

Canada's two Holydays of Obligation (December 25 and January 1) are observed during the Christmas season.

CHRISTMAS TREE

The Christmas tree probably originated from popular mediaeval religious plays. It was introduced to Canada around the end of the 18th century. Primarily a tradition for the home (although it is often used in the decoration of churches) it has a deep Christological significance: Christ is the true tree of life, born of human stock, of the Virgin Mary, the tree which is always green and productive.

CHRISTMAS CRIB

The Christ Child in the manger and other pictures of the story of Bethlehem has been used in church services from the first centuries. But the crib in its present form and its use outside the church originated with St. Francis of Assisi (+1226). It is a favourite part of home Christmas decoration.

The crib unites the gospel stories of Luke (angels and shepherds) and Matthew (magi) along with images from the Old Testament (manger and animals). Aspects of national and family traditions are often included in the design of the manger scene.

In the parish church, the crib is ideally set up outside the sanctuary area. It is never placed under or near the altar but may provide an important focus for the decoration of the building.

CHRISTMAS LIGHT

From the end of Advent through the Baptism of the Lord, houses and Christmas trees are usually illuminated.

From its Roman origin in the northern hemisphere of the earth during a season in which the days' light is becoming longer, Christmas also is a festival of light: "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (*Jn* 1.5). Following the ris-

ing star, from East to Jerusalem, magi were guided to the newly-born Jesus, "the Light of the world"; whoever follows him "will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (*Jn* 8.12).

BLESSING OF FAMILIES

Many places have a tradition of blessing families on New Year's Day or on the feast of the holy Family. This is an especially important tradition in French speaking Canada.

Some parishes include an aspect of this at the New Year's or Holy Family liturgy.

BLESSING OF HOMES

Epiphany is often associated with the blessing of homes. The tradition includes inscribing the door frame with the Cross of salvation, with the indication of the year and the initials of the three wise men (C.M.B for Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, their legendary names in the West since the 7th century). It expresses the blessing of Christ through the intercession of the three wise men and is an occasion for gathering offerings for charities and missionaries.

*How wonderful a transformation,
how mysterious a design,
how inconceivable a blessing!
The wickedness of the many
is covered up in the holy One,
and the holiness of One
sanctifies many sinners.*

Letter to Diognetus

Celebrating the Season of Christmas Liturgical Leaflet edited by the National Liturgy Office, and published by Publications Service, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2500 Don Reid Drive, Ottawa, ON. K1H 2J2 Canada. Copyright © Concacan Inc., 2006. All rights reserved. This text may be reproduced for personal or parish use. For commercial licence, please contact the publisher.

CELEBRATING THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Christ is born for us!

National Liturgy Office
CCCB
2500 Don Reid Drive
Ottawa, ON. K1H 2J2 Canada
Copyright © Concacan Inc., 2006
E-mail: liturgy@cccb.ca
Phone: 1-613.241.9461 Ext. 223



The Christmas season celebrates the mystery of the Incarnation and the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world: past, present and future.

The mystery and feast of Christmas (the Nativity of the Lord) is second only to Easter in the liturgical life of the Church. The Christmas season begins after evening prayer on December 25th and continues through the Baptism of the Lord. The first week of the season is the octave of Christmas which closes on the feast of the Mother of God. Some cultures preserve the traditions of “Twelve Days” for the celebration, extending Christmas Day through Epiphany.

For many years the Christmas season did not so much end as peter out; technically it lasted until February 2nd (then called the Feast of the Purification) even though the time “after Epiphany” had already begun. The Baptism of the Lord was added to the calendar in 1960 as part of the reforms of Blessed John XXIII. Celebrated on January 13th it was fixed as the end of the Christmas season. This feast is now celebrated on the Sunday (sometimes the Monday) after Epiphany and brings the season to a close; Ordinary Time begins.

Although not part of the Christmas season, February 2nd (the Presentation of the Lord) and March 25th (the Annunciation) continue the celebration of the mystery of Christmas during the year.

*Today true peace came down to us from heaven.
Today a new day dawns,
the day of our redemption,
prepared by God from ages past,
the beginning of our never ending gladness.*

(Christmas Responsory)

ASPECTS OF THE SEASON

Christmas is a season of feasts. Some are celebrations of various aspects of the mystery of the Nativity, while others are feasts in their own right that are as old as, or older than the Christmas feast itself. Unlike the days immediately after Easter (the octave or eight days), the period after Christmas sees the inclusion of many and varied celebrations.

These feasts reflect on various facets of the Christmas event.

Holy Innocents: reflecting *Mt* 2.13-18, December 28th.

Holy Family: on the Sunday after Christmas or December 30th. The newest of the seasonal feasts, included in the calendar in 1921.

Solemnity of Mary: January 1st has supported a varied number of titles including the civil New Year. It has commemorated the Circumcision (and Naming) of Jesus and been simply the “Octave Day” of Christmas. The celebration of Mary brings the day to the earliest of her titles and the oldest feast in honour of the Mother of God.

Holy Name of Jesus: January 3rd

Epiphany: a feast from the Eastern Churches and the original Eastern celebration of Christ’s birth. It now commemorates the “manifestation” of Christ to the nations and is kept on January 6th or the first Sunday after January 1st. The liturgical texts centre on the magi, but include as well references to Jesus’ baptism and his first miracle at Cana as images of his appearance to the world, event that are celebrated.

Baptism of the Lord: Jesus begins his saving work; the Sunday (or Monday) after Epiphany.

Other Feasts:

26th St. Stephen, first Christian martyr

27th St. John, apostle, evangelist

And in some places:

29th St. Thomas Becket, martyr, bishop

31st St. Sylvester, pope

THE CHRISTMAS READINGS

The readings for the three Masses of Christmas have formed part of the liturgy of the day by long tradition.

The Mass at Midnight originates from the 5th century celebration in the “cave” chapel at St. Mary Major in Rome.

The Dawn service (sometimes called the Mass of the Shepherds) originated from a service to honour the Byzantine Greeks who lived in Rome and was celebrated in their church of St. Anastasia.

The Day Mass is the oldest and original celebration and centres on the reading of John’s Prologue and the light that comes into the world.

Texts for the Vigil Mass (celebrated in the evening before the Night service) are also included in the Missal.

Mediaeval writers saw in the three Masses of Christmas a reflection of Jesus’ threefold birth or coming:

Jesus as the eternal Word of the Father (coming in eternity), as Son of Mary (coming in time), and his birth (coming) today in the hearts of believers.

Holy Family reflects on Jesus’ childhood and family life.

The Solemnity of Mary speaks of the mystery of her motherhood and the naming of Jesus.

Epiphany reflects on the universal call to salvation.

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAYS offer a semi-continuous reading of the First Letter of John traditionally associated with the Christmas season. The gospels present the manifestations of the Lord: his childhood (*Luke*), the signs of the Gospel of *John* and miracles in the other Gospels.

Bethlehem itself reflects the richness of the season. It means “house of bread” and reminds us of Jesus, the Bread of Life whose Nativity we celebrate.