

Question 202

What are some Catholic Christmas traditions?

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226AD) created the Christmas crèche or nativity set to help people who might never have a chance to visit the Holy Land and see Bethlehem in person. Typically, the manger is set up a day or two before Christmas and on Christmas Eve; all the figures are placed inside except the baby Jesus, which is carried in and placed in the manger during the procession at midnight Mass when the crèche is blessed.

The pope has a custom in Rome of blessing the images of the baby Jesus which the youngest child in each home brings to Mass at the Vatican on Gaudete Sunday (third Sunday of Advent). They then go home and wait for Christmas when the infant can be placed in the family nativity set at home.

The song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" originated in England during the reign of Elizabeth I when Catholics were persecuted for their religion. There are twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany. The song uses symbols which at first glance seem nonsensical but were actually a secret code used to teach the Catechism to Catholic children in England when it was illegal to do so. The "True Love" referred to in the song ("On the first day of Christmas, my True Love gave to me...") is God the Father.

The "partridge in a pear tree" is **Jesus Christ**.

The "two turtle doves" are the **Old and New Testaments of the Bible**.

The "three French hens" are the **three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love**.

The "four calling birds" are the **four Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John**.

The "five gold rings" are the **first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch**.

The "six geese a-laying" refer to the **six days of Creation**.

The "seven swans a-swimming" are the **seven sacraments**.

The "eight maids a-milking" are the **eight Beatitudes**.

The "nine ladies dancing" are the **nine choirs of angels**.

The "ten lords a-leaping" are the **Ten Commandments**.

The "eleven pipers piping" are the **eleven faithful apostles**.

The "twelve drummers drumming" are the **twelve doctrines in the Apostles' Creed**.

Christmas trees originated in Germany in 1521. A priest put an evergreen tree into the church to represent the gift of Christ, which is always present (evergreen) not just at Christmas, but all year round. There is a legend that a monk in seventh-century Germany used the triangular shape of the fir tree to explain the Holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit).

On Christmas Eve, Polish Catholics use the Oplatek, which is a rectangular wafer of bread that is broken into pieces and given to each member of the family with a blessing.

Hispanic Catholics have a Christmas custom of Las Posadas, a reenactment of the journey of Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary looking for a place to stay as Mary was about to give birth to Jesus.

- From "The Catholicism Answer Book - The 300 Most Frequently Asked Questions"