

Advent – Christmas: Some historical & liturgical background

Why Advent?

Preparation for Christmas is an important theme for Advent, but more is involved. Advent affords a vision for our lives and reveals profound possibilities in our lives.



The vision of life that Advent bequeaths us is twofold – a glance back to the first coming of Christ in Bethlehem, and a gaze forward to the future coming of Christ. Stretched between these two, we live into life's adventure, lured by the grace of G-D.

First, we celebrate G-D-become-human in Jesus of Nazareth, confessed as the Christ. We ponder his life and experience his presence as a human being in our history. Christ came to reveal what life can and ought be. He gave us authentic, valid tenets by which we can live true and valid lives. Jesus knew that the human heart could not live in isolation. He called forth disciples around the model of a people held together by love. In that community – and to speak more carefully, that *communion* – we discover untold meaning and purpose.

When Christ left this earth, he did not abandon us. He remains with us in his Spirit, the Church, the sacraments, the Scriptures and each other. He lives in *communion* with us and keeps his vision of life before us, pouring grace into our lives.

When Christ comes again, his presence will no longer be hidden behind the signs and symbols of the liturgy or the words of the Scriptures. His presence among us will be revealed in all its fullness, a presence that will never end, a presence that will perfect and complete our *communion*.

This is the "greater significance" of Advent. In these few short weeks, we espy the sweeping panorama of time - from Christ's birth to his Second Coming. The season unfolds the magnificent horizon of life and hope for the future given to us by Christ.

Advent is our time to become more involved, more caught up in the meaning and the possibilities of life as a Christian community. Thus, we are preparing not only for Christmas but also for Christ's Second Coming. When he comes again, we will be awake and watchful. He will not find us asleep. "Watch!"

The Advent Wreath

The Advent Wreath, a venerable European tradition, can be a simple, but fun way to involve even little children in learning about Christian preparation - not only for celebrating Jesus' birth, but to make our hearts truly ready to receive Him.

The wreath's symbolism of the advent (coming) of Light into the world is clear. The gradual lighting of the four candles, one on each Sunday of the Advent season, combined with the liturgical colors of the candles (purple is the penitential color used during Advent and Lent; rose is a liturgical color used only on Gaudete Sunday in Advent and Laetare Sunday in Lent) help to symbolize not only our expectation and hope in Our Savior's first coming into the world, but also in his Second Coming' establishing the fullness of the kingdom of G-D.

The wreath itself is also symbolic. The circle of evergreen in which the candles are placed represents everlasting life. The seedpods, nuts and cones used to decorate the wreath are symbolic of resurrection, and fruits represent the nourishing fruitfulness of gospel life.

Gathering materials for the wreath – perhaps on an outing in the park or woods or even in the backyard – and assembling it at home is an interesting family project in which even the youngest children can participate.

On the first Sunday of Advent, you may sprinkle the wreath with holy water and bless it before the first purple candle is lit. The appropriate Advent collect can be prayer as the candle[s] are lit each day of the week, followed by the blessing before meals, if you use the wreath at mealtime. The second Sunday two purple candles are lit; the third Sunday, two purple and one rose; and all candles are lit on the fourth Sunday.

Children who are old enough can take turns lighting the candles. (The littlest ones can blow them out at the end of the meal.) If you use the wreath at mealtime, it is helpful to place it on a tray or platter so it can be moved, and to protect the table from candle wax.

On Christmas Day, all the greens and decorations are replaced with fresh ones, and four new white candles, symbolizing Christ, replace the colored ones and are burned throughout the Christmas season. The Advent season is also a good time to pray the Angelus at family meals.



St. Nicholas

Feastday: December 6

Patron of Bakers and Pawnbrokers

St. Nicholas ("of Bari"), Bishop of Myra (Fourth Century) 6th of December feast day. The great veneration with which this saint has been honored for many ages and the number of altars and churches which have been dedicated in his memory are testimonials to his holiness and of the glory which he enjoys with God. He is said to have been born at Patara in Lycia, a province of Asia Minor. Myra, the capital, not far from the sea, was an episcopal see, and this church falling vacant, the holy

Nicholas was chosen bishop, and in that station became famous by his extraordinary piety and zeal, as well as many astonishing miracles. The Greek histories of his life agree that he suffered imprisonment on account of his faith and made a glorious confession in the latter part of the persecution raised by Diocletian, and that he was present at the Council of Nicaea and condemned Arianism. The silence of other authors on these matters makes many justly suspect these circumstances. He died at Myra, and was buried in his cathedral.

This summary account by Alban Butler tells us all that is known about the life of the famous St. Nicholas, and even a little more; for his episcopate at Myra during the fourth century is really all that seems indubitably authentic. This is not for lack of material, beginning with the life attributed to the monk who died in 847 as St. Methodius, Patriarch of Constantinople. But he warns us that "Up to the present the life of this distinguished Shepard has been unknown to the majority of the faithful" and sets about enlightening their ignorance nearly five hundred years after the saint's death. This is the least unreliable of the "biographical" sources available, and a vast amount of literature, critical and expository have grown up around them. Nevertheless, the universal popularity of the saint for so many centuries requires that some account of these legends should be given here.

We are assured that from his earliest days Nicholas would take nourishment only once on Wednesdays and Fridays and did so in the evening according to the canons. *"He was exceedingly well-brought up by his parents and trod piously in their footsteps. The child, watched over by the church, enlightened his mind and encouraged his thirst for sincere and true religion"*. His parents died when he was a young man, leaving him well off and he determined to devote his inheritance to works of charity. An opportunity soon arose. A certain citizen of Patara had lost all his money and moreover had to support three daughters who could not find husbands because of their poverty so, the wretched man was going to give them over to prostitution. This came to the ears of Nicholas, who thereupon took a bag of gold and, under cover of darkness, threw it in at the open window of the man's house. Here was a dowry for the eldest girl and she was soon duly married. At intervals Nicholas did the same for the second and third; at the last time the father was on the watch, recognized his benefactor and overwhelmed him with his gratitude. It would appear that the three purses represented in pictures, came to be mistaken for the heads of three children and so they gave rise to the absurd story of the children, resuscitated by the saint, who had been killed by an innkeeper and pickled in a brine-tub.

Coming to the city of Myra when the clergy and people of the province were in session to elect a new bishop, St. Nicholas was indicated by God as the man they should choose. This was at the time of the persecutions at the beginning of the fourth century and *"As he was the chief priest of the Christians of this town and preached the truths of faith with a holy liberty, the divine Nicholas was seized by the magistrates, tortured, then chained and thrown into prison with many other Christians. But when the great and religious Constantine, chosen by God, assumed the imperial diadem of the Romans, the prisoners were released from their bonds and*

with them the illustrious Nicholas, who when he was set at liberty returned to Myra."

St. Methodius asserts that *"thanks to the teaching of St. Nicholas the metropolis of Myra alone was untouched by the filth of the Arian heresy, which it firmly rejected as death-dealing poison"* but says nothing of his presence at the Council of Nicaea in 325. According to other traditions he was not only there but so far forgot himself as to give the heresiarch Arius a slap in the face. Whereupon the conciliar fathers deprived him of his episcopal insignia and committed him to prison; but our Lord and His Mother appeared there and restored to him both his liberty and his office.

As against Arianism so also against paganism, St. Nicholas was tireless and took strong measures: among other temples he destroyed was that of Artemis, the principal in the district, and the evil spirits fled howling before him. He was the guardian of his people as well in temporal affairs. The governor Eustathius had taken a bribe to condemn to death three innocent men. At the time fixed for their execution, Nicholas came to the place, stayed the hands of the executioner, and released the prisoners. Then he turned to Eustathius and did not cease to reproach him until he admitted his crime and expressed his penitence. There were present on this occasion three imperial officers who were on their way to duty in Phrygia. Later, when they were back again in Constantinople, the jealousy of the prefect Ablavius caused them to be imprisoned on false charges and an order for their death was procured from the Emperor Constantine. When the officers heard this, they remembered the example they had witnessed of the powerful love of justice of the Bishop of Myra and they prayed to God that through his merits and by his instrumentality then might yet be saved.

That night St. Nicholas appeared in a dream to Constantine and told him with threats to release the three innocent men, and Ablavius experienced the same thing. In the morning, the Emperor and the prefect compared notes, and the condemned men were sent for and questioned. When he heard that they had called on the name of the Nicholas of Myra who had appeared to him, Constantine set them free and sent them to the bishop with a letter asking him not to threaten him any more but to pray for the peace of the world. For long this was the most famous miracle of St. Nicholas, and at the time of St. Methodius was the only thing generally known about him.

The accounts are virtually unanimous that St. Nicholas died and was buried in his episcopal city of Myra, and by the time of Justinian there was a basilica built in his honor at Constantinople. An anonymous Greek wrote in the tenth century that, *"the West as well as the East acclaims and glorifies him. Wherever there are people, in the country and the town, in the villages, in the isles, in the furthest parts of the earth, his name is revered, and churches are built in his honor. Images of him are set up, panegyrics preached, and festivals celebrated. All Christians, young and old, men and women, boys and girls, reverence his memory and call upon his protection. And his favors, which know no limit of time and continue from age to age, are poured out over all the earth; the Scythians know them, as do the Indians and the barbarians, the Africans as well as the Italians."*

When Myra and its great shrine finally passed into the hands of the Saracens, several Italian cities saw this as an opportunity to acquire the relics of St. Nicholas for themselves. There was great competition for them between Venice and Bari. The last-named won, the relics were carried off under the noses of the lawful Greek custodians and their Mohammedan masters, and on May 9, 1087 were safely landed at Bari, a not inappropriate home seeing that Apulia in those days still had large Greek colonies. A new church was built to shelter them and the pope, Bd. Urban II, was present at their enshrining.

Devotion to St. Nicholas was known in the West long before his relics were brought to Italy, but this happening naturally greatly increased his veneration among the people, and miracles were as freely attributed to his intercession in Europe as they had been in Asia. At Myra *"the venerable body of the bishop, embalmed as it was in the good ointments of virtue exuded a sweet smelling myrrh, which kept it from corruption and proved a health giving remedy against sickness to the glory of him who had glorified Jesus Christ, our true God."* The translation of the relics did not interrupt this phenomenon, and the "manna of St. Nicholas" is said to flow to this day. It was one of the great attractions which drew pilgrims to his tomb from all parts of Europe.

It is the image of St. Nicholas more often than that of any other that is found on Byzantine seals; in the later middle ages nearly four hundred churches were dedicated in his honor in England alone; and he is said to have been represented by Christian artists more frequently than any saint except our Lady. St. Nicholas is venerated as the patron saint of several classes of people, especially, in the East, of sailors and in the West of children. The first of these patronages is probably due to the legend that during his life time, he appeared to storm-tossed mariners who invoked his aid off the coast of Lycia and brought them safely to port. Sailors in the Aegean and Ionian seas, following a common Eastern custom, had their "star of St. Nicholas" and wished one another a good voyage in the phrase "May St. Nicholas hold the tiller." The legend of the "three children" gave rise to his patronage of children and various observances, ecclesiastical and secular, connected therewith; such were the boy bishop and especially in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, the giving of presents in his name at Christmas time. This custom in England is not a survival from Catholic times. It was popularized in America by the Dutch Protestants of New Amsterdam who had converted the popish saint into a Nordic magician (Santa Claus = Sint Klaes = Saint Nicholas) and was apparently introduced into this country by Bret Harte. It is not the only "good old English custom" which, however good, is not "old English," at any rate in its present form. The deliverance of the three imperial officers naturally caused St. Nicholas to be invoked by and on behalf of prisoners and captives, and many miracles of his intervention are recorded in the middle ages.

Curiously enough the greatest popularity of St. Nicholas is found neither in the eastern Mediterranean nor north-western Europe, great as that was, but in Russia. With St. Andrew the Apostle he is patron of the nation, and the Russian Orthodox Church even observes the feast of his translation; so many Russian pilgrims came to Bari before the revolution that their government supported a church, hospital and

hospice there. He is a patron saint also of Greece, Apulia, Sicily and Loraine, and of many cities and dioceses (including Galway) and churches innumerable. At Rome, the basilica of St. Nicholas in the Jail of Tully (in Carcere) was founded between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries. He is named in the preparation of the Byzantine Mass.

The "O" Antiphons

During the final week of Advent, seven short verses are sung prior to the Magnificat during Evening Prayer of the Church. These are the seven days before the vigil of Christmas. They each commence with the exclamation "O." Each one ends with a [plea for the Messiah to come](#). As Christmas approaches, the cry intensifies in urgency and expectation.

The antiphons were composed in the seventh or eighth century when monks searched through texts from the Old Testament which looked forward to the coming of our salvation. They form a rich mosaic of scriptural images. These seven verses, or antiphons as they are called, appear to be the originals although from time to time other texts were used. They became very prevalent in the Middle Ages. While the monastic choirs sang the antiphons the great bells of the church were rung.

A curious feature of these antiphons is that the first letter of each invocation may be taken from the Latin to form an acrostic in reverse.

So, the first letters of *Sapientia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, and Emmanuel*, provide the Latin words: ERO CRAS. The phrase spells out the response of Christ himself to the heartfelt prayer of his people: "*Tomorrow I will be there.*"

Why not join with the Prayer of the Church each evening and reflect on these words preparing for Christmas day by day?

December 17th:

O Wisdom, you come forth from the mouth of the Most High. You fill the universe and hold all things together in a strong yet gentle manner. O come to teach us the way of truth.

December 18th:

O Adonai and leader of Israel, you appeared to Moses in a burning bush and you gave him the Law on Sinai. O come and save us with your mighty power.

December 19th:

O stock of Jesse, you stand as a signal for the nations; kings fall silent before you whom the peoples acclaim. O come to deliver us, and do not delay.

December 20th:

O key of David and scepter of Israel, what you open no one else can close again; what you close no one can open. O come to lead the captive from prison; free those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

December 21st:

O Rising Sun, you are the splendor of eternal light and the sun of justice. O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

December 22nd:

O King whom all the peoples desire, you are the cornerstone which makes all one. O come and save man whom you made from clay.

December 23rd:

O Emmanuel, you are our king and judge, the One whom the peoples await and their Savior. O come and save us, Lord, our God.

The Last Eight Days of Advent

During the last eight days of Advent, it is useful to reflect on the different titles given to the Lord who is to come. The titles are Old Testament titles, here conferred on Jesus, indicating he is the promised Messiah.

Wisdom

St. Paul tells us that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. He is saying that it is hard to imagine the Wisdom of God, who knows all things, because God has created all things. This title of God reminds us especially of the Book of Wisdom in the Old Testament - a beautiful hymn in which wisdom is personified and is active in the world.

Adonai

A name for the Most High God, whose true name could not be uttered, and of whom it was said that no-one could gaze on the face of God and live. Adonai is the Lord of armies, who will march out to save the people in battle.

Stock of Jesse

Jesse was the father of King David, and Jesus is a descendent of David. From David comes the association of Jesus as royal, of David's line. Jesus inherits the throne of David, re-defining his role as King of the Jews.

Key of David

Jesus is not simply a ruler descended from David, but a liberator, a redeemer. This name echoes the mission of Jesus to bind and to loose, a mission Jesus passes on to his disciples.

Rising Sun

The sun is a sign of God's creation, God's endurance, and a sign of God's glory. God's glory outshines the sun and will endure after the sun and moon have failed. Psalm 84 describes God as the sun:

"For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly." (Psalm 84:11 NRSV)

King

God is the king above all kings, and the prophet Samuel is reluctant to anoint a king for the Israelites as this will seem like a rejection of God's rule. Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king; Jesus answers indirectly because his kingship does not accord with the expectations of the Romans, the Jewish authorities, or even his followers.

Emmanuel

The prophecy of Isaiah foretells a sign to be given by God: a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son whom she will call Emmanuel: a name which means God is with us. Jesus is the word made flesh, God in the midst of the people.

The Genealogy of Jesus

The genealogy of Jesus is traced through Joseph, but Joseph had nothing to do with Jesus' conception. The following explanation sheds light on what seems to be a confusing issue.

We have two genealogies of Jesus – *Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38*.

Because there are so many substantial differences between these two (for example, many of the ancestral names don't match), they have given scholars a headache through the ages. For example: Who was Joseph's father? Was it Jacob (according to Matthew), or Eli (according to Luke)?

One answer is: both lists are family records, but Matthew is giving us Joseph's record, and Luke is giving us Mary's. But that answer contradicts the text – Luke makes it clear that he is tracing Jesus' descent through Joseph. Nor does it fit with what we know of ancient middle eastern peoples. A genealogy traced through the mother would not have been normal at that time and place in history.

We have to remember that Israel's origin was tribal. The clan leader was, of necessity, a dominant male. The individual's survival depended on being able to claim membership within the tribe. Since in real life many things could happen to a bloodline, a number of supplementary laws and customs developed. A person could become a member of a clan without actually being born into it. One way was by adoption. Another was to be born of a woman who was married to a man of that clan. Even when the husband was not the child's biological father, he was still officially the legal father, simply because he was husband to the child's mother.

In the Bible, genealogies can serve different purposes. Besides establishing identity, they can also be used to structure history into epochs and to authenticate a line of office-holders. That's why an individual can be accorded two or more genealogies according to the purposes for which they were drawn up. Rarely do ancient biblical genealogies afford us a list of strictly biological ancestry.

What were Matthew's and Luke's purposes in giving Jesus a genealogy? They list different ancestors but agree totally on the most important fact: Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. To see how Matthew made a strong statement about this, read slowly Matthew 1:1-17. Let the repeated, rhythmic phrases "A the father of B," "B the father of C," and so forth, almost lull you to sleep. What happens when you get to verse 16? The lilting, fixed pattern is suddenly altered: "Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary. It was of her that Jesus who is called the Messiah was born." By using his genealogical list in this way, Matthew was able to proclaim both that Jesus was virginally conceived and that he was also legitimately a "son of

David, son of Abraham" (1:1). For Matthew's Jewish Christian audience this was like calling Jesus the Messiah.

Luke proclaims Jesus' virginal conception when he speaks about Jesus as being – so it was supposed – the son of Joseph in verse 3:23. He then takes his genealogy back to Adam and even to God himself. In doing this, he is stating that Jesus is nothing less than the Son of God. Because neither evangelist was principally concerned with Jesus' biological ancestry, the lists could differ, and each evangelist could present a different popular tradition suitable to his own specific purpose.

So, we see that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, but he was his legal father. The two genealogies make that point emphatically. Because of that, all of us can now proclaim with the Scriptures that Jesus was, indeed, son of David, son of Abraham, and Son of God.

Feast of Epiphany

In the Western church, the feast of Christmas was established before that of Epiphany.

The early western Christian Church decided to celebrate Christmas on December 25. The East continued to treat January 6 as the day marking Jesus' birth. The west generally acknowledges a twelve-day festival, starting on December 25, and ending on January 6, known as the twelve days of Christmas, although some Christian cultures, especially those of Latin America and some in Europe extend it to as many as forty days, ending on Candlemas, or February 2 (known as *Candelaria* in Spanish).

In the Western Churches it is associated principally with the visit of the Magi or Wise Men

Prior to 1970, the Roman Catholic Church (and prior to 1976, the Anglican churches) believed Epiphany to be an eight-day feast, beginning on January 6 and continuing through the *Octave of Epiphany*, or January 13.

Many traditionalist Catholics continue to use this calendar, celebrating the feast of the Holy Family on the Sunday within the octave. On the Feast of the Epiphany itself, the priest, wearing white vestments, will bless the Epiphany Water, frankincense, gold, and chalk. The chalk is used to write the initials of the three magi over the doors of churches and homes.

More recently, most Roman Catholics in the United States mark Epiphany on the Sunday after the first Saturday in January (before this the Sunday between January 1 and January 6 in years when there was one, was designated the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus), and most Catholics and Anglicans (along with many other Protestants) now formally end the Christmas season on the Sunday immediately following January 6, or, for American Catholics, the ensuing Monday in years when the Epiphany falls on January 7 or January 8. In either case, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord is observed on the latter day, after which the first installment of Ordinary Time begins. (But note that some Churches, such as the Anglican Catholic

Church, and some groups of Roman Catholics, still use the pre-1970 calendar; for these bodies, Christmas still has twelve days and ends on January 5, and Epiphany is still celebrated on January 6 with an 8-day octave.)

The Irish call this day Little Christmas or Women's Christmas (Irish: *Nollaig na mBan*). In Rome, "Epiphania" was transformed into Befana, the great fair held at that season, when *sigillaria* of terracotta or baked pastry were sold (Macrobius I, x, xxiv; II, xlix).

In France, on Epiphany people eat the *gâteau des Rois* in Provence or the *galette des Rois* in the northern half of France and Belgium. This is a kind of king cake, with a trinket or a bean hidden inside. The person who gets the piece of cake with the trinket becomes king for a day.

In the United States, Christmas usually ends the day after December 26 while other parts of the World are still celebrating Christmas up until the Epiphany or even beyond the Epiphany. (Please allow for those in the U.S. who welcome Christmas music, etc., at other times of the year, as Christmas time tends to be burdened with activities.)

The feast of manifestation, or Epiphany, is traditionally celebrated on the 12th day after Christmas, January 6th. In the dioceses of the United States this feast has been moved to the Sunday between January 2 and January 8.

Presented here is the background of Epiphany and some traditional customs that can be implemented for the feast in your home.

The Middle Ages, with its love for pageantry and the picturesque, celebrated the Feast of the Three Kings with much pomp and ceremony. Their lives were dramatized, picturing them first as Magi, members of a learned and respected priesthood, then as counselors of a king, tutors of princes, skillful astrologers, and interpreters of dreams, and finally as kings with their offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What little was known about them offered fascinating material for dramatization: their call, their wanderings in the desert as they followed the star, their detention by Herod, their adoration of the Christ-Child, their return home to Babylon and Persia, and the subsequent conversion of their people to Christianity.

Another custom peculiar to this feast and prevalent in Germany and other European countries is "star caroling." Three young men, colorfully dressed, accompanied by a star-bearer, go singing from house to house. In return for their "star songs" they receive some little recompense. In many localities these young men are altar boys who are thus rewarded in some slight way for their serving at Mass.

Epiphany is a large celebration, especially in Spanish speaking countries. Things look different around the household: the infant Jesus in the manger now has a small gold crown and is wearing regal robes. The figures of the wise men have reached Bethlehem, completing the nativity scene.

Reminiscent of Christ's baptism in the Jordan and the administration of Baptism on the vigil of the Epiphany is the blessing of water as it is still done in many churches. This "Water of the Three Kings" is then used in the blessing of homes on the following day.

According to a central European custom, pastors also may bless pieces of chalk for each family to use in inscribing the names of the three Magi over their doorways, as a manifestation of their Christian faith and a protection against the powers of evil.

The Church extends itself on Epiphany to the homes of the faithful. The custom of blessing the home probably grew up on account of the words in the Gospel, "And entering into the house, they found the Child with Mary, His Mother, and falling down they adored Him." The priest blesses the house if he can be present, but if not, the father of the family may do so. He leads the family (and any guests who may have been invited for the occasion) from room to room, blessing each and inscribing the initials of the three Magi (Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar) above the doors with the chalk that has been previously blessed. The doors are inscribed with the following:



20 + C + M + B + 21

The initials are separated by crosses and the year above the door. The initials CMB also stand for the words "*Christus Mansionem Benedicat*" which means "May Christ bless this house". This inscription above the entry of our house should be a reminder to us that we should be with and go to Christ in all our comings and goings.

A Twelfth Night Cake or Bread is usually baked, and the "Three Kings" are invited: either members of the family or other guests. If they are older, they can get involved in blessing the house by marking their "initial" over the doors. The children can prepare for the "Kings" by creating crowns and perhaps royal capes to wear.

The Origin of the Twelve Days of Christmas

We are, most of us, familiar with "*The Twelve Days of Christmas.*" It's a delightful nursery, even nonsense rhyme set to music. But it had a quite serious purpose when it was written.

It is a good deal more than just a repetitious melody with pretty phrases and a list of strange gifts.

Catholics in England during the period 1558 to 1829, when Parliament finally emancipated Catholics in England, were prohibited from *any* practice of their faith by law - private *or* public. It was a crime to *be* a Catholic.

"*The Twelve Days of Christmas*" was written in England as one of the "catechism songs" to help young Catholics learn the tenets of their faith – a memory aid, when to be caught with anything in **writing** indicating adherence to the Catholic faith could not only get you imprisoned, it could get you hanged, drawn and quartered, a rather peculiar and ghastly punishment. Hanging, drawing and quartering involved hanging a person by the neck until they had almost, but not quite, suffocated to death; then the party was taken down from the gallows, and disemboweled while

still alive; and while the entrails were still lying on the street, where the executioners stomped all over them, the victim was tied to four large farm horses, and literally torn into five parts - one to each limb and the remaining torso. Gruesome cruelty of a scale too monstrous to be contemplated.

The song's gifts are hidden meanings to the teachings of the faith. The "*true love*" mentioned in the song doesn't refer to an earthly suitor, it refers to God Himself. The "*me*" who receives the presents refers to every baptized person. *The partridge in a pear tree* is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge which feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings, much in memory of the expression of Christ's sadness over the fate of Jerusalem: "*Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered thee under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but thou wouldst not have it so...*"

The other symbols mean the following:

- **2 Turtle Doves** = The Old and New Testaments.
- **3 French Hens** = Faith, Hope and Charity, the Theological Virtues.
- **4 Calling Birds** = the Four Gospels and/or the Four Evangelists
- **5 Golden Rings** = The first Five Books of the Old Testament, the "Pentateuch."
- **6 Geese A-laying** = the six days of creation.
- **7 Swans A-swimming** = the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven sacraments.
- **8 Maids A-milking** = the eight beatitudes.
- **9 Ladies Dancing** = the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit.
- **10 Lords A-leaping** = the ten commandments.
- **11 Pipers Piping** = the eleven faithful apostles.
- **12 Drummers Drumming** = the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed