



The “Twelve Days of Christmas” are the days between Christmas and Epiphany (January 6). *Epiphany* comes from the Greek word “epiphaneia” which means “appearance,” “manifestation” or “showing forth.” Western Christians generally celebrate Epiphany as the day the Wise Men first saw Jesus (when Jesus first “appeared” to them). However, throughout history, Christians have also celebrated Christ’s baptism, and His first recorded miracle — the miracle at the wedding in Cana, on this day.

Matthew 3:13-17 New International Version (NIV)
The Baptism of Jesus

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

John 2:1-11 New American Standard Bible

Miracle at Cana

2 On the third day (T)here was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and (Mary) the mother of Jesus was there; 2 and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." 6

Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, (each pot able to hold) twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. 8 And He said to them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it to him. 9 When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew).

The headwaiter called the bridegroom, ¹⁰ and said to him, “Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now.” ¹¹ This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.

Why the 12 Days of Christmas?

The Roman Catholic Church started the tradition of the Twelve Days of Christmas — the days between Christmas Day itself and Epiphany — for a reason: Honoring the birth of an Incarnation of God is too important to be confined to just one day. So, the 12 Days Of Christmas, also known as Twelvetide, is the Christian festive season that celebrates more fully the Nativity of Jesus Christ.

For a spiritual aspirant in the Christian tradition, each of these special days between Christmas and Epiphany can deepen the inner meaning of Christmas.

Twelvetide has been celebrated in Europe since before the middle ages and has always been a time of festivity.

The first day of Twelvetide, is Christmas Day; of course, this day is all about celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

The second day of Christmas is called Boxing Day* — however, it is known as St Stephen’s Day in many countries outside of the UK, as this is the feast day of the 1st. C. Christian martyr St Stephen, one of the first ordained deacons of the Church. This day is all about the poor and the marginalized — those that society neglects.

***Note:** Boxing Day, December 26th, is celebrated in the UK, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, and a few European countries.

It was started in the UK about 800 years ago, during the Middle Ages. It was the day when the alms box, a collection boxes for the poor often kept in churches, were opened so that the contents could be distributed to poor people. Some churches still open these on Boxing Day.

The third day of Christmas celebrates St John the Apostle, who wrote the Book of Revelation; he is the patron saint of love, loyalty, friendships, and authors.

The fourth day of Christmas, December 28, is the Feast Of The Holy Innocents – the day when people remember all of the baby boys who were killed by King Herod in his search to find and kill the Baby Jesus.

The fifth day of Christmas is the day when St Thomas a Becket is remembered. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th C., and was murdered on December 29, 1170, for challenging the King's authority over the church.

The sixth day of Christmas is the day of St Egwin, Bishop of Worcester, who died on December 30, 717. He was known as a protector of orphans and the widowed.

The seventh day of Christmas falls on New Years Eve and on this day Pope Sylvester I is traditionally celebrated. Saint Sylvester I was pope from 314 to 335; his 21-year-long pontificate saw the beginnings of the Christian Roman Empire ...

The most important event of his reign was the Council of Nicaea (*May 325 - doctrine, ritual, organization, brahmins present*) ... The Roman emperor Constantine I the Great favored Christianity and had much control over the new church's ecclesiastical affairs ... According to ... legend, it was Sylvester who converted and baptized Constantine — the first Roman emperor to become a Christian.

The eighth day of Christmas falls on New Years Day, and Mary the Mother of Jesus is celebrated.

The ninth day of Christmas honors St Basil the Great and St Gregory Nazianzen, who were two important 4th C. Christians.

The tenth day of Christmas is the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus and marks the day Jesus was named in the Jewish Temple, according to Hebrew ritual.

The eleventh day of Christmas is a day to celebrate St Elizabeth Ann Seton who was the first American saint who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is also the Feast Day of Saint Simon Stylites, a 4th & 5th C. ascetic; he lived for 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar.

The twelfth day of Christmas is also known as Epiphany Eve as is it that day before January 6, the Epiphany; it is the the twelfth day of Christmas.

In the Western church, Epiphany is usually celebrated as the time the Wise Men or Magi arrived to present gifts to the young Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). Traditionally there were three Magi, probably from the fact of three gifts, even though the biblical narrative never says how many Magi came.

By the 16th century, some European and Scandinavian cultures had combined the Twelve Days of Christmas with (sometimes pagan) festivals celebrating the changing of the year. These were usually associated with driving away evil spirits for the start of the new year.

Twelfth Night often included feasting along with the removal of Christmas decorations.

Since modern American seasonal parties and social gatherings typically take place between Thanksgiving and Christmas, we have all but lost the history associated with the twelve days of Christmas. In the past, the greatest celebrations of the season happened after Christmas Day.

Authors Joe Wheeler and Jim Rosenthal note:

“It was not so long ago that most everyone in Christian nations celebrated the twelve days following Christmas Day. Today, so many have ceased to observe these days that people lift their eyebrows in puzzlement when Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night play is discussed or ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’ is sung.”¹

About that song, The New Oxford Book of Carols says:

“This song derives from a traditional ... game which was played on Twelfth Night. ...”³ But the carol may not be entirely frivolous.

According to Hennig Cohen and Tristram Potter, editors of The Folklore of American Holidays, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” contains a “charming example of medieval numerological wit.”⁴

Here is how it works:

“On the first day the **true love** gave one [gift](#) (a partridge in a pear tree), on the second day he gave three gifts (two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree), and so on, so that on the twelfth day he gave seventy-eight fanciful gifts. . . . [In the end] that lady has received exactly 364 gifts – enough to last until next Christmas. (You) might ask, ‘What about the 365th day?’; but I am sure that to the medieval mind there was no need for a gift from a mortal giver on Christmas Day itself.”

A Final Note: Christmas Eve & the Ramakrishna Order

Late December 1886, at the ancestral home of Baburam (Swami Premannanda), in Antpur, West Bengal, India:

Long after the evening, Narendranath [Swami Vivekananda] and eight other direct disciples of Shri Ramakrishna sat under the open, bright, and starlit sky and lit a fire, concentrating on meditation. After the meditation they were discussing about God when Narendranath had a rare inspiration and started talking about the life of Jesus, his penance and sacrifice. His words were so eloquent and so full of humility that everyone was very deeply moved.

He then talked about St. Paul and other disciples of Jesus whose hard labour and sacrifice made it possible for Christianity as a religion and the Christians as religious group to come up and prosper. He exhorted his fellow disciples to shape themselves as the Christian saints (had done), and called upon them to sacrifice their lives for the welfare of mankind.

Narendranath's fellow disciples were (sur)charged by his oration. They stood up and touched the fully-lit fire and took the solemn oath of renouncing this world.

The fire in front of them reflected upon their faces and made their emotion-charged oath even brighter. The whole atmosphere, as it were, trembled by divine inspiration and lapped up this heavenly sight. When their minds came down to earth again, they were astonished to know that the night was the "Christmas Eve".

Later, recalling the importance of the Antpur incident, Swami Shivananda said "It was at Antpur that our resolve to become a group grew more intense. Thakur had already made us 'Sannyasis' – that was cemented at Antpur." After spending a week at Antpur they came back to Calcutta.

They embraced Sannyasa formally by performing "Biraja Homa" at Baranagar Math in January 1887.