



Photo © John Zich

The faithful may see themselves in the Lukan account of the shepherds, who were amazed and spread the Word about the birth of the Savior.

# Radiant with Splendor: The Masses of Christmas

Nathan P. Chase

In the Masses of Christmas, we do not remember the celebration of Christ's incarnation and birth as a thing of the past relegated to the pages of history, but rather as an event that is as real today as it was two thousand years ago. Each Christmas, as we celebrate Christ dwelling among us, we truly experience the birth of Christ: "Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us" (entrance antiphon, Mass at Dawn). This essay will examine the origins of Christmas and then will reflect on the readings and prayer texts of the four Masses celebrating the Nativity of the Lord.

## THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS

The oldest feast of Christ's "beginnings," which include his birth, baptism, the visit of the Magi, and the wedding feast at Cana, is the Solemnity of the Epiphany. While many today see this feast as a celebration of the visit of the Magi, the older theology and celebration of Epiphany closely connected Christ's baptism with his incarnation, a connection we can still see today in the readings during the Christmas Masses. In the early Church, the celebration of Christ's baptism at Epiphany was a celebration of his "birth," or his manifestation as the messiah. Over time the connection between Christ's baptism and birth was split, especially in the West, due to the Christological controversies in the early

Church. As a result, December 25 would become a celebration of Christ's birth in Bethlehem, while Epiphany would become a celebration of his baptism and the other signs of his manifestation as the messiah.

The first record of the celebration of Christmas is documented in the Roman Chronography of 354. Given the commemorations in the document, it is clear that the feast was already being celebrated in the city of Rome by 336. From Rome, the feast spread to other parts of the West and most of the East between the 360s and the 380s.

The origins of December 25 as the celebration of Christ's nativity have been attributed to two possible explanations. The first, known as the history of religions hypothesis, holds that Christmas was established to supplant the pagan festival of the *Dies Soli Invicti* ("Birth of the Invincible Sun"). The other hypothesis, the computation hypothesis, is more complicated. It is rooted in the fact that some early Christians considered March 25 to be the date of Christ's death. For the ancients, a perfect life was symbolized by a whole number. In other words, an individual's day of conception was the same as their day of death. Since Christ must have lived a perfect life, March 25 as the day of Christ's death must also then have been the day of his conception. If March 25 was Christ's conception, then nine months later, the typical time of gestation, gave December 25 as the date of his birth. It is likely that some combination of these two hypotheses provides an explanation for the celebration of Christ's nativity on December 25.

### The Rise of Multiple Masses on Christmas

In the Roman tradition, the celebration of Christ's nativity occurs during four Masses that span from December 24 to 25. The first Mass to commemorate Christmas was celebrated on the morning of December 25, and is now known as the Mass during the Day. This Mass was established by the fourth century, as indicated by the Roman Chronography. It was also originally the only Mass for the feast.

The Masses during the Night and at Dawn were later developments that were a product of the papal stationary liturgies of the fifth and sixth centuries. By the fifth century, it appears that the Mass during the Night was added as a result of the construction of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and its grotto, which was a replica of the grotto at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The pope would travel to Santa Maria Maggiore to celebrate the night office and Mass in imitation of the liturgy being celebrated in Bethlehem. By the sixth century, the pope celebrated the Mass at Dawn at the church of St. Anastasia in Rome on his way back from Santa Maria Maggiore. The church of St. Anastasia was the imperial church of the Byzantine authorities in the city of Rome. The Mass celebrated there was in commemoration of St. Anastasia of Sirmium, an important martyr in the East whose feast day fell on December 25. While her feast was the reason for the papal visit, eventually the Mass texts used were those for Christ's Nativity.

Finally, the Vigil Mass on December 24 appears in some of the earliest Roman sacramentaries. However, over time this



The prayers and readings of Christmas highlight that God is with us now.

Mass came to be celebrated on the morning of December 24 as the last Mass during Advent. After the Second Vatican Council, the Mass on December 24 was restored as a proper evening vigil to Christmas.

## READINGS AND PRAYERS AT THE MASSES OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

### The Vigil Mass

**Readings:** *Isaiah 62:1–5 (The Lord delights in you.); Acts 13:16–17, 22–25 (Paul bears witness to Christ, the son of David.) Matthew 1:1–25 (The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David.)*

The readings of the Vigil Mass place Christ's coming within the history of Israel and the promises given to Israel through the descendants of David. First, the reading from Isaiah reveals the special relationship the Lord has with Israel, a relationship in which God calls the people "My Delight" and the land "Espoused." In the Gospel, Matthew shows the birth of Jesus as the culmination of the story of ancient Israel by setting the account of the birth of the Savior within the genealogy of Jesus. After tracing Jesus' roots from Abraham to David to "Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary," the evangelist states, "Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ." As Matthew goes on to report the account of the angel telling Joseph to take Mary into his home, we see the fulfillment of the promises given to Israel. Between these readings, the account from Acts explicitly connects the genealogy in Matthew to God's promise to send a savior from David's descendants. But the reading does not end there; it looks to the future. Noting that John the Baptist heralded Christ's coming with a baptism of repentance, this reading provides baptismal undertones to the Mass, reminding us of the importance of baptism to our salvation.

The coming of the Savior of Israel is a central message of the prayer texts for the Mass. This is clear already in the entrance antiphon: "Today you will know that the Lord will come, and he will save us, and in the morning you will see his glory." The focus on "today" points to the anamnetic reality of the day.



Photo © John Zich

The phrase “the Word became flesh” in the Communion antiphon of the Mass during the Night points to the incarnational reality of the Eucharist here and now.

We celebrate the birth of Christ as a reality that we are participating in—it is as real today as it was when Christ was born in Bethlehem. The collect also attests to the redemption we look forward to in the person of Christ:

O God, who gladden us year by year  
 as we wait in hope for our redemption,  
 grant that, just as we joyfully welcome  
 your Only Begotten Son as our Redeemer,  
 we may also merit to face him confidently  
 when he comes again as our Judge.  
 Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the  
 Holy Spirit,  
 God, for ever and ever.

Within this prayer is the twofold dimension of the season: real remembrance (not reminiscence) of Christ’s birth and our eschatological hope for redemption and Christ’s second coming. The way in which Christ’s incarnation has set in motion the redemption of all humankind is further articulated in the prayer over the offerings:

As we look forward, O Lord,  
 to the coming festivities,  
 may we serve you all the more eagerly  
 for knowing that in them  
 you make manifest the beginnings of our redemption.  
 Through Christ our Lord.

The readings and prayers for the Vigil Mass articulate the way in which Christ’s birth fulfills the promises given to Israel, thereby setting in motion the salvation of all humankind that will be fulfilled in the eschaton.

### Mass during the Night

*Readings: Isaiah 9:1–6 (A son is given to us.); Titus 2:11–14 (The grace of God has appeared to all.); Luke 2:1–14 (Today a Savior has been born for you.)*

The prayers and readings of the Mass during the Night play with the imagery of light and darkness to convey the message of the coming of Jesus. In the first reading we hear of a guiding light to a people shrouded in gloom: “The people who walked in darkness / have seen a great light; / upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom / a light has shone.” This reading speaks of Israel’s hope for a promised messiah and, aligned with the motif of fulfillment in the readings of the Vigil Mass, links the coming Savior to David’s throne. From “a child is born to us, a son is given to us,” we hear in the last verse, “from David’s throne and over his kingdom.” In the second reading, we hear of a movement from ungodliness to godliness as Titus tells of a “rejection of godless ways and worldly desires . . . to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.” The reading also furthers the double motif established at the Vigil Mass: Christ’s incarnation is redemption for us now, but we also look forward to the fulfillment of our redemption in Christ’s second coming. The Gospel account of the birth of Jesus links Jesus’ birth to David through his birth in the city of David. Moreover, the same

imagery of light and darkness that were part of the Vigil Mass pervades the Gospel account. The shepherds are watching their flocks at night when suddenly “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” We, like the shepherds, are also waiting in the night for the coming of our Savior, Jesus. The reading ends with all of the heavenly hosts singing, “Glory to God in the highest / and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

The light and darkness motif continues in the opening collect:

O God, who have made this most sacred night  
radiant with the splendor of the true light,  
grant, we pray, that we, who have known the mysteries  
of his light on earth,  
may also delight in his gladness in heaven.  
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the  
Holy Spirit,  
God, for ever and ever.

The theme of light, which runs throughout the Advent season, comes to fruition in this Mass, reaching its fulfillment in the birth of the Son of God incarnate, the light of the world. This Mass also sets the stage for the light imagery that pervades the rest of the Christmas season. Moreover, the reference to God making this sacred night radiant is a reminder that this night (December 24 into 25, 2022), is the sacred night of Christ’s birth. The collect also points to our future judgment, and the hope for our salvation. The theme of glory, which also appears throughout the readings for the Mass, finds a particularly poignant home in the Communion antiphon: “The Word became flesh, and we have seen his glory.” The use of the phrase “the Word became flesh” within the communion ritual points to the incarnational reality of the Eucharist for us here and now—the Eucharist is the prolongation of Christ’s incarnation and his dwelling with us.

## Mass at Dawn

**Readings:** *Isaiah 62:11–12 (Behold, your Savior comes!); Titus 3:4–7 (Because of his mercy, he saved us.); Gospel: Luke 2:15–20 (The shepherds found Mary and Joseph and the infant.)*

The coming of the Lord for the redemption of Israel and all humankind, first articulated by the readings of the earlier Masses, continues in the readings for the Mass at Dawn. This begins with the reading from Isaiah, which attests to the redemption of Israel. The reading from Titus is clear that Christ’s incarnation was the result of God’s mercy toward us. The reading from Titus also connects this Christmas celebration to our rebirth in baptism, which parallels what we see in the reading from Acts at the Vigil Mass. This also points back to the close connection among Christ’s incarnation, birth, and baptism in the early Church’s celebration of Epiphany. The Gospel reading continues the Lukan account of the birth of Jesus. From this passage, we hear of the shepherds meeting with the child and of their utter amazement. The reading ends with: “Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.” This reading calls us to glorify and praise God, whom we too have seen and met this day.

While the readings for this Mass do not highlight the motif of light and darkness, the prayers focus primarily on this imagery, more so even than the prayers for the Mass during the Night. The entrance antiphon sets the motif for the Mass: “Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us; / and he will be called Wondrous God, / Prince of peace, Father of future ages: / and his reign will be without end.” Here again is a reminder of our participation in the historical event of Christ’s birth. This antiphon, in fact, picks up primarily on the reading from Isaiah used in the Mass during the Night as well as the Gospel reading. The collect continues the theme of illumination and the desire that we live for the glory of God’s name:

Grant, we pray, almighty God,  
that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your  
incarnate Word,  
the light of faith, which illumines our minds,  
may also shine through in our deeds.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the  
Holy Spirit,  
God, for ever and ever.

The collect sets forth the radical life of discipleship and service that we are called to live out in our love for Christ. Not only do we celebrate Christ’s incarnation, birth, and the redemption of humanity, but we celebrate our call to participate with Christ in the redemption of ourselves and the world. Here we articulate in Christmas language our baptismal call.

Both the readings and prayers for this Mass are a continuation of the readings and prayers from the Mass during the Night. To aid the faithful’s understanding, the homilist may want to draw connections to the readings and prayers of the earlier Mass.

## Mass during the Day

**Readings:** *Isaiah 52:7–10 (All the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.); Hebrews 1:1–6 (God has spoken to us through the Son.); John 1:1–18 (The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.)*

The reading from Isaiah continues the theme of Israel’s redemption through the coming of her Savior: “Break out together in song, / O ruins of Jerusalem! / For the LORD comforts his people, / he redeems Jerusalem.” This is then directed to the whole world, which should rejoice. The reading from Hebrews continues the connection between the coming of Christ and the salvation promised to Israel. Now, however, the promise is fulfilled; what was said “in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets” has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The whole hosts of heaven and earth will also praise him in his glorification.

The relationship between the Father and the Son, proclaimed in the reading from Hebrews, is made more explicit in the reading from the prologue to the Gospel of John. The prologue is a powerful testament to the mystery of the incarnation that makes clear that the Word made flesh dwells with us.

Furthermore, this reading continues the symbolism of light—Christ is the light of the world who has come to save it—found throughout the Christmas Masses. The reading from John best brings out the prophet Isaiah’s words in the first reading that Christ is he “who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation.” Those who accept Christ will become redeemed children of God.

The restoration of humankind in the incarnation, and thus our ability to now become sons and daughters of God, is the central motif of the prayers for this Mass. This is the central message of the opening collect:

O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of  
human nature  
and still more wonderfully restored it,  
grant, we pray,  
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,  
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.  
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the  
Holy Spirit,  
God, for ever and ever.

The global reach of this message, as articulated in the readings, is further extended in the Communion antiphon: “All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” Both our ability to become children of God through Christ and the reality that this message extends to the whole world, are articulated in the prayer after Communion:

Grant, O merciful God,  
that, just as the Savior of the world, born this day,  
is the author of divine generation for us,  
so he may be the giver even of immortality.  
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

The Mass during the Day, then, makes it clear that the incarnation and birth of Christ brings with it a promise of redemption for all of humankind. Here again the language of “born this day” reminds us that today we participate in Christ’s incarnation and birth—his dwelling with us now.

What we see, then, in the readings is a progression of the story of the incarnation and its effect on the world. The Vigil Mass makes it clear that the promises given to Israel will be fulfilled in the coming of the messiah. The Mass during the Night celebrates the fact that the Savior has come to redeem humankind. The Mass at Dawn emphasizes that we should glorify God, who has fulfilled his promises to us. This promise is extended to the whole world in the Mass during the Day. All of humankind can now become children of God and so inherit eternal life. Throughout all of the Masses, we look forward in eschatological hope to our redemption and the second coming of Christ our Savior.

### **The Nativity Prefaces and the Proper Form of the Communicantes of the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I)**

*The Roman Missal* provides three prefaces from which to choose for these four Masses.

### **Preface I of the Nativity of the Lord: Christ the Light**

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,  
always and everywhere to give you thanks,  
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.

For in the mystery of the Word made flesh  
a new light of your glory has shone upon the eyes  
of our mind,  
so that, as we recognize in him God made visible,  
we may be caught up through him in love of  
things invisible.

And so, with Angels and Archangels . . .

This preface focuses on the Word made flesh and uses the motif of light and darkness. Given these motifs, it resonates most closely with the prayers and readings of the Mass during the Night, the Mass at Dawn, and the Mass during the Day.

### **Preface II of the Nativity of the Lord: The Restoration of All Things in the Incarnation**

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,  
always and everywhere to give you thanks,  
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God,  
through Christ our Lord.

For on the feast of this awe-filled mystery,  
though invisible in his own divine nature,  
he has appeared visibly in ours;  
and begotten before all ages,  
he has begun to exist in time;  
so that, raising up in himself all that was cast down,  
he might restore unity to all creation  
and call straying humanity back to the heavenly Kingdom.

And so, with all the Angels, we praise you,  
as in joyful celebration we acclaim:

This preface focuses primarily on the divine nature of Christ and Christ’s preexistence. It also points to the already-but-not-yet redemption of the world. It is a perfect fit for the Mass during the Day, given the proclamation of the reading from Hebrews and the Prologue to John at that Mass.

### **Preface III of the Nativity of the Lord: The Exchange in the Incarnation of the Word**

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,  
always and everywhere to give you thanks,  
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God,  
through Christ our Lord.

For through him the holy exchange that restores our life  
has shone forth today in splendor:  
when our frailty is assumed by your Word  
not only does human mortality receive unending honor  
but by this wondrous union we, too, are made eternal.

And so, in company with the choirs of Angels,  
we praise you, and with joy we proclaim:

This preface focuses on two related themes: restoration and union. As such, it relates well to each of the Masses for Christmas, but especially the Vigil Mass and the Mass during the Night and the Mass during the day.

### Proper Form of the Communicantes

There is also a proper form of the Communicantes of the Roman Canon that can be used for the Christmas Masses and during the octave:

Celebrating the most sacred night (day)  
on which blessed Mary the immaculate Virgin  
brought forth the Savior for this world,  
and in communion with those whose memory we venerate,  
especially the glorious ever-Virgin Mary,  
Mother of our God and our Lord, Jesus Christ,

Again, the prayer makes it evident that we participate in the incarnation and birth of Christ. Also apparent in the global reach of this event in reshaping all of human history.

### Solemn Blessings

The solemn blessing can replace the final blessing at these Masses:

May the God of infinite goodness,  
who by the Incarnation of his Son has driven darkness  
from the world  
and by that glorious Birth has illumined this most  
holy night (day),  
drive far from you the darkness of vice  
and illumine your hearts with the light of virtue.  
R. Amen.

May God, who willed that the great joy  
of his Son's saving Birth  
be announced to shepherds by the Angel,  
fill your minds with the gladness he gives  
and make you heralds of his Gospel.  
R. Amen.

And may God, who by the Incarnation  
brought together the earthly and heavenly realm,  
fill you with the gift of his peace and favor  
and make you sharers with the Church in heaven.  
R. Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,  
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
come down on you and remain with you for ever.  
R. Amen.

The solemn blessing is a wonderful summary of the themes that run throughout the Christmas Masses. Articulated in the blessing are the themes of light and darkness, the celebration of the incarnation and birth of Christ "today," the incarnation as the source of redemption, the call to spread the Gospel message

across the entire world, and the desire to become sharers in the Church in heaven. The last theme connects with our divine adoption and our looking forward to Christ's second coming.

### CONCLUSION

I am reminded of the saying of Gregory of Nazianzus: "What [Christ has not] assumed has not been healed; it is what is united to his divinity that is saved" (Ep. 101). This appears to be precisely the message of the readings and prayers for the Masses of Christmas. The incarnation is a central part of the paschal mystery and our salvation. Christmas is pointing us already to Easter—the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross. The story of Christmas as articulated in these Masses is a far departure from the idyllic picture of the cute babe wrapped in swaddling clothes in the crèche. Throughout the readings and prayers, we are reminded of the gloom and darkness of the world and the sad state of humankind. However, guided by a promise, we have also seen the most impressive of miracles: the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. The Masses of the Nativity of the Lord especially focus on Christ's dwelling among us in the here and now. In the prayers and the readings, we hear that Christ—the manifestation of the Word made flesh—is with us today. The Word made flesh, the babe of Bethlehem, has turned the darkness of the world into light, our despair into hope, and our sadness into joy. For this reason, no matter the state of our world, Christians wait in eschatological hope each year, confidently proclaiming on Christmas day, "Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us." ♦

### RESOURCES

Adam, Adolf. *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy*. Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1981.

Bradshaw, Paul F., and Maxwell E. Johnson. *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity*. Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 2011.

Connell, Martin. *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year*, vol. 1. New York: Continuum, 2006.

Righetti, Mario. *Manuale di storia liturgica*, vol. 2, "L'anno liturgico-II breviario," 3rd edition. Milan: Ancora, 1969.

NATHAN P. CHASE, PHD, is the assistant professor of liturgical and sacramental theology at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, MO. He is the author of a number of pieces in the area of liturgy, including "Pruning the Prayers: Early Medieval Liturgical Adaptation in the Hispano-Mozarabic Easter Vigil;" "Apta diei et loco: The Votive Masses in the Holy Land;" and "Crisis, Liturgy, and Communal Identity: The Celebration of the Hispano-Mozarabic Rite in Toledo, Spain as a Case Study."

**At [www.PastoralLiturgy.org](http://www.PastoralLiturgy.org)**

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL: <http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/RadiantwithSplendor.pdf>.