

## *The Tradition of Las Posadas*

In rural villages and urban neighborhoods throughout the Americas, people of all ages gather to re-enact the Advent novena known as *Las Posadas*, which recalls the biblical quest of Mary and Joseph to find lodging in Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus. This nine-day celebration begins Dec. 16 and ends with the traditional midnight mass on *La Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve).

The novena's roots trace to the sixteenth century, when St. Ignatius of Loyola suggested that prayers be said to prepare for Christmas. In 1580, St. John of the Cross suggested that the novena include more pageantry, such as a procession, to accompany the prayers. He led a procession through the halls of the Carmelite Convent of Avila, Spain, carrying images of Joseph and Mary. The travelers sought hospitality as they knocked on the doors of the residents. In 1587, Fr. Diego de Soria, an Augustinian monk, introduced this practice to the indigenous people of Mexico as a way to share the Gospel. Since then, the novena has spread from Mexico to the Philippines, Guatemala, the southwest United States, and, eventually, the rest of the nation.



Today, the novena custom of processions weaves together the prayerful vigilance, the virtue of hospitality and the commitment to social justice that are so appropriate during the Advent season. For nine nights, the procession is led by a young girl portraying *la Virgen María*, who rides a real donkey, escorted by a young man representing *San José*. In some processions, miniature statues of Mary and Joseph accompany live mules. They are followed by children who portray angels, *Los Santos Reyes* (Three Kings), and a host of *pastores y pastoras* (shepherds and shepherdesses), all usually adorned in colorful handmade costumes.

The march of *Los Santos Peregrinos* (The Holy Pilgrims) process carrying brightly decorated *báculos* (walking staffs) and *farolitas* or *luminarias* (little lanterns), while blowing whistles, until they reach the first night's chosen home. There, the group knocks on the door of the innkeeper while chanting or reciting a traditional litany, begging repeatedly for shelter for the night. The innkeeper and those waiting behind the closed door turn the pilgrims away. Mary and Joseph proceed to a second house where the scene is repeated.

Upon their stop at the third inn, the Holy Family is recognized. The doors are opened to the pilgrims and *posadas* (shelter) is offered for the evening. Everyone is welcomed into the home. The guests kneel before the *Nacimiento* (the Nativity scene) to pray the Christmas Novena or the rosary and sing Christmas hymns. The ritual is followed by a party, where the pilgrims feast on traditional foods of hot punch, tamales and fried cookies known as *buñuelos*. Children chant a playful tune, "Scatter the candies, scatter the sweets; for we are children who want to eat," as they strike a *piñata* filled with hard candies, tangerines and peanuts. The original *piñatas* had seven spikes that represent the seven capital sins: greed, gluttony, laziness, pride, envy, anger, and lust. The person who is about to strike the *piñata* is blindfolded; this represents the faithful, who should be blinded to the temptation of the seven capital sins.