



THESE  
TWELVE DAYS  
OF CHRISTMAS

Hans Christoffersen



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# **These Twelve Days of Christmas**

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## **Introduction**

*“On the first day of Christmas my  
true love gave to me...”*

Most of us first hear this “jingle” in retail stores somewhere around the beginning of November. Many begin to buy their Christmas gifts soon thereafter and have them all bought and wrapped following the weekend after Thanksgiving. In our household, the first Christmas cards begin to show up in the mail around December 1.

We live in a society and culture that constantly seems to be ahead of itself. Our contemporary time-rhythms focus on what is to come with such anticipation that, once it comes, we've already had our fill, and we want to put it behind us as soon as possible. The impact of this cultural emphasis is so strong that the time-rhythm to which our faith community subscribes—to await the great day of celebration with expectant yet patient anticipation and then extend the wonderment of it to further explore and revel in its meaning for several days or weeks—has fallen on hard times. As a test of this supposition, just go to a shopping mall at some point during the “Christmas shopping season” and randomly ask people to explain what period the “Twelve Days of Christmas” covers.

Hillaire Belloc, the English writer and close friend of G. K. Chesterton, once

wrote an essay about how Christmas was celebrated at his house. The tree was brought in at 5:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve and decorated that evening before midnight Mass. The tree then stood decorated until after “the Twelfth Night”—the feast of the Epiphany on January 6—indicating to the whole family that the Christmas feast and the Christmas party was “on.” In how many American homes is this—or something similar—observed?

Given these conflicting rhythms of time that bring tension to many a Christian heart, arguing about the right or correct way to celebrate Advent and Christmas may not be very fruitful. But if we approach it in the sense of the momentum, meaning, and wonderment these celebrations and their anticipation intend to communicate to our weary hearts, maybe we can regain a more wholesome perspective of who we are—and what we

are about—not only when we succumb to the temptation of extending Christmas to weeks before it happens—and then only to shorten it when it does arrive—but also when we allow the profound silence of the mystery of the Incarnation to encompass us.

## **A Time of Anticipation and Wonder**

The season of Advent was a significant time in my childhood home. My parents did much to make us aware that something new was happening, and there was an expectancy in the air. The lighting of the first candle in the Advent wreath indicated to me that Christmas was approaching, which certainly was exciting, but it also said something else about the faith in which my parents enveloped us kids: an unfolding, here and now, of something

that gave purpose to all of our lives, not to mention the time and the place we lived in.

As a boy of eight or nine, I sensed that the particularity of my time, my history—my story, whatever it would turn out to be—was oriented toward “a day” that only God knows. There was a longing in the air that morning for the wholeness of inclusion beyond anything any one of us knew how to expect. The insignificance of lighting a small candle on a dark Sunday morning was significant enough to stay with me now, decades later. In my present memory, I remember it as if we were setting out on a pilgrimage right there at the kitchen table, pulled by faint echoes of swords being beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2:2-4), of wolves lying down with lambs (Isaiah 11:6-9), and of the poor, maimed, blind, and lame feasting at God’s table (Luke 14:21). The atmosphere of



that day reminded us that we, too, were “favored.”

What we did on those dark Advent mornings is something human beings have done, in one way or another, down through the ages. It is profoundly human to surround the shortest, darkest, and coldest days of the year with special ritual. The motivation for this most probably lies in the fact that this time of the year used to fill every human heart with fear—fear of darkness, the cold, and the fact that the food supplies may not last until the time when new crops are well underway. Yet, it is also a time of promise and longing—the promise that the receding sun is reaching its nadir tells us of longer and warmer days ahead. These types of fear and promise together sow images of hope—hope for changes from what is known, and perhaps endured, to the peace and fulfillment that the future holds.

Christians share these common human experiences of fear, promises, and hope. In the midst of the hopes and dreams of the human community, Christians do what comes naturally, and that is to embrace the season of Advent and the feast of Christmas that are given us as the Church's way to express these profoundly deep human dreams.

### **A Little History**

It wasn't always so, however. In the first three centuries of the Christian era, there was only one Christian feast: The annual observance of the Easter mysteries, celebrated once every week on the Lord's Day—the day following the Sabbath, Sunday—with Eucharist. Not until the fourth century do we find testimony of any celebration of the feasts of the Nativity and Epiphany of the Lord. Late in

that century, sermons from Saint John Chrysostom seem to indicate that the faithful were resisting “the fact” that Christ was born on December 25. The earliest evidence that directly relates the birth of Christ to December 25 is in an almanac—a calendar of annual Christian and civil celebrations—from the year 354. The earliest mention of a celebration of the Nativity of Christ on this date comes from a Roman martyrology written in the year 336.

Why did this development happen then? The answer to this question is complex, and entails theological, liturgical, and political aspects. As vast numbers of people became Christians throughout the fourth century, a need arose to “spell out” more concretely the mystery—and, therefore, the life—of Christ. Earlier, the Easter vigil had been “extended,” first with a forty-hour fast in which the suffering

and death of Christ was commemorated on Good Friday and his self-giving in the Eucharist on Holy Thursday. To this was soon added the entry into Jerusalem on Palm/Passion Sunday. On “the other side” of the vigil, the celebration of the Ascension forty days later was added, and the great feast of Pentecost ten days after that. In the light of this gradual expansion of celebrating the various mysteries of Christ, the “beginning” of the mystery of Christ, his incarnation and birth, likewise took on increasing importance as a further dimension of the Easter celebration.

Another reason for the institution of this feast at this time was the Church’s struggle with Arianism, which, even though condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325, continued to be divisive for the next fifty years. Celebrating the Nativity of the Lord helped focus the faithful on the central Christian mystery that God

became human in the God-man Jesus Christ—the divine manifested in human flesh! Tellingly, for the next eight hundred years the name of this feast was not Christmas but the *Nativity of the Lord* or the *Manifestation of the Lord*—Epiphany.

At this time, no one knew the actual birthday of Jesus, and scholars have long since speculated on why December 25 was chosen. Many see a connection in a Christianization of the Roman feast of *Sol Invictus*—“the invincible sun”—that was celebrated in Rome on December 25. Others relate it to the feast of Mithras—the Syrian sun-god—that took place every year at the winter solstice.

In either case, it was obvious to choose this time of year as a way to “immunize” the recently converted (and perhaps not always wholeheartedly so) Christians from the attraction of these feasts that the neighbors possibly were still celebrating.

Not only that, it gave the Church an opportunity to point to Christ our Savior as “the sun of righteousness,” as prophesied by the prophet Malachi (4:2). In the Gospel of John, Jesus, likewise, described himself as “the light of the world” (8:12).

### **A Time of Wonder and Extension**

As if to emphasize that Christmas begins on Christmas Day, the Roman liturgy “offers” three Christmas Masses: one at midnight, one at dawn, and one during the day. The origin of this goes back to an ancient tradition in Rome in which the pope would celebrate midnight Mass at the basilica of Saint Mary Major where wood from a crèche was placed in a chapel. The gospel reading was of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-14). At dawn, the pope would celebrate Christmas with the

Greek colony at their church in Rome, Saint Anastasia. The gospel would be the announcement of the Good News to the shepherds (Luke 2:15-20). Finally, the pope would celebrate Mass at the basilica of Saint Peter. This Mass “during the day” was the original Christmas Mass in Rome, and celebrated the eternal Word of God made flesh by proclaiming the Prologue of the Gospel of John.

You and I are not expected to attend all three Masses. We are, however, encouraged to reflect on the profound mystery of what it means for us that Jesus, the Light of the World and the power of the universe, comes to us as a tiny, helpless, and vulnerable baby. Our joy, our peace, and our wonderment is what we are called to share with one another in the days to come and then take with us into all the days of our lives.

The traditional twelve days of Christ-

mas fall between Christmas Day (our Savior's coming) until Epiphany (his manifestation as a human being) on January 6 (now most often celebrated on the Sunday between January 2 and 8). In the current calendar, the liturgical season of Christmas ends with the feast of the baptism of the Lord (the Sunday after Epiphany).

In-between, there are various feasts. The first is the feast of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It's quite a shift—from the coziness of a newborn baby to the gruesome stoning of an adult: it was not a “world of Christmas joy” that Jesus was born into! As if to reiterate this, we have the feast of the Holy Innocents two days later. Here, the cruelty resulting from human fear and the need to control life and others is juxtaposed with the human instinct to protect our young—our future and our life. The lesson seems clear: To



celebrate the birth of our Savior is not a way to escape the troubles of the world, be it by shopping “till we drop” or by daydreaming ourselves somewhere else; it is to be immersed ever more deeply into them!

Then there’s the feast of the Holy Family, instituted by Pope Benedict XV in 1921. Again, we are mistaken if we think this celebrates an idyllic family. Scripture portrays a family that, although uniquely graced and destined, struggled with issues of forced emigration, disobedience, of not being understood, and the ominous predictions pronounced in the midst of blessings. In the midst of it all, however, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus continued to love one another. They show us that what makes loving families possible is the ability to trust the relationship of grace and destiny within the makeshift quality of life: to give birth in the least desirable

place, to leave hastily for another country in the middle of the night, to suffer rumors that your son is “out of his mind,” to use water when the wine has run out, etc.

The octave of Christmas, January 1, has traditionally been celebrated as a feast of Mary’s divine motherhood: *Theotókos*, the “God-bearer,” the Mother of God, the one in whom God truly became human. Here we celebrate her unique role in God’s plan of salvation: she is the mother of one person, Jesus Christ, who is truly God and truly human, wholly and completely one with God and one with us.

Mary’s ready openness—her “yes”—to become the mother of Jesus determines the Incarnation of the Word of God and thus, in turn, the very existence of the Church, the body of Christ. Pope Paul VI proclaimed Mary *Mother of the Church*, seeing in her the archetype of the Church. In her alone, the Church of Christ has been

fully realized: in her “yes,” Mary becomes a fully realized human person—and a personification of the Church—whose whole being is solidly planted in both heaven and earth. To the extent that you and I are incorporated into Mary’s “yes” through our own “yes” we are grafted onto the mystery of the Church, the communion of saints.

The great feast of Epiphany sums up the celebration of the mystery of Christ’s origins. Saint Paul writes in several places about “the mystery of Christ” as referring to the whole of God’s plan of salvation, which, once hidden for the ages, is now revealed to human beings in the person of Jesus Christ. The Christian mystery is that the incomprehensible has come close to us in our history. Not only that, an aspect that we may not find very unusual—but which was nothing short of shocking to Paul and his Jewish contemporaries—was

that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6).

This is not just theology; you and I live in this mystery! As members of the Church, we are part of a community incorporated into the history of salvation. Likewise, this feast is not just a dramatic story of the adventures of three astrologers; it has to do with us, our story, our worship. Given our human limitations, we do not comprehend the mystery of Christ and his manifestation among us, but we experience awe and reverence, and we “see” in momentary glances that we live on the verge of the Church to come; it is glimpsed in the sacraments we celebrate, in the healing words we hear or share with another, and in the hopeful longing that keeps us reaching out for what is both beyond us and in our midst.

Liturgically, the feast of the baptism of Jesus brings the Christmas season to a formal close. It does so with “a rip”! The readings these past weeks about Jesus’ birth and infancy are, rather abruptly, followed by an account that takes place thirty years later. What connects the baptism with the other feasts of this season is that it celebrates another dimension of Jesus’ manifestation to the world: “Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him” (Mark 1:10). It is Jesus’ “inauguration,” the event that tells us that the presence of Christ among us will tear up reality as we know it. Likewise, at the moment of Jesus’ death, Mark tells us that “and the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (15:38). In Mark’s Gospel, the life, ministry, and death of Jesus of Nazareth—the reason for his

coming—rips open the veil of the human tendency to hide behind our preconceived notions and securities of what we consider the realities and “truths” of the natural world and of organized religion. What the life of Jesus shows us is that this tear is not a destructive one, but a healing one.

By clothing himself wholly in our humanity, in his birth and his baptism, Jesus has torn asunder that cloth which covered our eyes and kept us from seeing, with the eyes of our soul, that it is God who—by emptying divinity into our humanity—is painfully parting the fibers of our being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of our substance and bear us away within God’s very self.

## Conclusion

On the first day of Christmas, what *did* our true love give to us? *Who* is our true love? How do we live the mystery? In the hustle and bustle of getting ready for “the holy days”—and then recovering from them—have we allowed ourselves to be led by the star? Have we journeyed to the unimportant town of Bethlehem, or did we have more significant things to do, such as the “after-Christmas-sales” or a couple of financial transactions that may benefit us if we “get them in” before December 31?

The answer to all these questions lies in what it is you and I celebrate at Christmas. Is the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem an event that merely *touches* your heart, or do you allow it to *seize* your heart? If it touches your heart, it is still *outside* of you. Only when you allow yourself to

be seized by it does it become a reality *within* you.

Unlike our feverish attempts to live our lives according to the time-rhythm of contemporary culture—an arbitrary cycle of work and rest, life and death—time with and in the Lord happens according to the natural rhythm of God's time. God's time is both a time of anticipation and a time of extension; it consists of both beginnings and ends, of birth and death and resurrection. Time reveals eternity. There are times when nothing special happens—be present to that! There are times when something completely new begins—be present to that! When we learn to be present to this rhythm, we have learned how to live and celebrate all Twelve Days of Christmas because we have tasted the divine harmony for which God created us.



*These Twelve Days of Christmas* reminds us of the blessings and joy of our Lord's birth. Beginning with a reflection on Advent as a season of waiting, this pamphlet offers a brief history of the development of Christmas as a special feast and time of extended joy. Christmastime begins with the memorial of Jesus' birth, but it includes other spiritual riches as well. Feast days honoring Saint Stephen, the Holy Innocents, Mary's motherhood, the Holy Family, and the Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord help us to experience the mystery of the incarnation in a more complete way—a way that brings a lasting spiritual joy to this very special time.



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