



When do the 12 Days of Christmas begin?



The 12 Days of Christmas are now most famous as a song about someone receiving lots of presents from their 'true love'. While historically, the 12 Days have been celebrated in Europe since before the Middle Ages, few people really have the answer to: “When do the 12 Days of Christmas begin?”

The 12 Days of Christmas start on Christmas Day and last until the evening of the 5th January - also known as Twelfth Night.

The 12 Days each traditionally celebrate a feast day for a Saint and/or have different celebrations:

Day 1 (25th of December): Christmas Day - celebrating the Birth of Jesus, the Christ.

Day 2 (26th of December also known as Boxing Day in England): Feast of St Stephen. He was the first Christian martyr.

Day 3 (27th of December): Feast of St John the Apostle and Evangelist.

Day 4 (28th of December): The Feast of the Holy Innocents – commemorating the Jewish male children slain by King Herod (two years older and under) in Bethlehem and its vicinity; after he had been told by the Magi of the birth of a king of the Jews. (Matthew 2)

Day 5 (29th of December): The Memorial of St. Thomas Becket; Archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered on 29th December 1170, for challenging the King Henry II’s authority over the Church.

Day 6 (30th of December): Within the Octave of the Nativity.

Day 7 (31st of December): Within the Octave of the Nativity; sometimes celebrated as the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Joseph and Mary (usually the Sunday immediately following Christmas Day).

Day 8 (1st of January): 1st January – The Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Day 9 (2nd of January): The Memorial of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Nazianzen, bishops and doctors of the Church; considered great teachers, writers and scholars in the early 4th century Church.

Day 10 (3rd of January): The Memorial of the Holy Name of Jesus. This remembers when Jesus was officially 'named' in the Jewish Temple.

Day 11 (4th of January): The Memorial of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American saint, who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries and founded the first congregation for women religious in the U.S., the Sisters of Charity.

Day 12 (5th of January): The Memorial of St. John Neumann who was the first Bishop in American in the 19th century.

(NB: The Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord is generally celebrated on the next Sunday.)

Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night was a big time of celebration with people holding large parties. During these parties, often the roles in society were reversed with the servants being served by the rich people.

At the start of Twelfth Night the Twelfth Night cake was eaten. This was a rich cake made with eggs and butter, fruit, nuts and spices. The modern Italian Panettone is the cake, we currently have that's most like the old Twelfth Night cake.

A dried pea or bean was cooked in the cake. Whoever found it was the Lord (or Lady) of Misrule for night. The Lord of Misrule led the celebrations and was dressed like a King (or Queen). This tradition goes back to the Roman celebrations of Saturnalia. In later times, from about the Georgian period onwards, to make the Twelfth Night 'gentile', two tokens were put in the cake (one for a man and one for a women) and whoever found them became the 'King' and 'Queen' of the Twelfth Night party.

During the Twelfth Night, it was traditional for different types of pipes to be played, especially bagpipes. Lots of games were played including ones with eggs. These included tossing an egg between two people moving further apart during each throw - drop it and you lose; and passing an egg around on spoons.!

The first Monday after the Christmas feast has finished was known as 'Plough Monday' as this was when farming work would all begin again!

Twelfth Night is also known as Epiphany Eve. In many countries, (following the recorded scriptural writings of Christmas) it's traditional to then place the figures of the Wise Men or Three Kings into the Nativity Scene on Epiphany Eve ready to celebrate Epiphany on the 6th of January. [Remember, the Wiseman did not arrive until after Jesus' birth – they saw and followed the Star until it came to rest over the crèche where they found the Christ child.]

It's also traditional to take your Christmas decorations down following Twelfth Night [in other words, after the Epiphany. Additionally, in many Eastern Rites to this day, (again following the recorded scriptural writings of Christmas) gifts are not exchanged between people until the day the Epiphany is celebrated.]