# Hallmarks of Filipino Christmas

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The chilly breeze that arrived last weekend signified the last stretch of what is considered the longest Christmas season in the world, which is observed in the Philippines.

From the advent of the “ber months,” this nation has psyched itself up for the coming festivities, starting with the hanging of parol (star-shaped lanterns patterned after the star of Bethlehem) outside windows, to the Christmas countdowns conducted by media outlets, malls, and local government units.

Malls have giant Christmas trees up and standing since September, a fitting tribute to the mall culture that Filipinos are known for worldwide. The Philippines is so enamored with Christmas that over half a million airline seats have been purchased locally ahead of time for travel during Christmas and New Year’s Days to both domestic and Asian destinations.

The Bureau of Immigration announced last Dec. 15 that it was bracing for a rise in both arrivals and departures this month, estimating some 110,000 daily holiday travelers compared to the pre-pandemic average daily numbers of 55,000 arrivals and 47,000 departures (2019).

As Christmas is deeply ingrained in Philippine culture, a significant number of the 2.16 million overseas Filipino workers are returning home to spend Christmas with their loved ones. They, along with the Filipino migrants living abroad, are looking forward to family reunions, festive parties and celebrations, and the observance of religious rites that this long season brings.

## The first Christmas

Travel has been an integral part of this holiday season, even figuring prominently over 2,000 years ago during the first Christmas, when Jesus Christ was born in the Roman-controlled region of Judea/Palestine. According to the Gospel of Luke, Joseph and Mary had to leave Nazareth in Galilee for the Bethlehem town of David in Judea in compliance with Caesar Augustus’ order for a census of the entire Roman world.

Based on its historical origins, the first Christmas was a story of humility. Jesus’ earthly parents, who were traveling far from home, had no place to stay except in a stable, which was, as one would expect, full of smelly farm animals. Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, Jesus. “She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them” (Luke 2:7).

The Belén, the traditional nativity story of Jesus present in most Filipino homes, has evolved since it was introduced by the Spanish in the 16th century. The glamorized composite version (with three wise men) often misses out on the reality of the first Christmas. The first Christmas was beauty in simplicity witnessed by shepherds and celebrated by angels who declared, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

Despite its lack of grandeur, the birth of Jesus gave us more. It was a testament to how love shapes us all, uniting even the mortal and the divine. It therefore behooves this country, where some 90 percent of the population identify as Christians, to remain true to what Jesus Christ’s earthly life stands for.

The message of Christmas, then and now, is meant for everyone.

By choosing to be born poor among the colonized Jews, Jesus was elevating the higher and revolutionary values of giving and self-sacrifice as the lasting solutions to poverty and conflicts that humanity has not been able to shake off since Adam. Jesus identified himself with those who were destitute, vulnerable, or unwelcome, no matter their faith beliefs or social status. Jesus said himself that “those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces” (Matthew 11:8).

## Making sense of Christmas

Amid the chaos and excitement of this season, it’s easy to forget what makes Christmas so special to the Philippines. Christmas is and should remain a vehicle for giving and extending empathy to those who are suffering and in need.

Malacañang has rightly advised against lavish Christmas parties among government workers, given the six storms that walloped the country in just one month, from Oct. 24 through Nov. 18, that affected 15 million residents across 17 regions.

But such a call for austerity is hollow because the national coffers have been bled dry by tone-deaf lawmakers and bureaucrats, which has contributed to the further ballooning of the national debt. One such example is the now-abandoned plan of the Philippine Health Insurance Corp. to bullheadedly spend P137.7 million for its 30th-anniversary celebration in 2025.

Christmas demands that everyone exercise special sensitivity to the suffering in our midst by reaching out to those in sick bays and jails, the homeless, the working class, disaster victims, and those seeking justice in this season and the next.

Thus, the Inquirer joins the Filipino nation in celebrating Christmas 2024 by urging for a prudent use of taxpayer money. Our leaders should transform their offices into a nativity scene for public service, embracing humility and self-giving. Maligayang pasko sa ating lahat!