

THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

When we hear tell of the birth of Christ, let us be silent and let the Child speak. Let us take his words to heart in rapt contemplation of his face. If we take him in our arms and let ourselves be embraced by him, he will bring us unending peace of heart. This Child teaches us what is truly essential in our lives. He was born into the poverty of this world; there was no room in the inn for him and his family. He found shelter and support in a stable and was laid in a manger for animals. And yet, from this nothingness, the light of God's glory shines forth. From now on, the way of authentic liberation and perennial redemption is open to every man and woman who is simple of heart. This Child, whose face radiates the goodness, mercy and love of God the Father, trains us, his disciples, as Saint Paul says, "to reject godless ways" and the richness of the world, in order to live "temperately, justly and devoutly" (Tit 2:12).

(Pope Francis, Homily, Christmas Eve, 2016)

**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth;
we have beheld His glory. [Jn1 14]**

Many people wrongly regard Christmas as the highlight of the liturgical year. They invest much time and resources in preparing for a single day of celebration. The Church however observes an Octave of Christmas until January 1 (after the Jewish practice of an 8 day celebration) and an extended Christmastime until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Christmas combines the celebration of all three epiphanies ('showing forths' or manifestations) of Christ – his epiphany to the Magi at his birth, his epiphany to St John the Baptist at his baptism in the Jordan and his epiphany to the disciples and the opening of his public ministry by the miracle of Cana. Although the liturgy and the decorations of Christmas Day focus on the historical birth of Christ, the meaning of the celebration is wider, concentrating on how Jesus fulfilled past prophecies and showing how his incarnation dignifies all humanity. The quiet prayer of the deacon/priest at the offertory at Mass, as he mixes the chalice, teaches us much about the feast. 'By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.'

The Christmas Crib

The preparation of the crib, in which children play a significant role, is an occasion for the members of the family to come into contact with the mystery of Christmas, as they gather for a moment of prayer or to read the biblical accounts of the Lord's birth. In its present form the custom of displaying figures depicting the birth of Christ was influenced by St Francis of Assisi's crib in Greccio in 1223.

'At Midnight Mass, an event of major liturgical significance and of strong resonance in popular piety, the following could be given prominence: '— at the end of Mass, the faithful could be invited to kiss the image of the Child Jesus, which is then placed in a crib erected in the church or somewhere nearby.' [The Directory on Popular Piety].

In setting up the crib, care must be taken to locate it in such a manner that it does not impede the altar or produce an obstacle to movements, while at the same time making it easily accessible for devotional visits.

The blessing of the Christmas manger may take place on the vigil of Christmas or at another suitable time. A prayer of blessing of a Christmas crib, tree and other Christmas blessings and prayers, may be found in 'Further Resources'.

The Christmas Tree

For many people, the Christmas tree is only a seasonal decoration. To Christians it symbolises the green of hope at a time of dying, the burning light of Christ at a time of spiritual darkness and the fruits of paradise, a theme of the medieval mystery plays. Its origin as a Christian symbol may trace to an historical event. In 722AD when St Boniface evangelised the Germanic tribes he chopped down their sacred oak tree of Thor in the forest of Geismar to prove the impotence of their god. Legend has it that as the oak split a fir tree sprang from its centre and Boniface told the people to take it home and put gifts under it. Boniface used the evergreen as a symbol of the eternity of the true God.

Although the primary place for the Christmas tree is the home, it may also be placed in church. In such a case, the decoration of the tree should be appropriate to its use in church and care should be taken that it does not interfere with the requirements of the liturgical space. You will find a Christmas Tree blessing in Appendix Eight.

The Epiphany of the Lord

The Western Church began celebrating the Epiphany in the 4th century where it was, and still is, associated with the visit of the Magi (wise men or kings) to the infant Jesus when God revealed himself to the world through the wonder of the incarnation of Jesus. The Magi (traditionally named Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar) found Jesus by following a star across the desert to Bethlehem. In the gospel according to Matthew, they offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matt 2:11). These gifts were symbolic of the importance of Jesus' birth, the gold representing his royal standing; frankincense his divine birth; and myrrh his mortality. The word *Epiphany* comes from a Greek verb meaning "to reveal", and the feast is celebrated on 6 January (twelve days after Christmas) but, in most countries and dioceses, the celebration is transferred to the Sunday between 2 January and 8 January, inclusive.

The Orthodox Church celebrates Epiphany as a season, not simply a day. The Epiphany season is seen as a continuation of the Christmas season, and together they last forty days. The three main events focused on during the Epiphany season are the visit of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and Jesus' miracle at the marriage at Cana – three manifestations, or showings, of who Jesus is.

The Ceremonial of Bishops suggests that there be a 'suitable and increased display of lights' today. It also suggests 'a special presentation of the gifts.' After the gospel of the day, the deacon or a cantor may sing the table of moveable feasts for this year. The text and a musical tone are provided in the missal (p.1505)

The Epiphany Blessing of Homes

A tradition associated with Epiphany is the blessing of homes with holy water and incense. Using blessed chalk, a parent or priest can mark the inside of the main door of the house with the initials of the Magi and a code of the current year connected with crosses: 20+C+M+B+18. Another explanation of the initials (C-M-B) are the first letters of the blessing: *Christus mansionem benedicat* ('May Christ bless the house'). An Epiphany Blessing of Homes will be found in 'Further Resources'.

