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St Nicholas pushes Santa to sidelines

Thousands of people greet St Nicholas - and not Santa Claus - in Fribourg, when he takes part in a traditional parade. St Nicholas festivities are common in December across Switzerland as well as much of northern Europe, and the Fribourg event is one of the biggest of its kind.

The St Nicholas parade is an institution in Fribourg. Each year, on the first Saturday in December, the city's patron saint rides on his donkey from St Michel College to the cathedral that bears his name where he gives a (mocking) speech on the year gone by.

But St Nicholas is also the stuff of legends. Stories about him say that he brought three children back to life after they had been killed and pickled by a butcher. Ever since then, Nicholas has also been the protector of children - and the patron saint of butchers.



St Nicholas

Fribourg's government outlawed the original St Nicholas parade in 1763 after celebrations got out of hand. It was only in 1906 that students from St Michel decided to push ahead with a new one.

What was originally nothing more than a student joke has since become a hugely popular event, despite a complete lack of exotic bells and whistles.

A student chosen by other pupils is disguised as St Nicholas and makes his way to the cathedral on a donkey, accompanied by the "pères fouettards" (whipping fathers) - characters dressed in black who are supposed to frighten the spectators, but in fact, they spend their time distributing Christmas biscuits and peanuts to the crowds, accompanied by the college marching band and a group of singers.

St Nicholas is a popular figure in Orthodox countries like Russia and Greece. In western Europe, his impact is felt most in places such as Switzerland, Germany, Alsace, Lorraine and Belgium, areas where Germanic traditions are still alive. *from swissinfo*

Families value a festive Christmas atmosphere

Christmas in Switzerland is an important family ritual and is not considered a time of tension and consumerism, according to a three-year study at Bern University.

Secular trends have left a mark on society but families say it is important to create a festive atmosphere at home. The study looked at how families with small children celebrate Christmas. It is part of extended research into family rituals and how religiosity is transmitted.

The research team found that Christmas traditions within families hardly change over generations.

In very general terms a Swiss family normally decorates a Christmas tree, gives presents and has a meal together. Most families celebrate on the evening of December 24, but it's not uncommon for a family to celebrate twice or more over the following days - with grandparents, uncles and aunts for instance. Children in patchwork families celebrate Christmas up to four or five times.

Many families also sing carols and decorate their homes for the occasion. Often people listen to music or the Nativity story and children recite verses. It has become a tradition in some families to watch television together.

Many people said Christmas was not primarily a religious festival but it was important to create a festive atmosphere. Unsurprisingly, about 50 per cent of parents said they went to church over Christmas but some families point out that it has simply become too difficult to organise. Religion is not necessarily seen to be linked to the church. An individual, private approach to religion has developed instead.

Compared with other family rituals, Christmas is one of the few festivals involving the extended family such as grandparents and brothers or sisters of the parents.

Children say the two most important days are birthdays and Christmas. For their part, adults consider Christmas as very much a family occasion. Bringing the family together is important to them. Material things are only of secondary importance.

One woman put it like this: Christmas is a chance to look at how things are within the family. It could be that family members have died or are absent because they want to stay away, or maybe there are new members, such as young children and new partners.

There was hardly any indication that Christmas was a time of tension in families. This is probably because families pull together for the sake of the children. They want it to be a time of harmony.

from swissinfo