



This is the actual Grotto of the Nativity under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Why is there so much confusion today about Christmas and what it means?

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9 things you need to know about Christmas

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There's a lot of confusion about Christmas.

Is it a day? Is it a season? Is it based on a pagan holiday? What is its real meaning?

Here are 9 things you should know about Christmas . . .

1. What is "the real meaning of Christmas"?

Although many voices in pop culture suggest that the true meaning of Christmas is being kind to each other, or being with our families, or something like that, the real meaning of the day--and the season it begins--is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains:

525 Jesus was born in a humble stable, into a poor family. Simple shepherds were the first witnesses to this event. In this poverty heaven's glory was made manifest. The Church never tires of singing the glory of this night:

The Virgin today brings into the world the Eternal
and the earth offers a cave to the Inaccessible.

The angels and shepherds praise him

and the magi advance with the star,

For you are born for us,

Little Child, God eternal!

2. Christmas is not based on a pagan holiday.

No matter how many times you hear Sheldon Cooper (or anyone else) say Christmas is based on a pagan holiday (whether Saturnalia, Sol Invictus, or anything else), we simply have no evidence of this.

If you read the writings of the Church Fathers, you do not find those who assign Christmas to December 25th saying things like, "Let's put Jesus' birthday here so we can subvert a pagan holiday." (Not that subverting pagan holidays is a bad thing.) They simply don't do that.

The ones who say Jesus was born on December 25th do so because that is when they think he was born.

In his book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Pope Benedict comments:

"The claim used to be made that December 25 developed in opposition to the Mithras myth, or as a Christian response to the cult of the unconquered sun promoted by Roman emperors in the third century in their efforts to establish a new imperial religion. However, these old theories can no longer be sustained" (pp., 107-108).

3. Christmas is the second oldest Christian annual Christian celebration.

The Church's liturgical celebration of Christmas is discussed in a document called the [Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar](#) [.pdf].

According to the Universal Norms:

32. After the annual celebration of the Paschal Mystery [that is, Easter], the Church has no more ancient custom than celebrating the memorial of the Nativity of the Lord and of his first manifestations, and this takes place in Christmas Time.

4. Christmas is not one day long. It also is not twelve days long.

We tend to think of Christmas as being just December 25th, but the Christmas season lasts longer than that.

Many think of the "twelve days of Christmas," but the Christmas season is actually variable in length, depending on how soon a Sunday occurs after January 6th.

Here is the official rule for when it begins and ends:

33. Christmas Time runs from First Vespers (Evening Prayer I) of the Nativity of the Lord up to and including the Sunday after Epiphany or after 6 January.

This year (2012-2013), Christmas Time will run until January 13th (the Sunday after January 6).

5. What Christmas Masses are celebrated? And does there have to be a "midnight Mass"?

There is no mandated Mass at midnight, so don't get mad at your parish if they have it at a different time.

Here is what the Universal Norms say about how the Masses are supposed to work:

34. The Vigil Mass of the Nativity is used on the evening of 24 December, either before or after First Vespers (Evening Prayer I).

On the day of the Nativity of the Lord, following ancient roman tradition, Mass may be celebrated three times, that is, in the night, at dawn and during the day.

6. Christmas has its own "octave."

Embedded within the Christmas season is an "octave"--a period of eight days--that begins on Christmas Day itself. You could think of it as a season within a season.

Here's how the days of the octave are structured:

35. The nativity of the lord has its own octave, arranged thus:

a. Sunday within the octave or, if there is no Sunday, 30 December, is the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph;

b. 26 December is the feast of Saint Stephen, the first Martyr;

c. 27 December is the feast of Saint John, Apostle and evangelist;

d. 28 December is the feast of the Holy Innocents;

e. 29, 30, and 31 December are days within the octave;

f. 1 January, the octave day of the Nativity of the Lord, is the solemnity of Mary, the holy Mother of God, and also the commemoration of the conferral of the Most Holy Name of Jesus.

7. The Sundays of Christmas are also special.

The Sundays of Christmas Time have special significance as well. According to the Universal Norms:

36. The Sunday falling between 2 January and 5 January is the second Sunday after the Nativity.

37. The Epiphany of the Lord is celebrated on 6 January, unless, where it is not observed as a holyday of obligation, it has been assigned to the Sunday occurring between 2 and 8 January (cf. no. 7).

38. The Sunday falling after 6 January is the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

8. What is the "Epiphany" of the Lord?

The word "epiphany" means "manifestation" (display, revealing). The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains:

528 The Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Saviour of the world.

The great feast of Epiphany celebrates the adoration of Jesus by the wise men (magi) from the East, together with his baptism in the Jordan and the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee.

In the magi, representatives of the neighbouring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation.

The magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations.

Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Saviour of the world only by turning towards the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament.

The Epiphany shows that "the full number of the nations" now takes its "place in the family of the patriarchs", and acquires *Israelitica dignitas* (is made "worthy of the heritage of Israel").

9. Why is the Baptism of Jesus significant?

The Catechism explains:

536 The baptism of Jesus is on his part the acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's suffering Servant. He allows himself to be numbered among sinners; he is already "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world".

Already he is anticipating the "baptism" of his bloody death.

Already he is coming to “fulfil all righteousness”, that is, he is submitting himself entirely to his Father's will: out of love he consents to this baptism of death for the remission of our sins.

The Father's voice responds to the Son's acceptance, proclaiming his entire delight in his Son.

The Spirit whom Jesus possessed in fullness from his conception comes to “rest on him”.

Jesus will be the source of the Spirit for all mankind. At his baptism “the heavens were opened” - the heavens that Adam's sin had closed - and the waters were sanctified by the descent of Jesus and the Spirit, a prelude to the new creation.