



'TIS THE SEASON OF SAINTS

by Rita Piro

Contrary to what marketers and corporations may imply, the actual Christmas season begins with the vigil Mass on Christmas Eve and concludes on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord on the Sunday after Epiphany. The peak of the liturgical Christmas season is Jan. 5 — Epiphany this year in the U.S. — the end of “Twelvetide,” celebrated in the popular Christmas carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Perhaps an alternative — if not also more accurate — name for a song about that same time period could be “The Twelve Feast Days of Christmas,” since the Church celebrates beyond Christmas Day, the birth of the Savior, to include several important saints, solemnities, and memorials during this period.

Exploring the Saints of the Christmas Season and Honoring Them Through Tradition



JAN. 1 MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

The Blessed Mother is honored with many feast days throughout the year, the first of which occurs on the first day of January. Originally known as the Maternity of Mary, the feast celebrates Mary's motherhood of Jesus. A 1969 revision to the liturgical calendar by Pope Paul VI replaced the Feast of the Circumcision with the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.



JAN. 4 ST. ELIZABETH ANN SETON

Born in 1774 and raised in the Episcopal Church, Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton had a privileged upbringing.

After the death of her husband, William Seton, with whom she raised five children, Seton lived and worshiped with Catholic friends and converted to Catholicism in 1805.

The Sulpicians of St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore invited Seton to join them in their mission of religious education.

Mother Seton, as she became known, is considered the founder of the Catholic school system in the United States. She was canonized in 1975 by Pope Paul VI and was the first native-born American saint of the Roman Catholic Church.



DEC. 26 ST. STEPHEN

The most famous of the first deacons appointed to aid the apostles, St. Stephen was the Church's first martyr. Acts of the Apostles 6:8 reads: “Stephen, filled with grace and power, was working great wonders and signs among the people.” The Pharisees, enemies of the followers of Jesus, accused Stephen of blasphemy and sentenced him to death by stoning. A young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus (the future St. Paul) was present when he was martyred. In many parts of the Christian world, the Feast of St. Stephen is celebrated as a public holiday.



DEC. 28 HOLY INNOCENTS

The feast of the Holy Innocents commemorates the massacre of children by King Herod in his attempt to kill the Infant Jesus (Matthew 2:16-18).

While early writings tell of thousands of baby boys being murdered by soldiers, in actuality, the number was probably much smaller as Bethlehem was a small town of people.

In some countries, the day is the similar to Halloween, where children and adults play harmless tricks and pranks, and schools and churches distribute candy and treats. In many parts of the Caribbean, Roman Catholic children have their toys blessed at local churches.



DEC. 30 ST. EGWIN

Born in the seventh century of royal blood, Egwin entered a monastery and was enthusiastically received by royalty, clergy, and the people as the bishop of Worcester, England. As a bishop, he was known as a protector of orphans and the widowed and a fair judge. Egwin founded Evesham Abbey, which became one of the great Benedictine houses of medieval England. It was dedicated to Mary, who is said to have told him where the church should be built in her honor. Egwin died at the abbey on Dec. 30, 717.



JAN. 2 STS. BASIL & GREGORY

Though more noted in the Greek Orthodox Church, Sts. Basil & Gregory are also celebrated in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran churches. While St. Benedict was the father of Western monasticism, Eastern monasticism claims Basil as its founder.

They were educated men who stood among the great orators of Christianity. Together with St. John Chrysostom, they influenced and reshaped Christian theology. The trio comprise the Three Holy Hierarchs of the Greek Orthodox Church and are honored as doctors of the Roman Catholic Church.



JAN. 5 EPIPHANY

The Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord was traditionally celebrated on Jan. 6 before being changed in 1970 to the Sunday after Jan. 1. Epiphany means manifestation. The Church celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to the whole world. The Nativity made Jesus known to only the shepherds, who were invited by the angels to meet their king. At Epiphany, Jesus is revealed to the Magi, who represent all the peoples of the earth. Outside the U.S., it is customary to exchange gifts. Children leave hay and carrots for the camels of the Three Kings, who are the gift-givers, rather than the Santa Claus.



DEC. 27 ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST

John and his older brother, James, lived in Galilee with their mother, Salome. They became disciples of Christ after witnessing John the Baptist declare, “Behold the Lamb of God!” as he saw Jesus approaching the River Jordan (John 1:36).

John never left Jesus and, along with James and Peter, was one of his three closest companions.

John, the patron of loyalty and friendship, was the only one of the apostles to die of natural causes rather than as a martyr.



DEC. 29 HOLY FAMILY

Little is known of the life of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in Nazareth. However, the primary purpose of this feast is to present the Holy Family as a model for Christian families through all of the struggles, joys, and blessings that a family shares. The Church recognizes parents as the primary teachers of the Catholic faith and honors them in this role. Just how does one live out the Church in the family? One way could be by making Christ the center of family and individual life — imitating the actions of the Holy Family.



DEC. 31 ST. SYLVESTER (OPTIONAL MEMORIAL)

At 21 years, 11 months, and one day, the papacy of Pope St. Sylvester (314-355) is one of the longest in Vatican history. During his papacy, several great churches were founded, including the Basilica of St. John Lateran. When the Gregorian calendar was reformed in 1582, the last day of the year combined the feast of St. Sylvester with New Year's Eve. Therefore, in some parts of Europe, New Year's Eve is known as Sylvester Day.



JAN. 3 MOST HOLY NAME OF JESUS (OPTIONAL MEMORIAL)

This feast is one of the many memorials the Church uses to help Catholics focus on the Lord's presence at every turn of life. The greatness of the name Jesus, which literally means “savior,” is understood in the words of St. Paul, who tells us, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth” (Philippians 2:9-11). It is in the name of Jesus that every good and holy act is committed. St. Bernard of Clairvaux encouraged devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus, noting that “to call on it calms and soothes the heart.”

