



# THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS



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Beginning with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England in 1558, the Roman Catholic Church and any practice of the faith was strictly forbidden.

Some of the various penal laws against Catholicism included the following: The Mass was outlawed. Priests were expelled from the realm, and threatened with the charge of high treason with the punishment of being hung, drawn, and quartered for returning and offering Mass. Any Catholic harboring a priest in the home or allowing him to offer Mass was subject to the same penalty. Catholic citizens were not allowed to vote, to hold property, to be witnesses in court, or to have weapons. Anyone who did not attend Protestant services was fined and imprisoned for repeated offenses. All Catholic schools were closed and instruction in the faith was forbidden. Anyone appointed to a civil office had to take an oath denouncing the Pope and the belief in transubstantiation, thereby in effect preventing any Catholic from such positions.

These laws remained in effect until April, 1829 when King George IV reluctantly signed the Emancipation Bill, granting political and religious freedom to Catholics. However, to this day the King or Queen of the United Kingdom cannot be a Roman Catholic.

Please note that these same penal laws were enforced in Virginia until the time of the Revolutionary War. Also, the intensity of enforcement of these laws depended upon the particular reign: for example, during the time of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell (1642-60), the Puritan Parliament even outlawed the celebration of Christmas.

Therefore, the song **The Twelve Days of Christmas** was written in England using seemingly secular images or symbols to help catechize children in the faith. The “true love” mentioned in each stanza does not refer to an earthly suitor, but to Almighty God. The “me” to whom the gifts are presented refers to any baptized Catholic. The purpose of the repetition is not only for the sake of pedagogy, but also emphasizes God’s continual renewal of His gifts to mankind.

The **partridge in a pear tree** is Christ. In nature, a mother partridge will feign injury to lure predators away from her defenseless nestlings. In the same way, our Lord protects us, vulnerable human beings, from Satan. The pear tree symbolizes the salvation of mankind, just as the apple tree symbolizes Adam and Eve’s Fall from Grace.

**Two turtle doves** represent the Old and New Testaments. Also, Jewish couples of modest income offered two turtle doves instead of the customary lamb as a sacrifice to God when they presented their newborn child in the Temple. Interestingly, our Blessed Mother Mary and St. Joseph offered a sacrifice of two turtle doves for the presentation of our Lord (cf. Luke 2:22-24).

Known for their beauty and rarity, the **three French hens** signify both the gifts of the Magi (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

The **four calling birds** are associated with both the four evangelists and their gospels—Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and the four major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

**Five golden rings** has a two-fold significance. A ring, or a circle, has no beginning or end but is continuous. Thereby, the ring reminds us of both God's eternity, His permanent, faithful, and continuous love for us and the circle of faith God's love for us, our love for Him, and our love for our neighbors. The number five also signifies the first five books of the Old Testament the Pentateuch or Torah (the books of law for the Jewish people).

The **six geese a-laying** represent the six days of creative work recounted in Genesis.

However, in Judaism, seven was a number of perfection. The **seven swans a-swimming** continues the Genesis theme, reminding us that God's plan included not just the six days of creating but also the seventh day of rest; we in turn must not forget to make Sunday a holy day by worshipping God at Mass, spending time with our loved ones, and relaxing. Moreover, the seven swans a-swimming refers to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven corporal works of mercy, the seven spiritual works of mercy, and the seven deadly sins.

The **eight maids a-milking** signifies the eight beatitudes and, at that time in our Church, the eight times during the year prescribed for the faithful to receive Holy Communion.

The **nine ladies dancing** are the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit and the nine choirs of angels.

The Ten Commandments are represented by the **ten lords a-leaping**.

**Eleven pipers piping** are the eleven faithful apostles at the time of the resurrection and ascension. (Remember that Judas, one of the Twelve, betrayed our Lord and committed suicide.)

Finally, the number twelve for the Jewish people represented completion and fullness. Therefore, the **twelve drummers drumming** are the twelve minor prophets, the twelve precepts of the Apostles Creed (still the structure of the first part of the Catechism), the twelve apostles (particularly the original 11 plus St. Matthias who replaced Judas), and the twelve tribes of Israel.

As we draw closer to Christmas, we should keep in mind the significance of this carol. Actually, I used to find the repetition and lengthiness somewhat irritating until I learned of its historical and religious significance. A good practice would be for parents to teach the carol in light of the history of persecution and the catechesis presented.

Catholic Education Resource Center: Saunders, Rev. William. "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Arlington Catholic Herald. Emphasis added. <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-twelve-days-of-christmas.html>.