

Celebrate the 12 days of Christmas

They don't end on Christmas, they start on Christmas! Here's a pullout guide to celebrating the days between the Feasts of the Nativity and Epiphany:

DAY 1

Dec. 25: The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Day)

In the United States, it's customary to exchange presents and eat a festive meal. Christmas is a Holy Day of Obligation – and in many churches, Christmas Midnight Mass begins when the day begins.

DAY 2

Dec. 26: St. Stephen's Day

The "Feast of Stephen" from the carol "Good King Wenceslas" is the feast of the first Christian martyr. In Great Britain, it was once also the day to "bury the wren," a tradition so old that no one knows where or how it began. The Christian version of the story is that a wren's tweets alerted the Roman soldiers to where St. Stephen was hiding, so boys would dress up in crazy outfits, hunt and kill a wren, and then go from house to house begging for money for its funeral. Later it became an annual day to give servants and tradesmen presents. Today, celebrate by making a donation to charity.

DAY 3

Dec. 27: St. John's Day

Many medieval paintings of the Apostle John show him holding cup that holds a writhing snake. The reason? A popular legend that wicked men served him poison wine, but when he blessed it the poison came out of the cup in the shape of a serpent.

In some countries, people once brought wine to church to be blessed on St. John's Day. Drink a toast to St. John today with your favorite non-poisonous beverage.



A painting by Hans Memling, circa 1475, shows poison in St. John's cup taking the shape of a snake.

DAY 4

Dec. 28 – The Feast of the Holy Innocents

A haunting Christmas carol from "The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors," a mystery play performed by guild members in Coventry, England, for centuries during the festival of Corpus Christi, commemorates this day. In the play, the mothers of Bethlehem sang it to their babies, knowing that Herod's men were coming to kill them:

Lullay, thou little tiny Child, By, by, lully, lullay. Lullay, thou little tiny Child. By, by, lully, lullay.

O sisters, too, how may we do, For to preserve this day; This poor youngling for whom we sing, By, by, lully, lullay.

Herod the King, in his raging, Charged he hath this day; His men of might, in his own sight, All children young, to slay.

Then woe is me, poor child, for thee, And ever mourn and say; For thy parting, nor say nor sing, By, by, lully, lullay.

DAY 5

Dec. 29 – Feast of St. Thomas Becket

An optional feast in the Roman calendar, this day commemorates the friend and ally of King Henry II who became a champion of the Church, and the king's adversary, after being named Archbishop of Canterbury. T.S. Eliot's verse play "Murder in the Cathedral" and Jean Anouilh's play "Becket" both tell the story, though both take serious liberties



COURTESY PHOTO

with history. In 1964 the Anouilh play was made into a hit film starring Peter O'Toole and Richard Burton. It's available on DVD; make tonight a movie night and watch it or another film that fits the season.

DAY 6

Dec. 30 – Feast of the Holy Family



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A contemporary Coptic painting shows the Holy Family traveling in Egypt.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the Holy Family fled to Egypt to escape Herod, but nothing about what happened there. Many legends about the Flight into Egypt are told all over the world. In Armenia, for example, the Copts celebrate the day the Holy Family first arrived in Egypt (June 1); and various places in Egypt are said to have been stops on the family's journey. In 1919, composer Ottorino Respighi wrote a piano composition based on Gregorian chant called "The Flight into Egypt," one of three he later transposed for orchestra. Listen to the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra play it at our website, TheCatholicTelegraph.com (search "flight into Egypt").

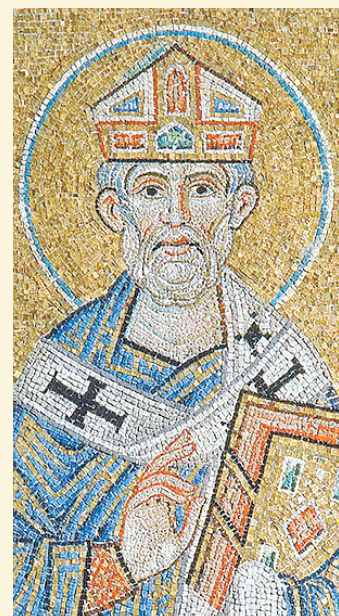
DAY 7

Dec 31 – New Year's Eve, Feast of St. Sylvester

A contemporary of Constantine's, St. Sylvester was pope during tumultuous times, but also organized public worship when Christianity became legal. In Austria and many surrounding countries, New Year's Eve is called "Sylvester night" and is celebrated with fireworks and parties.

This traditional adults-only punch recipe is said to have been enjoyed by the famous von Trapp family: Start with equal parts burgundy wine and hot tea. Muddle the wine with 12 cloves, one lemon rind, two tablespoons of sugar, and 2 cinnamon sticks per bottle. Just before serving, stir in the hot tea.

Whatever kind of punch you prefer, have a glass at midnight to ring in the new year with St. Sylvester.



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This mosaic at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice shows St. Sylvester holding a Bible.

DAY 8

Jan. 1: New Year's Day and the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God

"Theotokos" – God-bearer – is one of the oldest titles given to Mary, dating to ancient Christian days. It's also the World Day of Peace. Today, pray that the Blessed Mother intercedes for us and for the whole world:

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

DAY 9

Jan. 2: Feast of Sts. Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen

Bishops and Doctors of the Church, these saints were such great friends that they share the same feast day. But only one, St. Basil, has a holiday: St. Basil's Day (Jan. 2 for us; Jan. 1 for the Orthodox). In Greece, he's said to bring presents on his day. Vasilopita, or "Basil's bread," is a sweet bread served warm. Each loaf has a coin baked into it; whoever gets the slice with the coin will have good luck for the year. Visit our website at TheCatholicTelegraph.com for a recipe recommended by Greek Catholic Eparchy of Parma (Ohio).

DAY 11

January 4: Feast of Elizabeth Ann Seton

The first American-born saint founded the first parochial school in the country and the first new order of religious sisters. Celebrate her feast day with a treat she might have enjoyed as a child in Revolutionary War days: gingerbread. Find the recipe recommended by Colonial Williamsburg at our website, TheCatholicTelegraph.com.

DAY 10

Jan. 3: Feast of the Most Holy Name of Jesus:

Today, pray the Litany of the Holy Name of Jesus. Find it on our website, TheCatholicTelegraph.com. Here's an excerpt:

Jesus, joy of Angels have mercy on us.
 Jesus, King of the Patriarchs have mercy on us.
 Jesus, Master of the Apostles have mercy on us.
 Jesus, teacher of the Evangelists have mercy on us.
 Jesus, strength of Martyrs have mercy on us.
 Jesus, light of Confessors have mercy on us.
 Jesus, purity of Virgins have mercy on us.
 Jesus, crown of Saints have mercy on us.



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Jan. 6: NOT Epiphany (this year)

Because Epiphany has been translated from Jan. 6 to Sunday in the United States, there's an extra day between the 12th day of Christmas and "church" Epiphany... repeat any day's celebration, or pick up one you missed.

Epiphany

Because they follow the older Julian calendar for church dates, Greek, Russian, and other Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas today, when we celebrate Epiphany. In many European countries, Epiphany is "Three Kings Day." Children leave out hay and water for the Three Kings's camels, and in return the Kings leave presents in their shoes.

In Italy, children receive gifts from La Befana, a smiling "Christmas witch" who goes from house to house looking for the Three Kings and the Baby Jesus. She each hearth with her broom – and with it, sweeps away all the troubles of the old year.

Celebrate Epiphany by baking a crown-shaped Three Kings cake. In New Orleans, French-style cakes are covered with colored sugar and icing, but variants of a different style of cakes are eaten in Spanish-speaking countries. Find a recipe for Mexican Rosca de Reyes at our website, TheCatholicTelegraph.com. Serve it with hot chocolate.

If you're up for even more parties, try this: In Mexico, a tiny figure of a baby is often hidden in this bread. The recipient takes it to church on Feb. 2 (Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation), then hosts a party at home.