

(S)catalonia's Fecal Christmas Festivities

By Josh Ward

Some of the world's most curious Christmas traditions can be found in Catalonia, where the idea of holiday cheer seems to involve some of life's more basic bodily functions.

Here are two factoids that one wouldn't necessarily expect to find in the same Wikipedia entry: "the infant Jesus is God in human form" and "everyone defecates."

But if you navigate to the entry attempting an explanation of the fecal-centric Catalan tradition known as *el caganer*, that is exactly what you'll find. Indeed, the tradition is a much-loved element of the Christmas celebration in Catalonia, despite its somewhat obscure beginnings.

A caganer -- or "pooper" -- is a small figurine of a person squatting down with lowered pants (or raised skirt) to answer nature's call. They have been around since the 17th century and can often be found hiding in an obscure corner of a Nativity scene.

Some say that the figurines originally became popular among farmers who believed -- quite practically -- that the caganer's "offerings" would make the soil rich and productive for the coming year. In somewhat vaguer terms, the Web site for the [Association of Friends of the Caganer](#) -- an organization founded in 1990 to celebrate the caganer tradition and which boasts 60 members spread across the world -- states that the figures were meant to add "a human side to the representation of the mystery of Christmas."

The [Wikipedia entry](#) mentions how the caganer might represent "the equality of all people" because "everyone defecates" or it may be meant to reinforce that "the infant Jesus is God in human form."

Young children in Catalonia still play a Where's-Waldo-like game that involves searching for the caganer in the Nativity scene arrangement. According to the Friends Web site, the *caganer* is "placed under a bridge, behind a haystack or otherwise discretely hidden" as it "would show a lack of respect" to have him near the arrangement's manger scene.

The original *el caganer* is a wooden or clay figure of a peasant wearing the traditional floppy red Catalan cap with a black band (*barretina*) and smoking a cigarette or a pipe. But the figure's popularity has led to a massive expansion in the range of defecating figurines.

Marc Alos is part of a family that has been producing and selling such figurines since 1992 in Girona, a town 100 kilometers (62 miles) northeast of Barcelona. The company, [Terra I Mar - Caganer.com](#), offers 150 types of *caganer* figurines, ranging from political and sports figures to more anonymous and traditional figures, such as farmers, nuns and Santa Claus -- all of them evacuating their bowels. "People call from all over the world asking for us to make statues of their local figures," Alos says, "but there's no way we could make everyone happy."

With annual sales of between 20,000 and 25,000 figurines, Alos's company is the largest of its kind. By far the most popular figure, Alos says, is the traditional farmer figure. Second place, however, is occupied by a squatting version of outgoing US President George W. Bush.

When asked why he thought Bush's figure was so popular, Alos preferred only to say: "We always sell most the people who are either loved or hated." Based on recent sales figures, Alos adds, it would appear that US President-elect Barack Obama fits into one of those categories as well.

Relaxative Holiday Mirth

The other scatological element of the traditional Catalan Christmas is the *Tió de Nadal*, which roughly translates as "Christmas log." Also known as the *Caga Tió*, or "pooping log," this character is a 30-centimeter (one-foot) log hallowed out on one end. In recent times, the other end of the log has been given a smiling face, topped with a miniature version of the *barretina* and propped up on two stick legs.

Starting on Dec. 8, which marks the Feast of the Immaculate Conception holiday in the Catholic tradition, the log is "fed" small amounts of candies, nuts, figs or *torrons* -- a local type of nougat -- every night and sleeps under a little blanket. On Christmas Eve or Christmas day, depending on the household, one end of

the log is put in the fireplace and ordered to "poop."

To hasten and encourage the log's symbolic bowel movement, children sing special songs and beat it with sticks, yelling "*caga tió!*" Someone then reaches around the log and under the blanket to bring forth a gift that is then shared by the group.

Of course, if the revelers are still hungry, then can always go to their local pastry shops, which have sweets shaped like feces on offer during the holiday season.

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