun would often disappear for many days in pagan northern Europe. Scouts went to mountaintops to scan the horizon for its return. When they spotted the first light, they returned with the joyous news. A great festival began, called the Yuletide. It was a solstice feast served around a fire burning the Yule log. They believed this log had the magical effect of helping the sun shine more brightly. Merriment lasted until the log burned out, which often took 12 days. People tied apples to the branches of trees to

remind themselves that spring and summer would return. Mistletoe was sacred because it grew on the most sacred tree, the oak. They cut pieces of it and gave a spray to each family to hang in their doorways as good luck. Kissing under the mistletoe was a pledge of friendship.

Do you see? Long before Christmas, the end of December was a time of riotous religious festivals in cultures that had no contact with each other. They simply shared one thing in common—they rejoiced at the return of light in the darkness.

THE ADVENT OF CHRISTMAS

In the early years of Christianity, Easter was the primary holy day (holiday). There was no celebration for honoring the birth of Jesus. In 336 AD, church officials decided to change that. The Bible does not mention the date of the nativity, and scholars believe Jesus was most likely born in the spring. Roman Pope Julius I chose December 25 as

an effort to adopt and absorb the traditions of both Saturnalia and the supposed birth of Mithra. First called the Feast of the Nativity, “Christmas” spread to Egypt by 432, then to England in the sixth century. At the end of the eighth century, the celebration of Christmas had spread all the way north to Scandinavia.

By holding Christmas at the same time as winter solstice festivals, church leaders increased the chances it would be popular. Everyone was already in a party mood. It also made sense theologically. What was the principle reason people celebrated the winter solstice? The return of light in the darkness! Don’t you see? Jesus is the ultimate return of light! Scripture announces this from the Old Testament to the New.

- In speaking of the coming Messiah, Isaiah said, *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned…For to us a child is born, to us a son is given…*(Isaiah 9:2, 6a)
- Jesus’ most beloved disciple, John, said it this way, *“The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world…In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* (John 1:9, 4-5)
- In order to make the point as brilliantly as possible, Jesus said, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

Do you remember the Roman name for the winter solstice? *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. Change the Sun to Son, and you can see the brilliance of celebrating Jesus' birth at the time of the winter solstice. Because of his resurrection which opens the door to heaven, He is the unconquerable one, overcoming death to secure us eternal life! His birthday is truly the Birthday of the Unconquered Son!

Pope Julius I and the early church fathers had the right idea: establish The Feast of the Nativity not only as an alternative, but as a much deeper fulfillment of existing celebrations.

However, something predictable happened. The influences of surrounding solstice festivals wormed their way into Christmas. It began in Rome with the gift giving, which grew more and more extravagant. The Roman philosopher Libanius finally exclaimed, "The impulse to spend seizes everyone!" Sound familiar? By the Middle Ages in Europe, believers attended church on Christmas, and then celebrated raucously in the streets in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today's Mardi Gras. During the 1600's, Protestant Reformers outlawed Christmas in England for several years because the feast was marked by "drunkenness, gluttony and superstition."

The secularization of Christmas was moving along like a juggernaut under its own power. Please don't think me cynical, *but this is so human*. Throughout history we have taken things meant to

be simple and profound, then encrusted them with so many traditions their original intent gets lost. For a man who decried materialism in every form, I believe Jesus would be aghast at the commercial enterprises bearing His name, especially at Christmas.

But this is human. We take something meant to be simple and profound, and encrust it with so many traditions that we obscure the original intent.

The same goes for Christmas! What was originally meant to draw people's eyes away from the world and onto Jesus has been hijacked by our commercial culture. Every Christian knows this, but we continue in our hurried commercialism. One writer, Michael Jessen, put it this way.

For a holiday that celebrates the birth of the ultimate, anti-materialistic prophet, Christmas has become burdened with "stuff." Jesus urged his disciples to simplify their lives, drop all their possessions, and follow him. But as His birthday nears, statistics abound about the extra garbage (almost 25%) we produce, the increased stress we endure, the credit card abuse we commit, the additional hoard of food and drink we ingest. Polls repeatedly say we yearn for less commercialization of Christmas, yet we also tell pollsters we expect to spend as much or more than last year during the holidays.

I don't need to belabor this point. We know this is true. Christmas is a stressful time of making lists, checking them twice, sending out cards, writing checks, filling our calendars with three to four times our normal activity. Then there are the expectations! Somewhere deep in the heart of most people—bathed in the glow of Christmas lights, surrounded by the aroma of warm cookies—nestles the notion of an "ideal Christmas." Look at TV ads this season. See how many of them try to sell their products with old-fashioned, Normal Rockwell images of Christmas nostalgia. When reality falls short of the ideal, many people experience shattered expectations. They think, *maybe if I try harder next year, I'll be able to reach the ideal.*

Something has definitely gone wrong.

I believe every Christian would agree that for millions of people in the United States, this holiday that bears the name of Christ is devoid of any real devotion to Jesus. There is so much else to draw our attention in the seasonal commercial blitz.

The little baby in the crèche is darling, but I have to get ready for my party tonight.

I have to get that guest room ready for relatives.

I still have a dozen people on my shopping list for whom I have no clue what to buy!

I ask you this question. When people view us during Christmas, do they see an alternative to the culture? After all, ***we*** are the believers. Do our lives, habits, and words cause them to stop and ponder the

miracle of the Christ child? Do we help our Lord contribute to the salvation of the world, or are we so caught up in the secular frenzy that even those in our own families can't see anything "alternative" about us?

There are some simple ways you can have an alternative, authentic Christmas. You'll hear them in a bit. But first, we have another reality to remember.

SECTION TWO: REMEMBER: THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS IS *LOWLY*

Have you ever met Jesus in person? I have many times in my 20 years of ministry. But as I write this book, I especially remember the first time a man named John met Jesus.

It was a few days after Christmas. I had led a number of adults and youth across the Mexican border to help build a children's center in a squatter's neighborhood of Tijuana. Families were living illegally on a landfill dump, the ground so polluted and filthy that the Mexican government, given the overcrowded conditions of Tijuana, had turned a blind eye. It was a neighborhood without water or electricity. Pigs and barefooted children ran through the streets. The homes were a mixture

of plywood, cement block, corrugated tin—anything to provide shelter. The air reeked of burning trash from the nearby dump.

The people of this neighborhood, in partnership with a Christian ministry, had formed an association. Our task was to help them build a one-room structure at the center of the settlement. The humble building would provide one hot meal a day and classes for local children.

We worked hard—framing, dry walling, and plastering. A crowd of children on Christmas vacation from the local school gathered to watch us.

That's when we first saw Pablo. He was mentally retarded, that much was obvious. On top of his mental disability, one of his eyes strayed to the side, giving his face a permanent slant. The other kids weren't mean to him; they simply ignored him. Pablo lived on the margin, watching life unfold with his quizzical expression.

John was one of the adult leaders in our group, and he immediately felt drawn to Pablo. He would sit next to the boy, using broken Spanish, hand gestures, and the universal language of love, to communicate acceptance. It was a joy for me to watch these two connect across a potentially unbridgeable gulf.

On the day we were to leave, we came to the neighborhood early in the morning. Fog from the Pacific Ocean blanketed the streets of Tijuana. It was damp and cold and most of us zipped up our jackets or snuggled deeper into our sweatshirts.

The families of the association came to say goodbye and to thank us for our service. Quite a crowd gathered. We thanked *them* for their display of hope and love in such dire surroundings. We thanked them for the joy in their hearts that had ministered to us more than they could imagine.

John was standing next to me, wearing a thick new sweatshirt. He nudged me with his elbow. “I don’t see Pablo,” he said.

“No?” I said, distracted by the rest of the crowd.

“You don’t understand,” said John. “I need to say goodbye to Pablo.”

With that he started to circulate through the crowd, using broken Spanish to find directions to Pablo’s house. Then he disappeared down a dirt street into the foggy morning. I stayed busy with goodbyes and final instructions about our return journey. We were ready to load up the vans when I realized John was still gone.

Finally he emerged from a side street. I noticed he was only wearing a tank-top. He stopped near a hovel of tin and cardboard and just stood there, his head hung down, resting his chin on his chest. I went to his side.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

He looked up with tears in his eyes. “I found Pablo. God, what an awful place to live! There wasn’t even a door, just a blanket hanging at the entrance. I called out a couple times to see if there was anyone home. All I heard was a shuffling

sound. I stuck my head through the entrance and saw some oily blankets moving in the corner. Then Pablo stood up. He had on some underwear and a worn T-shirt, and he was shivering."

"Any parents?" I asked. "No one else around?"

"No."

"What did you do?"

"I took off my sweatshirt and helped him put it on. He just gave me a hug. He wouldn't let go. Do you know what I mean? He just pulled me closer to him and didn't want me to go."

The tears were running freely from John's eyes now, dripping off his nose and chin. He looked at me with an expression I have seen so many times in my ministry. There was a question in his eyes that asked, "How can I make sense of this?"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "That wasn't Pablo, John. It was Jesus. And it is Jesus who is now wearing your sweatshirt. It is Jesus who will never forget, even unto eternity, that you helped him when he was cold and friendless."

John just reached over and hugged me, perhaps like Pablo had hugged him. Arm in arm, we made our way to van for our ride home.

Yes, John met Jesus face to face. How do I know? Because Jesus said it in his own words.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one

from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25: 31-40)

We find Jesus among the poorest of the poor. That should be no surprise. I have met him among the homeless in back alleys, in prisons, in shabby trailer courts, at hospital bedsides, in mental wards and orphanages. Being lowly was Jesus' destiny from beginning to end.

Don't believe me? Start with the Christmas story…

On a dark night in enemy occupied country, an unlikely Jewish couple returns to the town of their roots. An angel has told the woman, pregnant out of wedlock, that she is bearing the long awaited Messiah in her womb. She and her older husband still can't understand why God would choose a lowly maiden to give birth to His son. Go figure.

When the couple arrives in their ancestral hometown, all the lodgings are full. They are forced to stay in a dugout stable, ripe with the smells of barnyard animals. There, out of sight in a back street of Bethlehem, the most awesome miracle of time takes place. God's very son is born into our dark world. He would be King of Kings. But his birth had no pomp and splendor, no rich tapestries, no courtiers waiting in the wings to bathe him in fine oils. No…he was laid in a feeding trough as the animals chewed their cuds and gazed at him.

Meanwhile, God sends some angels to give a birth announcement of the child. Does he send these heavenly beings to the Roman courts, the palace of the local King Herod, or even into the busy streets of Jerusalem? No, the message comes first to a smelly group of humble shepherds tending their flocks in the fields.

So began the career of the greatest figure in history. And the lowly nature of that first night

would set the tone for his entire life. Consider these facts about Jesus.

- He was home schooled, not at the knee of established rabbis.
- He was a blue collar carpenter.
- He grew up in Nazareth, a town considered a backwater breeding ground for troublemakers.
- He left home to begin his three year preaching career with no money or place to live. He said, “Foxes have their holes, and birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” (Matthew 8:20)
- His greatest sermon, preached on a mountainside, contained radical statements like “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 5:3)
- In one teaching after another, especially his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14), he proclaimed that the one who is humble and broken before God is the one who will know salvation.
- When asked by his disciples how they could be great, he replied, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” (Matthew 20:24-28)
- During his final meeting with his disciples—a time we call The Last Supper—he knelt down and washed their feet as a lowly

reminder of his call to servanthood (John 13:1-5).

- Then, though he was God himself, he went all the way to the cross. He was humiliated, spit upon, savagely beaten, and then hung as a common criminal to die.

You can't get much lower than this. A famous poem, adapted from a sermon by James Francis, expresses the lowliness of Jesus beautifully. It is called *One Solitary Life*.

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in another obscure village.
He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty, and then for three years
He was an itinerant preacher
He never wrote a book.
He never held an office.
He never owned a home.
He never set foot inside a big city
He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born.
He had no credentials but Himself.
While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him.
His friends ran away. One of them denied Him.
He was turned over to His enemies.
He went through the mockery of a trial.
He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves

His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth while He was dying -- and that was His coat..
When He was dead, He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.
Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today He is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of progress.
I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched
and all the navies that ever were built,
and all the parliaments that ever sat,
and all the kings that ever reigned,
put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as that
One Solitary Life.

Now you have two reminders. Christmas was originally meant to be an alternative to the culture at large. It was also lowly in origin, a lowliness expressed in every aspect of Jesus' ministry.

If you celebrate a Christmas that incorporates both of these truths, you will be mightily blessed this year. How can you do this? Read on…

SUGGESTIONS FOR AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTMAS

To live more simply…

1) Cut your Christmas budget in half – Figure out approximately what you spent on Christmas last year. Cut that figure in half as your new budget for this year. The extra money can simply be savings, or you can donate it to a ministry that helps people who have less.

2) Practice matching gifts - Place a big collection box in your living room. Decorate it with pictures of Jesus' birth. Then do something truly radical. For every dollar you spend this Christmas, put a matching amount in the collection box. This can range from 10% to 100%. Then have a family meeting to decide where you will donate this money to Christ's work. It can be a real learning experience for your family to pray about how God would have you use your matching dollars most wisely in serving others. This year, my family and I will be sending money to help with new church developments along the Mexican/American border

3) Practice matching "pet" dollars—We spend more on pet food in the U.S. and Europe than it would take to provide adequate nutrition and basic health care to the more than one billion people on the planet who lack these necessities. Put one dollar

into your home collection box for each dollar you spend on your pets during Advent.

4) Set a limit on gifts per person - perhaps one or two. Let's be honest. So many of the things we receive for Christmas become "white elephant" gifts for the future. Or they end up spread out on our driveways for a garage sale. Set a limit on gifts.

5) Give personalized, hand-made gifts—Of all the things my daughter has given me over the years, the most precious is a poem she once wrote to me. While I have long forgotten other gifts, this one hangs on my office wall. Use your creativity to create a loving, meaningful heirloom.

6) Offer alternatives for gift-giving—Write a letter to family & friends sharing your feelings about Christmas giving. Suggest gifts you would like to receive (i.e., a donation to a soup kitchen; a gift of their time).

7) Refuse to use credit cards – Many years ago, my wife and I tore up all our credit cards. We have only a Visa tied to our debit card, one we use for hotel reservations or other special needs. So many people celebrate Christmas on credit, then pay what I believe are evil usurer fees for months afterwards, placing their family in bondage to debt.

8) Instead of buying gifts for friends—invite them to a potluck or a no-host dinner at a restaurant.

Being together is more important than getting and giving more stuff.

8) Practice baking an extra dozen—When you do your Christmas baking, make an extra dozen to deliver to a widow or single person in your community.

To find Jesus…

1) "Soften" Jesus' manger with good deeds— Have the members of your family practice "good deeds" to others, at least one a day throughout Advent. Discuss them in the evening. For every deed place a strand of yarn in an empty manger in your living room. By Christmas, the baby Jesus will have a soft place to lay his head!

2) Start a family service tradition—There are so many ways to do this—caroling, making gifts for the lonely, serving at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Every community has organizations that help the poorest of the poor. Get your family into the places where Jesus would most likely be during Christmas.

3) Adopt a struggling family—Your pastor knows of families who are struggling financially. You can anonymously adopt one of these families, find out the names and ages of its members, and then provide food and presents to make their Christmas more memorable.

4) Adopt an elderly resident of a local nursing home—Many residents in these retirement centers have no regular contact from family or friends. They are quite literally dying of loneliness. Get help from the nursing home staff. They will direct you to an elderly man or woman who needs special care.

5) Consider a short mission of mercy during the Christmas break—You earlier read the story of John's encounter with Jesus in Tijuana. You could actually take an trip across the border, or simply do a deep dive into urban needs in the city where you live.

To have a more "lowly" Christmas…

1) Practice the ministry of reconciliation—If you are at odds with anyone in your life, find it in your heart to forgive. Go to that person and do everything possible to make amends. You will find that letting go of resentment and bitterness makes room in your heart for the Christ child to be born anew!

2) Give the gift of time to a loved one—Our lives are often caught up primarily in ourselves. ***Our*** schedules, ***our*** agendas, ***our*** needs! Do something with a spouse, child, parent, or friend that would not be your customary choice. Do it simply because you know the other person enjoys it, and you want to spend time with him or her.

To celebrate the season in its Biblical context…

1) Advent calendars – Here is a tradition that still has a lot of meaning. Advent calendars became popular in Europe during the 1850s, and the tradition spread throughout the world. Most of you know the concept. The large cardboard calendars have small compartments with doors. Each day of Advent (the four weeks leading to Christmas) you open a door, read a relevant Bible passage, and even enjoy a piece of chocolate. This is a simple but effective way to gather the family and remember the story of Jesus' birth. It can lead into prayer, sharing, and singing. You can purchase an advent calendar at your local Christian bookstore.

2) Advent meditations – This is a simple way to gather the family daily around Biblical truths. Again, you can purchase these at your local Christian bookstore or order online.

3) Consistent attendance at the church of your choice – It is one of my greatest pleasures to see people rediscover the power of living in a community of faith. That's what I call a church—***a community of faith***. It is a group of people learning how to love God and each other with new power and vitality. There is no better way to expose yourself to the joy of the Christmas season than to worship with others who are focusing on Jesus.

4) Decorate slowly—Most of us put up our Christmas tree early in the season. Decorate it slowly to show that more is not necessarily better. Add one or two decorations a day so that you can simply enjoy the beauty of the green tree.

CONCLUSION

You have undoubtedly noticed the poinsettias between sections of this booklet. Let's conclude with the Mexican legend of how these unique plants originated.

Pepita was a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve Services. As she walked slowly to the chapel with her cousin Pedro, her heart was filled with sadness rather than joy.

"I am sure, Pepita, that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes," said Pedro consolingly.

Not knowing what else to do, Pepita knelt by the roadside and gathered a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a small bouquet.

Looking at the scraggly gift, she felt more saddened and embarrassed than ever by the humbleness of her offering. She fought back tears as she entered the small village chapel.

As she approached the altar, she remembered Pedro's kind words: "Even the most humble gift, if

given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes." She felt her spirit lift as she knelt to lay the bouquet at the foot of the manger.

Suddenly, the weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all who saw them were certain that they had witnessed a Christmas miracle right before their eyes. From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as Flores de Noche Buena, or Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloom each year during the Christmas season. Today, the common name for this plant is the poinsettia!

This charming tale reminds us of two great truths about Christmas, both of which are central to this booklet.

First, the primary focus of this season is Jesus. Just like Pepita, we should be concerned with the question, "*What do I have to offer to the Lord?"* not, "*How can I buy presents for every other person on my list?*

Second, the simplest and humblest gifts are the most powerful, because they unleash miracles. Pepita's gift of weeds, given from a simple heart that loved Jesus, sparked a miracle that everyone around her witnessed.

Will you celebrate Christmas in such a way that those in your world see the miracle of devotion to Jesus? Will you help them cut through

the commercial chains that bind the birth of Christ?

I sincerely hope so. Have a blessed, authentic Christmas!