

PASTOR'S COLUMN

When does Christmas end?

A number of times in my priesthood, I have been asked when Christmas officially ends. When is the proper time to take down the Christmas tree, the nativity set and all the other Christmas decorations? The answer is: Christmas officially ends with the celebration of the Lord's Baptism. That occurs two or three weeks after Christmas Day. This year the Lord's Baptism will be celebrated on Sunday, January 13, 2019. That is the official end of Christmas, 2018.

Why does Christmas go on for so long? It is important to recall that, once Christmas Day has ended, there are still several major liturgical celebrations in the Christmas Season: (1) the Feast of the Holy Family (celebrating the special role of Joseph and Mary in the life of Jesus); (2) the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (recalling the sacred role of Mary as the mother of Jesus); (3) the Solemnity of the Epiphany (remembering the visit of the magi to Bethlehem and the opening up of salvation to all people); and (4) the Baptism of Jesus (recalling the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry and our own baptism into Christ).

We have a number of major feasts and solemnities during Christmas time because the incarnation of Jesus Christ into human flesh is so great an event in human history that we just can't celebrate it for a day or two and be done with it. Rather, there must be a proper celebration of the story of our salvation history.

Yes, the shopping malls will take down Christmas decorations right after New Years' Day; in their place, the stores will put out merchandise for Mardi Gras and Valentine's Day. The Catholic Church, by contrast, keeps the Christmas decorations in place until the day after the celebration of the Lord's Baptism. If possible, we should keep up our Christmas decorations till that day too.

Not to confuse you, but some Catholics will keep up their Christmas decorations till the Feast of the Lord's Presentation, also known as Candlemas (because of the candles that are blessed that day for home use). That celebration is always on February 2, which is exactly 40 days after Christmas Day. Whenever I visit a home and see a lighted Christmas tree and poinsettia plants up in late January or early February, I don't think the people are way-late as regards to Christmas. Rather, I know I am dealing with serious Catholics.

Whether we continue the celebration of Christmas to the Lord's Baptism or to his Presentation or take down our decorations sometime before then, the main point is this: Christmas is a Season, not a Day. So, let's savor the blessing of God becoming one of us.

God bless,

Fr. Joe