

### DID YOU KNOW?

The birthplace of Jesus — Bethlehem — means “house of bread.” Many ancient commentators interpreted this as pre-figuring the Eucharist. Jesus came to earth in the “house of bread” and comes to us in the form of Living Bread every time we receive him in the Blessed Sacrament.



### Catholics around the world treasure a rich variety of Christmas traditions:

- The *posada* is a traditional Mexican procession. On each of nine nights, beginning on December 16, participants play the parts of the Holy Family, villagers, and innkeepers, and process to a home seeking shelter. Each procession is followed by a party, the greatest celebration being the last one on Christmas Eve. The parties are customarily preceded by prayer.
- In Poland, it is customary to share an *oplatek* on Christmas Eve. An *oplatek* is a wafer into which a scene of the Nativity is pressed. It is blessed, and pieces are shared by the family.
- In the Philippines, many erect *parols*, or star-shaped lanterns, along roadways and in front of houses as a sign of welcome and hope for peace.

## THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

For Catholics, December 25 is only the beginning. Our celebration continues as other feasts shed their own unique light on the gift of Jesus.

❖ **January 1** is both the **Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God**, and a day of prayer for world peace. We can deepen our celebration of the New Year by our prayer that our families and our world be open to the peace Jesus offers.



“Praying Virgin” Corneil photo

❖ The **Solemnity of the Epiphany**, traditionally observed on January 6, is transferred to a Sunday in the United States. “Epiphany” means “manifestation,” and it’s the celebration of Jesus’ manifesting to all of the world his glory as Savior to all nations, symbolically through the Magi. Epiphany is also a day to share gifts in many cultures, as well as a day to feast. Place the Magi in the Nativity set and read their story from the Gospel of Matthew.

❖ **Epiphany** is traditionally a day to bless homes. Part of this blessing involves bracketing the initials of the Magi — Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar — with the year above your door, usually in chalk, like this: 20+C+M+B+06. (Another tradition claims the initials stand for “*Christus mansionem benedicat*,” meaning “*May Christ bless this home.*”)



“The Baptism of Christ” Andrea del Verrocchio, OSV file photo

❖ The **Baptism of the Lord** commemorates the final “Christmas” feast, when the Father reveals the divinity of Jesus at his baptism through the Holy Spirit in the Jordan River. It is a good day to celebrate our own baptism, our “new birth” in Christ and inclusion in his body, the Church.



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### DID YOU KNOW?

Catholics have traditionally celebrated great feasts for an “octave” — a period of eight days afterward. The Octave of Christmas includes many important dates: St. Stephen (December 26), St. John the Evangelist (December 27), the Holy Innocents (December 28), the Holy Family (Sunday after Christmas), and the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1). Praying with the Scripture readings for these feasts is a good way to keep focused on God’s love even after December 25.

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By Amy Welborn  
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# How to Celebrate Christmas as a Catholic



“Madonna and Child” by Carlo Maratta • Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

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“FOR TO US A CHILD IS BORN,  
TO US A SON IS GIVEN.”

ISAIAH 9:6

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In our culture, the observance of Christmas begins in mid-October or even earlier, as stores put out their holiday displays.

But the calendar Catholics live and celebrate by is different from the secular world's. When we let our faith and the ancient wisdom and tradition of the Church center us as we plan, schedule, and organize our time, we're celebrating Christmas as Catholics.

## ADVENT

As Catholics, we prepare for Christmas by celebrating the season of Advent in the four weeks preceding Christmas. We hear John the Baptist, echoing the words of the prophets of Israel, call us to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord in our own lives now, and to look for the fulfillment of his kingdom in the future.

### DID YOU KNOW ?

We celebrate two great feasts of Mary during Advent. On the **Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception** (December 8), we celebrate the truth that Mary was conceived without sin. (This feast does not celebrate the conception of Jesus, as many mistakenly believe.) On the **Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe** (December 12), we celebrate Mary's appearance to the poor Indian peasant St. Juan Diego in Mexico in 1531.



### The O Antiphons

As Christmas draws near, the Church traditionally prays these verses highlighting the ways Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy. We begin December 17 with "O Wisdom on High" and end December 23 with "O Emmanuel." The full texts of these verses can be found in any missalette. You might pray them before a meal or in the evening, perhaps around the Advent wreath in the eight days leading up to Christmas.

# 5 Ways to Prepare for Christ's Coming

## 1 Use an Advent Wreath

The circular wreath with four candles reminds us of God's eternal nature and the light Christ brings into our lives. You can say a prayer and light the candles before dinner each night or at some other consistent time.



## 2

### Make a Jesse Tree

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come from the line of King David, son of Jesse. The Jesse Tree is a way of remembering Jesus' roots in Israel. Hang from the branches each day a symbol of an important point in Israel's history: Noah's ark, Jacob's ladder, David's harp, and so on.



## 3

### Count Down to Christmas with an Advent Calendar

Advent calendars begin on December 1, with a door to be opened each day. Behind each door is a Scripture verse or small picture of a biblical scene. A calendar is great for keeping our focus (especially children's) on the coming of Christ.

## 4

### Celebrate God's Mercy

During Advent, we prepare our hearts for the Word who brought light into darkness. It is a particularly fitting time to welcome the light of God's forgiveness into the dark places of our sinful lives by celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

## 5

### Discover the History of Santa on the Feast of St. Nicholas

St. Nicholas of Myra's feast on December 6 is celebrated in many European countries as a day to share gifts — often candy, and often placed in shoes. As Europeans immigrated to the United States, various St. Nicholas traditions combined and emerged as Santa Claus. Sharing the story of St. Nicholas can help us emulate the generosity of his faith-filled life and reclaim this Christian saint.



## CHRISTMAS

After we've spent four weeks contemplating our great need for God, the reality that meets us at Christmas is an indescribable gift: The Father has answered our prayers, sending his Son as one like ourselves, immersing himself in human life and speaking words we can understand.

No wonder we say "Merry Christmas!"

It's good to remember the medieval origins of this very word: "Christ's Mass," where we begin our celebration of this season that lasts until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

### DID YOU KNOW ?

"X-mas" isn't really an attempt to "X" Christ out of Christmas. In Greek, "X" is the letter "chi," the first letter of "Christ" and a commonly abbreviated way the early Christians referred to Christ.

### 3. Raise the Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree — especially a real one — is an evergreen, symbolic of God's eternal love as well as the tree in the Garden of Eden, the beginning of the brokenness that Jesus came to heal. A prayer around the tree helps bring this meaning to life. Waiting to put up the tree until a week or so before Christmas and leaving it up until the end of the Christmas season reminds us of this, too.



Many other plants can have a role in Christmas celebrations: Poinsettias, holly, rosemary, Star of Bethlehem, and the Christmas Rose all have rich symbolic and legendary connections with the Nativity that any family would enjoy exploring.

## How to Celebrate Christmas

### 1. Go to Mass

At Christmas, we celebrate God's gift of Jesus to the world. When we celebrate "Christ's Mass," this gift is offered to us through Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist. Receiving Jesus in the Eucharist on Christmas, a holy day of obligation, is the moment toward which all of our preparations have brought us.

### 2. Set Up a Nativity Scene

The Nativity scene, or crechê ("crib" in French) was popularized by St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. Many families put out most of the Nativity scene before Christmas, but wait until December 25 to place Baby Jesus in the manger, and until the Feast of the Epiphany to arrange the Magi.



### 4. Let Lights Shine

On Christmas Eve, we read from the first chapter of John's Gospel about the light that "shines in the darkness." Our celebrations of Christmas are marked by all kinds of lights: lights on our houses and trees, in our churches, a white Christmas candle in the middle of our Advent wreath, all announcing the Good News that we are now "children of the light."



### 5. Exchange Gifts

Our gift-giving echoes God's gift of his Son to us. The story of King Wenceslas bringing gifts to the poor and Matthew's narrative of the Magi traveling far to bring their finest to the newborn king can give perspective and new direction to our gift-giving, as can a prayer said over our gifts for those who will receive them.

### 6. Share a Feast

Christians throughout history have used food as a way to express their joy in the gift of Jesus. The feast we share with family, friends, and with the poor is a symbol of our communion as children of God.