

Is Madison Avenue Manipulating You?

Anthony Durniak

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Usually towards the end of November there are big parades, and family get-togethers to celebrate Thanksgiving. Actually, this holiday is the kickoff for one of the most over publicized sales extravaganzas ever to come from the advertising world of Madison Avenue. I am, of course, speaking of the over-commercialized pre-Christmas rush. During this period department stores start bombarding us with loud carols, old men in red suits, strings of flashing lights, glittery ornaments and numerous other items which Madison Avenue hopes to place us in a gift-buying mood...At the same time Christmas is turned into a secular holiday without any regard to its original meaning.

Christmas in July?

With this advance pressure on Christmas it is actually possible to have the proverbial "Christmas in July." Just as you are planning and packing for your summer vacation spree, Christmas card sales are run in every major store with a left over stock. When you finally reach your vacation spot you open a copy of your favorite magazine to find that you can order Christmas gif subscriptions or give a membership to a book club at low pre-Christmas rates.

September finally arrives and the commercial world starts to prepare you for the "closeness" of Christmas. In many stores the Christmas ornaments and cards are beginning to crowd the plastic jack-o-lanterns, masks, and trick-or-treat bags.

October and Halloween pass and with November crisp in the air, the suggestive sales promotion gains momentum. In almost every advertisement, except those for Thanksgiving turkeys, beautiful tinsel-bedecked trees peek out from the corners.

Jewelry is rested on boughs of holly with captions calling it the "perfect gift." Toys wrapped in wide colorful ribbons, find their way underneath shiny trees in display windows. China and silver companies ask if you have enough of their merchandise to entertain elegantly for the holidays.

On Thanksgiving Day Santa Claus makes his well-publicized "grand debut," in a big department store parade. Everything now accelerates into a last ditch effort to sell everything, as if there were no tomorrow. Just to make sure, the newspapers start counting those tomorrows until Christmas. Most of the television commercials mysteriously are taken during a light falling snow and through a frosted window pane behind which is a glistening Christmas tree, around which a smiling family is of course, looking at the new appliance or hobby supplies that mom or dad got, and the question is asked, "This year why not give...?" In others the airlines show the adverse conditions caused when that light falling snow accumulates, and after showing you the sun-bathers in Hawaii or some other sunny area, ask you, "Why not spend this Christmas in...?"

Obviously Madison Avenue puts you in this frame of mind because it is profitable to the Big Businesses of America. Not only are you encouraged to give gifts and go on trips, but they tell us what to give and where to go. And once you're there they encourage you to call your friends back home long distance or to wire flowers and candy.

What Happened to God?

But what happened to the reverence of Christmas? Why do we allow Christmas to become buried under this high pressure sell? What happened to jovial old St. Nick who loved children and went out of his way to provide their presents (which he made, not bought)? As young adults we can be very effective in starting a backlash against this manipulation by Madison Avenue simply by learning more about our Orthodox faith and applying what we know.

A revitalization of the legend of our Saint Nicholas (today's Santa Claus) could help to change the emphasis from what you give to the thought behind your gift. We should and can participate in the charitable spirit that is part of the Christmas spirit by volunteering our services to philanthropic organizations or by buying gifts from organizations such as U.N.I.C.E.F., the Tuberculosis Foundation (Christmas seals), and the National Wildlife Federation, and thereby help others less fortunate than ourselves. We can resist the trend of leaving home for Christmas by stressing the American traditions of trimming the family tree together on Christmas Eve, and the hanging of stockings and by reawakening the spirit of exchanging homemade gifts as a token of appreciation and love.

We as Orthodox Christians must recognize our responsibility to preserve Christmas as the Nativity of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We must also recognize the need of our younger brothers and sisters to identify with Santa Claus. We can answer this need and still fulfill our Christian obligations by teaching them the story of St. Nicholas and the gift bearing wise men and exchange gifts on one of these days rather than the Nativity. In this way we can utilize the American Santa Claus to preserve a rich heritage and the Christian concepts of gift giving to those we love and thus free our families to go to church to celebrate a joyous Nativity and also break the bondage imposed on us by Madison Ave.