

ABOUT THE FOUR MASSES OF CHRISTMAS

On the solemnity of Christmas, the Church actually celebrates for distinct Mass texts – the Vigil Mass, the Mass during the Night (sometimes commonly referred to as “Midnight Mass”), the Mass at Dawn (“the Shepherd’s Mass”), and the Mass during the Day.

The various Masses of Christmas have an interesting historical development. Pope Saint Gregory the Great mentions in a Christmas homily the priestly practice of celebrating three Masses on this day, a custom which is still observed in our own time. The first such Christmas Mass was that which was celebrated during the day, originally at Saint Peter’s Basilica, by the pope, at 9AM. In the fifth century, a replica of the cave where Christ was born was constructed underneath the Basilica of Saint Mary Major; here, the pope began to celebrate a Midnight Mass in this small chapel as a way of marking the timing and setting of the event of Christ’s birth that took place in Bethlehem.

The last of the three Christmas Masses began to be observed in the sixth century. At the time, Eastern Christians celebrated the birth of Christ, not on December 25, but on January 6. In the East, December 25 was, instead, a feast of Saint Anastasia. After the Byzantine Greeks conquered Rome, popes began the practice of traveling to the Church of Saint Anastasia on the Palatine Hill to celebrate a Mass at dawn on December 25 as a sign of respect for the emperor, before then moving to Saint Peter’s Basilica for the usual 9am Christmas Mass. In our current Roman Missal, these three traditional Christmas Masses (in the night, at dawn, and during the day) continue to be observed, and are accompanied by a Vigil Mass for Christmas. While distinct sets of readings are assigned to each of these Masses, these passages may be used interchangeably as a group at each Mass.

Other liturgical features that mark this day include the rubric to genuflect at the mention of the Incarnation during the recitation of the Creed, and the option to sing the announcement of the “Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” which is taken from the *Roman Martyrology*. (Adapted from an article by Father Matthew Ernest, Office of Worship, Archdiocese of New York).

These readings are assigned to the Lectionary in all three cycles – Years A, B, and C (Lectionary nos. 13-16). To help you prepare for Mass, these readings may be found at <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/122520.cfm>

The Nativity of the Lord – Vigil Mass

First Reading	Isaiah 62:1-5
Responsorial Psalm	Psalm 89: 4-5, 16-17, 27, 29
Second Reading	Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25
Gospel	Matthew 1: 1-25 [or 1: 18-25]

The Nativity of the Lord – Mass during the Night

First Reading	Isaiah 9: 1-6
Responsorial Psalm	Psalm 96: 1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13
Second Reading	Titus 2: 11-14
Gospel	Luke 2: 1-14

The Nativity of the Lord – Mass at Dawn

First Reading	Isaiah 62: 11-12
Responsorial Psalm	Psalm 97: 1, 6, 11-12
Second Reading	Titus 3: 4-7
Gospel	Luke 2: 15-20

The Nativity of the Lord – Mass During the Day

First Reading	Isaiah 52: 7-10
Responsorial Psalm	Psalm 98: 1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6
Second Reading	Hebrews 1: 1-6
Gospel	John 1: 1-18 [or John 1: 1-5, 9-14]