

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS INTRODUCTION

EJBS: The Twelve Days of Christmas is probably the most misunderstood part of the church year among Christians who are not part of liturgical church traditions. Contrary to much popular belief, these are not the twelve days *before* Christmas, but in most of the Western Church are the twelve days from Christmas until the beginning of Epiphany which is January 6th; the 12 days count from December 25th until January 5th.

In some traditions, the first day of Christmas begins on the evening of December 25th but the following day is considered the First Day of Christmas (December 26th). The origin of the Twelve Days is complicated, and is related to differences in calendars, church traditions, and ways to observe this holy day in various cultures.

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.

In some cultures, especially Hispanic and Latin American culture, January 6th is observed as Three Kings Day, or simply the Day of the Kings. Even though December 25th is celebrated as Christmas in these cultures, January 6th is often the day for giving gifts. In some places it is traditional to give Christmas gifts for each of the Twelve Days of Christmas.

The Twelfth Night is January 5th, the last day of the Christmas Season

before Epiphany (January 6th). In some church traditions, January 5th is considered the eleventh Day of Christmas, while the evening of January 5th is still counted as the Twelfth Night, the beginning of the Twelfth day of Christmas the following day. Twelfth Night often included feasting along with the removal of Christmas decorations. French and English celebrations of Twelfth Night included a King's Cake, remembering the visit of the Three Magi, and ale or wine; in our country a King's Cake is part of the observance of Mardi Gras in French Catholic culture of the Southern USA.

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MONICA: The popular song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is usually seen as simply a nonsense song for children. However, some have suggested that it is a song of Christian instruction dating to the 16th century religious wars in England, with hidden references to the basic teachings of the faith. They contend that it was a method of teaching the catechism to youngsters.

The "true love" mentioned in the song is not an earthly suitor, but refers to God. The "me" who receives the presents refers to every baptized person who is part of the Christian Faith. Each of the "days" represents some aspect of the Christian Faith that was important for children to learn.

However, many have questioned the historical accuracy of this origin of the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. It seems that some have made an issue out of trying to debunk this as an "urban myth," some in the name of

historical accuracy and some out of personal agendas. There is little "hard" evidence available either way. Some church historians affirm this account as basically accurate, while others point out apparent historical discrepancies. However, the "evidence" on both sides is mostly in logical deduction and probabilities.

It is certainly possible that this view of the song is legendary or anecdotal. Without corroboration and in the absence of "substantive evidence," we probably should not take rigid positions on either side and turn the song into a crusade for personal opinions. That would do more to violate the spirit of Christmas than the song is worth. So, for the sake of historical accuracy, we need to acknowledge this uncertainty.

However, on another level, this uncertainty should not prevent us from using the song in celebration of Christmas. Many of the symbols of Christianity were not originally religious, including even the present date of Christmas, but were appropriated from contemporary culture by the Christian Faith as vehicles of worship and proclamation.

Perhaps, when all is said and done, historical accuracy is not really the point. Perhaps more important is that Christians can celebrate their rich heritage, and God's grace, through one more avenue this Christmas. Now, when they hear what they once thought was a secular "nonsense song," they will be reminded in one more way of the grace of God working in transforming ways in their lives and in our world. After all, is that not the meaning of Christmas anyway?