

Eight Days of Celebration Highlight God's Presence

Kathy Kuczka

As dawn comes on December 26, many people will consider Christmas 2022 to be over. Holiday decor will be taken down, gifts will be put away, and Christmas carols played on the radio will yield to regular programming. In the Church's liturgical calendar, however, the Nativity of the Lord continues to be celebrated until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Christmas and Easter are the only solemnities with an eight-day period (or octave) of celebration and observance. The Christmas octave includes the liturgies of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day; the Feast of St. Stephen, the First Martyr, on December 26; the Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, on December 27; the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28; the optional memorial in honor of Thomas Becket, bishop and martyr, on December 29; and the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph on the Sunday within the octave, or, if there is no Sunday, on December 30.

The celebration of Christmas and the feasts in its octave, while distinct, are united.

A look at the Gospel readings during the four Christmas Masses reveals a gradual progression of the events of the birth of Christ:

- Mass at the Vigil: (Christmas Eve) Matthew 1:1–25, the genealogy of Jesus
- Mass during the Night: (Midnight Mass) Luke 2:1–14, the angels announce the birth of the Savior
- Mass at Dawn: Luke 2:14, the shepherds went to see the baby Jesus lying in the manger
- Mass during the Day: John 1:1–18; the Word was made flesh

The Gospel from John's account that is proclaimed on Christmas Day is the same Gospel that was used at the earliest Christmas liturgies and widens the focus of the solemnity. This Gospel announces that the Word has become flesh—God has become human in the person of Jesus, ushering in a new relationship between God and humankind. It reminds the faithful that Christmas is not simply an event that happened long ago, but rather an event that is happening now, in our midst. It says that God has chosen to share in the flesh of humankind and invites all humankind to share in God's divinity.

A look at the feasts that occur in the seven days immediately after Christmas bears witness to this. Most of these feasts



The days of Christmas celebrate the new relationship that God has with humankind.

honor martyrs. St. Stephen, whose feast is celebrated on the day after Christmas, was stoned to death and died praying for his persecutors. The Feast of the Holy Innocents honors those young children who were murdered under the order of King Herod the Great. The optional Memorial of Thomas Becket recognizes the archbishop of Canterbury who was executed in the Canterbury cathedral by the followers of King Henry II in 1170. From the earliest liturgical calendars, these feasts have been included in close relation to Christmas. The Church in the Middle Ages called these saints “companions of Christ,” viewing them as an honor guard for the Christ child. These saints, in imitation of Christ, offered the complete gift of themselves. United in death with Christ, they now share in his resurrection.

The observances during the octave of Christmas underscore that Christmas is not just about the birth of the baby Jesus two thousand years ago, but rather the continuation of God's plan of salvation through Jesus.

The Feast of the Holy Family and the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, on January 1, the octave day, call attention to the reality that Jesus was born from a woman into a human family, participating fully in the human condition.

The celebrations of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord point out that Christ came for all people and that the Spirit that came upon Jesus at his baptism is the same Spirit that awaits all who believe.

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