



## Christmas in the Year of Our Lord 2014



As I write this Christmas letter during Thanksgiving week, I am remembering the dinner and gathering with Birthright friends held at Holy Family Parish last October 18<sup>th</sup>. I sensed a Presence at the fellowship meal and Dr. Joe Nasca's presentation that evening. I put the word in upper case because it felt like a graced moment.

Presence, more than "presents," is what Christmas and Birthright have come to mean to me.

Going back to 1970, I recall my first Christmas in Venezuela. I will never forget Midnight Mass and the manner in which the people celebrated Christ's birth. I was astonished to see how elegantly people dressed – some of the women even wearing furs – something I never expected in the tropics! To me that was Presence. It spoke of a deep spiritual understanding for what Christmas is really about.

Crèches were another distinguishing sign of a Venezuelan Christmas, much more so than Christmas trees, which were imported and of more recent usage. You often saw shopping malls sponsoring competitions to see who would put up the best life-sized crèches. These stayed up until February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the feast of the Presentation, which signaled the official end of the Christmas season.

One uncommon Christmas custom, at least for us gringos, is what is called "Misas de Aguinaldo," or "Misas de Gallo." For nine consecutive days, from December 16 to 24, often early in the morning, a special Mass is celebrated in anticipation of the birth of the Christ-child. The idea is that Advent takes on a more joyful tone as the Day draws near, plus the community takes turns paying a visit to the Virgin Mary as the time approaches to give birth. Later people also visit with each other, often exchanging favorite Christmas dishes like the "hallaca."

The hallaca (pronounced "ayaca") is to the Venezuelan Christmas what turkey or ham is to ours. I would describe it as a stew made of different meats garnished with raisins, capers and other exotic ingredients, incorporated into a cornmeal turnover, which is then wrapped in a banana leaf and tied with string. It is cooked in boiling water and served steaming hot, sometimes on top of the banana-leaf-turned-serving-plate. Usually not very spicy, but it does feed the soul as well as the body. Another example of Christmas Presence.

I've been associated with Birthright for several years, yet it seems it was only recently that I encountered the statement, "*The essence of Birthright is love.*" I'm sure it was there all along in our literature, but I failed to "notice" it. I think I've finally taken note of it because of people who truly care kindly for those who seek our services.

If the essence of Birthright is love, it manifests itself in the respect with which every woman is treated. It's a lesson that applies to all persons regardless of their gender or social position. I am sincerely grateful for the witness Birthright gives in the respect shown to others. It is something that carries over beyond crisis pregnancy work and also speaks of Presence.

May God's Spirit be born in our hearts and in our families this Christmas. Our best wishes to you for a Joyful and Merry Christmas and a New Year filled with Our Savior's blessings.

Fr. Marcel Rainville, SSE  
Burlington Birthright Board Member





We don't usually add a second page to our Christmas newsletter but we have exciting news to share.

First, we will be placing five more advertisements in Seven Days newspaper starting in mid-January. This is part of our effort to increase our visibility and to build public awareness of Birthright and how we can be of help to those women who are pregnant and distressed.

Second, an adjacent room recently became available in our building, and our Board of Directors has approved our renting this space. Our current office is one room which has served both for business and seeing clients. It has the usual accoutrements (desk, computer, printer, files, bookcase, storage closet and two chairs for clients). Birthright International recommends that each Birthright office has a separate room used mainly for seeing clients, and that is how this new room will be used. It is small and has a beautiful, non-working marble fireplace and mantel, providing a more comfortable and relaxing atmosphere when speaking with clients. However, the room does need to be furnished. We plan to use two chairs we already have, but we could use a coffee table, end tables, a loveseat or small sofa or an additional chair or two, toss pillows, lamps, decorative items for the walls, and a folding table that can be used as a work table when needed. A small refrigerator would also be wonderful so we can offer refreshments to our clients when they visit. If you have items you are not using and would be willing to donate, please let us know.

Through the generosity of our landlord, we will be using this new space at no charge until January 1. In order to keep the space available and pay the increased rent, we need your help! If you are not already making regular monthly donations to Birthright, this is the perfect time to please consider doing so. You can sign up on our website at <http://birthright.org/en/landingpage/lp-burlingtonvt>. Just click on the "Donate Now" button and after selecting the amount you'd like to donate each month, be sure to check the box next to "Make this a monthly recurring donation." There is also a space to dedicate your gift to someone. You can then choose to have the monthly pledge charged to either your credit or debit card by filling in the information requested. We hope you will take advantage of this new and easier way to support Birthright, and we greatly appreciate your generous support of our work with pregnant women and their babies.

Lastly, we will be having training for new volunteers sometime in February, dates to be determined. Watch for an announcement in your church bulletins. In the meantime, please call our office at 865-0056 or email us at [birthrightbvt@gmail.com](mailto:birthrightbvt@gmail.com) to let us know of your interest or to answer any questions you may have.



Thank you!

