



# UNIVERSITY OF SANTO TOMAS

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

## UNIVERSITY OF SANTO TOMAS PASKUHAN FESTIVITIES Catechesis on the Lighting of the Christmas Tree and Campus Décor

“**T**he people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing” (*Is* 9:2-3). The Prophet Isaiah proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, who would not only bring light with Him, but would be the Light of lights. Jesus is the “True Light” (*Jn* 1:9), who was born in the cold and dark night to conquer the darkness in human hearts (cf. *Jn* 1:5). The Thomasian family formally begins the *Paskuhan* Festivities with the lighting of the Christmas tree and campus décor. Light is a rich symbol that represents sacredness, goodness, greatness, wisdom, knowledge, joy, truth and divine presence.

Modern Christmas trees can be fresh-cut, potted, or artificial and are used as both indoor and outdoor decorations.<sup>1</sup> However, since ancient times, evergreen trees have a special meaning for people who lived in the temperate zone. In addition, there are few flowering plants such as holly, ivy and mistletoe, which bloom even during winter, that hold special significance. These plants represent new life in the darkness of winter.

Medieval mystery plays depicted the tree of paradise and the Christmas light or candle symbolized Christ as Light. Modern Christmas trees emerged in western Germany during the 16<sup>th</sup> century as Christians brought trees into their homes and decorated them with gingerbread, nuts and apples.

José Rizal (1861-1896), the National Hero of the Philippines and a UST alumnus, may have brought the idea of the Christmas tree to the Philippines in 1886 when he wrote “*Ang Puno ng Pino*” (The Pine Tree) for his nephews and nieces, an illustrated Tagalog translation of Hans Christian Andersen's “The Fir Tree.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in his letter to his sister Saturnina, Rizal mentioned the Christmas traditions he encountered in Spain and Germany: “On Christmas Eve, they bring from the forest a pine tree, and this tree is chosen because, besides being upright, it is the only tree that keeps its leaves during winter... It is decorated with tinsel, paper, lights, dolls, candy, fruits, dainties, etc., and at night time, it is shown to the children, and around this tree the family celebrates Christmas.”<sup>3</sup>

The Americans probably brought the Christmas Tree to the Philippines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually, a star is placed on top of the Christmas Tree, depicting the star that showed the Magi the way to Bethlehem (cf. *Mt* 2:1, 9-10), which reminds the faithful that God created the light (*Gen* 1:3) and that the Baby is the “True Light that enlightens everyone” (*Jn* 1:9), that “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (*Jn* 1:5).

Pope Francis said that “the Christmas tree with its lights reminds us that Jesus is the Light of the world (*Jn* 8:12; 9:5; 12:46), the Light of the soul that drives away the darkness of animosity and makes room for forgiveness.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he underscored that “in turning on the light of the Christmas tree, we wish for the light of Christ to be in us. A Christmas without light is not Christmas. Let there be light in the soul, in the heart; let there be forgiveness to others; let there be no hostilities or darkness.... Let there be the beautiful light of Jesus. This is my wish for all of you, when you turn on the light of the Christmas tree.”<sup>5</sup> ■

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/plant/Christmas-tree>

<sup>2</sup> According to Mr. Ambeth R. Ocampo, the original manuscript remains unlocated and was believed destroyed during the Battle for Manila in 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Ocampo, Ambeth R., *The First Christmas Tree in the Philippines*, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 25 December 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Greetings to the Donors of the Christmas Tree and Nativity Scene in St. Peter's Square, 7 December 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Lighting of the Christmas Tree in Gubbio*, 7 December 2014.