

## **Irish Christmas**

### **Lighted Candle Placed in Window**

A distinctive feature of Christmas decorations is the very large candle placed near the front window and lighted on Christmas Eve. According to one belief, the candle long served as a symbol of welcome to Mary and Joseph who sought shelter in vain on that first Christmas Eve. The ceremony of lighting the candle is one of simple ancient rituals during which prayers are said for the departed and the privilege of striking the match is usually given to a daughter named Mary. (Another tradition is that the candle be lighted by the youngest member of the family and snuffed out only by someone named Mary).

For centuries it has been a practice in Irish villages to set the kitchen table after the evening meal on Christmas Eve. On it is a loaf of bread filled with caraway seeds and raisins, a pitcher of milk and a large lit candle. The door is left unlatched. Thus, hospitality is extended to the Holy Family or to any traveler that might be on the road. Also it is said that the candles were "kindled to guide the angels who on Christmas night direct the New Born from the Heavens".

The story of the abiding religious faith to which this nation has clung to so strongly for centuries is reflected in the symbolism of the lighted candle in the window, which spells out the simple beauty of the Christmas story.

This flickering symbol also served as a signal in times past to any priest seeking shelter and protection that he was welcome in this house and that it was safe to say Mass there.

Irish actress, Roma Downey, who portrays the angel Monica on *Touched By an Angel*, is in keeping with the tradition of her native land, where families from her hometown of Derry light candles in every window on Christmas Eve as a welcome to friends, Santa and wayward travelers.

Candle lighting at this time can also be traced back to antiquity, to the time when ancient Romans lighted candles at the midwinter festival to signify the return of the sun's light after the winter solstice.

### **Holly Wreaths**

The glossy-leaved holly with its clusters of red berries, popular as a door decoration in North America can be traced to early settlers from the south of Ireland. Some came to the United States during the Great Potato Famine. Holly grows wild in the south of Ireland and at Christmas time houses are lavishly decorated with holly.

### **Santa Claus/Father Christmas/Daidi na Nollag**

In some areas, due to English influence, it is Father Christmas who the children wait for to fill their stockings on Christmas Eve. In other areas of Ireland, due to western influences, you will find Santa Claus instead. But some children will still wait for Daidi na Nollag/when he arrives in his green robes.