

Christmas is...

Ready or not, the Christmas season arrives on the 25th of December. Hopefully, the preparatory season of Advent has given us the time and space to allow the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to enter into this festive time of celebration that lasts over two weeks. What is this mystery that we celebrate with Church services, traditional foods, gift-giving, gatherings of family and friends, music, acts of charity, and festive greetings of good will to all people?

In the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, we read: “Next to the yearly celebration of the paschal mystery (the Easter celebrations of Christ’s death and resurrection), the Church holds most sacred the memorial of Christ’s birth and early manifestation. This is the purpose of the Christmas season.”¹

The miracle of God’s presence among us, the Word-made-Flesh, and His manifestation to the world for our salvation is such a rich and multifaceted mystery that we can’t sum it up on one day of celebration, but rather, we enter into different facets of this mystery through the various celebrations that constitute the Christmas season.

The Christmas season begins with Evening Prayer 1, on the evening of the 24th of December, also called Christmas Eve. There is a vigil Mass that may be celebrated before or after this first evening prayer. Christmas Day, the 25th of December, is traditionally anticipated with the celebration of Eucharist during the night or Midnight Mass (*Missa in nocte*); the celebration of Eucharist Mass at dawn (*Missa in aurora*); and Mass during the day (*Missa in die*). As this festive season continues, it is punctuated with other major feasts, such as: the Feast of the Holy Family (the Sunday after Christmas, or, if there is no Sunday within eight days of Christmas, on December 30), the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1), Epiphany of the Lord (January 6 or, in our country, on the Sunday that falls between January 2 and January 8), and the Baptism of the Lord on the following Sunday (or the day after Epiphany), which brings the season of Christmas to a close.

Let’s explore these feasts that mark our Christmastide, so that we may better appreciate the Christmas message of God’s love for us.

In Canada, Christmas Day (December 25) and the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1) are holy days of obligation.

¹ *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* (1969) in The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), #33, p. 176.

Christmas is... The Nativity of the Lord

Beginning with Evening Prayer 1 on Christmas Eve, we begin to celebrate the great act of God's love: that God should choose to become human, the Word-made-Flesh, in order to save us. As Adolf Adam wrote:

God was mighty enough to become weak, weak as only a newborn child is. God exchanged a heavenly realm for the wretchedness of humanity in order to present us with God's visible proximity and intimacy.... This God who became human wished to walk the human path in order to show us the path of true humanity.²

The Solemnity of Christmas, this feast which commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, is a celebration of the fulfilment of the prophecy found in the *Book of the Prophet Isaiah*: "the virgin shall be with Child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-with-us'." (Isaiah 7:14) This celebration is not simply a marking of an historical event, but it celebrates and invites us to participate in this great mystery of the Incarnation: that God would choose to become a human being while remaining God, the Word-made-flesh: Jesus Christ. God unites God's very person with us, so that we may come know God's love for us and share in the divine nature: our salvation through Jesus Christ.

It has been a long standing tradition to celebrate Mass at night, or Midnight Mass. It is amazing to see so many people come to worship the Lord at this unusual hour. Perhaps it is an expression of the way in which God acts, something so remarkable: God chooses to become one with us. The Word, which issued from the mouth of the Father and created the heavens and earth, chooses to become a vulnerable infant! In this turning upside-down all our expectations of how God should act, we respond by coming to Mass in the middle of the night: a beloved turning upside-down of our schedules in order to join our hearts and voices in a unified act of thanksgiving, the Eucharist, to welcome Christ among us.

This celebration of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is a paradox that we continue to celebrate with Mass at dawn and during the day: "God's own Son is born to make known to us the unseen God. He is to die on the cross, be gloriously resurrected, and communicate to us the fullness of life."³ Today is born our Saviour, Christ the Lord!

² Adolf Adam, *The Key to Faith: Meditations on the Liturgical Year*. Trans. Patrick Madigan, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 22.

³ *Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year*. Volume 1: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 220.

Christmas is...The Holy Family

A recently established feast (instituted by Pope Leo in 1893, and entered into the universal calendar by Pope Benedict XV in 1921), the Feast of the Holy Family is celebrated on the Sunday after Christmas (or on December 30 if there is no Sunday between December 25 and January 1).⁴

Let us reflect on the Opening Prayer for Mass on this day:

Father, help us to live as the holy family,
united in respect and love.
Bring us to the joy and peace of your eternal home.⁵

The prayer petitions God, the Father, for assistance. We all belong to a family: big or small, children of our own, adults with aging parents, single parents raising little ones, orphans, and childless couples. We are all members of the human family. The struggles of family life, especially with the pressures and stresses of day-to-day life and certain elements of our contemporary society, which consciously or unconsciously erode the fabric of family life, make it difficult at times to support vibrant and healthy familial relationships. And so we petition God to help us.

We see in the Holy Family: Jesus, Mary and Joseph, a model of family life that is open and trusting in God's will, even in the midst of great struggle. Our prayer highlights the importance of unity in respect and love. These qualities are the backbone of human life and flourishing. As all relationships are called to be built upon these two, fundamental building blocks which foster communion with one another, so too do they give us a foretaste of the divine communion with God that we are being drawn into more and more.

The petition concludes with a prayer for our final end in the heavenly home of God. This home is marked with peace and joy. Our own homes and communities, when they foster respect, love, and trust in God's goodness, already express a bit of the peace and joy of our final homecoming in heaven. As we participate in the festive liturgy this day and listen to the readings, let us be open to God's Spirit in our families, so that each Christian home may radiate Christ's light to the world.

⁴ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year. Volume 1: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 221-2.

⁵ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, The Roman Missal: Sacramentary. (Ottawa: CCCB Publications Service, 1983), 126.

Christmas is...Mary, Mother of God

On the eighth day after Christmas, January 1, we celebrate the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, and “proclaim the Virgin Mary to be the mother of Christ and the mother of the Church”.⁶ On this day, we continue in the Church’s long-standing tradition of honouring Mary, the mother of Jesus, with the title: Mother of God.

This young woman, who said yes to be a unique instrument in God’s hands, gave birth to the one who saves the world from sin and death: Jesus, the Christ. Mary was chosen to conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Saviour, even in her virginal state. As affirmed in the Council of Ephesus, ‘the Virgin Mary is Mother of God “because she bore according to the flesh the Word of God made flesh”...[an affirmation which] rightly makes the divine motherhood of Mary the corollary of the incarnation of the Son of God.’⁷

By honouring Mary as the Mother of God, we are giving praise and glory to God by recognizing that this feast points to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. In the Letter to the Galatians, we read: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (v.4). This expresses the great event that Mary participates in by uniquely being the mother of the Lord, and therefore, the Mother of God.

But the passage continues: “in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (vv.5-7) Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection open the path of salvation. By coming to us and sharing our humanity through his birth, and by raising this humanity to the Father through his resurrection, all those baptised into this great mystery become co-heirs to Christ’s sonship, that is, we become sons and daughters of God the Father through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Blessed Virgin Mary as Mother of Jesus, the Son of God, becomes our mother, too! By uniting to him, we are given a Mother: “In her we salute the one who is blessed among all women, perfect model not only of all the blessed of God, but of the whole Church, of which she is the greatest icon. In bearing the Saviour, she gave us the one who makes us sons [and daughters] of God, heirs by the grace of the kingdom, who cry out to the Father by calling him “Abba!”⁸ Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

⁶ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, The Roman Missal: Sacramentary. (Ottawa: CCCB Publications Service, 1983), 135.

⁷ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year. Volume 1: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 243.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

Christmas is...the Epiphany of the Lord

Traditionally celebrated on January 6th, the feast of Epiphany in the Roman Catholic calendar may also be celebrated on the first Sunday after January 1st. This feast finds its origins as the original celebration of Christmas in the Churches of the Christian East. Epiphany from the Greek “*epiphania*” means appearance or revelation, especially of the Divine.⁹ When this feast was adopted in the Christian West, it focused on the revelation of Jesus as Saviour of the world.¹⁰ His coming was not only to save the people of Israel, but that he has come as the Messiah and King of all people.

On this day, we recall the story of the wise men, or Magi, who, led by a star, visit the Holy Family and upon meeting them, pay the infant Jesus homage. (cf. Matthew 2:1-12) It is a sign that Jesus will be the king of all nations: good news for the entire earth.

This feast, like all the celebrations of the Christmas season, is not simply a commemoration of an historical event. More importantly, through celebrating the Feast of Epiphany, the timeless message of salvation first expressed through the manifestation of God’s presence as the Christ Child to the Magi continues to be a manifestation of the same message to all people: “as revelation of God and of his plan of salvation, and through our celebration of this feast, we continue to enter into their grace and power for the salvation of the world.”¹¹

The Church celebrates the mystery proclaimed through the Feast of Epiphany as “a living reality of salvation in today’s world and in the Church, which has been given the mission of announcing and opening the way to it.”¹² Not unlike the star that led the wise men to the manger in Bethlehem, we ask God to lead us to God’s “glory in heaven by the light of faith.”¹³

⁹ Adolf Adam, The Key to Faith: Meditations on the Liturgical Year. Trans. Patrick Madigan, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year. Volume 1: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 253.

¹² *Ibid.*, 262.

¹³ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, The Roman Missal: Sacramentary. (Ottawa: CCCB Publications Service, 1983), 144.