



CATHOLIC CUSTOMS & TRADITIONS



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS





INTRODUCTION

*Those who contemplate
the beauty of the earth find
reserves of strength that will
endure as long as life lasts.
There is something infinitely
healing in the repeated refrains
of nature—the assurance
that dawn comes after night
and spring after winter.*

RACHEL CARSON

Those who contemplate
the liturgical seasons are
in a similar place.

In this booklet, we focus on what is “infinitely healing” in the undercurrents of Advent hope and anticipation; the early darkness with stars shining like “angels giving glory to God”; the ancient longing of the “O” Antiphons; the familiar and tender stories of Christmas Eve; the exuberant generosity of God’s gift of Jesus;

the symbolic treasures of the Magi; and the charismatic emergence of John the Baptizer.

As Catholic Christians, the liturgical year is our compass, directing us toward ever-new experiences of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It invites us to glimpse mysteries of faith we may have previously overlooked. It teaches us to go deeper into God by reflecting often on the words and actions of Jesus. It reveals to us the flow of joy, sorrow, longing, hope, death, and resurrection in Jesus' life—and in every life.

Through this booklet we invite intergenerational learning groups, catechists, RCIA teams, confirmation candidates and sponsors, parish study groups, and all parishioners to let the liturgical year reveal its “reserves of strength” and offer “infinite healing” through its repeated refrains. Above all, be open to its blessed assurance that “dawn comes after night and spring after winter.”



Advent

Daylight grows shorter. The dark of night grows longer and more intense. A spirit of expectation begins to pick up momentum: shopping trips, gift wrapping, parties, a different kind of music and song, and an avalanche of decorations. Something wonderful is about to happen. Young and old alike prepare to celebrate Christmas by taking part in a great variety of traditions, some of them only remotely associated with preparation for the Christian mystery of the Messiah's birth.

Advent is the beginning of the church's liturgical year, and the First Sunday of Advent always falls on the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Andrew, November 30. Advent looks forward to the annual celebration of Jesus' birth, both the historical event itself and the saving event of the coming of God in flesh, Christ's return at the end of the world, and his coming into our lives every day.

The word "Advent" (Latin *adventus*, "coming") originally described the whole mystery of the Incarnation. The conception of Jesus was an Advent, but so was his birth and what will be his final coming at the endtimes.

ORIGINS OF ADVENT

Once Christmas became popular, Advent evolved as a liturgical season. In ancient times, people tended to precede a time of feasting with a time of fasting. There are hints of a penitential season at this time of the year in the late 5th century in Spain and Gaul (roughly, today's France and the Lowlands). These areas had links to the Eastern church, which celebrated its Nativity feast on January 6, called Epiphany. They approached this feast with forty days of fasting and penance, very similar to Lent, possibly because Epiphany was seen as a time for baptism, as was the Easter Vigil at the end of Lent.



By the mid-6th century, the church in Rome had begun to focus on days of penance that occurred on the Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday after the feast of St. Lucy (December 13). The reason lay in a five-day pagan harvest festival of Saturnalia, from December 17-23. On

December 17, sacrifice was offered to Saturn, god of agriculture. The days following were filled with gift exchanges, feasting, and excesses. It seems that the church tried to offset the influence of this popular pagan festival with days of fasting, prayer, and penance as it looked ahead to the feast of Nativity on December 25.

There is also an ancient tradition of singing the O Antiphons during the Liturgy of Hours on precisely the same days as the pagan Saturnalia. The singing of these O Antiphons, always an Advent tradition, is still popular today, and they have become the Alleluia verses at Mass for December 17-23:

- (*O Sapientia*) Come, Wisdom of our God...
- (*O Adonai*) Come, Leader of Ancient Israel...
- (*O Radix Jesse*) Come, Flower of Jesse's Stem...
- (*O Clavis David*) Come, Key of David...
- (*O Oriens*) Come, Radiant Dawn...
- (*O Rex Gentium*) Come, King of all Nations...
- (*O Emmanuel*) Come, Emmanuel...

ADVENT TRADITIONS

Some religious traditions during the month of December are directly associated with the themes of Advent. Others are already part of the celebration of Christmas but are anticipated during the weeks of Advent.

ADVENT WREATH

Advent traditions reflect a spirit of expectation and, therefore, unfold gradually. Probably the most popular tradition today is the lighting of candles on an Advent Wreath. This custom originated among Lutherans in Germany in the 16th century and became popular in other areas. Along with the Christmas tree, it is probably an example of Christianizing practices popular from pre-Christian times. There had always been a festival of burning special lights and fire at the end of November and beginning of December in Germanic lands as the darkness of winter becomes more severe.

The Advent Wreath is made of evergreens and is placed on a table or suspended from the ceiling. There are four candles, one for each week of Advent. The color of the candles is not essential because the symbolism is primarily in the flame. It is popular, however, to have three of them be violet or purple, the traditional color of Advent. One is rose, the traditional color of the Third Sunday of Advent, originally called Gaudete (“Rejoice”) Sunday



from the first word of the entrance antiphon for Mass.

After the wreath is blessed on the first Sunday of Advent, a prayer is prayed and a candle lit. This ceremony repeats on each of the following three Sundays. Light increases, pushing out darkness, with another candle lit until all four are burning.

Wreaths are symbolic of victory and glory. The symbolism of the Advent Wreath goes beyond this. It lies in the tension between darkness and light. It represents the long time when people lived in spiritual darkness, waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the light of the world. Each year in Advent people wait once again in darkness for the coming of the Lord, his historical coming in the mystery of Bethlehem, his final coming at the end of time, and his special coming in every moment of grace.

JESSE TREE

Biblical persons associated with the coming of the Messiah are represented by the tradition of the Jesse Tree, named after the father of David. Symbols are gradually added to the tree or branch. They represent ancestors of Jesus, either in faith or bloodline, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesse, David, Solomon, Joseph, and Mary.

ADVENT CALENDAR

The four weeks before Christmas can be designed into a special Advent calendar of personal preparation. The days are marked with goals toward personal conversion or service to be done for others.



Christmas

Christmas is no longer just a Christian liturgical feast. Over the centuries it has become a seasonal mood, not limited to believers who prepare for and rejoice over the birth of Jesus. Almost every aspect of society celebrates the season in some way.

Despite the secular overtones of the season, the word “Christmas” underscores its profound Christian and spiritual significance. It has been used in English-speaking countries since the Middle Ages; the word was derived from the Old English *Cristes Maesse*, or “Mass of Christ.”

With the Father’s gift of Jesus as a model, Christmas also celebrates the mystery of giving—and receiving—both with and without Christian faith. Finally, Christmas incorporates numerous pre-Christian traditions concerning the winter solstice along with the legends of St. Nicholas that gave rise to the modern creation of Santa Claus.

ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS



The primitive church seems to have had little or no interest in the actual date of Jesus' birth. They celebrated the mystery of his resurrection weekly and annually. Martyrs and saints were honored with anniversary festivals before celebrating the Nativity became a tradition. Eventually, however, the

church's desire to live out liturgically the entire Christ mystery led to a Nativity festival. Another possible reason is the church's response to the influence of early heresies, especially Docetism, that denied the human nature of Jesus.

The actual date of Christ's birth is unknown. The gospels do not record it, nor is there any early tradition to identify it. There are two traditional dates: December 25 in the Western church and January 6 in the Eastern church. Both have been celebrated by the church as memorials of Jesus' birth, the latter becoming the feast of Epiphany. Neither of them, however, is recognized as the actual date today.

DATE OF CHRISTMAS

Rome had a Nativity festival by 336 and probably a generation or so earlier. There is still disagreement among scholars concerning the reason why these early Christians of the late 3rd and early 4th century chose to celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25. Theories, still popular today, are based on three tendencies of the early Christians: their high respect for symbolism, their natural tendency to borrow from the real world around them, and their attempts to offset the influence of pagan festivals.

Earthy symbolism is very powerful at this time of the year in the northern hemisphere. Each year, the darkness of night begins creeping up on daylight as days became shorter and nights longer. At the winter solstice this situation changes and the light of day begins once again to defeat the darkness of night. The winter solstice occurred on December 25 in the ancient Julian calendar and became the popular date for Christmas. As noted in the origin of Advent, a five-day pagan harvest festival of Saturnalia devoted to Saturn, the god of agriculture, occurred shortly before the winter solstice. It was celebrated with gift exchanges, feasting, and excesses. Did Christians turn their hearts to the mystery of Christ's birth to offset this pagan celebration?





NON-CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

Mithraism, a pagan sun cult popular in the Roman Empire during primitive Christianity, promoted this natural symbolism. Devotees of Mithra, a Persian deity, celebrated the birthday of their sun god with a festival called *dies natalis Solis Invicti* (Latin, “birthday of the unconquered sun”) at the winter solstice. One theory is that Christians began to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25 when this festival of the sun became popular in Rome. Christianity would have been comfortable with the symbolism because its own gospel speaks of light, or sun, as a symbol for the presence and meaning of Christ. The adoption of this date for the birthday of Jesus would have challenged people to turn from adoration of the material sun to adoration of Christ, the truly unconquered light of the world (John 8:12).

POPULARITY OF CHRISTMAS

During the Middle Ages, Christmas exploded in popularity. So did religious traditions associated with it. New Christians from barbarian tribes added elements from their own pre-Christian winter traditions, putting their stamp on Christmas traditions that continue today.

Early immigrants brought their different Christmas traditions and attitudes to America. Spanish and French Catholics, for example, continued to celebrate Christmas with elaborate liturgies in church and religious traditions brought with them from their homelands. Puritans continued to obey a prohibition against any Christmas celebration in colonies that would become the New England states. This policy continued until the 19th century. Christmas was an ordinary workday in Boston until 1856. By the end of the century, however, all states had granted legal recognition to Christmas Day.

SACRED AND SECULAR

A mixture and even confusion of the sacred and secular characterizes the Christmas season today. Most people are comfortable with this situation, as “Silent Night” alternates with “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” Some popular Christmas traditions are considered religious but are only indirectly so.

CHRISTMAS CANDLE

The most obvious feature of the Christmas season is the popularity of special lights. The religious use of a special candle, called the Christmas Candle, is an ancient tradition. Some place it in the middle of the Advent Wreath, whose symbolism is now completed with the coming of Christ: The light has succeeded in pushing away the darkness of sin and religious ignorance. Others place it in some obvious place in the home.

WINDOW LIGHTS

Other forms of Christmas lights are also popular during this festive season. The custom of putting



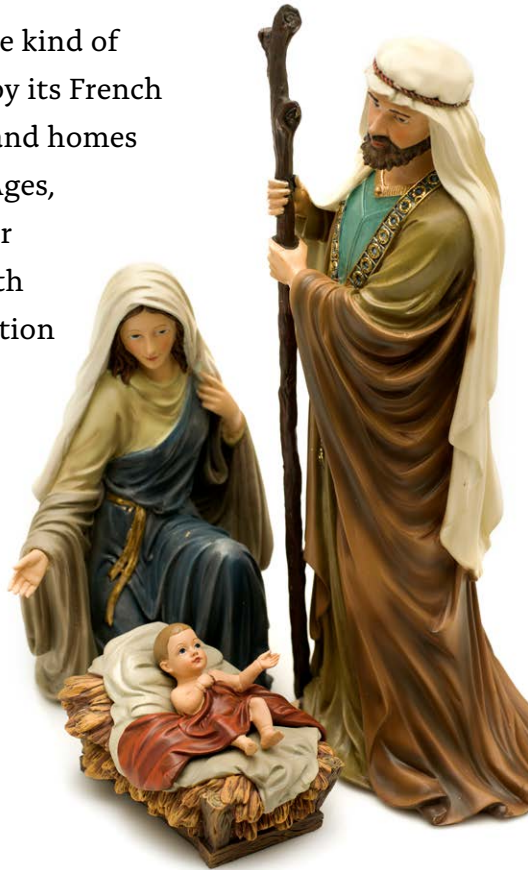
a candle in the window comes from 19th-century Irish immigrants. It represents a beacon to light the way for Mary and Joseph and the coming of the Christ Child. (It is possible, however, that its origin lies in a time of suppression of Catholicism in Ireland. The candles attracted fugitive priests to safe houses.) This Christmas tradition was popularized by carolers in Boston a century ago.

LUMINARIES

In the Southwest there was a custom among Hispanics of placing luminaries, or burning candles, in paper sacks filled with sand. These decorate sidewalks and fronts of homes. This tradition has spread throughout the country. Luminaries symbolically light the way for the Christ Child.

NATIVITY SCENE

The tradition of having some kind of Nativity scene, also known by its French name (*crèche*), in churches and homes evolved during the Middle Ages, first in churches as a prop for Nativity plays associated with Mass. A *crèche* is a reproduction of the cave in Bethlehem with the principal characters: Mary, Joseph, the infant Jesus in a manger, shepherds, angels, and animals. St. Francis of Assisi popularized this custom with a living Nativity scene at Greccio, Italy, in 1223.



LAS POSADAS

Among Hispanics it is popular to tell the story of Mary and Joseph's search for room in an inn by way of a ritual called Las Posadas. A procession of families with "Mary" and "Joseph" approaches a designated home, the "inn," and sings out for a place for Mary who is pregnant. From inside the home the excuses of having no room is sung. This ritual is repeated on a series of nights until finally the "seekers" are invited in for a party.

OPLATEK

Among people of Slavic ancestry and still today among many Poles in the United States, the father of the family solemnly breaks a Christmas wafer made of wheat flour,



oplatek (Polish, "thin wafer"), on Christmas Eve. He distributes it to those present as a symbol of love and peace. These pieces are then shared with wishes for luck,

health, and happiness. Pieces are also shared with friends and neighbors, a symbol of unity in the human family.



CHRISTMAS TREE

Next to the Nativity scene, the most popular Christmas tradition is to have a Christmas tree in the home. This custom is not the same as bringing a Yule tree or evergreens into the home, originally popular during the month of the winter solstice in Germany. The word “yule” seems to have come from the Anglo-Saxon *geol*, a word for feasting and drinking. The Yule tree reflected a long-



ing for “green things” during the cold, dark winter. This tradition became so popular that “Yule” eventually became a substitute name for Christmas. The burning of a Yule log was adapted from an ancient Scandinavian practice of lighting bonfires to mark the winter solstice.

Most Christmas traditions associated with evergreens and trees are related somehow to pre-Christian practices. Teutonic and Scandinavian peoples, for example, worshiped trees and decorated houses and barns with evergreens at the new year to scare away demons.

The Christmas tree originated in Germany, as did so many other Christmas traditions. There it was first called the Paradise Tree. The Christmas tree seems to have re-



sulted from the combination of two traditions: a prop from a popular morality or mystery play of the Middle Ages with a festival of lights from pre-Christian times.

One of these mystery plays was a skit about Adam and Eve with a message promising that a Messiah would come. (December 24 was observed as the feast of Adam and Eve.) The prop of this skit was a Paradise Tree, a fir tree decorated with the traditional apple. Children were so delighted with this tree that parents were persuaded to have one in the home, especially when these plays were forbidden in churches because of abuses. The Paradise Tree, decorated with apples, other fruit, and pastries, soon became a family tradition.

Another tradition was popular at the same time and place as the Paradise Tree. As the winter solstice approached, Germanic peoples celebrated a festival of lights as they had done ever since pre-Christian times. After their conversion these people re-interpreted the solstice lights, or candles, as symbolic of the light of the Messiah, Christ, shining in the darkness of sin and spiritual ignorance. These candles were placed each year on steps or shelves in the shape of a pyramid, decorated with evergreens and the Star of Bethlehem at the top.

In the early 17th century, these two traditions of lights and the Paradise Tree seemed to have merged. The Christmas lights or burning candles and the Star of Bethlehem were attached to the Paradise Tree of the same shape as the Christmas pyramid. This gave rise to the Christmas tree.

The Christmas tree as a widespread tradition is relatively recent. At first, Christmas trees in this country were small table trees decorated with homemade ornaments from needlework, pastries, and ribbon. By the end of the 19th century, floor-to-ceiling trees were common, decorated with homemade and commercially manufactured decorations, and wrapped in tinsel garland. In the late 1930s the lightbulb-blowing process was adapted to Christmas tree balls.

Christmas trees appear in numerous forms today, including artificial ones. For many people they are mere-

ly a holiday decoration. They preserve, however, rich Christian symbolism: the green of hope at a time of dying, the burning light of Christ at a time of spiritual darkness, and the fruits of paradise.

CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Today, Christmas songs are usually called “carols” (Old English *carolen*, “to sing joyfully,” which in turn came from the Greek *choraulein*, a ring dance with flutes). Originally carols were Latin hymns. Christmas carols in a modern sense became popular in Italy in the 13th century under the influence of St. Francis of Assisi and spread throughout Europe. Carols sung today come from both Protestant and Catholic composers of recent centuries.

The tradition of going Christmas caroling was introduced in the American colonies by the English. Later, late in the 19th century, it was popularized in the Beacon Hill district of Boston. In St. Louis at the turn of the 20th century, carolers would sing at homes decorated with a candle in the window.



MISTLETOE

What has become an occasion of affection and even merriment, a kiss under the mistletoe, was a serious tradition in pre-Christian times. Among the Druids, a pre-Christian religious group in Gaul, Ireland, and Britain, mistletoe was considered a sacred plant with powers to heal and to protect. Because it was so sacred, enemies who met under it were expected to pledge themselves to a truce. From this came the custom of placing it over a doorway as an invitation to peace, good will, and hospitality. After Britain became Christian, the use of mistletoe was forbidden because of pagan practices associated with it. For a while, however, it became a symbol of Christ at Christmas in Britain because of its reputation for healing powers.

HOLLY

The use of holly as a religious tradition and Christmas decoration originated



in northern Europe, where it was called the “holy tree.” Because of its appearance it became associated with the burning bush of Moses and Mary’s burning love for God. The red berries and prickly points also became symbolic of the crown of thorns and the bloody death that the Christ Child would eventually suffer.



POINSETTIA

The poinsettia with its scarlet leaves, now of many hues, came from Mexico where it grows as a shrub. It blooms at Christmastime, and Mexicans called it “flower of the Holy Night.” It was brought to the United States by the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett (1779-1851) who had them grown in his greenhouse in South Carolina. Only since 1920 have they become potted plants. Poinsettias are now associated as much with Christmas as lilies are with Easter.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

Christmas cards with a seasonal greeting and message became popular late in the 19th century. The first is believed to have been designed in England by John Calcot Horsley.



CHRISTMAS PAGEANTS

Acting out the mysteries in the life of Jesus was very important for the edification and education of people in earlier times. One of these played out the story of the Nativity and was at times connected with public worship or Mass.

Widespread abuses and exaggerations caused these mystery plays to be prohibited in churches by the 15th century. In a “cleaned-up” form they survived outside

of church buildings. Three hundred years later, a simple form of the ancient Nativity play became popular again in Germany and came to the United States with immigrants. Some features of this drama have become part

of Christmas services in both Protestant and Catholic churches, with children in costumes representing Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and angels.



EXCHANGING GIFTS

It is understandable that a time of good will and high emotion became the occasion of exchanging gifts with family and friends. This has become one of the most popular features of the Christmas season. This custom is actually older than the feast itself. As mentioned earlier, the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which occurred about the same time, included merriment and gift exchanges.



KRISS KRINGLE

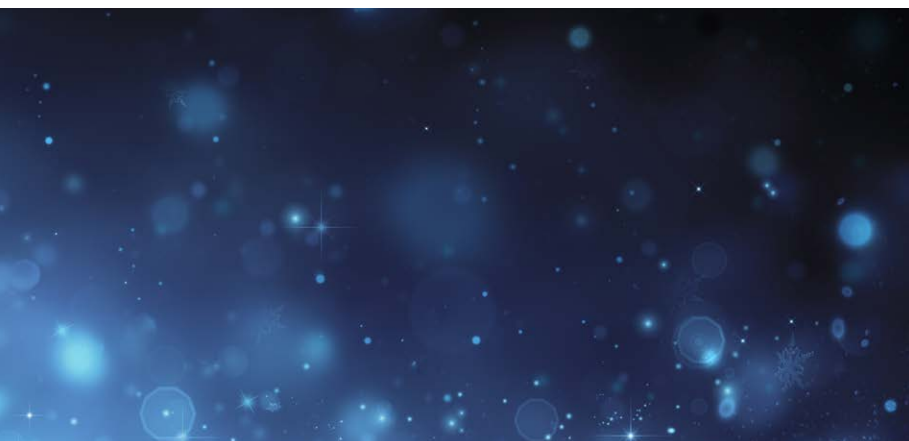
An important traditional dimension of this gift-giving is that it be secret, especially for children. At a time when the celebration of Christmas was entirely religious, children were told that the Christ Child had brought them gifts. He also provided other details of the Christmas celebration such as decorating the tree and completing the Nativity scene. Until recent times this tradition continued in most countries. “Christ Child” is *Christ Kinder* in German, later deteriorating into Kriss Kringle. In this form the custom was popularized by the German settlers in Pennsylvania.



SANTA CLAUS

A concern of many parents is how to deal with the popularity of this Christmas character among young children and in society generally. The origin of this tradition is a fascinating and deliberate mixture of a bishop-saint, Father Christmas, Christmas Man, and the Norse mythological god Thor.

The veneration of saints was abolished in most Protestant areas soon after the Reformation. Banned, too, were the religious traditions associated with these saints. Banned, therefore, was St. Nicholas (Latin, *Sanctus Nicolas*). St. Nicholas had been the bishop of Myra in present-day Turkey. He was venerated as a confessor because he suffered imprisonment for his faith (d. 350). Legends tell of his practice of giving presents secretly. A feast in his honor was celebrated on December 6 and included



the popular custom of a visit from St. Nicholas. This visitor in bishop's robes and a long white beard questioned young children about their behavior, encouraged them to prepare for the coming of the Lord at Christmas, and distributed simple gifts of candy, fruit, or toys. Sometimes this visit was secret during the night, and shoes put out by children were filled with gifts. In some form this tradition continued among Catholics.

Only Dutch Protestants after the Reformation kept the ancient tradition of a visit from St. Nicholas on December 6, in their language, *Sinter Klaas*. They brought this tradition and name to the American colonies. Their first church in New York City was named after him. The Dutch, however, lost control of their colony to the English. English-speaking Protestant children envied

their Dutch friends' gifts from Sinter Klaas, which they pronounced as Santa Claus. Their parents, however, did not want to cooperate with a tradition that involved a Catholic saint, and a bishop at that.

A curious solution evolved. The secret visit with gifts was transferred from the eve of December 6 to Christmas Eve and absorbed into traditional Christmas festivities. And the good saint was replaced, except for his name, by an entirely new character. This new creation

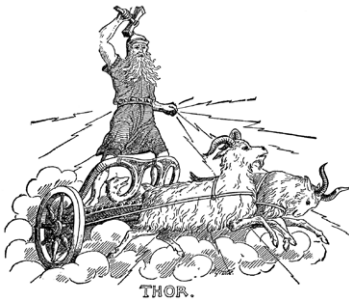


was a mixture of Father Christmas, popular in England, with some features from the Christmas Man, the mythical god Thor, and a little bit of St. Nicholas. Santa's colors of red and white, for example, were the colors of St. Nicholas' vestments and those of the Norse god of the north, Thor.

The Christmas Man, part of the evolution of Santa Claus, was created in some of the European countries where the Protestant Reformation had banished St. Nicholas. This character took his place as a secular sym-

bol in some places. Details such as the sleigh, reindeer, and chimney visits may have come from this tradition.

The Santa Claus we know today is, therefore, a “manufactured” but delightful character. In 1809, Washington Irving, in his *Knickerbocker’s History of New York*, contributed to Santa’s evolution by describing St. Nicholas as a heavy-set Dutchman, smoking a pipe, riding over rooftops in a wagon and dropping presents from his pockets down chimneys. These details were further expanded and St. Nicholas, now Santa Claus, became “a jolly old elf” in 1822 with Clement C. Moore’s popular poem which begins, “’Twas the night before Christmas.” Final details were made popular by cartoonists in the late 19th century, especially by Thomas Nast.



The work of these cartoonists also echoes details from mythology about the Norse god Thor: elderly, jolly (though god of war), with white hair and beard, friend of the common people, living in the north land, traveling through the sky in a chariot pulled by goats, and as god of fire, partial to chimneys and fireplaces.

There does not seem to be any harm done to the faith of children by cooperating with the tradition of Santa Claus. Acquaintance with myths is an important part of children’s emotional development.



The Christmas Season

Not many religious Christmas traditions—or secular ones—continue after December 25 in the typical family in the United States. The church, however, is not finished with Christmas yet. The Christmas season continues and includes Epiphany and concludes with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

All major religious feasts used to be extended for at least a week, a sign that church and people were reluctant to say goodbye to it. The celebration a week later was called the *octave* (Latin, “the eighth day”). Festivities, sometimes elaborate, continued during the days in between. The celebration of Christmas was stretched even further than a week. The twelve days of Christmas, secularized in a popular song, were an ancient sacred and festive celebration of Christmastime and included a number of special feasts.

FEAST DAYS OF MARTYRS

It is difficult today for people to appreciate a time when there was no pervading Christmas mood, neither religious nor secular. There was such a time. The celebration of feast days of martyrs evolved before there was a Christmas season. Three of them are celebrated as feast days immediately following Christmas.

These feasts during Christmastime represent three kinds of martyrdom common during the centuries of persecution:

those who went to their death willingly (St. Stephen),

those who were willing to die but were not put to death (St. John),

and those who were put to death without their choice (Holy Innocents). The feast of Holy Innocents was a direct spin-off from the celebration of Christmas. As part

of the larger story of Jesus' birth,

the gospel according to Matthew

(2:13–19) tells of the massacre of innocent

boys two years old and younger at the order of King Herod.





HOLY FAMILY

The feast of the Holy Family has been celebrated by the universal church only since 1920. Originally celebrated on the third Sunday after Epiphany, it is now observed on the Sunday between Christmas and January 1. Devotion to the Holy Family became popular after the 16th century. The theme of

family, and this feast dedicated to it, is of special importance today in face of challenges to the contemporary family.

JANUARY 1

The celebration of a New Year's Day on January 1 with a special theme is not a universal tradition. Different people began their secular calendar on different days. It was common to observe it on March 25, the vernal, or spring, equinox. Such was the case in England until the mid-18th century. New Year's Day was celebrated on March 1 until the 8th century in the Frankish empire, on Easter

in France until the 15th, and on Christmas until the 16th in Scandinavia and Germany. A January 1 date was set for the Roman Empire in 45 BCE by Julius Caesar with the creation of the Julian calendar.



In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII sponsored a reform of the Julian calendar. This was accompanied by a method of calculating and dividing the year still in force today. This Gregorian calendar reinstated January 1 as New Year's Day. Protestant countries rejected this calendar, and therefore the January 1 observance of New Year's Day, until 1700 in Germany, 1752 in Great Britain and the American colonies, and 1753 in Sweden.

January 1 has had many religious themes in Christian history. None of them are associated with the secular understanding of New Year's Day so popular in our society today. At first the day was celebrated as special because

it was the Octave of Christmas and, so to speak, a repeat of that day and theme. The church promoted penitential liturgies and fasting to offset the influence of pagan New Year's boisterous practices. In the year 567, the Second Council of Tours prescribed a three-day fast to correspond with the first days of the new year.

The church never succeeded in curtailing boisterous New Year's Eve celebrations with its penitential emphasis. Therefore, other religious themes evolved for this day. The first one was a Marian theme because on this day the papal liturgy was held at the oldest church dedicated to Mary, St. Mary Beyond the Tiber. At first it celebrated the birthday of Mary (later moved to September 8) who gave birth to Jesus, continuing a Christmas theme.

In Spain and Gaul during the 6th century the church began to dedicate January 1 to the mystery of the circumcision of Jesus. This was in accord with the Scriptures that this event took place on the eighth day after Jesus's birth (Luke 2:21). This theme spread to Rome only in the 13th century and was added to the celebration of the Octave of Christmas and the feast of Mary.

Today January 1 continues to be a holy day in the United States. It combines a number of themes: the Octave of Christmas; Mary, the Mother of God; and, more recently, the theme of peace in the world. The theme of Jesus' circumcision was dropped in 1969. A Christmas theme continues by way of songs, music, and decorations.

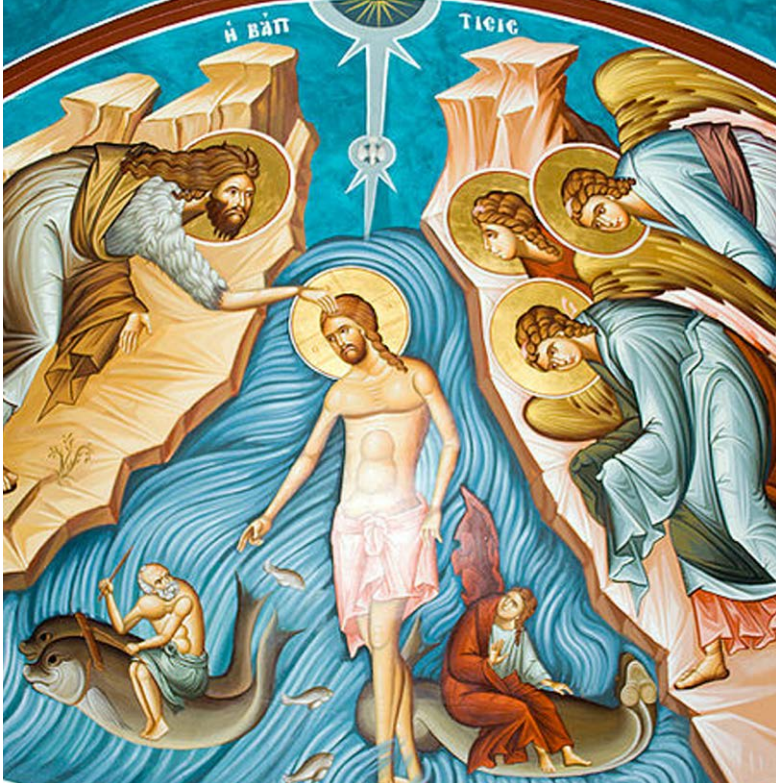
NEW YEAR'S DAY

The theme of January 1 as New Year's Day has never been part of the church's celebration, although this theme is frequently heard in homilies. The tradition of drinking and partying as the old year gives way to the new goes back to ancient times and is a secular remnant of what had originally been pagan religious rites. Ancient pagan religious rites included a form of confession and satisfaction for the previous year's failures and evil, lighting of new fires, and some kind of communion with the dead. Loud noises from horns, drums, and shouting drove away evil spirits that were especially active at this time of the year. This may sound a little like Halloween. The end of October was New Year's Day among the Celts who gave us our Halloween customs.

EPIPHANY

Epiphany was traditionally celebrated on January 6. Today in the United States it is celebrated on the Sunday between January 2 and 8. "Epiphany" comes from the Greek *epiphanein*, a "showing, appearance, or revelation." It was used to describe the appearance of a god among the people, a theophany, or a visit from some civil dignitary. The Greek-speaking church of the East found it natural to use the word to describe the appearance of the true God in

flesh. Consequently, some churches in that part of the world celebrated a festival on January 6 recalling Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and his Cana miracle; others celebrated a festival commemorating his birth, and eventually a combination of the two.



Evidence of a Nativity festival in Egypt and in the churches of the Near East is very ancient, possibly beginning before the 3rd century. Theories of why a January 6 date was chosen by the Eastern church parallels the arguments for the December 25 date in the West.

This feast of the Epiphany was introduced into Gaul in the mid-4th century because the churches in that part of Europe had close ties to the East. In Gaul the Epiphany themes of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, his transfiguration, and the miracle at Cana were developed.

By the end of the 4th century, Eastern and Western churches took over each other's Nativity feasts. Since then, Christmas and the Epiphany have been celebrated in both churches. This duplication led to the evolution of a separate theme for each. The Eastern church continued to emphasize the theme of Jesus' epiphanies with the gospel stories of Jesus' baptism and his miracle at Cana. In the Western church, the Epiphany evolved into a celebration of the gospel story of the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12) on the occasion of Jesus' birth: his epiphany to the gentiles.

The Christmas season officially ends the Sunday after Epiphany with the commemoration of Christ's baptism.

MAGI

The gospel story of the Magi, so closely associated with Epiphany, is a reflection on an important aspect of the mystery of Incarnation: The Messiah has come to all people and not just to the Jews. The word "magi" is Greek and refers to a learned caste in Babylonia, probably astrologers and interpreters of dreams. It fits into the symbolism of supernatural circumstances that led representa-

tives of the gentile nations to the Messiah. References to prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures (for example, Isaiah 60:1–6) are used by the gospel author to emphasize the universal purpose of Jesus' birth. In Psalm 72:10ff, the King of Judah, one of the Messiah's titles, is promised gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the three gifts mentioned in the gospel, were traditional symbols of homage in the East. Traditionally they have come to symbolize the destiny of Jesus: gold for his royalty, frankincense for his divinity, myrrh for his suffering and death.



This gospel reflection on the birth of the Messiah was embellished by popular details as the centuries passed. The magi were identified as kings by Tertullian (c. 160–225), and the number of Magi was set at three by Origen (d. 254) because of the three gifts mentioned. Their physical appearance comes from legends in the 9th century. They described the kings as representing the three major races and gave them names: Melchior, an old white man with a long white beard, bearing the gift of gold; Caspar, young and of darker hue, carrying incense; and Balthasar, a black man, offering myrrh.

BLESSING OF HOMES

One popular religious tradition since the Middle Ages has been associated with the feast of the Epiphany: the blessing of homes with holy water and incense. The ritual calls for a priest or parent to mark, with blessed chalk, the inside of the main door with the initials of the Magi and a code of the current year connected with crosses: e.g., 20+C+M+B+21. Another explanation of the initials (C-M-B) is that they are the first letters of the blessing: *Christus mansionem benedicat* (Latin, “May Christ bless the house”).

CANDLEMAS

Two other feasts have a Christmas theme but fall outside of the traditional Christmas season. The first is Candlemas, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the temple, on February 2, forty days after Christmas Day. It could be considered the closing of the season. The gospel for this feast proclaims the words of Simeon that the infant Jesus will be “a revealing light to the Gentiles, the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:32).

This feast was celebrated in Jerusalem as early as the fourth century. It became a commemoration of the purification of Mary: “They came to offer in sacrifice ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,’ in accord with the dictate in the law of the Lord” (Luke 2:22–24; see Leviticus 12:6–7).

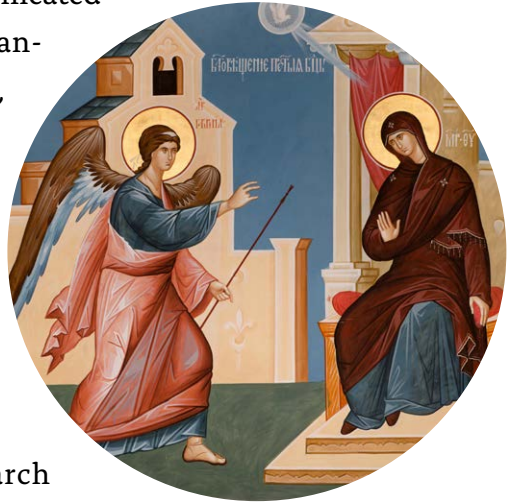
By the end of the 7th century, this feast was celebrated in Rome on February 2 with the addition of a candlelight procession. This procession seems to have originated as a substitute for a similar pagan torch procession of expiation around the city walls. The day eventually received the popular title of Candlemas (“Candle Mass”) because candles were blessed before the Mass and procession. Today this feast is called the Presentation of the Lord. Candles are still blessed and some form of procession may be held.



ANNUNCIATION

Another feast associated with the mystery of the Incarnation and, therefore, with Christmas, is the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord. It has been celebrated on March 25 in the Western church since before the middle of the 7th century. The theme of the feast remembers God's decision, communicated

to Mary through the angel messenger Gabriel, that she would be the mother of an unusual child: "Great will be his dignity and he will be called Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32).



The choice of a March 25 date from early centuries is tied up with the choice of December 25 for Christmas. A strong possibility is that March 25, the date of Jesus' death and last Passover, was considered by early Christians as the date of creation and the first moment of Jesus' Incarnation or conception. Once Christ's birthday was remembered annually with a feast on December 25, another feast remembering the beginning of Jesus' life in Mary's womb nine months earlier, on March 25, fell into place.



Child of Bethlehem,
grant that we may share
in this profound mystery of Christmas.

Put into our hearts this peace
for which we sometimes seek so desperately
and which you alone can give us.

Reveal to us also your
beauty, holiness, and purity.

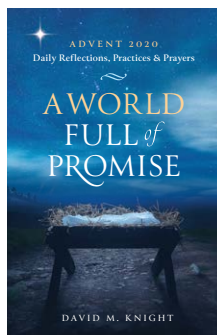
Awaken in our hearts

Love and gratitude
for your infinite goodness.

Join us all together in your love,
and give us your heavenly peace.

ST. JOHN XXIII

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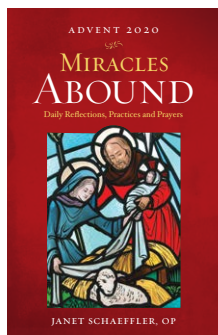
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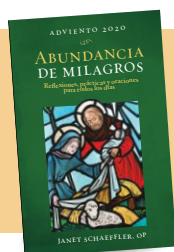
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