

CHRISTMAS:

Christian Celebration of the Birth of Jesus

Christmas is the Christian feast commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ on **December 25**. First mentioned in Rome in the middle of the fourth century, the date was a Christian replacement for the Roman celebration of Sol Invictus (Latin, “the Unconquered Sun”) at the winter solstice. The observance of the date spread from Rome to the East, although some churches do not focus on the birthday of infant Jesus and others (e.g., the Armenian) celebrate Christ’s birth on **January 6**.

Over the centuries, many customs, not all of them universally observed, became attached to this day. The erection of the Christmas crib (crèche) began with Francis of Assisi, who made the first one in Greccio, Italy, in 1223. Use of Christmas greenery (trees, wreaths, etc.) was an adaptation of pre-Christian customs that began in Germanic countries but spread to England in the nineteenth century through the influence of Queen Victoria’s husband, who was German. Santa Claus (Saint Nicholas), Father Christmas, and Father Frost are all adaptations of European folk customs celebrated in the winter season. Christmas carols began as a wider custom of singing popular religious songs (as opposed to liturgical hymns) on seasonal feasts but over the years increasingly became identified with this season. Midnight services derive from the Western liturgical custom of celebrating three Masses (“Christmas” is from the Old English meaning “Christ’s Mass”) on the day at midnight, dawn, and midmorning. The seasonal exchange of gifts is connected to an imitation of the Magi as gift-bearers to the Christ child and to the custom of giving children gifts on the feast of Saint Nicholas, who was honored earlier in the month. In many countries it is still customary for gifts to be given on **January 6**, which is the day of the Magi, or Three Kings’ Day.



Advent

The Advent season begins about four weeks before Christmas on a Sunday. It commemorates the start of the Church year. The purpose of this period is to prepare Christians for the celebration of the Messiah’s coming and the incarnation of God as man. Christmas Eve is a special celebration on the night before Christmas (**December 24**) in which the major messianic prophecies of the Old Testament are read. In the sacred beauty of this holy night the message of Christianity is born anew in light, song, beauty and prayer.

Epiphany

Epiphany means “manifestation” or “appearance” and concludes the festival of Christmas. It celebrates the visit of the Three Kings to the Christ Child as well as the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.

Christian Scripture New King James Version, Luke 2:1-20:

The Birth of Jesus and the Visit of the Shepherds

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

*“Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth
Peace, Goodwill Toward Men!”*

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

A Multitude of Celebrations

Celebrations of Christmas reflect the rich cultural diversity of the many communities throughout the world who honor this holy time. These include community re-enactments of Mary and Joseph seeking lodging at the inn, in the procession called Las Posadas, which is practiced throughout the Americas and in the Philippines. Children play an important role in Las Posadas, as in this re-enactment of the Nativity scene from México.

