



Celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas

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The Twelve Days of Christmas are the days from Christmas until the Epiphany (traditionally January 6th). Since Epiphany is now celebrated, in most dioceses, on the Sunday between January 2nd and 8th, the days between Christmas and the Epiphany may be more or less than twelve.

In reality, the church celebrates the Christmas season until the feast of the Lord's Baptism (Sunday after Epiphany). In other periods of history, Christmas was not officially over until February 2 (Feast of the Presentation of our Lord, also called Candlemas Day) when all Christmas greens were taken down and burned in a bonfire.

These twelve days are an opportunity to:

- continue reflecting on Christ's incarnation among us
- celebrate several important feast days
 - St. Stephen (the first Christian martyr)
 - St. John the evangelist
 - The Holy Innocents
 - The Holy Family (instituted by Pope Benedict XV in 1921)
 - Mary, Mother of God (January 1, has traditionally been celebrated as a feast of Mary's divine motherhood: Theotókos, the "God-bearer," the Mother of God, the one in whom God truly became human)
 - The Epiphany
- observe family customs and rituals

**SOME SUGGESTIONS (FOR FAMILIES TO PICK AND CHOOSE FROM)
FOR CELEBRATING THE TWELVE DAYS:**

December 26 – the feast of St. Stephen

- In addition to being the church's first martyr, Stephen was also one of the first deacons, whose ministry was to care for the poor. Research poverty issues in your area. Make a decision to volunteer or donate during the coming year to reach out to the poor.
- Read Acts 6:8 – 8:2. Many people, especially the English, call this “Boxing Day” in which St. Stephen’s generosity is remembered by giving to the needy. Many people give boxes filled with gifts to the poor. Collect good used clothing, toys and books for those in need.
- Give a gift a day. Not the big expensive kind, but some small gift for each family member as you gather briefly around the tree each evening. Gifts may be as simple as a candy bar, a homemade picture or card, or a handwritten note expressing your love, your recognition of some strength in the recipient or a promise to do some special thing in the days ahead. (You might want to make it that the gift has to fit on a tree branch.)

December 27 – the feast of St. John the Evangelist

- Today is a day of reconciliation in Eastern European churches. In 1983 it was the day Pope John Paul II reconciled with the man who tried to assassinate him. During these Christmas days reach out to an estranged friend or family member. If it’s difficult to call or send an e-mail right now, ask St. John to pray for your reconciliation.
- Place all your Christmas books, videos, and puzzles in a large basket decorated with a festive bow under your Christmas tree. This visible “entertainment center” can remind you to take time to enjoy the Christmas story. Each night before bed, gather around the tree to read a book or two from the basket. Or pop popcorn and pile onto the sofa for a video.
- The ancient church viewed Advent as a fasting time: a time to cook and bake, preparing for the Christmas feast by letting go of food, eating only what they needed and saving rich food for the feast. Then during the twelve days of Christmas, all the food was evenly distributed among the friends, family and neighbors as gifts, so everyone could share the bounty. It was a practical arrangement: without it, some people might have starved. Today (and perhaps throughout the twelve days), give anonymous gifts of food, desserts, snacks that you have made to others who are lonely or needy.

December 28 – the feast of the Holy Innocents

- Today could be a day for parents to pray a special blessing for their children. Signing their forehead(s), parents could pray, “May God continue to bless you. May God guide your heart and mind to love more deeply, in the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. A special dessert for this night might be angel food cake, in memory of the innocent children whom Herod put to death.
- Read Matthew 2: 13-18. Due to Herod’s anger, the Holy Family became refugees. There are 12 million refugees in the world. Write down reasons why people become refugees (war, property, etc.). Give 50 cents to the poor for each reason.
- Sit by the Christmas tree, pointing out different ornaments and family stories they bring to mind.
- Are you travelling to see relatives this Christmas season? Think of Joseph’s and Mary’s journey to Bethlehem. Give 50 cents (to the needy) for every time you eat in a restaurant during your trip.

December 29 – the feast of St. Thomas aBecket

- As archbishop of Canterbury, St. Thomas Becket had to struggle with spiritual and political decisions that affected the role of the church in England. As a family, write or e-mail your congressional representative about an issue of injustice that needs to be corrected.
- Remember the Christ Child by indulging together as a family in child’s play: skating, sledding, new board games, reading, etc.
- Visit a neighbor who has young children. Take the children to a park to play. Share your memories of Christmases past.
- Offer to babysit for a family that has young children. Take along a favorite game. Play games; be a child again.

The Feast of the Holy Family (the Sunday after Christmas)

- Plan to spend the entire day with family-including extended family if possible. During a meal, share stories of your favorite times together.
- Each year on this day, make a video, interviewing the children, one at a time, in front of the Christmas tree. Ask questions about the year’s experiences – vacations, last summer, school, hobbies, best friend, favorite gift and why.
- Be family for those who spend the holidays alone – visit a nursing home or hospital. Invite a widow to dinner.

- For those living alone, how might you gather with those who are family to you: phone someone, invite friends for dinner, etc.
- Prayer for Holy Family Sunday: Jesus, you blessed and touched people who were brought to you. Look lovingly on our family, blessing us all the days of our lives. With your help, may we daily love and follow you so that we, as a family, may grow more deeply in love with you and share your love with all we meet. Bless us with the peace of your presence now and help us to live together in peace always. Amen.

December 30

- Gather all the Christmas cards you've received and choose one at random each evening to read at dinnertime. Share some memories about the person who sent you the card. If it's someone you haven't seen in a while, send an e-mail or make a phone call to reconnect in the coming week.
- Prepare a take-out party to share with someone who is homebound. Put hot chocolate mix, cookies, napkins, a book, a game, a video, etc. into a creative package. Take the party to the person's home and spend the evening enjoying it together.

December 31 - the feast of St. Sylvester I

- There are stories about St. Sylvester giving hospitality to Christians who would travel through Rome. Like Jesus, he would wash their feet and serve them at the dinner table.
- To mark the end of the year, have a dinner party or at least a special family dinner. Ask everyone to bring something to the party or dinner that symbolizes a blessing received from God in the last year. Place them all under the Christmas tree, and, just before midnight, ask everyone to describe their blessing.
- Help prepare for a more peaceful new year in the place where your family can do the most – your home. Invite family members to write one or two things they could do in the coming year to make your home a more peaceful place. These resolutions need not be shared with anyone else. Rather, they could be put away in a secret places and each person could refer to them once a week or once a month.

January 1 – the feast of the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

- Today is often also observed as a world day of prayer for peace. Ask Mary's help (patroness of our country) to help us all bring about peace in our lives, our homes, our country, our world.

- Reread the Christmas Gospel. Say a prayer of thanks for the gift of Jesus; ask Jesus – the Prince of Peace – to show you ways to work for peace this year.

January 2 - the feast of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Nazianzen

- These are two fourth-century Eastern saints who taught about the Trinity. As young men they studied together in Athens where their friendship grew into a lifelong brotherly love. Spend some time this day with your closest friends, and be sure to let them know how much they mean to you.
- Ask someone who may be lonely to go out with your family to look at decorations and window displays. Talk about which displays communicate the true meaning of the holidays. Sing songs as you go from house to house.

January 3 - the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus

- In *Philippians*, St. Paul says that God bestowed on Jesus "the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (2:10). Just as Jesus' name is holy, so is ours. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "Everyone's name is sacred. The name is the icon of the person. It demands respect as a sign of the dignity of the one who bears it." Talk about each family member's name – what does it mean; why did your parents choose that name, etc.
- Go through all of this year's Christmas cards. As a family, discuss and vote on the:
 - Message that best describes the true meaning of Christmas
 - Best picture on a Christmas card
 - Cutest (or most unusual) Christmas card
 - Christmas card you were most surprised to receive
 Pray for those who sent you Christmas cards.

January 4 – the feast of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

- St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was devoted to her family and the church. Talk today about some ways your family could make your parish an even better community.
- Designate today as Good News day. Only good news can be talked about.
- Take a drive, stopping at neighboring churches to visit their Nativity scenes.

January 5 – the feast of St. John Neumann

- Cook something special for breakfast. Spend time talking and enjoying the members of your family.

- Write three family letters to people who are far away. Remind them of something kind they have done for your family.
- Have some hot chocolate and cookies around the Christmas tree, inviting each family member to share their thoughts about –
 - I love Christmas because...
 - My favorite Christmas song is...
 - My favorite part of the Christmas story is when...
 - My favorite Christmas meal is ...
 - My favorite funny memory of Christmas is when ...
 - My favorite Christmas trip was to ...
 - My favorite Christmas gift I ever gave was...
 - My favorite Christmas ever was ...

The Feast of the Epiphany (celebrated on the Sunday between January 2 and 8)

- An ancient Epiphany practice is the blessing of homes by marking the entrance to the house with chalk. To bless your home, gather everyone outside the front door, and offer this prayer:

Leader: "Let us bless our home and pray that all will be welcome here. Let this door be an entry for the blessings of God. Let this door be a gateway of God's blessings to the world."

Members of the household take turns inscribing with chalk "20 + C + M + B + ____ (the last two digits of the coming year)" over the top of the door. C, M, and B are the initials of the traditional names for the Magi: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

Leader: "Christ taught us to call upon the Father, and so we pray: Our Father . . ."

- In many cultures, this day is also a gift-giving day. You might save one Christmas gift (for each family member) to open on this day. Think of the giver. If the giver is present, tell the person what he or she means to you. If the giver is far away, call or write a letter to express your thanks and love.
- A Twelfth Night Cake could be baked. This can be any cake with three surprises baked inside: pieces of candy or whole nuts. The persons who get the surprises are kings/queens for the night and wear paper crowns.

Baptism of the Lord (the Sunday after Epiphany)

- Spend some time today telling stories about family Baptisms. Look at photos, videos, Baptismal robes and candles, etc. Invite – or call – your godparents.
- Take down your Christmas tree. Make it a special time for family and friends. Prepare some special treats to share while you put away the decorations of Christmas. Savor

the part of Christmas that can't be put away – the memories that are now a part of your lives.

ANOTHER WAY OF CELEBRATING THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Families could take the verses of the Christmas song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” using the themes to remember one of God’s gifts. This could be done by eating a specific food, playing a game, or participating in a certain activity. Enjoying good things is a way of saying thank you to God.

After celebrating each gift, the family might take a few moments to think about the goodness of God and pray a prayer of thanks.

Day 1: a partridge in a pear tree

- The dessert for today’s meal might be fresh pears (perhaps with choose) or cooked pears with chocolate sauce.

Day 2: two turtle doves

- As you remember that the dove is a symbol of peace, at breakfast each family member chooses another member’s name out of a basket and promises during the day to pray for that person.

Day 3: three French hens

- Serve a special chicken dish or Cornish hens for dinner this evening.

Day 4: four calling birds

- Purchase some bird seed to feed the birds.

Day 5: five golden rings

- Have a treat at lunch: sugar or cinnamon donuts.

Day 6: six geese-a-laying

- Have a Christmas egg hunt.

Day 7: seven swans-a-swimming

- Swans might remind you of the story, *The Ugly Duckling*, the reality that beauty can be found in surprising places. During dinner invite each family member to share the most beautiful thing they saw during the day.

Day 8: eight maids a-milking

- Take a trip to a nearby ice cream store.

Day 9: nine ladies dancing

- Why not put on your favorite songs/music and have a dance time with the family?

Day 10: ten lords-a-leaping

- Go walking or jogging as a family; or skating, sledding or skiing.

Day 11: eleven pipers piping

- What song would your family play for the world? Choose one or write your own.

Day 12: twelve drummers drumming

- Appreciate the beauty of silence today. Take an hour of quiet in which everyone reads, reflects, prays...



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