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Paying attention to the season

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Sleigh bells ring, and we're listening. In fact, they're already driving us nuts. The minute December peeks around the calendar pages, the frenzy begins.

Patience and anxiety jockey for space. Hope and despair churn inside hearts. Joy and sadness compete for top billing in the mental compartment labeled "Christmas."

And nothing really gets done until the new year.

It's all about buying stuff. Society claimed this annual time of craziness to pump consumerism a long time ago. Christmas morning once was about new clothes and chocolate. Now it's iPhones and iPads (regular and mini), Bose headphones and flat-screen TVs. It's PlayStations and Wiis and LeapFrog 2 Explorer Learning Tablets for the kids. It's getting (electronically) ridiculous.

They tell us to see Christmas through the eyes of a child. OK, well, what do they see?

They say some of the top video games of 2012 were "Diablo III," "Battlefield 3" and "BioShock Infinite." Other top games for PC, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3 include "Resident Evil 6," "Assassin's Creed III" and "Hitman: Absolution." They're all about anger. As Dorothy said to Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.

Forget attention deficit disorder. We're turning our children into wide-eyed zombies ready to do violence at every turn. No more pulling pigtails; cut 'em off. No more jostling for the first place in line; neutralize the one in front with a rabbit punch.

Are all the small ones like that? No, of course not. But many are fed a steady diet of the latest, greatest

garbage to watch with the latest, greatest electronics. No matter child psychologists' experiments find children are perfectly happy with cardboard refrigerator boxes, great for castles and palaces. Whiz-bang has replaced gee-whiz, and everything needs to be plugged in.

It isn't Christmas. The season is not in the vaguest way connected to a time of patient, hope-filled, joyful expectation for the gifts of friends and family, of a few days' rest, of maybe some quiet and some solitude in recognition of the birth of Jesus Christ.

It seems no one wants to remember what the holiday is all about. Others complain well and loud about how media and government conspire to remove religion from the season. I don't exactly think it's a lost cause, but the inanity of the discussion defies belief.

For example, the video clip of television personality Bill O'Reilly arguing with Gov. Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island says it all. Chafee refuses to call the tree in his state house a "Christmas tree." He says it's a "holiday tree." Chafee's reasoning is perfectly strange: He says when he went to public school in Rhode Island, he had to recite the Lord's Prayer after the Pledge of Allegiance, and that's the same as having a Christmas tree in a public building. Stranger still, Chafee, a professional farrier (a sort of combo blacksmith-veterinarian for horses), runs a state that is 88 percent Christian.

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At least the White House and New York's Rockefeller Center still have Christmas trees -- for now. But there are lots of other places -- schools, hospitals, public buildings -- where Christmas has been canceled and replaced by a plain vanilla "holiday" in the name of some perverted understanding of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

I think if we are going to honor the season -- anybody's season -- it is important to remember what it is all about. I don't mind -- in fact, I think it quite important -- to celebrate not only Christmas, but Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and any other holiday as the shortest day of the year approaches. The point is there will be light, increasing light, in last week of December. Religious folks are grateful for that light and count it as a gift of God.

That light illuminates -- more and more each day after Dec. 21 -- the fragile earth we cling to. It brings us just a tad more warmth, maybe even a bit more joy. It gives us hope for days ahead, encouraging us to celebrate love and life without anything that needs to be plugged in, without anything that distracts us from the project of being human.

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