

do not run to the Christmas tree for their gifts; these have been given to them by their parents days before. Instead, after their breakfast, they leave their homes in their best finery to greet their *Ninong* (godfather) and *Ninang* (godmother). This is why Christmas Day in the Philippines is called *Pasko ng mga Bata* (Children's Christmas).

Santa Claus to the Filipino child is the *Ninong* or *Ninang*. Each child usually has two sets of them: one for baptism and another for confirmation. And Christmas is the day they receive gifts from their godparents, after kissing their hands as a sign of love and respect.

The night of Christmas is quiet, for everyone is tired from the previous night's celebration. This is one night in the whole Christmas season when the whole town is tranquil. There is hardly any sound to be heard, except the hoarse voices of a few persistent carollers, and they might even be shooed away for disturbing the peace.

On December twenty-eighth, the Filipinos celebrate *Niños Inocentes* (Innocents' Day), commemorating that violent day when King Herod, in his determination to kill the Infant Jesus, ordered the slaughter of all innocents in Judea; through a clever ruse, however, the Holy Family succeeded in eluding the Roman soldiers.

This day is the Philippine counterpart of April Fool's Day, when pranksters are extra busy. Filipinos are terribly sensitive people and the matter of "face" — as with all Orientals — is very crucial to them. But on this day, all that is forgotten. And practical jokes are taken in good humor.

Some years ago, an obituary appeared in a local daily announcing the death of a well-known politician who, it turned out, was very much alive. It came out on Innocent's Day — and the chuckles roared on till after New Year.

Then the New Year comes. On the eve, Christmas trees are lighted again; so are the lanterns and the votive candles beside the *Belen*. In many churches, there is a Midnight Mass, where the more

At midnight Christmas Eve: fireworks, bells, and brass bands playing the national anthem

solemn faithful go to greet the New Year with prayers and hymns.

New Year's Eve in the big cities is essentially a western celebration with masked balls, drinking, eating and noisemaking. The parks are filled with merrymakers and the explosion of firecrackers and sky rockets add to the tremendous din. At the Rizal Park, beside Manila Bay, a big fireworks display is held, featuring masterworks of the country's best pyrotechnic artists.

In the rural areas, the festivity assumes an almost pagan abandon. Children dance in the streets and play noisy games before midnight. Young men and some women go from house to house with gongs, drums, tin cans and bamboo rattlers.

At the stroke of midnight, the noise becomes deafening. The bells ring out wildly from the steeples; the ships' sirens sound off, bigger firecrackers are detonated, and everyone makes as much racket as he can in the belief that he might be able to drive the evil spirits away and, thereby, make the New Year bountiful and blessed.

New Year's day is celebrated by all Catholics around the world as the day the Child Jesus was circumcized. But in the Philippines, it is also called *Pasko ng mga Dalaga at Binata* (Christmas of the Lovers). On this day, the sweethearts go to Mass together, and the usually strict parents are a bit more lenient. Gifts are exchanged between young men and women, and lovers promise to be true to each other.

The final Christmas festivity is the Feast of the Three Kings, sometime around January sixth. This is called *Pasko ng mga Matatanda* (Elders' Christmas), and the day is, once again, marked by gift-giving — this time, by children to their parents and elders.

By this time, any foreign visitor will think that the Filipino is truly weary of his marathon Christmas revelry. But that is not so. For right now, he is probably looking forward to the fiesta in honor of the village patron saint. And, believe me, there are more than 30,000 such fiestas in the Philippines every year.

But, of course, that's another story. □



The commercial decorations are also uniquely Filipino.