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Seasoning the Seasons™

The Institute for Christian Formation, Inc.

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The Christmas Season

Merry Christmas!

Turn on your radio December 26th and you might have a hard time finding any stations playing Christmas carols. And chances are people will ask you if you *had* a nice Christmas. How did we get it so mixed up?

At sundown on December 24th Advent ends and we *begin* the Christmas Season. Yes, Christmas is an entire season, not just one day. And contrary to the shopping mall mentality, the Christmas season is just beginning Christmas Day - not ending! The Christmas Season begins at sundown Christmas Eve and continues through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The primary liturgical color for the Christmas Season is white, which expresses purity, joy and glory. Gold, which expresses honor and praise, is sometimes used in place of white.

The Christmas Season is full of wonderful feasts and rich traditions. The five major feasts of the Christmas Season are the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord; the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God; the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord; and, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

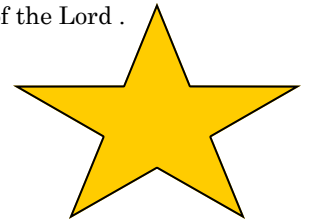
So, we know that Christmas is more than a day; it's even more than Twelve Days; it's an entire season!



The Nativity of Christ
Mid 16th Century
Iconographer:
Theophanes the Cretan

Christmas Star

- * The Christmas Star, or the Star of Bethlehem, is a five-pointed star.
- * This can help us remember the five major feasts of the Christmas Season: The Nativity of the Lord; The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; Mary, the Holy Mother of God; The Epiphany of the Lord; and The Baptism of the Lord.



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Ho-Ho-Hodie!



Christmas is often referred to as the birthday of Jesus.

Yet we really aren't celebrating his *birthday*; we're celebrating his *birth*.

Listen carefully to the wording of some of our most traditional and popular Christmas carols...*Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born **this happy morning**...* (*O Come, All Ye Faithful*); *Christ, the Savior, **is born**...* (*Silent*

Night, Holy Night); *Jesus Christ **is born today**...* (*Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*). The action is happening now.

The Latin word *hodie* translates to *this day*, or *today*. So it is more than remembering an event that happened over 2,000 years ago. Practice awareness... Christ is born **today!**

The Twelve Days of Christmas

We are all familiar with the carol, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. But did you know that in singing this carol you are actually repeating a *catechism* of sorts? From the mid-16th century through the early 19th century, Roman Catholics living in England could not publicly practice their faith. So the *Twelve Days of Christmas* was used to symbolically teach the Catholic faith.

My true love refers to God. *A partridge in a pear tree* symbolizes Jesus, who died on the wood of a tree. *Two turtle doves* refer to the two sections of our Bible - the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. The Christian virtues of faith, hope and love are represented by *three French hens*, while the four Gospels are symbolized by *four calling birds*. *Five golden rings* represent the Pentateuch (first five

books of the Bible). The six days of creation are *six geese a-laying*. *Seven swans a-swimming* refer to the seven sacraments. The Beatitudes are symbolized by *eight maids a-milking*. The nine fruits of the Holy Spirit are *nine ladies dancing*. *Ten lords a-leaping* refer to the Ten Commandments. The eleven faithful apostles are *eleven pipers piping*, while the *twelve drummers drumming* refer to the twelve articles of faith in the Apostles' Creed!



The Infancy Narratives



Of the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - only two include an infancy narrative, or a story about the birth of Jesus. The evangelists Matthew and Luke are the two who give us accounts of Jesus' birth.

Have you ever taken the time to sit down and read through Matthew's infancy narrative, and then Luke's?

They offer us different insights.

Joseph is very prominent in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. And it is only in Matthew's Gospel that we hear of the visit of the Magi.

Luke's infancy narrative places more emphasis on Mary. It is in Luke's Gospel that we hear of the annunciation to Mary by the Arch-

angel Gabriel. And it is in this Gospel we learn about the angels announcing the birth of Jesus and the visit of the shepherds.

Most of our manger scenes and Christmas carols blend these two accounts, giving us Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds, and Magi bearing gifts. *Glory to God in the highest!*

Theotokos!



Holy Mary, Mother of God... These words roll so easily off of our tongues in prayer. They are some of the earliest words of prayer we memorized in our childhood. But how often do we really stop and reflect upon what it is we are stating in these words?

The Greek word *Theotokos* literally translates as *God-bearer*. This is the title Eastern Christians still use today in referring to Mary, the Mother of God. It is also the title of Mary that was at the heart of a great controversy at the Council of Ephesus in the year 431. Mary was the Mother of Jesus, but could she be called the Mother of God? Saint Cyril of Alexandria's position won out, and

Mary was affirmed as the *Theotokos*.

On January 1st, the octave day of the Nativity of the Lord, we celebrate the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. Being a holy day of obligation, we are provided with a wonderful opportunity to come together as a people of faith to keep the Feast! *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us!*



Theotokos with Christ Child
12th Century; Iconographer:
St. Alpyy of the Kiev Caves

El Día de los Tres Reyes

In many cultures, especially those with Hispanic populations, January 6th is *El Día de los Tres Reyes*, or Three Kings' Day. It is on this day that people commemorate the Magi bringing gifts to the newborn Christ child. In these cultures, rather than Santa bringing children gifts on Christmas, it is the Three Kings who bring the gifts on Epiphany! (Today, in some places, both Santa and the Three Kings visit the children.)

Rather than writing wish lists for Santa, children write their list for the Three Kings. And instead of leaving out cookies and milk for Santa and carrots for his reindeer, children leave water and hay for the Three Kings' camels! Before going to bed on the Eve of Epiphany, children might place a box with grass under their bed, or leave their empty shoes in the doorway or window sill in anticipation of the Three Kings' visit. In some locales there is a big parade on Epiphany Day, featuring the Three Kings riding on camels or horses. The Kings may visit the nativity scene at the local church. And on Epiphany Day in the homes, the fiesta usually includes the traditional Three Kings' Cake. Baked in the shape of a crown, candied fruits can be used as jewels in the crown. Baked into the cake is a tiny plastic doll, symbolizing the infant Jesus. The person whose piece of cake contains the doll is King for the day, and will experience good fortune!



Chalk it Up!



While we celebrate Three Kings' Day and sing carols about the Three Kings, it is interesting to note that nowhere in Scripture are we told how many kings or magi actually visited the infant Jesus. We traditionally refer to *Three* Kings, because Matthew 2:11 refers to the *three* gifts which the magi brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh. And over the years one leading tradition has identified these three kings as Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

These names of the Three Kings figure prominently in another Epiphany tradi-

tion - the blessing of homes on Epiphany. The Epiphany blessing of homes is common in a number of cultures. To bless your home on Epiphany, take chalk and over your doorway inscribe 20+C+M+B+13* (*or current year). The first two numbers and the last two numbers in the inscription are the current year, while C, M and B are the traditional initials of the Three Kings! Your service of blessing could include the proclamation of Matthew 2:1-12 (the visit of the magi) and the singing of hymns and carols.

Wining and Dining with Jesus

The word *epiphany* has its roots in the Greek word *phaneia*, which means appearance or manifestation. Traditionally celebrated on January 6th, in our country the Solemnity of the Epiphany has been transferred to the Sunday between January 2nd and January 8th.

When we think of Epiphany, perhaps the first thing

that comes to mind is the visit of the magi to the Christ child. Yet we celebrate two other manifestations of Christ, as well. On Epiphany we celebrate not only the visit of the magi, but also the baptism of the Lord, as well as his first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana.

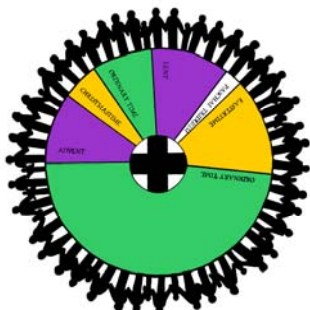
A wonderful hymn with which to celebrate these manifestations at Epiphany is *Songs of Thankfulness and Praise* (text by Christopher Wordworth). Raise your voice in thankfulness and praise on this merriest day of the Christmas Season - Epiphany!



Christ Changing Water into Wine
14th Century, Serbian

The Institute for Christian Formation

P.O. Box 20174
Cincinnati, OH 45220



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E-mail: info@instituteforchristianformation.org

Visit us on the Web:
www.instituteforchristianformation.org

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The Baptism of the Lord

The last major feast of the Christmas Season, in fact - the last day of the Christmas Season - is the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. This feast is usually celebrated on the Sunday after Epiphany Sunday, except when Epiphany is celebrated on January 7th or 8th. Then this feast is celebrated on the Monday after Epiphany.

The baptism of Jesus is a significant event. Mark's Gospel, the earliest Gospel written, begins with the preaching of John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus. In all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), at the baptism of Jesus the spirit of God *descends like a dove* upon Jesus and a voice from heaven pronounces Jesus to be *my beloved Son*. In these three Gospels, it is immediately following Jesus' baptism that he is tempted by Satan, and it is immediately after this temptation that Jesus begins his public ministry.



Theophany
Early 17th Century
Greek

In John's Gospel, as soon as John the Baptist gives testimony to Jesus, witnessing to the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove upon Jesus, Jesus calls his first disciples. And this is immediately followed by Jesus' first miracle - changing water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana.

Yes, baptism is a significant event! Not just for Jesus, but for each one of us. It is in baptism that we die and rise with Christ. It is in baptism that we enter the Church, the Body of Christ. It is in baptism that we become children of God. It is in baptism that we are anointed priest, prophet and king.

So as we come to the conclusion of this Christmas Season, let us celebrate not only Jesus' baptism, but our own. And let us continue to remember and celebrate our baptism each and every day as we follow Jesus this new year.