

RCIA: INQUIRY SESSION NINE

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Week: 12/12/22-18/12/22

CHRISTMAS AND ITS CUSTOMS

What is Christmas?

Christmas is an annual sacred Christian holiday that commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, as foretold in the scriptures.

When is it celebrated?

Christmas is always celebrated on the 25th of December,

Why is Christmas on Dec. 25?

It wasn't until three-and-a-half centuries after Christ's birth that the date Dec. 25 was chosen to celebrate his birthday. Pope Julius I picked the date in 350 AD, and it was formalized in 529 AD, when Roman Emperor Justinian declared Christmas to be a civic holiday. Many historians believe that both the Pope and the Emperor chose this date because it coincided with the pagan festivals celebrating the winter solstice on Dec. 21 or 22.

Why is it called Christmas?

The word *Christmas* comes from *Cristes maesse*, Old English for "Christ's Mass," which references the Catholic tradition of celebrating Mass to honour the birth of Jesus.

How did Christmas start?

After Jesus died, early Christian celebrations focused mainly on his crucifixion and resurrection, so Easter was the original big Christian holiday. However, about three centuries later, when the Christian church had become much larger and more influential, religious and political leaders wanted a way to make the Christian holidays more popular, so they combined Christmas and the winter solstice—even if it meant giving Jesus an arbitrary birth date, as mentioned above.

Christmas Customs

1. Nativity Scene (Crib)
2. Christmas Carols
3. Christmas Tree
4. Christmas Flowers
5. Remembering Those in Need
6. Christmas Wreath
7. Nollaig na MBan
8. St. Stephen's Day and the Wren

1. NATIVITY



The traditional creation of nativity sets is presumably due to St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was born into a merchant family in the Umbrian town of Assisi, in modern-day Italy, around 1181. But Francis rejected his family wealth early in his life and cast off his garments in the public square. In 1209, he founded the mendicant order of the Franciscans, a religious group that dedicated themselves to works of charity. Franciscans minister by serving the material and spiritual needs of the poor and socially marginalized.

According to St. Bonaventure, Francis in 1223 sought permission from Pope Honorius III to do something “for the kindling of devotion” to the birth of Christ. As part of his preparations, Francis “made ready a manger and hay, together with an ox and an ass,” in the small Italian town of Greccio. He used the vivid scenery to bring believers who did not know how to read the Christmas Gospel of Luke. The main objective was the interpretation of the Christmas Gospel. One witness, among the crowd that gathered for this event, reported that Francis included a carved doll which cried tears of joy and “seemed to be awakened from sleep when the blessed Father Francis embraced Him in both arms.” This miracle of the crying doll moved all who were present, Bonaventure writes. But Francis made another miracle happen, too: The hay that the child lay in healed sick animals and protected people from disease.

“I want to enact the memory of the Infant who was born at Bethlehem, and how he was deprived of all the comforts babies enjoy; how he was bedded in the manger on hay... For once I want to see all this with my own eyes,” the saint said. When he saw the completed Nativity Scene, illuminated with torches at night and in the company of his fellow friars and a crowd of people from the town, he was “overcome with devotion and wondrous joy.”

The Nativity story continued to expand within Christian devotional culture well after Francis’ death. In 1291, Pope Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan pope, ordered that a permanent Nativity scene be erected at Santa Maria Maggiore, the largest church dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Rome.

In later years, nativity scenes began incorporating the characters of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. The familiar cast of characters we see in modern nativity scenes include: baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the wise men, the shepherds, the angel, and animals. In the New Testament’s four gospels, only Matthew and Luke describe Jesus’ birth. Matthew mentions the wise men, while Luke mentions shepherds. No account mentions the wise men and the shepherds together. In fact, Matthew’s account mentions the wise men followed the star to Jesus’ home after his birth. Nor are donkeys, cattle or sheep mentioned in any accounts.

2. CHRISTMAS CAROLS



Christmas carols are “traditional songs that are sung just before Christmas that celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ”.

The word Carol means dance or a song of praise and joy! Originally, carols used to be written and sung during all four seasons, but only the tradition of singing them at Christmas has really survived. Music has been a part of the church festivities in honour of the birth of Jesus for centuries. The first recorded carol in the scriptures was sung by the choir of Angels who sang, “Glory to God in the Highest and on earth, peace, and good will to all people.”

One of the earliest documents of recorded carol singing can be found in 129, when a Roman Bishop said that a song called “Angel’s Hymn” should be sung at a Christmas Mass in Rome. Another famous early Christmas Hymn was written in 760, by Comas of Jerusalem, for the Greek Orthodox Church. Soon after this many composers all over Europe started to write Christmas carols. Then, in 1223, St. Francis of Assisi started Nativity Plays in Italy. As part of the production, people sang songs or “canticles” that told the story of the Incarnation and birth of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah.

One early carol, written in 1410, was about Mary and Jesus meeting different people in Bethlehem. Only a very small fragment of the song still exists. Most Carols from this time and the Elizabethan era are not Biblically based, but rather a very loose ideas from the Christmas story.

The Wexford Carol

"The Wexford Carol", sometimes known by its first verse "Good people all this Christmas time", occasionally claimed to be from the early Middle Ages, recalls the birth of Jesus Christ. It is likely it was composed in the 15th or 16th century based on its musical and lyrical style. The song achieved a renewed popularity due to the work of William Grattan Flood (1859–1928), who was organist and musical director at St. Aidan's Cathedral in Enniscorthy. He transcribed the carol from a local singer and had it published in The Oxford Book of Carols, putting Enniscorthy into most carol books around the world.

Lyrics

Good people all, this Christmas time,
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done
In sending His beloved Son
With Mary holy we should pray,
To God with love this Christmas Day
In Bethlehem upon that morn,
There was a blessed Messiah born.

The night before that happy tide,
The noble virgin and her guide
Were long time seeking up and down
To find a lodging in the town.
But mark how all things came to pass
From every door repelled, alas,
As was foretold, their refuge all
Was but a humble ox's stall.

Near Bethlehem did shepherds keep
Their flocks of lambs and feeding sheep
To whom God's angels did appear
Which put the shepherds in great fear
Prepare and go, the angels said
To Bethlehem, be not afraid
For there you'll find, this happy morn
A princely Babe, sweet Jesus, born.

With thankful heart and joyful mind
The shepherds went the babe to find
And as God's angel had foretold
They did our Saviour Christ behold
Within a manger He was laid
And by his side the virgin maid
Attending on the Lord of Life
Who came on earth to end all strife.

There were three wise men from afar
Directed by a glorious star
And on they wandered night and day
Until they came where Jesus lay
And when they came unto that place
Where our beloved Messiah lay
They humbly cast them at His feet
With gifts of gold and incense sweet

3. CHRISTMAS TREE



According to tradition, the first Christmas tree was the brain-child of a man named Winfrith (also known by the Latin name Boniface). Winfrith was an 8th-century English missionary to the heathen Saxons of Germany. When Winfrith came to Geismar in Hesse – or so the tale goes – he found there a huge and very old oak tree that was revered by the natives as sacred to the god Thor. In the presence of a large number of hostile Saxons, Winfrith defied the power and authority of the old gods. He attacked the oak with his axe. But before he could cut it down, a mighty blast of wind came and finished the job for him. The giant tree was shattered into four great pieces.

This convinced the Germans that Winfrith's Gospel was true. As a result, they built a chapel out of the wood from the fallen oak. And Winfrith himself – or so it is said – cut a small fir sapling from the forest and placed it in the chapel as a symbol of the Christ-child's birth and the beginning of His reign among this formerly heathen people.

Christmas Trees might well have started out as 'Paradise Trees' (branches or wooden frames decorated with apples). These were used in medieval German Mystery or Miracle Plays that were acted out in front of Churches during Advent and on Christmas Eve.

In early church calendars of saints, 24th December was Adam and Eve's day. The Paradise Tree represented the Garden of Eden.

It was not until the 16th century, however, that fir trees were brought indoors at Christmas time. And so, the Christmas tree in our homes became such a part of family Christmas tradition. Each year as we place the decorations and ornaments on our tree, which echoes the gift of the Christ Child, Emmanuel, "our God is with us".

The signs and symbols found in Christmas traditions help us to contemplate the mystery of God made man to be close to each one of us.

The Christmas tree with its lights reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world, the light of the soul that drives away the darkness of animosity and makes room for forgiveness.

The great height of the Christmas tree symbolizes that the Son of God, who lowered himself in assuming the human condition to draw us up to himself.

Star – represents the bright star that shone the night of Christ's birth. "Where is the new-born king of the jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him." (Mt. 2:2)

Candy cane – represents the shepherd's staff. Christ is also called the Good Shepherd. And there were in the same country, shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. (Lk. 2:8)

Gifts – represent gold, frankincense and myrrh.....And when they opened their treasures, they presented him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Mt. 2:11)

Evergreen tree – represents eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (Jn.3:16) Because of Christ's sacrifice, we will enjoy eternal life.

4. CHRISTMAS FLOWERS

The Poinsettia



This beautiful red and green plant has become a popular symbol of the Christmas season and it has a deeply Christian meaning. It is native to Mexico and Central America, and in some Spanish-speaking countries it is known as "*Flor de Nochebuena*,"

which means the "Holy Night Flower." Its English name was given in honour of Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, who brought the plant to America in 1829. The flowers (bracts) were thought to be symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem and the red colour is connected to the blood of Jesus' sacrifice..

There is a legendary Mexican story from the 17th century about this plant that connects it to Christmas.

As Christmas drew near a poor Mexican girl was sad because she didn't have anything to give to the baby Jesus. Her cousin tried to cheer her up and encouraged her to give even the smallest gift with great love. Not knowing what to do, the poor girl gathered some weeds along the roadside and put them in a bouquet. She approached the nativity scene, slightly embarrassed, but confident that she was giving Jesus the best that she could give. After she placed them in front of the manger the weeds transformed into a beautiful red poinsettia and were later known as "Flowers of the Holy Night."

Franciscan friars in Mexico began using the poinsettias in Nativity processions. Since then it has become a staple of Christmas decorations both in churches and homes.

5. REMEMBERING THOSE IN NEED

Christ came to us in our poverty. As St. Paul says, “Christ came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). Thus, remembering people in need is a practice that can help us understand the true meaning of Christmas and God’s gift to us, who in one way or another are poor.

A way of doing this is practicing works of mercy. This can include giving Christmas presents to other families in need, supporting the work of church agencies that care for the homeless, feed those who are hungry, provide shelter for those in difficulty.

6. CHRISTMAS WREATH

Wreaths were made of bay laurel, pine, herbs, and flowers. Each addition to a wreath had a specific meaning as a ritual or cherish symbol.

The Circle

Traditional wreaths are in the form of a circle. This circle has numerous meanings, both to Christians and non-Christians alike:

The eternal presence of God, with no beginning and no end

The cycle of the seasons, from spring to winter and eventually to spring again

The hope of life renewing itself

The hope of eternal life through Christ, the Saviour

The unending love of God



Materials in the Wreath

The early wreaths were made out of several evergreen materials. The evergreens in general represent continuity and survival through difficult times. Each evergreen used, however, also has a meaning:

Holly represents the crown of thorns that Christ wore at the Crucifixion Pine, holly and yew symbolize eternal life, Cedar stands for healing Laurel

represents the conquest over pain and suffering Pine cones, seeds, and nuts represent birth and rebirth.

Colours

The traditional Christmas colours of red and green also have symbolic meaning. Green represents the life and growth. For Christians, it stands for the eternal life of the soul. Red signifies the blood Christ shed on the cross.

7. NOLLAIG NA MBAN

Known in Ireland as Little Christmas or Nollaig na mBan, January 6 is regarded as the end of the Christmas season. Originally celebrated as the Feast of the Epiphany, or Three Kings' Day, January 6 is a Christian feast which marks the visit of the three wise men to Bethlehem after the birth of Christ. It's a day where Christians celebrate the manifestation of the son of God on Earth.

The twelfth and final day of Christmas, January 6, was known in Ireland as Nollaig na mBan or Women's Christmas or Little Christmas. As a reward for their hard work over the Christmas season, it was a day off from all house work for women and traditional roles were supposed to be reversed in the home:

men did the women's work in the house while women rested and gathered together informally.

8. ST. STEPHEN'S DAY AND THE WREN

The Wren is blamed for the betraying the Christian martyr St. Stephen when was in hiding by making noises and flapping its wings, hence the reason for hunting the Wren on St. Stephen's Day.

Of course, the little wren was considered the 'King of all birds' in Celtic mythology, as it is said that the birds had a contest to see who could fly the highest. The clever wren flew higher than the eagle by sitting on the eagle's back as it soared high and then the wren could fly even higher when the eagle got tired. So this custom of hunting the wren could also stem from Pagan times.

In the old days it was a real wren that was killed and placed on the top of the pole and the "wren boys" would carry it around to houses and beg for money to bury the bird as it was considered to be evil. Money is still collected but this is given to charity and of course a wren is not killed anymore but some Wren Boys march with a fake bird.

The Wren Boys would sing this traditional song at each house:

The Wren, the Wren the king of all birds,
St. Stephens's day, he was caught in the furze.
Although he is little, his honour is great,
Rise up, kind sir, and give us a trate.

We followed this Wren ten miles or more
Through hedges and ditches and heaps of snow,
We up with our wattles and gave him a fall
And brought him here to show you all.

For we are the boys that came your way
To bury the Wren on Saint Stephens's Day,
So up with the kettle and down with the pan!
Give us some help for to bury the Wren!