

CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP  
AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

***DIRECTORY***  
***ON POPULAR PIETY AND THE LITURGY***

**PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES**

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**Christmastide**

106. During Christmastide, the Church celebrates the mystery of the Lord's manifestation: his humble birth in Bethlehem which was made known to the shepherds, the first of Israel to welcome the Savior; the Epiphany to the three wise men who had "come from the East" (Mt 2,1), the first of the Gentiles who recognized and adored Christ the Messiah in the child of Bethlehem; the theophany at the river Jordan in which the Father declares that Jesus is His "well-beloved Son" (Mt 3, 17) at the outset of his messianic mission; the miracle of Cana in which Jesus "manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him" (John 2,11).

107. In addition to these celebrations recalling the primary meaning of Christmas, there are also other celebrations closely connected with the mystery of the Lord's manifestation: the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents (28 December) whose blood was shed because of hatred for Jesus and because of Herod's rejection of his lordship; the memorial of the Holy Name of Jesus, 13 January; the feast of the Holy Family (Sunday in the octave of Christmas) celebrating the holy family in which Jesus "grew in wisdom and grace before God and men" (Lk 2, 52); the solemnity of the 1E January which recalls the divine, virginal and salvific motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary; and, although outside of Christmastide, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord (2 February), celebrating the encounter between the Messiah and his people, represented by Simeon and Anna, and the prophecy of Simeon.

108. Much of the richness and complexity of the mystery of the Lord's manifestation is reflected in displays of popular piety, which is especially sensitive to the childhood of Christ which reveals his love for us. Popular piety intuitively grasps:

- the importance of the "spirituality of gift", which is proper to Christmas: "a child is born for us, a son is *given* to us" (cf. Is 9, 5), a gift expressing the infinite love of God, who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3, 16);

- the message of solidarity conveyed by the event of Christmas: solidarity with sinful man, for whom, in Christ, God became man "for us men and for our salvation"(118); solidarity with the poor, because the Son of God "who" was rich but became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of your poverty" (2 Cor 8, 9);
- the sacredness of human life and the wonderful event that is every birth, since the Word of life came amongst men and was made visible through his birth of the Virgin Mary (cf. 1 John 1, 2);
- the messianic joy and peace to which man has aspired in every age: the Angels announce the birth of the Savior of the world to the shepherds, the "Prince of Peace (Is 9.5) and proclaim "peace on earth to men of good will" (Lk 2, 14);
- the spirit of simplicity and poverty, humility and trust in God, suggested by the events surrounding the birth of Christ.

Popular piety, precisely because it can intuit the values inherent in the mystery of Christ's birth, is called upon to cooperate in preserving the memory of the manifestation of the Lord, so as to ensure that the strong religious tradition surrounding Christmas is not secularized by consumerism or the infiltration of various forms of neopaganism.

### *Christmas Eve*

109. In the space of time between the first Vespers of Christmas and Midnight Mass, both the tradition of Christmas carols, which are potent means of conveying the Christmas message of peace and joy, and popular piety propose certain forms of prayers, differing from country to country, which should be cherished and, where necessary, made consonant with the celebration of the Liturgy: These would include:

- "live cribs" and the inauguration of the crib in the homes of the faithful which is an opportunity for family prayer: this prayer should include a reading of St. Luke's account of the birth of Christ, the typical Christmas carols, as well as prayers of petition and praise, especially those of children who are the protagonists in such family moments;
- the inauguration of the Christmas tree. This event also offers an opportunity for family prayer. Apart from its historical origins, the Christmas tree has become a potent symbol to-day and is very diffuse amongst Christians; it evokes both the tree planted in the center of Eden (Gen 2, 9), and the tree of the Cross, which lends it a Christological significance: Christ is the true tree of life, born of human stock, of the Virgin Mary, the tree which is always green and productive. In the Nordic countries, the tree is decorated with apples and hosts. "Gifts" can be added; but among the gifts placed under the tree, something should be included for the poor since they belong to every Christian family;

- the Christmas supper. The Christian family, which traditionally blesses the table and gives thanks to the Lord for the gift of food, performs this ceremony with greater intensity at the Christmas supper which gives potent concrete expression to the joy of family ties.

110. Where possible, the Church desires that the faithful should prepare for the celebration of Midnight Mass on the 24 December with the Office of Readings (119). Where such is not possible, it may be opportune to arrange a vigil of hymns, readings, and elements drawn from popular piety.

111. At Midnight Mass, an event of major liturgical significance and of strong resonance in popular piety, the following could be given prominence:

- at the beginning of Mass, the proclamation of the Savior's birth according the formula contained in the Roman Martyrology could be made in song;
- the prayer of the faithful should really be universal, and where appropriate, use several languages; and the poor should always be remembered in the presentation of the gifts;
- at the end of Mass, the faithful could be invited to kiss the image of the Child Jesus, which is then placed in a crib erected in the church or somewhere nearby.

### *The Feast of the Holy Family*

112. The feast of the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (Sunday in the Christmas octave) is a festive occasion particularly suitable for the celebration of rites or moments of prayer proper to the Christian family. The recollection of Joseph, Mary and Jesus' going up to Jerusalem, together with other observant Jewish families, for the celebration of the Passover (cf. Lk 2, 41-42), should normally encourage a positive acceptance of the pastoral suggestion that all members of the family attend Mass on this day. This feast day also affords an opportunity for the renewal of our entrustment to the patronage of the Holy Family of Nazareth (120); the blessing of children as provided in the ritual (121); and where opportune, for the renewal of marriage vows taken by the spouses on their wedding day, and also for the exchange of promises between those engaged to be married in which they formalize their desire to found a new Christian family (122).

Outside of the feast, the faithful have frequent recourse to the Holy Family of Nazareth in many of life's circumstances: joining the Association of the Holy Family so as to model their own families on the Holy Family of Nazareth (123); frequent prayers to entrust themselves to the patronage of the Holy Family and to obtain assistance at the hour of death (124).

### *The Feast of the Holy Innocents*

113. Since the sixth century, on 28 December, the Church has celebrated the memory of those children killed because of Herod's rage against Christ (cf. Mt 2, 16-17). Liturgical tradition refers to them as the "Holy Innocents" and regards them as martyrs. Throughout the centuries Christian art, poetry and popular piety have enfolded the memory of the "tender flock of lambs"(125) with sentiments of tenderness and sympathy. These sentiments are also accompanied by a note of indignation against the violence with which they were taken from their mothers' arms and killed.

In our own times, children suffer innumerable forms of violence which threaten their lives, dignity and right to education. On this day, it is appropriate to recall the vast host of children not yet born who have been killed under the cover of laws permitting abortion, which is an abominable crime. Mindful of these specific problems, popular piety in many places has inspired acts of worship as well as displays of charity which provide assistance to pregnant mothers, encourage adoption and the promotion of the education of children.

### *31 December*

114. Popular piety has given rise to many pious exercises connected with 31 December. In many parts of the Western world the end of the civil year is celebrated on this day. This anniversary affords an opportunity for the faithful to reflect on "the mystery of time", which passes quickly and inexorably. Such should give rise to a dual feeling: of penance and sorrow for the sins committed during the year and for the lost occasions of grace; and of thanks to God for the graces and blessings He has given during the past year.

These sentiments have given rise to two pious exercises: prolonged exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, which afford an opportunity for the faithful and many religious communities for silent prayer; and the singing of the *Te Deum* as an act of community praise and thanksgiving to God for the graces received from Him as the year draws to a close (126).

In some places, especially in monasteries and in associations of the faithful with a particular devotion to the Holy Eucharist, 31 December is marked by a vigil of prayer which concludes with the celebration of the Holy Mass. Such vigils are to be encouraged and should be celebrated in harmony with the liturgical content of the Christmas Octave, and not merely as a reaction to the thoughtless dissipation with which society celebrates the passage from one year to another, but as a vigil offering of the new year to the Lord.

## *The Solemnity of the Holy Mother of God*

115. On New Year's Day, the octave day of Christmas, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Holy Mother of God. The divine and virginal motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a singular salvific event: for Our Lady it was the foretaste and cause of her extraordinary glory; for us it is a source of grace and salvation because "through her we have received the Author of life"(127).

The solemnity of the 1 January, an eminently Marian feast, presents an excellent opportunity for liturgical piety to encounter popular piety: the first celebrates this event in a manner proper to it; the second, when duly catechized, lends joy and happiness to the various expressions of praise offered to Our Lady on the birth of her divine Son, to deepen our understanding of many prayers, beginning with that which says: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, sinners".

116. In the West, 1 January is an inaugural day marking the beginning of the civil year. The faithful are also involved in the celebrations for the beginning of the new year and exchange "new year" greetings. However, they should try to lend a Christian understanding to this custom making of these greetings an expression of popular piety. The faithful, naturally, realize that the "new year" is placed under the patronage of the Lord, and in exchanging new year greetings they implicitly and explicitly place the New Year under the Lord's dominion, since to him belongs all time (cf. Ap 1, 8; 22,13)(128).

A connection between this consciousness and the popular custom of singing the *Veni Creator Spiritus* can easily be made so that on 1 January the faithful can pray that the Spirit may direct their thoughts and actions, and those of the community during the course of the year(129).

117. New year greetings also include an expression of hope for a peaceful New Year. This has profound biblical, Christological and incarnational origins. The "quality of peace" has always been invoked throughout history by all men, and especially during violent and destructive times of war.

The Holy See shares the profound aspirations of man for peace. Since 1967, 1 January has been designated "world day for peace".

Popular piety has not been oblivious to this initiative of the Holy See. In the light of the new born Prince of Peace, it reserves this day for intense prayer for peace, education towards peace and those value inextricably linked with it, such as liberty, fraternal solidarity, the dignity of the human person, respect for nature, the right to

work, the sacredness of human life, and the denunciation of injustices which trouble the conscience of man and threaten peace.

### *Solemnity of the Lord's Epiphany*

118. Many traditions and genuine manifestations of popular piety have been developed in relation to the Solemnity of the Lord's Epiphany, which is of ancient origin and rich in spiritual content. Among such forms of popular piety, mention may be made of:

- the solemn proclamation of Easter and the principal dominical feasts; its revival in many places would be opportune since it served to make the connection between the Epiphany and Easter, and orientate all feasts towards the greatest Christian solemnity;
- the exchange of "Epiphany gifts", which derives from the gifts offered to Jesus by the three kings (cf. Mt 2,11) and more radically from the gift made to mankind by God in the birth of Emmanuel amongst us (cf. Is 7, 14; 9, 16; Mt 1, 23). It is important, however, to ensure that the exchange of gifts on the solemnity of the Epiphany retain a Christian character, indicating that its meaning is evangelical: hence the gifts offered should be a genuine expression of popular piety and free from extravagance, luxury, and waste, all of which are extraneous to the Christian origins of this practice;
- the blessing of homes, on whose lintels are inscribed the Cross of salvation, together with the indication of the year and the initials of the three wise men (C+M+B), which can also be interpreted to mean *Christus mansionem benedicat*, written in blessed chalk; this custom, often accompanied by processions of children accompanied by their parents, expresses the blessing of Christ through the intercession of the three wise men and is an occasion for gathering offerings for charitable and missionary purposes;
- initiatives in solidarity with those who come from afar; whether Christian or not, popular piety has encouraged a sense of solidarity and openness;
- assistance to the work of evangelization; the strong missionary character of the Epiphany has been well understood by popular piety and many initiatives in support of the missions flourish on 6 January, especially the "Missionary work of the Holy Child", promoted by the Apostolic See;
- the assignation of Patrons; in many religious communities and confraternities, patron saints are assigned to the members for the coming year.

### *The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord*

119. Closely connected with the salvific events of the Epiphany are the mysteries of the Baptism of the Lord and the manifestation of his glory at the marriage feast of Cana.

Christmastide closes with the Baptism of the Lord. Only in recent times has the feast been rehabilitated, and hence has not given rise to any particular displays of popular piety. However, the feast presents an excellent opportunity for the faithful to be reminded of their rebirth as children of God in Baptism. The rite of *asperges* could be opportunely used at all Masses on this day, and homilies could well concentrate on the symbols associated with Baptism.

### *The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord*

120. Until 1969, the ancient feast of the presentation of Our Lord (130), which is of Oriental origin, was known in the West as the feast of the Purification of Our Lady, and closed the Christmas season, forty days after the Lord's birth. This feast has for long been associated with many popular devotional exercises. The faithful:

- gladly participate in the processions commemorating the Lord's entry into the Temple in Jerusalem and his encounter with God, whose house he had come to for the first time, and then with Simeon and Anna. Such processions, which in the West had taken the place of licentious pagan events, always had a penitential character, and were later identified with the blessing of candles which were carried in procession in honor of Christ, "the light to enlighten the Gentiles" (Lk 2, 32);
- are sensitive to the actions of the Blessed Virgin in presenting her Son in the Temple, and to her submission to the Law of Moses (Lk 12, 1-8) in the rite of purification; popular piety sees in the rite of purification the humility of Our Lady and hence, 2 February has long been regarded as a feast for those in humble service.

121. Popular piety is sensitive to the providential and mysterious event that is the Conception and birth of new life. Christian mothers can easily identify with the maternity of Our Lady, the most pure Mother of the Head of the mystical Body - notwithstanding the notable differences in the Virgin's unique Conception and birth. These too are mothers in God's plan and are about to give birth to future members of the Church. From this intuition and a certain *mimesis* of the purification of Our Lady, the rite of purification after birth was developed, some of whose elements reflect negatively on birth.

The revised *Rituale Romanum* provides for the blessing of women both before (131) and after birth (132), this latter only in cases where the mother could not participate at the baptism of her child.

It is a highly desirable thing for mothers and married couples to ask for these blessings which should be given in accord with the Church's prayer: in a communion of faith and charity in prayer so that pregnancy can be brought to term without difficulty (blessing before birth), and to give thanks to God for the gift of a child (blessing after birth).

122. In some local Churches, certain elements taken from the Gospel account of the Presentation of the Lord (Lk 2, 22-40), such as the obedience of Joseph and Mary to the Law of the Lord, the poverty of the holy spouses, the virginity of Our Lady, mark out the 2 February as a special feast for those at the service of the brethren in the various forms of consecrated life.

123. The feast of 2 February still retains a popular character. It is necessary, however, that such should reflect the true Christian significance of the feast. It would not be proper for popular piety in its celebration of this feast to overlook its Christological significance and concentrate exclusively on its Marian aspects. The fact that this feast should be "considered [...] a joint memorial of Son and Mother"(133) would not support such an inversion. The candles kept by the faithful in their homes should be seen as a sign of Christ "the light of the world" and an expression of faith.