

# SUPPER SANCTUARY IN THE SOUTH

A lesson from *Las Posadas*

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

I'VE YET TO SPEND A WINTER IN the South, so I've never had the chance to partake in holiday traditions y'all celebrate—no country ham, or brandy milk punch, or stockings stuffed with oranges. But I do know of a relative newcomer that has migrated across the region over the past thirty years, one that is both historical yet of the moment, and perfect for all Southerners to adopt: *Las Posadas*.

It's a Catholic celebration that translates as "The Inns." Held across Latin America, it is most identified with Mexico. *Las Posadas* takes place over nine days, from December 16 to 24, and commemorates the search for lodging that Joseph and Mary endured in Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus Christ. Every night, neighbors dress up their children as shepherds and angels, and pick two people to take on the roles of Joseph and Mary. The group then goes

from home to home and asks for shelter, offering carols and prayers.

All the houses refuse the pilgrims shelter save for the last one, which welcomes them in with food and songs.

I fondly remember the *Posadas* of my childhood. I always liked to play one of the Three Wise Men, because we got to wear fake beards and flowing robes. I'd skip lunch each day of the *Posadas* so that I could gorge on my aunts' tamales, buñuelos (fried flour tortillas dusted in brown sugar and cinnamon), and champurrado (a masa-based hot chocolate drink). For me, the value of *Posadas* was mostly about grub and family. I gave little thought to its ostensible religious purpose.

*Posadas* left my life years ago, as the children of my neighborhood grew up, cousins moved far away, and I drifted from the Catholic Church. As an adult, though, the Christmastime performance

illustrations by Delphine Lee





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has taken on a deeper meaning—due in part to what I see happening in the South.

As millions of Latinos have made *el Sur* their home over the past three decades, *Las Posadas* is becoming part of the Southern holiday fabric. YouTube videos feature reenactments from Carrboro, North Carolina, to Hoover, Alabama. Pontotoc, Mississippi, to Charlottesville, Virginia.

In today's South, *Las Posadas* has transcended its Catholic roots. For the past two years, the Children's Museum of Atlanta has offered its own afternoon interpretation complete with *baile folclórico*, storytime, and a make-your-own-lantern workshop.

Five years ago, Hugo Olaiz of Forward Movement, a nonprofit publishing ministry of the Episcopal Church, wrote a guide for Episcopalians on "How to Celebrate a Mexican *Posada*."

Argentinean by birth, Olaiz arrived tino North Carolina to spread the Good News and was wowed by the *Posadas* of his Mexican neighbors. He saw an opportunity to connect longtime residents to newcomers with a holiday where neighborly love is central.

"We learn from the *Posadas*," he wrote,

"that by welcoming the poor and the needy, we are welcoming Jesus in our midst."

In a region that has seen the largest percentage increase of Latinos of any region of the United States over the past generation, the South now witnesses the incorporation of a holiday that speaks to its core: sanctuary. Through food. To welcome strangers.

WHEN I TRAVEL through the South, I'm always on the lookout for Mexican restaurants. More than keepers of stories, or even places of nourishment, Mexican restaurants interest me as inns of sorts. When I take a seat, I'm back at home in Southern California, in a place where the fajitas are familiar and the accents remind me of my parents.

I seek a sanctuary. I'm not the only one. The idea of restaurants as safe spaces is becoming increasingly popular nationwide, owing to our political climate and to the continued battle against the racism and sexism that has too long plagued the restaurant industry. Toward that end, the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United—a nonprofit that advocates for low-wage restaurant workers and has a

chapter in New Orleans—launched a sanctuary restaurant movement in 2016.

Those who sign up agree to publicly declare that their businesses welcome LGBT folks, undocumented immigrants, people of color, and other afflicted groups. The restaurants affix a decal on their windows that declare they're "A Place at the Table for Everyone."

It's a noble gesture, even if only about forty businesses have signed up in the South. Many restaurateurs understandably don't want to involve themselves with controversy, especially if it might affect their bottom line.

To those folks, I present *Las Posadas*. *Posada* is both a place and an action. To offer *posada* is to envelop sojourners with love, food and shelter.

*Posadas* are easy to stage and offer rich cross-cultural possibilities. Although the story is Christian at its root, its underlying message—the welcome of travelers—is universal.

It's something the South should take to heart, because *ustedes* are *Las Posadas* manifest.

The region was not a common landing point for Mexican immigrants until the 1990s. The South became their *posada*. It offered a chance to realize their

dreams where other places didn't. They found work, established lives, forged community.

And many of them did so by opening restaurants.

Those restaurants, in turn, give *posada* to all Southerners. In many small towns, Mexican restaurants have taken the place of diners or biscuit joints to become a de facto community center. Where retirees share tales over margaritas. Where families celebrate birthdays with sombreros and candle-topped scoops of fried ice cream.

Where Southerners can learn about their new neighbors. And where strangers from afar find refuge in a meal.

So for this Christmas, I offer restaurateurs and home cooks alike a challenge: Hold a *Posada*. You don't have to adopt the Christian aspect of it if it doesn't mesh with your beliefs. Pay attention to the lesson of welcoming those rejected by others.

Before each evening of the *Posada* culminates in a feast, the participants join in song: "Enter, enter, holy pilgrims, holy pilgrims/Welcome to my humble home/Though 'tis little I can offer/All I have please call your own."

Sounds like Southern hospitality. 🍷

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