

CONTINUE TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS . . .

For Catholics, December 25 is only the beginning of the Christmas season.

‡ **The Feast of the Holy Family.** This feast is celebrated on the Sunday in the Christmas “octave” — an eight-day period after Christmas. It is a fitting day to thank God for our own families and pray for a deepening of mutual love, in imitation of the Holy Family.

‡ **The Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28.** On this day, we remember the children killed by Herod in his determination to end the life of the Messiah. This can be a day of prayer for the innocents of today who are exploited and abused — many people now pray on this day for the victims of abortion — and an opportunity to think about bringing the compassion of Christ to those in need.

‡ **New Year’s Eve, December 31.** This is a day that almost instinctively lends itself to prayer. Many

churches have prayer vigils, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, and Benediction during this evening, watching for the New Year.

‡ **The Feast of Mary, the Mother of God, January 1.** The octave day of Christmas is both a feast honoring Mary, the Mother of God, and a day of Prayer for World Peace. Our celebration of the New Year can be deepened by prayer that our world will be open to the peace Jesus offers.

‡ **The Feast of the Epiphany, January 6.** *Epiphany* means “manifestation,” and so this feast is the celebration of God’s glory being manifest to all nations, symbolically through the Magi. This is a good day to set the Magi in the nativity scene and share their story from the Gospel of Matthew.

Epiphany is also a traditional day to bless homes. This blessing incorporates inscribing the year, bracketing the initials of the Magi (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar) above the door, usually in chalk, like this: 20+C+M+B+08. (Another tradition claims the initials stand for *Christus mansionem benedicat*, meaning “May Christ bless this home.”)

‡ **The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.** This is the final “Christmas” feast, celebrated on the first Sunday after Epiphany, and commemorates God’s revelation of the divinity of Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River. It’s a good day to celebrate our own baptism, our “new birth” in Christ and our entrance into his Church.

God’s sign is simplicity. God’s sign is the baby. God’s sign is that he makes himself small for us. This is how he reigns. He does not come with power and outward splendor. He comes as a baby — defenseless and in need of our help. He does not want to overwhelm us with his strength. He takes away our fear of his greatness. He asks for our love: so he makes himself a child.

— Pope Benedict XVI, homily, Midnight Mass, 2006



“Baptism of Christ” by Guidoccio Cozzarelli Art Resource

For More Information:

Ann Ball, *Catholic Traditions in the Home and Classroom*

Carol Shulze Dowgiallo and Robert Dowgiallo, *On That First Christmas Eve*

Michael Dubruiel, *A Pocket Guide to the Mass* ———, *The How-To Book of the Mass*

Jacquelyn Lindsey, *Catholic Family Prayer Book*

Leisa and Paul Thigpen, *Building Catholic Family Traditions*

Paul Thigpen, *My Daily Catholic Bible*

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How to Celebrate Christmas as a Catholic



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Cover image: “Adoration of the Magi” by Gentile da Fabriano, Art Resource

“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

— Luke 2:11

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Our modern observance of Christmas seems to begin in the fall, as stores are filled with holiday displays, and end on December 26, when Christmas trees start peeking out from the trash. However, celebrating Christmas as a Catholic means that, as much as we can, we follow a radically different calendar — one given to us through the ancient wisdom and tradition of the Church — before, during, and even after December 25.

KEEPING THE “MASS” IN CHRISTMAS

The medieval origins of the very word we use to name this feast and season refers to the fundamental spiritual opportunity that’s here for all of us: “Christ’s 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. This is the moment toward which all of our preparations — including the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or Confession — have brought us.

There are actually four different Masses for Christmas, all with different readings, prayers, and emphases: the Vigil Mass, the Mass at Midnight, the Mass at Dawn, and the Mass during the Day. Familiarizing ourselves with all the readings for these Masses, through using a missal, web site, or another resource, is a good way to enrich our understanding of the meaning of the Incarnation and Nativity.

HOW TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS

The first step in celebrating Christmas is to properly celebrate the season of Advent. As we pray with the Church, attend to the Scripture readings of the season, and participate in whatever symbolic celebrations are meaningful to us, we prepare for the coming of the Lord in our lives now and in his fullness at the end of time.

These are the most important and powerful themes we’ll encounter in the Scripture, prayer, and celebrations of the Church during the Christmas season.

‡ We celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation: God meeting us, coming to us as one of us, humbly and full of love.

‡ We recall the faith-filled reception of this miraculous good news by Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi.

‡ We allow ourselves to be formed by all that this teaches us about gifts and giving, God’s solidarity with all of us — especially the poor and sinners — the sacredness of human life, the peace God promises, and the hope for the fullness of God’s presence among us.

The Christmas season begins with Evening Prayer on December 24 and continues through the Baptism of the Lord. The feast of the Presentation of the Lord on February 2 — also known as Candlemas, or the Feast of the Circumcision — marks another ancient way of ending the Christmas season.



1 Set up a Nativity Scene

The nativity scene, or *crèche* (“crib” in French), was popularized by St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. Many put out most of the nativity scene before Christmas, but wait until December 25 to place the Baby Jesus in the manger, and until the feast of the Epiphany to arrange the Magi.

Setting up the crib can be an occasion for prayer and the reading of Scripture.



2 Raise the Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree, especially a real one, is an evergreen. It is symbolic of God’s eternal love, as well as of the tree in the Garden of Eden, the beginning of the brokenness that Jesus came to heal by another “tree”

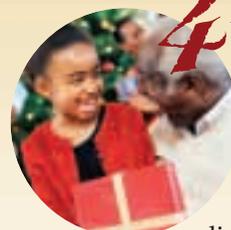
(the cross) on which he was crucified. A prayer around the tree helps bring this meaning to life.



3 Let Lights Shine

On Christmas Day, 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, on our trees, and in our churches. Many people also place a white candle in the middle of the Advent wreath (a common tradition to remind us of Christ’s innocence), announcing the Good News that we are now “children of the light.”



4 Exchange Gifts

Our gift-giving echoes God’s gift of his Son to us. The story and carol of King Wenceslaus’ charity, and Matthew’s narrative of the Magi traveling far to bring their finest to the newborn king, can help give perspective and direction to how we give our gifts — perhaps praying for our gift recipients and taking extra care to provide for the poor in our gift-giving.



5 Share a Feast

Christians throughout the ages have feasted to celebrate the gift of Jesus, and our feast today is a symbol of our communion as children of God. How can we also remember the poor — among whom Christ was born — during our celebrations and feasting?

DID YOU KNOW?

The birthplace of Jesus, “Bethlehem,” means “house of bread.” Many ancient commentators interpret this as prefiguring 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 under the forms of bread and wine in the Blessed Sacrament.

CHRISTMAS AROUND THE WORLD

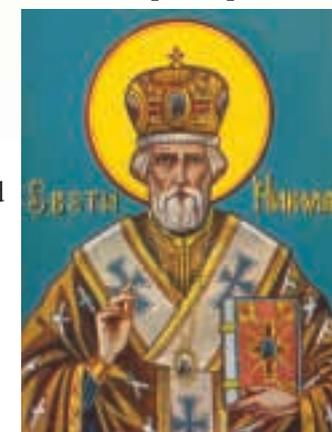
“Catholic” means “universal.” We can clearly see this universality in the diverse traditions Catholics around the world have for celebrating Christmas:

‡ *Las Posadas*, traditional in some Latin American cultures, is a procession with prayer and song dramatizing Mary and Joseph’s search for shelter in Bethlehem.

‡ In Poland, *Oplatek* wafers have nativity scenes pressed into them. Blessed by a priest, these are brought home to the family and laid on a bed of straw. Then, pieces are broken off and shared, with a prayer for the blessings of the next year.

‡ In the Philippines, many erect *Parols*, or star-shaped lanterns, along roadways and in front of houses as signs of welcome and hope for peace.

In cultures around the world, what we might think of as Christmas traditions of gift-giving and feasting are associated with other days around this time, most popularly the feasts of St. Nicholas (December 6) and Epiphany (January 6).



St. Nicholas Center, www.stnicholascenter.org