

Religious Symbolism of The Twelve Days of Christmas

(The 12 Days of Christmas)

History of The Twelve Days of Christmas

By Dennis Bratcher (excerpted)

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 (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 (see Christmas). 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 (Spain: la Fiesta de Reyes, el Día de los Tres Reyes, or el Día de los Reyes Magos; Dutch: Driekoningendag). 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. Since Eastern Orthodox traditions use a different religious calendar, they celebrate Christmas on January 7th and observe Epiphany or Theophany on January 19th.

By the 16th century, some European and Scandinavian cultures had combined the Twelve Days of Christmas with (sometimes pagan) festivals celebrating the changing of the year. These were usually associated with driving away evil spirits for the start of the new year.

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 mnemonic device to teach the catechism to youngsters. The "true love" mentioned in the song is not an earthly suitor, but refers to God Himself. 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.

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. One internet site devoted to

debunking hoaxes and legends says that, “there is no substantive evidence to demonstrate that the song 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' was created or used as a secret means of preserving tenets of the Catholic faith, or that this claim is anything but a fanciful modern day speculation. . .” What is omitted is that there is no “substantive evidence” that will disprove it either

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?

For an illustrated children's version, see Helen Haidle's *“The Real 12 Days of Christmas: The Story Behind the Song”* illustrated by Celeste Hendriquez, published by Zonderkidz, ISBN 0-310-70118-X.

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1st Day: The partridge in a pear tree is Christ Jesus upon the Cross. In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge because she would feign injury to decoy a predator away from her nestlings. She was even willing to die for them. The tree is the symbol of the fall of the human race through the sin of Adam and Eve. It is also the symbol of its redemption by Jesus Christ on the tree of the Cross.

2nd Day: The “two turtle doves” refers to the two turtle doves that were brought as a sacrifice to the temple by Mary and Joseph when Jesus was forty days old. Jewish families have used turtledoves as offerings to God for hundreds of years. Luke 2:22, 24.

3rd Day: The “three French hens” represent the three gifts of the Magi (wise men): gold, frankincense, and myrrh. French hens were valuable poultry during the sixteenth century – only the rich could afford them.

4th Day: The “four calling birds” refers to the four evangelists who wrote the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—which sing the song of salvation through Jesus Christ.

5th Day: The “five golden rings” represents the first five books of the Bible, also called the Jewish Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

6th Day: The “six geese a-laying” is the six days of creation.

7th Day: The “seven swans a-swimming” refers to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. (Rom. 12:6-8)

8th Day: The “eight maids a milking” reminded children of the eight beatitudes listed in the Sermon on the Mount.

9th Day: The “nine ladies dancing” were the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

10th Day: The “ten lords a-leaping” represents the Ten Commandments.

11th Day: The “eleven pipers piping” refers to the eleven faithful apostles.

12th Day: The “twelve drummers drumming” were the twelve points of belief expressed in the Apostles’ Creed: belief in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, made man, crucified, died and arose on the third day, that he sits at the right hand of the father and will come again, the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting.