

## Thoughts for an *Extraordinary* Christmastide

**The Vigil of Christmas** (a.k.a Christmas Eve Day): The word “Vigil” in the tradition of the Roman Rite refers to a day of proximate preparation which immediately precedes a feast day, and which is generally penitential in character. The Mass of this preparation day is properly the Vigil Mass of the feast. 24 December, the day always preceding the Feast of Christmas, is such a day of preparation and is titled in the Missal as: “The Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord” (“*In vigilia Nativitatis Domini*”). In 1962, this day was observed as a day of fasting and abstinence (unless it falls on a Sunday).

- **The Office of Prime and the Christmas Proclamation:** During the Office of Prime in the morning of the Vigil of Christmas, the Christmas Proclamation is solemnly proclaimed during the reading of the Martyrology (a book which contains many of the Saints who are associated with each given day). While most of the Proclamation is sung in the Prophecy Tone at a usual pitch, the words “in Bethlehem of Juda, is born of the Virgin Mary, being made Man” are sung a fourth higher while all kneel to reverence the mystery being proclaimed. The final line, however, of the Proclamation – “THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE FLESH” – is sung in a tone similar to that used by the Narrator during the Passions in Holy Week. In this way, the Liturgy is looking forward from Christmas to Holy Week and Easter and indicating that Christ came into this world to suffer and to die for our salvation.
- **Mass of the Vigil of Christmas:** The Gospel of the Mass relates the story of the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream and revealing the mystery of the Incarnation (Mat 1:16-21).

## Christmastide

**Name:** The word “Christmas” comes from the combining of the two late Old English words “*Cristes Maesse*” or “the Mass of Christ.” The Masses of 25 December are especially remembered as the Masses of Christ because they celebrate His births. There are other feasts (such as Candlemas, the Feast of the Purification, on 2 February and Michaelmas, the Feast of St. Michael, on 29 September) whose names are formed in the same manner. The Latin name of the feast on 25 December is “*Nativitas Domini*,” the Nativity, or Birthday, of the Lord. In the Romance languages the name of this day is derived from the Latin (e.g. Noel in French and Navidad in Spanish).

**Length:** Christmastide begins on Christmas Day, 25 December, and ends on 2 February, the Feast of the Purification, which is the last day on which the Christmas Preface is recited. This means Christmastide is 40 days long. Because of its length, the season of Septuagesima often overlaps with Christmastide.

**Divisions:** Christmastide has several divisions within it:

- The 12 Days of Christmas are from 25 December to 5 January inclusively. During this time the Christmas Preface is said.
  - Within the 12 Days is the Octave of Christmas from 25 December to 1 January.
- Epiphanytide, along with Time after Epiphany, have their own write-up.

## Christmas and its 12 Days

**Date and Day of Christmas:** Christmas is celebrated on 25 December, which is determined by counting nine months from 25 March on which day tradition states that Our Lord was incarnated in the womb of Mary and on which Our Lord also died. It is a Jewish tradition that prophets always die on the day of their conception or birth and the early Christians held that Christ's conception and death were on the same day, thus placing His birth in December. The celebration of Christmas is not fixed to one day of the week but traverses the days of the week from year to year. As such, each day of the week is sanctified by the celebration of Christmas.

**Matins:** During the evening of 24 December, Christmas Matins is traditionally chanted. Matins is the First Hour in the Divine Office. Christmas Matins contains nine Psalms and three sets of three readings. The last three readings are commentaries on the Three Gospels of the Day.

**Three Masses:** Three Masses are said on Christmas Day. Each Mass has its own chants, prayers, and readings. The practice of having three Christmas Masses originated in Jerusalem.

- The First Mass is the Midnight Mass and its theme is the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. It is held that Christ was born in Bethlehem at midnight.
- The Second Mass is the Dawn Mass or the Mass of the Aurora and its theme is the birth of Christ in the soul by grace which is expressed by the visit of the shepherds in the Gospel. This Mass is also called "the Shepherds' Mass" on this account. In this second Mass there is a commemoration of St. Anastasia who is a Martyr-Widow. By this commemoration, the Church joins the Virginité of Mary with the Martyr-Widowhood of Anastasia to show that married life is not to be excluded from the blessings brought by the coming of Christ.
- The Third Mass is the Day Mass and its focus is on the eternal generation (birth) of the Son, true God from true God, from the Father.

**The Octave Day of Christmas (1 January):** Formerly in Rome, two Masses were said on this day. One Mass, the Octave of the Lord, commemorated both His Circumcision and His Presentation in the Temple. The second Mass was a protest against the pagan celebrations associated with the New Year. After the February 2nd Feast of the Presentation was established at Rome, the first Mass became more focused on the Circumcision. The second Mass gradually fell into disuse. As time went on, this day, due to influence from France, received some Marian characteristics.

The remaining four days (to make a total of twelve) continue the celebration of Christmas.

**Gloria?:** Yes, and even on ferias until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord! The angels have sung the opening words of the *Gloria* to the shepherds and the Church takes up this hymn in joyful celebration of the birth of Christ.

**Liturgical Color:** The color of this season is white which expresses: (1) the gladness to which the angels invited the world, (2) the beauty of our Divine Sun that has risen in Bethlehem, (3) the spotless purity of the Virgin-Mother, and (4) the cleanheartedness which they should have who come to worship at the mystic Crib.

**Organ and Flowers?:** Yes, they have returned from their Advent absence to help the Church express her gladness during this season of joy.