DUODECIM DIES NATIVITATIS

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Christmas is not one day but a season. The Twelve Days run from the Nativity on 25 December to Twelfth Night on 5 January, the eve of the Epiphany. Each day has its own feast in the traditional Roman calendar, and the faithful keep them with Mass, carols and feasting, after the fast of Advent.

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." — John 1:14

1 — White
25 DECEMBER
The Nativity of Our Lord
Every priest may offer three Masses: at midnight, at dawn and in the day, honouring Christ's eternal birth from the Father, His birth in time from Mary, and His birth in our souls.

2 — Red
26 DECEMBER
St Stephen, Protomartyr
The first martyr follows hard upon the crib: "Yesterday Christ was born on earth, that today Stephen might be born in heaven" (St Fulgentius).

3 — White
27 DECEMBER
St John, Apostle and Evangelist
The beloved disciple who leaned on the Lord's breast. Wine is blessed today and drunk as "St John's Love," recalling the poisoned cup he blessed and drank unharmed.

4 — Red
28 DECEMBER
The Holy Innocents
The baby martyrs of Bethlehem. Before 1960 the Mass was said in violet, without Gloria or Alleluia, in mourning — except on a Sunday.

5 — Red
29 DECEMBER
St Thomas Becket
Archbishop of Canterbury, slain in his own cathedral in 1170 for defending the liberty of the Church against King Henry II.

6 — White
30 DECEMBER
Sunday within the Octave
Kept on the Sunday that falls between 29 and 31 December, or else on 30 December. Its Gospel tells of Simeon and Anna in the Temple.

7 — White
31 DECEMBER
St Sylvester I, Pope
The pope of the Peace of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea. In the evening the faithful sing the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving for the year now ending.

8 — White
1 JANUARY
The Circumcision · Octave Day
Eight days after His birth the Child sheds His first drops of Blood and receives the Holy Name. The Octave also honours the divine maternity of Mary.

9 — White
2 JANUARY
The Most Holy Name of Jesus
Kept on the Sunday between 1 and 6 January, or on 2 January if there is none. "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Phil 2:10).

10 — White
3 JANUARY
Christmastide · St Genevieve
A Christmas weekday (formerly the Octave of St John). In France, the feast of St Genevieve, virgin and patroness of Paris.

11 — White
4 JANUARY
Christmastide
A Christmas weekday, formerly the Octave of the Holy Innocents. The crib, greenery and feasting of the season continue.

12 — White
5 JANUARY
Twelfth Night · Vigil of the Epiphany
Until 1955, the Vigil of the Epiphany. Epiphany water is solemnly blessed with long exorcisms, and the household prepares for the coming of the Kings.

6 JANUARY

The Epiphany

The Twelve Days end and the great feast of the Manifestation begins. The Church celebrates three wonders on this day: the adoration of the Magi, the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan, and the first miracle at Cana. The deacon chants the date of Easter for the coming year.

Chalk is blessed and the doorway marked **20 + C + M + B + 27** — the initials of Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, and of *Christus mansionem benedicat*, "May Christ bless this house." Traditionally Christmastide continues until Candlemas, 2 February.

The Carol and Its Catechism

A popular devotional reading of the old English carol

1	*A partridge in a pear tree*	Jesus Christ, who like the mother partridge feigns injury to draw predators from her young
2	*Two turtle doves*	The Old and New Testaments
3	*Three French hens*	Faith, hope and charity
4	*Four calling birds*	The four Gospels and Evangelists
5	*Five gold rings*	The five books of Moses, the Pentateuch
6	*Six geese a-laying*	The six days of Creation
7	*Seven swans a-swimming*	The seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, or the seven sacraments
8	*Eight maids a-milking*	The eight Beatitudes
9	*Nine ladies dancing*	The nine fruits of the Holy Ghost (Gal 5:22)
10	*Ten lords a-leaping*	The Ten Commandments
11	*Eleven pipers piping*	The eleven faithful Apostles
12	*Twelve drummers drumming*	The twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed

A word of caution

A popular story claims that English Catholics wrote this carol as a secret catechism during the penal times, when the Faith was outlawed (1558–1829). No historical evidence supports this: the claim first appears only in the late 20th century, and every item it "hides" was common to Protestants too.

The carol is best enjoyed as a festive counting song. The symbolism can still be a fruitful aid for teaching children the Faith, as long as it is not presented as history.