

# **The 12 Days of Christmas**

## **By: Rev. Fr. Christos P. Mars**

We are surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of Christmas. We see Christmas trees everywhere; we hear songs about Santa Claus and Frosty the Snowman; and we smell the gingerbread, candy canes, and all the foods that are made once a year during this time.

We work, wait and anticipate the magical date on the calendar of December 25<sup>th</sup>, and look forward to all the time that we spend together with friends and family.

After the great holiday of Christmas comes and goes, we think little of what is to come, except that the New Year is around the corner. We think about promises and resolutions that we will make and all the things we would like to accomplish and do in the upcoming year.

After the New Year, and all the celebrations that have taken place, we once again move on to our daily lives and routines and forget about the holiday of Christmas until the next year.

Many of us have fallen into this trap of forgetting about the real meaning of Christmas. We have forgotten that this time of year is not about giving presents, or receiving presents, or Santa Claus, the reindeer and Frosty, or all the other novelty items that are associated with Christmas. This time of year we should all be focused on one very important thing: The Birth of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ.

Without Christ's Birth, all the things that have transpired to lead us out of darkness and sin would never have happened! St. John Chrysostom says that the feast of the Nativity of Christ is the capital of feasts. All other feasts of the Lord—Epiphany, the Transfiguration, the Passion the Cross, the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ—arise from the Nativity. Without the Nativity, there would have been no Resurrection, and without the Resurrection, the purpose of the Divine Incarnation would not have been fulfilled.

All these feasts of the Lord are unified. We separate them in order to celebrate them and to look more closely into their content. But in every Divine Liturgy, we live through all the events of the Divine Incarnation, which is, according to the Fathers, always Christmas, always Easter, always Pentecost.

Each of these feasts is experienced in the Divine Liturgy. For Christmas, the imagery contained within the icon of the Nativity can easily be seen in the context of the Divine Liturgy.

The cave in which Christ was born is the Church; the manger is seen as the Altar; Joseph is the server; the magi are the clergy; the shepherds are the deacons; the angels are the priests; the Lord is the bishop; the Theotokos is the throne; the gifts of the magi are the chalices; the Incarnation is the vestments; the cherubim are the fans; the Holy Spirit is the paten; and the Father Who

overshadows all things with His power is the veil covering the paten.

At every single Divine Liturgy, we experience the whole life of Christ: from His Birth, to His Crucifixion, death, burial, Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven. Maybe that is why in the Liturgical hymns the feast of Christmas is called the Winter Pascha.

Christmas shares many characteristics with the feast of Pascha. We begin by looking at the fast period of the Church. We see the similarities between Christmas and Easter. The Church in her infinite wisdom has given us a forty-day fast period to prepare us for the upcoming feast of Christmas, similar to the one for Easter.

Other similarities between the feast of Christmas and Easter include pre-feast preparations, such as services on Christmas Eve that prepare us for the coming of Christ. There are special Royal Hours with their prophecies, Epistles, Gospels and hymns on the eve of the feast, followed by the Vespers Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. There are canons and countless hymns that continue to prepare us for the Birth of Christ. And finally, on the day of Christmas itself, we celebrate the Divine Liturgy once again and fully embrace that Christ has come in human form for the salvation of the world.

The liturgical verses and hymns for Christmas and Epiphany, the Pascha of Christ's Incarnation and manifestation in the flesh, repeat those of Easter, the Pascha of Christ's death and Resurrection. The Lord's Birth and baptism are directly connected to

His dying and rising. He was born in order to die. He was baptized in order to be raised. The harmony between these events is overwhelming, and the beauty of it is almost more than we can bear.

Jesus lay as an infant in the cave during the reign of Caesar Augustus that He might lie in the Tomb under Pontius Pilate. He was hounded by Herod that He might be caught by Caiaphas. He was buried in baptism that He might descend into death through the Cross. He was worshipped by wise men that the whole of creation might adore Him in His triumph over death. The Pascha of His Cross was prepared by the Pascha of His Coming. The Pascha of His Resurrection was begun by the Pascha of His Incarnation. The Pascha of His Glorification was foretold by the Pascha of His Baptism. This is what Christians celebrate each year in the Winter Pascha.

And this is what we need to keep in mind during this Christmas season. We need to remember that Christ came into the world for our salvation, to redeem us from the sins and the transgressions that have befallen us from the time of Adam and Eve. That is why Christ is called the new Adam, because Christ took the sins of humanity and cleansed them with His own blood. From the Gospel readings, we know that the place where Christ was crucified was called Golgotha, meaning "the place of the skull," and many times in the icon of the Crucifixion, we even see a skull at the base of Christ's Cross. But does anyone know whose skull that is? It is the skull of Adam. Through Christ's Crucifixion and His Blood, He has cleaned the sin of Adam and Eve, and given us a new chance at life.

So if Christ is the new Adam, who is the new Eve? The Theotokos is the new Eve—by accepting Christ and saying to the archangel Gabriel, “*Let it be done to me according to your word*” (Luke 1:38), she has given herself over to Christ, to His ways, and to His teachings. She has committed her whole life to Christ, and will never, ever stray away from that commitment. It is not by chance that when we pray the petition to the Theotokos during the Divine Liturgy that we ask for each of us to “*commend ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God.*” We pray that we, too, may have the same commitment as the Theotokos did, to accept Christ and to follow Him.

We can now begin to understand how important the feast of the Nativity really is. Christ, Who is the new Adam, came into the world to save humanity from its sins, and through the Theotokos, the new Eve, we accept Christ with our whole heart, our whole mind, and our whole soul.

The magi, who came to visit Christ and brought Him gifts, did so because they believed that Christ was the One of which the Prophets spoke. Christ was the One that the world was waiting for. Christ was our Lord, Who came in human form to save us from ourselves. The wise men knew this of Christ, and therefore brought Him gifts that reflected Christ’s divinity. They brought him gold, because Christ is called the King of Kings, and the gold shows His royalty. They offered frankincense because Christ is the God of Gods. Frankincense is burned in the censer before the Image of God. And the final gift that was given to Him was myrrh—because they knew that Christ was going to suffer for our salvation. Thus, even

from the time of His Birth, Christ is given gifts that prepare Him for His death and burial.

The wise men, who we incorrectly dub as the *three* wise men, came and were among the first to worship Christ along with the shepherds. We incorrectly say the three wise men because they brought with them three gifts, and thus we assume that there are only three. However, in the biblical tradition that we read in the Gospel of St. Matthew, we can clearly see that the Gospel tells us only that “*wise men from the east came*” (Matt. 2:1). It does not tell us that there were three. Nonetheless, whether there were three or thirty-three, the wise men came and worshipped Christ as God made into flesh.

With all this in mind, Christmas can now become something more than just Santa Claus, Frosty, gingerbread and candy canes. Christmas can become our understanding of how Christ came into the world as a young Child to save us from our fallen nature—all because He loves us!

A great disappointment, for me, this time of year is the day after Christmas, because most people forget about Christmas until the next year. All they look forward to is New Years, and nothing else. As Orthodox Christians, we should not forget about Christmas the day after and just look forward to the New Year, because we celebrate Christmas for twelve full days after Christmas, ending with another joyous event, the feast of Epiphany.

Many of us have heard the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Did you know it is actually a religious song? This song is

probably the most misunderstood part of the Church year, because it is **NOT** the twelve days before Christmas, but the twelve days **AFTER** Christmas.

The twelfth night is January 5<sup>th</sup>, the last day of the Christmas season before Epiphany, which is on January 6<sup>th</sup>. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is typically considered a simple, nonsense song for children. However, some have suggested that it is a song of Christian instruction, with hidden references to the basic teachings of the faith. 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. Let us look at the twelve days of Christmas and see if we, too, can see the Christian meaning in the song.

*"On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree."* The partridge in a pear tree is **Jesus Christ**, whose Birth we celebrate on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the first day of Christmas. In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge that feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings, recalling the expression of Christ's sadness over the fate of Jerusalem as told in the Gospel of St. Luke: "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered you under My wings, as a hen does her chicks..." (Luke 13:34).

*"On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me, two turtle doves."* These two turtle doves represent the **Old and New Testaments**, which together bear witness to

God's self-revelation in history and the creation of humanity.

*"On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me, three French hens."* The three French hens refer to the three theological virtues from I Corinthians: **Faith, Hope and Love**.

*"On the fourth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, four calling birds."* The four calling birds refer to the four evangelists, **Matthew, Mark, Luke and John**, who proclaim the Good News of God's reconciliation of the world to Himself in Jesus Christ.

*"On the fifth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, five golden rings."* The five golden rings refer to the first five books of the Old Testament known as the Torah or the Pentateuch (**Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy**) which give the history of humanity's sinful failure and God's response of grace in the creation of humanity to be a light to the world.

*"On the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, six geese a-laying."* The six geese refer to the passages in Genesis where we read about the **six days of creation**, and the confession of God as Creator and Sustainer of the world.

*"On the seventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me, seven swans a-swimming."* The seven swans refer to both Romans and I Corinthians, where we learn about the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit: **prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading and compassion**.

*"On the eighth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, eight maids a-milking."* The eight

maids are **the eight beatitudes** found in the Gospel of St. Matthew 5:3-11: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."*

*"On the ninth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, nine ladies dancing."* The nine ladies dancing are the nine **fruits of the Holy Spirit**, as found in Galatians: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**

*"On the tenth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, ten lords a-leaping."* The ten lords a-leaping are the **Ten Commandments**, which are in Exodus: **You shall have no other gods before me, do not make an idol, do not take the Lord's Name in vain, remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not covet.**

*"On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me, eleven pipers piping."* The eleven pipers piping refer to the **eleven faithful Disciples of Christ**, as found in the Gospel of St. Luke: **Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.** The list does not include the twelfth disciple, Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ to the religious leaders (that is why I said the *faithful Disciples*).

*"On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, twelve drummers drumming."* The

twelve drummers drumming refer to **the twelve points of the doctrine in the Creed.**

After all of this, we can truly see how one of our favorite holiday songs is actually a song with much hidden meaning and Christian teaching. Society is the same way. There is much hidden in the greeting "Happy Holidays" that society has adopted. However, the word "holiday" actually means holy day, another hidden meaning that refers back to one of the most holy days in our calendar, and that day is Christmas.

Therefore, during this holiday season remember a few important things. First, Christ is the reason that we celebrate these days; do not be fooled into thinking that we celebrate Christmas as a day that Santa Claus brings us material gifts. Christ is the One Who brings us gifts, and the gifts that He brings are Gifts that last forever. Second, when people greet you with "Happy Holidays," remember the hidden meaning, and that it refers to the Holy Day of Christ's Birth.

Finally, do not fall into the temptation to use these Holy Days as days to fall into sin. Use these days to come closer to Christ, to speak with Him and make Him a part of your life. Put Christ in the center of your life, so that when our souls are asked of us He may say, *"Well done you good and faithful servant, enter into eternal life."*

May the Birth of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ guide us and give us inspiration, fulfillment and peace in the coming year.

Merry Christmas!!! Καλά Χριστούγεννα!!!