

Christmas Traditions and Prayer

Work of Christmas Begins

*"When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
to make a little music with the heart...
And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say.
Then the work of Christmas begins.*

-- Howard Thurman, adapted



Christ's Mass - Christmas - Christ's Birth - *The word 'Christmas' comes from Cristes maesse, an English phrase that means Mass of Christ.* The history of Christmas dates back over 4000 years. Many of our Christmas traditions were celebrated centuries before the Christ child was born. The 12 days of Christmas, the bright fires, the yule log, the giving of gifts, carnivals (parades) with floats, carolers who sing while going from house to house, the holiday feasts, and the church processions can all be traced back to the early Mesopotamians.

No one knows the real birthday of Jesus! No date is given in the Bible. The early Christians certainly had many arguments as to when it should be celebrated. Also, the birth of Jesus probably didn't happen in the year 1AD but slightly earlier, somewhere between 2BC and 7BC (there isn't a 0AD - the years go from 1BC to 1AD). *The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th was in 336AD* in the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine (he was the first Christian Roman Emperor). A few years later Pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th December.

Christmas is called Noel in France, which is why "Joyeux Noel" is the season's greeting in French. The word "noel" may come from "les bonnes nouvelles", meaning "the good news" (gospel is Greek for "good news"). The "First Noel" was the proclamation of the news of Christ's birth. In France children put their shoes in front of the fireplace so **Pere Noel (Father Christmas)** can fill them with gifts. Adults exchange gifts on New Year's Day.

In **Spain Navidad (Christmas)** is a season that lasts nearly a month, beginning December 8th with the feast of the Immaculate Conception (the Virgin Mary is the patron saint of Spain) and ending January 6 with Epiphany. The season emphasizes religious rather than the secular traditions celebrated so much elsewhere. Much time is spent in church. Most homes have manger. Festive aspects include special dances, bonfires and a Christmas dinner (featuring seafood). On Epiphany Eve children fill their shoes with grass, straw or grain for the camels of the Wise Men and place them on the doorstep. On the morning of Epiphany (Three Kings Day) the children find the gifts left by the Wise Men. The Wise Men play a role similar to Santa Claus — they visit hospitals, appear in parades and children write them letters requesting special gifts. The Christmas lottery in Spain is the largest in the world. The winning numbers are sung by orphan schoolchildren on December 22. Another lottery, the Christ Child, is drawn on January 7th.

In **Sweden the Christmas season begins with St. Lucia's Day** on December 13. "Lucia" is Latin for "light", and the "festival of lights" probably has its roots in Druid solstice celebrations. Homes commonly have four-candle Advent candelabras, one candle being lit on each Sunday after Advent. Saint Lucia is said to be a third century Roman Christian woman who refused to marry a pagan nobleman. The nobleman reported her adherence to the illegal Christian faith to the authorities, who killed her in prison as a result of her intransigence. Swedish girls dress in bridal white to honor Saint Lucia. St. Lucy's Day is also observed in Finland & Italy (especially in Sicily).

Italy, like Spain, emphasizes Nativity scenes and religious aspects of the season in its Christmas observances. People fast and pray prior to Christmas dinner. Epiphany is similarly the day for gifts, but the gifts are left by an elderly woman (La Befana) who had intended to help the wise men find the young Jesus — but had been busy cleaning. Children write letters to La Befana requesting toys. Dressed in black she flies on the broom she had been using for sweeping and slides down the chimney on Epiphany Eve to fill the good children's stockings with gifts and to leave a lump of coal in the stockings of bad children. A large Christmas tree is ceremoniously presented at the Vatican by the Pope, much the way the National Christmas tree presented by the American President. The Pope blesses crowds in Vatican square at noon on Christmas Day.

In **Russia Babouschka** is the name of the elderly woman who failed to provide food & shelter to the Wise Men. She wanders searching for the Christ child, leaving gifts for children. Christmas dinner is a meatless meal eaten on January 6th (Christmas by the Julian calendar) following a period of fasting. In **Ukraine** the meatless Christmas dinner is served in twelve courses to honor the 12 apostles.

In **Greece, the Feast of St. Nicholas** on December 6th is a celebration of the patron saint of sailors and fishermen. Boats are decorated with blue and white lights (colors of the Greek flag) and become places to have parties. St. Basil is the Greek "Santa Claus" (not St. Nicholas), and St. Basil's Day (January 1st) is the time for gift-giving. The main symbol of Christmas in Greek homes is a wooden bowl full of water that nurtures basil wrapped around a cross. The Christmas season ends on Epiphany (January 6th) celebrating the arrival of the Three Wise Men to Bethlehem.

In **Egypt** Christians belonging to the Orthodox Coptic Church constitute about 7% of the population. Religious holidays are determined by the Coptic calendar, which puts Christmas at January 7th. Christmas is preceded by a 43-day Advent fasting period which prohibits eating between midnight and 3pm, and in which meals are vegetarian or fish. Advent ends at Midnight Mass at Christmas. A basilica is built on a cave in which the Holy Family were believed to have stayed upon fleeing Bethlehem.

The **Ethiopian Orthodox Church** follows the Coptic calendar in celebrating Christmas on January 7th and Epiphany twelve days later. About 40% of Ethiopians are Christian. Christmas is celebrated by playing genna (a game resembling hockey) rather than by exchanging gifts. A 3-day celebration of the baptism of Jesus begins on January 19th.

The **Armenian Orthodox Church** (the world's oldest national church) not only refused to move the Nativity from January 6 to December 25, it continues to use the Julian calendar as the basis for determining religious

holidays. Thus, Christmas in Armenia is celebrated on January 19th. Armenians fast on the week preceding Christmas, avoiding meat, eggs and dairy products. On Christmas Eve children climb to rooftops where they sing Christmas carols.

Bethlehem is five miles south of Jerusalem in the Israeli-held Palestinian West Bank. There an Eastern Orthodox Shrine, the Church of the Nativity, is built on the site where Jesus was reputedly born. A cave underneath the church (the "Grotto of the Nativity") has a large silver star on the floor marking the spot where Mary was said to have given birth. The Grotto is shared by the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Armenian Church, which celebrate the Nativity on December 24, January 7 and January 18, respectively. (Although the Eastern Church accepted December 25 as the date of the Nativity in the first millennium AD, it retained the Julian calendar for calculating religious holidays, which places the Nativity on January 7th by the Gregorian calendar.)

In **Latin America** Nativity scenes rather than Christmas trees are the decorative centerpiece of **Navidad** — often containing elaborate ornaments, figurines and electric lights (although Christmas trees are popular in Argentina). In **Chile Old Man Christmas** climbs through open summer windows with his bag of toys. In **Brazil Papai Noel** arrives in a helicopter at a large soccer stadium in Rio wearing a fir-trimmed red suit. In **Mexico** children break cardboard or paper mache pinatas hung by rope to be rained-upon with candies & small toys. Mexican children re-enact Joseph and Mary searching for shelter by leading a procession that goes from house to house. In **Guatemala** Midnight Mass is followed by a Christmas dinner featuring tamales, and the occasion is marked by firecrackers. Guatemalans incorporate traditional Mayan flying pole dancing into the Feast of the apostle St. Thomas on December 21st.

People in the **British West Indies** have a Christmas celebration called **Jonkonna**, which is a combination of English mumming and African traditions. The festival involves elaborate costumes, music, dancing and mumming.

Christmas in **Australia & New Zealand** is celebrated with beach parties & outdoor barbecues — along with caroling and other religious observances. Christmas marks the beginning of summer holidays at the end of the school year, so students have an additional reason to celebrate. The **Christmas tree in New Zealand is the Pohutukawa**, which has brilliant red flowers prior to Christmas. The **Australian Father Christmas** brings gifts by boat or helicopter rather than in a sleigh, and leaves them on the breakfast table or in pillowcases rather than under a tree.

Christmas is a national secular holiday in **India**, where the Hindus & Muslims celebrate in the secular traditions. Poinsettias & tropical plants are used for decoration and mango & banana trees receive Christmas ornaments. Tribal Christians in the Northeast & West go to church & sing carols. In the South clay oil lamps are lit on roofs and the tops of walls in the evening.

The **Philippines** is the only Asian nation with a Christian majority. The five-pointed Star of Bethlehem (parol) is seen everywhere at Christmastime. At the **San Fernando lantern festival** some parols are so large they are transported on trucks. Philipinos follow the Hispanic tradition of pranks on Holy Innocents' Day and the Mexican tradition of Posados. Roman Catholic Masses are held frequently on Christmas Day.

In most **Middle Eastern** countries signs of fellow Muslims celebrating Christmas are viewed with scorn, so forms of Christmas celebration are rarely found among the non-Christians. Christians from all over the world come to Israel & Palestine to visit the Church of the Nativity in the West Bank town of Bethlehem and other sacred sites of historical significance to Christians. **The St. Nicholas festival is celebrated in Myra, Turkey.**

In **Zimbabwe Kisimusi (Christmas)** church services feature feasts & the singing of gospel songs. Fathers give gifts to wives & children, usually clothes & candy. Wearing new clothes to church on Christmas day is a common tradition among African Christians.

About one-tenth of the population of **Vietnam** is Roman Catholic. Catholic children enact Nativity scenes at Christmas time.

Christmas is increasingly celebrated in **China**, where coastal factories are the largest suppliers of Christmas paraphernalia to the American market. In China, the Communist Party does not regard Christmas as a religious threat because it is celebrated entirely as a fun occasion for exchanging gifts and for partying with family & friends — against a backdrop of Christmas trees, greetings, and melodies. China is adopting Christmas in much the way it has adopted Western music, clothing and videos.

The **Japanese** traditionally celebrated **oseibo**, a gift-giving season in December, but the main holiday season is around the New Year. Although gifts were given to friends, coworkers and relatives, expensive gifts were given to bosses, seemingly as tribute. Less than 1% of Japanese are Christian, but many of the secular aspects of Christmas celebration have become increasingly popular, especially in cities. Images of Santa Claus & decorated Christmas trees have become very common, along with Western Christmas holiday music. Christmas gift-giving is less family-oriented and more romantic, like Valentine's Day (possibly related to the fact that younger people are quicker to adapt foreign customs as a fad).

Conveniently, December 25th was the date of the signing of the Constitution of the Republic of China in 1947, so December 25th is an official holiday in **Taiwan** — which is celebrated like Christmas.



Nativity St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and founder of the Franciscan Order (clerics for the masses rather than for the aristocrats), is said to have been the first to depict a Nativity Scene (creche, crèche) in Greccio, Italy, around 1223 AD — using life-size wooden figures of Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the shepherds. The word "creche" comes from the French word for "manger", which in turn comes from the Italian word "Greccio", the name of the town having the first nativity manger scene.

Christmas is also sometimes called Xmas. The Greek transliteration of the word Christ is Xristos, the first letter which is the Greek letter "chi". The shortening of Christmas to Xmas by educated persons who knew Greek has been common since the sixteenth century, with the "X" often symbolizing a cross. "Xmas" was an ecclesiastical abbreviation used by churchmen in tables & charts. More recently the use of "X" has been associated with irreverent commercialism, leading to the saying "Put the 'Christ' back into Xmas". The American profanity "Jesus H. Christ", may come from the second letter of "chi" ("Christos" for "Xristos"), and has been in the use in the United States at least since 1850.



Christmas Spirit Christmas as celebrated by Catholics and early Protestants a few hundred years ago was not the secular holiday we recognize today. It was a "**Christes Maesee**" (Old English for Christ's Mass) or Nativity service. In 18th century England & America non-puritans who celebrated Christmas did so by churchgoing, holly in windows, caroling, mumming, some dancing, adult visiting and dinner parties featuring mince pie, fruitcake &

other seasonal foods. Children and exchanging of gifts were not featured in Christmas celebration. Charles Dickens and the transformation of the Dutch Saint Nicholas into Santa Claus changed the spirit of Christmas.

Charles Dickens wrote **A Christmas Carol** in 1843, the same year that the first Christmas card was published. Both the book and the card helped popularize the phrase "Merry Christmas". Dickens' popular book had an extremely powerful influence on undermining opposition to Christmas, especially among those influenced by Puritans in England and New England. Dickens used Scrooge to symbolize the idea that those who don't celebrate Christmas are uncharitable, twisted, mean-spirited and socially isolated. Dickens depicted Christmas as a one-day family event held in the home rather than a 12-day public holiday — thus contributing to changing the way Christmas was celebrated. Central to the Dickens Christmas celebration was a lavish family dinner.



The Christmas star has traditionally been associated with the spirit of the celebration. The stars that appear in the sky today are the same ones that were there two thousand years ago. Astronomers cannot place a new star appearance anywhere near the possible time of Christ's birth. Some star gazers suggest that if we move the birth of Jesus to the springtime of 6 B.C., we can attribute the star to the time the planets Mars, [Jupiter](#), and Saturn were close together in the heavens. They formed a triangle in the group of stars known as Pisces.



Everygreens: Dating back centuries before Christ, cultures brought evergreen trees, plants, and leaves into their homes upon the arrival of the winter solstice, which occurs in the northern hemisphere between December 21st and 22nd. Although the specific practices were different in each country and culture, the symbolization was generally the same: to celebrate the return of life at the beginning of winter's decline.

Winter Solstice or Winter Equinox is considered of "Pagan Origins" - Although there's some debate as to whether the Christmas tree as it's used today has Druid origins, it's clear that several non-Christian cultures brought evergreen plants indoors at the time of the winter solstice.

Egyptians particularly valued evergreens as a symbol of life's victory over death. They brought green date palm leaves into their homes around the time of the winter solstice.

Romans had a public festival called Saturnalia, which lasted one week beginning on December 17th, and included a variety of celebrations around the winter solstice. Curiously, the Roman winter solstice was marked on December 25th on the Julian calendar. These celebrations are thought to have merged with Druid practices of hanging mistletoe and the burning of the Yule log.



In Britain, the **Yule log** was originally seen as a magical amulet, and eventually made it into the hands of Father Christmas. In Italy the Yule log is still burned for the "Festa di Ceppo". In Catalonia, the log is wrapped in a blanket until Christmas Eve, when it's unwrapped and burned for the custom of "fer cagar el tio". And in Serbia, families bring the Yule log (known as a "badnjak") into their homes on Christmas Eve to be burned along with prayers to God to bring happiness, luck, and riches.

Druid priests in Great Britain also used evergreen plants and mistletoe in Druid ceremonies, and the mistletoe plant was the symbol of the birth of a god. Celtic Druids and Norseman of Scandinavia also used mistletoe in a mysterious ceremony just after the winter solstice.



The origins of the **Yule Log** can be traced back to the Midwinter festivals in which the Norsemen indulged...nights filled with feasting, "drinking Yule" and watching the fire leap around the log burning in the home hearth. The ceremonies and beliefs associated with the Yule Log's sacred origins are closely linked to representations of health, fruitfulness and productivity.

In England, the Yule was cut and dragged home by oxen or horses as the people walked alongside and sang merry songs. It was often decorated with evergreens and sometimes sprinkled with grain or cider before it was finally set alight.

To all European races, the Yule Log was believed to bring beneficial magic and was kept burning for at least twelve hours and sometimes as long as twelve days, warming both the house and those who resided within. When the fire of the Yule Log was finally quenched, a small fragment of the wood would be saved and used to light the next year's log.

It was also believed that as long as the Yule Log burned, the house would be protected from witchcraft. The ashes that remained from the sacred Yule Log were scattered over fields to bring fertility, or cast into wells to purify and sweeten the water. Sometimes, the ashes were used in the creation of various charms...to free cattle from vermin, for example, or to ward off hailstorms.

In the mid 1500's, Germans began using evergreen trees as a symbol of hope for the coming of spring. This practice is likely to have gradually evolved from Druid rituals of past, and merged with the celebration of Christmas leading to the tree's Christian beginnings.



Christmas Tree History: - The first use of Christmas trees as they're known today dates back to the 1500's. Some claim the tree originated in Germany in the mid 1500's, others claim it was Latvia in the early 1500's, and a few even believe in a legend that St. Boniface created the Christmas tree in the 7th century.

There are also claims that the first proper Christmas tree was erected in Riga, Latvia in 1510. Today, there is a plaque in the Town Hall Square in Riga that is engraved with the text "The First New Year's Tree in Riga in 1510". It is believed that this tree was burned during a New Year's celebration, and possibly decorated with paper flowers.

The most likely Christian beginnings of the modern Christmas tree were in the mid 1500's in Germany. In 1521 in the region of Alsace (formerly part of Germany), the first pine tree was decorated and used in a Christmas celebration. In 1539, in the Cathedral of Strasbourg, there are church records that state a Christmas tree was used for the Christmas celebration. And in 1570 there are reports from a Bremen guild cronical that a fir tree was decorated with fruits and nuts which children ate on Christmas day.

In the 1700's the Christmas tree custom had spread throughout northern Germany, and people began decorating the tree with candles that were lit on Christmas Eve, as is still done today in many homes across Europe. As the Christmas tree custom spread through Germany, the Roman Catholic Church eventually recognized it in the early 1800's. It was introduced to Vienna in 1816, quickly spreading across Austria, and in 1840 to France by the duchesse d'Orleans.

The Christmas tree was introduced separately in different US cities by German immigrants, most likely in the mid 1700's. Several US cities claim to have had the first Christmas tree in America. Bethlehem, PA appears to have had the first decorated Christmas tree in 1747 at the German Moravian Church settlement, however it was made by putting evergreen branches on a wooden pyramid! Windsor Locks, CT claims they have earliest date in 1777, while Easton, PA also claims the first Christmas tree in 1816! Since these first real Christmas trees, there have been many changes leading to today's modern Christmas tree!



Today's Christmas Trees - Today Christmas trees come in many forms...natural and artificial, undecorated, decorated with candles, lights, ornaments, and treats...colored, fiber optic, and even upside down Christmas trees!



Christmas Ornaments: The definition of Christmas tree ornaments comes to us from the root word "ornament" which is defined as an accessory used to beautify, enrich, or improve the appearance or general effect of an object. The tradition of Christmas trees and **Christmas Ornaments** is a much disputed one with several theories about their origin doing the rounds for a long time. The most popular theory holds that the tradition was started by a monk who came to Germany in the 7th/8th century to preach. It is said that this monk was Saint Boniface, the Apostle of the Germans.



Christmas Lights: The tradition of using small candles to light up the Christmas tree dates back to at least the middle of the XVIIth century. However, it took two centuries for the tradition to become widely established first in Germany and soon spreading to Eastern Europe. In 1882, the first Christmas tree was lit by the use of electricity. Edward Johnson lighted up a Christmas tree in New York City with eighty small electric light bulbs. It should be noted that Edward Johnson created the first string of electric Christmas lights that were then mass produced around 1890.



Christmas Tinsel: Around 1610, tinsel was first invented in Germany made from genuine silver. Machines were invented that shredded silver into thin tinsel-sized strips. Silver tinsel tarnishes and loses its shine with time, eventually, artificial replacements were invented. The original inventor of tinsel remains unknown.



Candy Canes: The origin of the candy cane goes back over 350 years, when candy-makers both professional and amateur were making hard sugar sticks. The original candy was straight and completely white in color.



Christmas Stockings: There is more than one theory as to the origins of the Christmas stocking but the legend of St Nicholas is the most popular; St. Nicholas' association with leaving gifts in stockings hung on the mantle has its roots in folklore. According to the story, a poor widower lived in Myra. He had three daughters and could not afford a dowry for them. To save the daughters from being sold by their father, St. Nicholas threw three bags of gold down the chimney. The bags landed in stockings that were hung by the fire to dry. This began the tradition of hanging stockings by the fireplace. This folklore was a key part in St. Nicholas' eventual evolution into the gift giving Santa Claus.



Christmas Stocking Treats Evolve Into Christmas Presents: The custom of giving Christmas gifts has ancient roots. Over time, the practice evolved from small gifts and treats given in stockings to a commercialized sensation. The history of Christmas gifts gives us an idea of how the nature of gifts has changed through the ages.

It is said that, Christmas as it is celebrated today, started during the Victorian era of the 1860's. Family members exchange gifts with each other. The gifts can be very simple things, the love and bonding which it fosters is the important idea. Gifts are given on the Christmas day or Christmas Eve or on Saint Nicholas day.

Especially in *Holland*, Christmas is purely a religious festival, the gifts are given to the family and friends on Saint Nicholas day.

German children are lucky, as they have two gifts giving days. The first one is on fifth December. The day is earmarked for small gifts. The main gift giving day is Christmas Eve.

Hungary follows the same pattern, except for the fact that there the gift is given by Jesus instead of Santa Claus.

Poland has two gift giving days, one on fifth December and the other on Christmas Eve. Spain has a tradition of giving gifts on Epiphany on sixth January.

The *Russian* tradition of gift giving day falls on the New Years Eve.



Christingle actually means 'Christ Light' and celebrates the light of Jesus coming into the world: but no one is really sure how the Christingles came into being. There are several stories told of how the custom was started. There is an ancient Welsh service called a 'Celenig' where Christingles are used and the Moravian Church (part of the [Czech Republic](#)) has held Christingle services for over 200 years. This is how some Czech people think the first Christingle might have been made:

Many years ago, children were asked to take a gift to put beside the crib in Church. One family had no money for gifts but were determined to take something. They found an orange which they felt would be okay, but were disappointed to find it was going moldy at the top. However, they thought they would scoop out the bad bits and put a candle in the top and turn it into a lantern. Thinking that it looked a bit ordinary, one of the girls took a red ribbon from her hair and tied it around the middle. They had difficulty getting it to stay in place, so fastened it with four small sticks, on the ends of which they put a few raisins. They took their lantern to church and were afraid of the reactions of the other children.



Mistletoe is especially interesting botanically because it is a partial parasite (a "hemiparasite"). But mistletoe is also capable for growing on its own; like other plants it can produce its own food by photosynthesis. There are two types of mistletoe. The mistletoe that is commonly used as a [Christmas decoration](#) (*Phoradendron flavescens*) is native to North America and grows as a parasite on trees in the west as well as in those growing in a line down the east from New Jersey to Florida. The other type of mistletoe, *Viscum album*, is of European origin. The European mistletoe is a green shrub with small, [yellow flowers](#) and white, sticky berries which are considered poisonous. It commonly seen on apple but only rarely on oak trees.

The rarer oak mistletoe was greatly venerated by the ancient *Celts* and *Germans* and used as a ceremonial plant by early Europeans. The *Greeks* and earlier peoples thought that it had mystical powers and down through the centuries it became associated with many folklore customs.



Sprigs of **holly and ivy** were traditionally brought into the home to celebrate Winter Solstice. They are both evergreen plants, symbolizing the eternal nature of the sun, which never dies, but merely sleeps during the winter months. The plant with its shiny green prickly leaves and red berry has come to stand for peace and joy, people often settle arguments under a holly tree. Holly is believed to frighten off witches and protect the home from thunder and lightning.

The sacredness of [holly](#), however, finds a Druid origin. The Druids believed that holly, with its evergreen look keeps the earth beautiful when the sacred oak lost its leaves. They used to wear sprigs of holly in their hair when they went into the forest to watch their priests cut the sacred mistletoe.

Holly was the sacred plant of Saturn and was used at the Roman *Saturnalia festival* to honor him. Romans gave one another holly wreaths and carried them about decorating images of Saturn with it. Centuries later, in December, while other Romans continued their Druid worship, Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus. To avoid persecution, they decked their homes with Saturnalia holly. As Christian numbers increased and their customs prevailed, holly lost its Druid association and became a symbol of Christmas.



The Glastonbury thorn legend ties in Christ's death as well as the celebration of his birth. The legend goes that soon after the death of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea came to [Britain](#) to spread the message of Christianity. When he traveled there from the Holy Land he brought with him his staff. Being tired from his journey, he lay down to rest. In doing so, he pushed his staff into the ground beside him. When he awoke, he found that the staff had taken root and begun to grow and blossom. It is said he left it there and it has flowered every Christmas and every spring. It is also said that a puritan trying to cut down the tree was blinded by a splinter of the wood before he could do so. The original thorn did eventually die but not before many cuttings had been taken. It is one of these very cuttings which is in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey today.



The Poinsettia with its beautiful, red, star-shaped poinsettia is a favorite Christmas flower in the United States. In Central America it is called the "Flame Leaf" or "Flower of the Holy Night". Now very popular in the US, the American settlers were not quite familiar with this one only a couple of centuries back. A native of Mexico, it was brought here over a hundred years ago by Dr. Joel Poinsett, the first US ambassador to Mexico. Most of the [poinsettias](#) used these days come from California.



Saint Nicholas, St. Nick, Father Christmas, Santa Claus, St. Nikolaus, Sinterklaas, Kris Kringle, Joulupukki, Weihnachtsmann, Saint Basil and Father Frost: From Saint Nicholas through the middle ages and up to our modern day Santa - Discover the travels and evolution of the World's most prominent "gift-giver."



Nicholas was born in Patara, , a city of Lycia, in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in 270 CE (200AD) and later became Bishop of Myra. He died in 345 CE on December 6th. St Nicholas was eventually named the patron saint of children, sailors, Russian and Greek in the 19th century.



Like Christmas, St. Nicholas began to be recognized in the 4th Century. One of the most famous stories associated with him, "Three Impoverished Maidens," is found on the St. Nicholas Center website. According to the story, the saint provided a dowry for three girls that were to be sold into slavery since their father could not afford to have them married. According to legend, Nicholas threw a sack of gold through the window, and it landed in a sock drying by the fire; hence where the Christmas stocking tradition originated.



In the 1200s, December sixth began to be celebrated as **Bishop Nicholas Day** in France. The eve of St. Nicholas Day has been celebrated on December 5 for centuries in Europe.

In the 1500s people in England stopped worshipping St Nicholas and favored more another gift giving figure **Father Christmas**. Over the centuries, St. Nicholas' popularity grew, and many people in Europe made up new stories that showed his concern for children.

The name **Santa Claus** was derived from the Dutch Sinter Klass pronunciation of St. Nicholas. Early Dutch settlers in New York (once called New Amsterdam) brought their traditions of St Nicholas. As children from other countries tried to pronounce Sinter Klass, this soon became Santa Klass, which was settled as Santa Claus. The old bishop's cloak with mitre, jewelled gloves and crozier were soon replaced with his red suit and clothing seen in other modern images.

Though The St. Nicholas Center claims that the first European explorers brought St. Nicholas lore with them to the Americas, it was not until the 1800s that St. Nicholas morphed into Santa Claus in the United States. Nissenbaum describes the transition of the stern, Bishop St. Nicholas' role as patron saint of New Amsterdam-present day New York, to the kind-hearted person described in the 19th Century poem by *Clement Clarke Moore*, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" better known in the United States as "*Twas the Night Before Christmas*".



The popular image of Santa Claus was created by the German-American cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840-1902), who drew a new image of the character annually, beginning in 1863. By the 1880s, Nast's Santa had evolved into the jovial, rotund Santa Claus we now recognize. The image was standardized by advertisers in the 1920s.



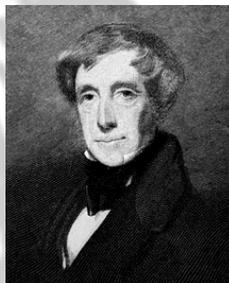
Father Christmas, who predates Santa Claus, was first recorded in the 15th century and then associated with holiday merrymaking and drunkenness. In Victorian Britain, his image was remade to match that of Santa. The French **Père Noël** evolved along similar lines, eventually adopting the Santa image.

In **Italy**, **Babbo Natale** acts as Santa Claus, while **La Befana** is the bringer of gifts and arrives on the eve of the Epiphany. It is said that La Befana set out to bring the baby Jesus gifts, but got lost along the way. Now, she

brings gifts to all children. In some cultures, such as *Germany*, Santa Claus is accompanied by **Knecht Ruprecht**, or Black Peter.

The current tradition in several **Latin American** countries is that Santa makes the toys, but gives them to the Baby Jesus to deliver to children's homes. This helps reconcile traditional religious beliefs with modern day globalization, most notably the iconography of Santa Claus imported from the United States.

In **Southern Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Alto Adige/Südtirol (Italy)** and Liechtenstein the *Christkind* (Christ Child) brings the presents as well. The German *St. Nikolaus* is *not* identical with the *Weihnachtsman* (Christmas Man, the **German** version of Santa Claus). *St. Nikolaus* wears a bishop's dress, brings small gifts (usually candies, nuts and fruits) on December 6, and is accompanied by *Knecht Ruprecht*.



Clement Clarke Moore (1779-1863) wrote 'A Visit From

Saint Nick' aka '*'Twas the Night Before Christmas*'. Originally written in 1823, it is the most popular and timeless of all Christmas poems.



Thomas Nast (1840-1902) was a German-born American caricaturist and editorial cartoonist who is considered to be the "Father of the American Cartoon" and the creator of the image of Santa Claus as we know him today.



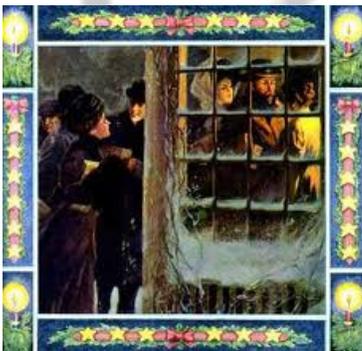
Haddon Sundblom & Coca-Cola Born in 1899, Haddon Sundblom dominated the commercial art scene for decades. Often using himself as the model, Sundblom developed the image of jolly Saint Nick for Coca-Cola.



Christmas Elves: Elves are known to be tiny, dwarf-like creatures, either male or female, with pointed ears. They are youthful but immortal and have magical powers that can control what you see and experience. Their abodes are said to be underground, in forests, or in springs and wells, but no one really knows about it because they keep their location a secret! It is also believed that on the 6th of January the elves light up their torches and come down from their secret village in the mountain to play in a hidden field to celebrate the last day of Christmas.



Lapland Reindeer or Caribou, the name by which the Americans are more familiar with reindeer, comes from an Indian word. It is man's most ancient herd animal, the first animals being raised around 15,000 years ago. Up until about 12,000 years ago, reindeer grazed over a vast area of Europe. Rock paintings by primitive peoples featuring them are widespread, as are discoveries of tools made from reindeer horn. There was even a period of European prehistory in a part of France called Dordogne that is sometimes called "the civilization of reindeer." The only surviving part of such a civilization might be found in Lapland, which is the northern part of Norway, Sweden and Finland.



Christmas Carols (also called a [noël](#)) is a [carol](#) ([song](#) or [hymn](#)) whose lyrics are on the theme of [Christmas](#) or the winter season in general and which are traditionally sung in the period before

Christmas. The word *carol* or *carole* is a medieval word of French and Anglo-Norman origin, believed to mean a dance song or a circle dance accompanied by singing. Broadly defined, carols express religious joy and is often associated to the Christmas season. Carols are also used to describe late medieval English songs on various subjects with a verse and refrain. Often the verse and refrain (also called burden) alternates. It is unclear when the first carol was written but it is believed that circa 1350 to 1550 is the golden age of English carols and most of the carols followed the verse-refrain pattern.



12 Days of Christmas: In England, between 1558 and 1829, it was *not* legal for Catholics to practice their kind of Christianity in private or in public. *'The Twelve Days of Christmas'* was written in England at the beginning of this time. There was another song called *'A New Dial'*, written in 1625, which gave religious meanings to the 12 Days of Christmas, but not so people could practice their faith is secret.

The **Twelve Days of Christmas** are the festive days beginning Christmas Day (25 December). This period is also known as **Christmastide**. The **Twelfth Day of Christmas is 5 January**, with the celebrations of Christmas traditionally ending on Twelfth Night and is followed by the **Feast of the Epiphany** on 6 January. In some traditions the first day of Epiphany and the twelfth day of Christmas overlap.

Over the centuries, differing churches and sects of Christianity have changed the actual traditions, time frame and their interpretations. **St. Stephen's Day** (or **Boxing Day**), for example, is 26 December in the Western Church and 27 December in the Eastern Church. **Boxing Day**, the first weekday after Christmas, is observed as a legal holiday in parts of the Commonwealth of Nations and was traditionally marked by the giving of Christmas boxes to service workers (such as postal workers and trades people) in the United Kingdom; 28 December is **Childermas** or the **Feast of the Innocents**.

Currently, the twelve days and nights are celebrated in widely varying ways around the world. For example, some give gifts only on Christmas Night, some only on Twelfth Night and some each of the twelve nights.



The Twelve Days of Christmas (song): The twelve days in the song are the twelve days *starting Christmas day*, or in some traditions, the day after Christmas (December 26) (Boxing Day or St. Stephen's Day, as being the feast day of St. Stephen Protomartyr) *to the day before Epiphany, or the Feast of the Epiphany* (January 6, or the Twelfth Day). The **Twelfth Night** is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the evening of the fifth of January, preceding Twelfth Day, the eve of the Epiphany, formerly the last day of the Christmas festivities and observed as a time of merrymaking.

"**The Twelve Days of Christmas**" is an English Christmas carol that enumerates a series of increasingly grand gifts given on each of the twelve days of Christmas. Although first published in England in 1780, textual evidence may indicate the song is French in origin. It has a *Roud Folk Song Index number of 68*. "**The Twelve Days of Christmas**" **Roud #68** Music by Traditional with additions by Frederic Austin Published c. 1780 Language English; may be French in origin Form Cumulative song.



Christmas Cards were introduced in 1843 (the same year A Christmas Carol was first published) by Sir Henry Cole, an English businessman and patron of art. The card was designed by John Calcott Horsley, and helped popularize the expression "Merry Christmas". Cole printed a thousand cards and sold them as a means to simplify the sending of Christmas greetings. Postage for the cards was one penny in the 1840s. Within a few years after the introduction of the halfpenny rate for mailing cards in the 1870s, the British Post Office was flooded with annual card mailings. Christmas cards in the United States were first produced for businesses to send to their customers as a form of advertising.

CHRISTMAS FOOD

From the time of the ancient Egyptians, **goose** was the main course of Winter Solstice feasts. Henry VIII of England is credited with replacing goose with **turkey**, which is more meaty & flavorful. Turkeys were first introduced to Europe in 1519 by the Spanish, who learned of turkeys from the Aztecs (who domesticated the birds). Fruit from an exotic American plant — the **cranberry** — was also added to Christmas dinners.

Christmas ham may originate from Norse traditions of eating wild boar in midwinter feasts. The ancient Romans ate boar during Saturnalia in honor of the the god Adonis who was slain by a boar and whose birthday was December 25th. The oldest existing printed Christmas carol is "*The Boar's Head Carol*" (printed 1521), which was sung in England at Christmas dinner while a boar's head was carried on a platter. The custom is still observed every Christmas at Queen's College, Oxford — a possible relic of the Roman occupation of Britain.

Humble pie was made from the "humbles" of deer (heart, liver, brain and other organs) by the servants of nobility who feasted on the more choice cuts of meat. By the 17th century humble pie had become such a traditional Christmas dish that it was outlawed by the Puritan Cromwell government in England.

Mincemeat pie was originally mainly minced meat preserved with sugar & spices. Fruits were often used as a less expensive preservative and flavoring agent than sugar. Meat was increasingly omitted (except for beef fat) and additional fruits were included.

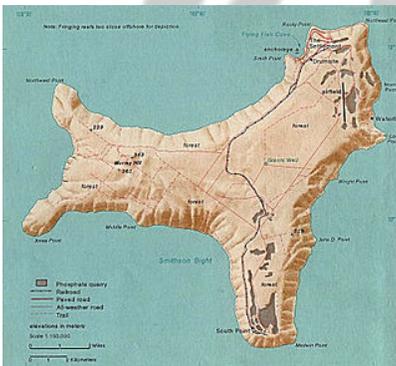
Plum pudding was originally a soup made by boiling beef & mutton with dried plums (prunes), wines and spices. The prunes & meats were later removed, raisins added and the pudding was thickened with eggs & breadcrumbs to be more like a steamed or broiled cake. So "plum pudding" is not a pudding and contains no plums.

Christmas Traditions and Prayer - Continued

In the 17th century the word "**plum**" was commonly used to refer to any dried fruit. A "**sugarplum**" was any candied fruit (dried & sugared) — and could be a plum, apricot, cherry, etc. Prior to the age of chocolate children yearned for sugarplums, which is why "visions of sugarplums" danced through the heads of children in Clement Moore's poem — and why the Sugarplum Fairy was a prominent character in "The Nutcracker".

Apples were a tempting ornament of the first Christmas trees in Germany, later augmented with cookies, nuts and other fruits. Americans added strings of popcorn. Children looked forward to dismantling the Christmas tree and gobbling-up the treats.

Candy canes are edible ornaments which originated in Germany in the late 1600s. Originally made as straight white sticks, a German choirmaster bent the sticks so as to represent a shepherd's staff — and distributed them to children during Nativity services (at least partly to keep them quiet by giving them something to suck on). Not until the year 1900 did candy canes become striped with the red-and-white Christmas colors or become flavored with peppermint or wintergreen. Some people have the idea that the J-shape is a reference to **J**-esus and that the red & white symbolize the blood & purity of Christ.



Christmas Island was named on December 25, 1643 by the British East India Company captain who arrived there on that Christmas. The island is a self-governing Territory of Australia located 1,466 miles northeast of Perth in the Indian Ocean. Postage stamps have been issued since 1958.

The world's very first Christmas stamp - made in Canada (1898)



The **first Christmas stamp** was printed by the Canadian post office in 1898, but another national Christmas stamp wasn't produced until Austria issued two in 1937. The practice of regularly issuing Christmas stamps was begun in Australia and a few other countries in the 1950s. The United States began the practice in the 1960s, also issuing stamps commemorating Hanukkah, Eid and Kwanzaa.



The **first Christmas Seal** (which has no postage value) was issued in Denmark in 1904 to raise money for tuberculosis, bearing the likeness of the Danish Queen (Louise of Hesse-Kassel) and the word Julen (Christmas). Over 4 million were sold in the first year at DKK 0.02 per seal. Christmas seals in the United States raise money for the American Lung Association. (Although tuberculosis is not common in the United States, drug-resistant strains have emerged. Tuberculosis remains one of the most common deadly infectious diseases in the world, with 1.7 million deaths in 2004.)

OTHER CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS



The 567 AD Council of Tours proclaimed **Advent**, a season from November 11 to December 24 characterized by the spirit of anticipating the birth of Christ. ("Adventists" are Christians who prepare for the imminent Second Coming of Christ.) The faithful were forbidden from being absent from regular church attendance during the period and were to fast as strictly as during **Lent**. Although the Orthodox Church still begins Advent on November 11, near 600 AD Pope Gregory I shortened the season to the four Sundays before Christmas. Later the requirements for fasting and abstention were relaxed, but Advent remains a season of spiritual preparation.



The **Advent wreath** is decorated with four candles, one of which is to be lit on each of the four Sundays. Advent is observed festively in Nuremberg, Germany where the season is begun with a gala opening of the *Christkindl Markt* (Christ child shopping market) on the Friday before the first Sunday of Advent. Christmas markets of stalls selling Christmas specialties in open plazas are popular not only in Germany, but in Italy and Belgium.



Las Posados is a Mexican custom that has spread to several Central American countries as well as to the Philippines. During the nine days preceding Christmas a nightly procession ("los posados") enacts Joseph and Mary searching for shelter in Bethlehem. According to tradition they must be refused at least once before an innkeeper lets them in.

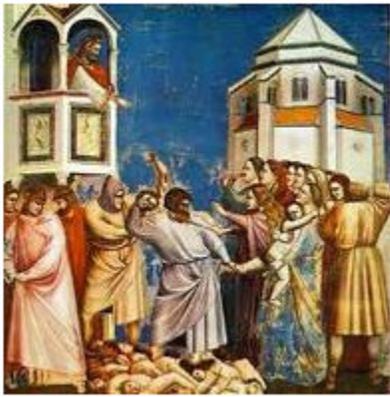


Midnight Mass is the first of three masses held at Christmas by the Roman Catholic Church, each mass characterized by a distinctive liturgy. For many people Midnight Mass is the most important of Christmas masses because of a popular belief that Jesus was born at midnight. Midnight Mass from St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome and from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is broadly televised.



St. Stephen's Day (December 26th) commemorates the first Christian martyr Stephen, who was stoned to death for his religious beliefs in 35 A.D. In the Middle Ages priests opened the church alms-box on St. Stephen's Day to distribute deposited coins to the needy.

St. Stephen's Day became Boxing Day in Britain and is a recognized holiday not only in Britain, but in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. In British tradition, Christmas was a day of exchanging gifts whereas the day following Christmas was a day in which people of less fortunate station (servants, trades people and the poor) received gifts from the more fortunate — often in boxes — without the expectation of anything being given in return. The custom declined, partly because trades people became too demanding of their annual "tips".



Holy Innocents' Day (December 28th) commemorates the slaughter of the boy babies of Bethlehem by King Herod. In *England* this day was the occasion for ritual beating of children, but in *continental Europe* it was more common for children to be given license to whip adults. The English did allow "boy bishops" to deliver sermons on December 28. In *Spain* and in many *Latin American* countries Innocents' Day is celebrated like April Fools' Day — the victims of the practical jokes are the "innocents".



The time between the holy season of Christmas and the holy season of **Lent** (the 46 days before Easter Sunday, in remembrance of Christ's 40 days in the wilderness) is sometimes called **carnival** (Latin for "farewell to meat"), in reference to the fasting of Lent). Starting on the day after *Epiphany*, the peak day of partying with



abandonment is the day before

Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent), namely



Mardi Gras (French for "Fat Tuesday") — although the days of celebration can include the entire carnival period.

Christmas Around the World (for more information see <http://www.thehistoryofchristmas.com/traditions.htm>)



In **Australia**, the holiday comes in the middle of summer--it's not unusual for some parts of Australia to hit 100 degrees Farenheit on Christmas day. In Sydney, thousands of families prepare their Christmas dinner and take it to Bondi Beach for a picnic. Australians decorate with Christmas Bushes, plants with little red-flowered leaves that are native to Australia.



Christmas in **Ireland** lasts from Christmas Eve to the feast of the Epiphany on January 6, which is referred to Little Christmas. Ireland's Christmas is more religious than a time of fun.



St. Nicholas is especially popular in **Russia**. The legend is that the 11th-century Prince Vladimir traveled to Constantinople to be baptized, and returned with stories of miracles performed by St. Nicholas of Myra. Since then many Eastern Orthodox Churches have been named for the saint, and to this day, Nicholas is one of the most common names for Russian boys. The feast of St. Nicholas (December 6) was observed for many centuries, but after the communist revolution, the celebration of the feast was suppressed.



The **Scottish people** have their big celebrations on New Year's Day, called **Hogmanay**. A long time ago there is a superstition that it is bad luck for the fire to go out on Christmas Eve, since it is at this time that the elves are

abroad and only a raging fire will keep them from coming down the chimney. On Christmas day, people sometimes make big bonfires and dance around them to the playing of bagpipes. Bannock cakes made of oatmeal are traditionally eaten at Christmas.



In **Sweden** after Christmas Eve dinner, a friend or family member dresses up as **tomte** or **Christmas gnome**. The tomte, unlike Santa Claus is supposed to live under the floorboards of the house or barn and ride a straw goat. The make-believe tomte, wearing a white beard and dressed in red robes, distributes gifts from his sack. Many are given with funny rhyme that hints at the contents.



In terms of its traditions, **Switzerland** is basically four different countries. There are German, French and Italian areas. In Switzerland, the **Chlausjagen Festival** or **Feast of St. Nicholas** is celebrated at dusk on 6 December with a procession of "lifeltrager" wearing gigantic illuminated lanterns in the shape of a Bishop's mitre on their heads. The Swiss wait for the Christ child called **Christkindli**, to arrive with gifts for all in his reindeer-drawn sleigh.



Contemporary 'Santa Claus' was born in the **United States** - thanks to a myriad of artists, writers, legends and the evolving nature of our country at the time. 'Santa Claus' is claimed to have been the Dutch word for **St Nicholas, Sinterklaas**. Although the Dutch had brought him with them in the 17th century, he did not become an important person at Christmas until the *Novelist Washington Irving* put him in a novel that he wrote in 1809.

A Christmas Prayer

*Loving Father, Help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and worship of the wise men.*

*Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come
with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the
blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.*

*May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children, and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake.
Amen.*

by Robert Louis Stevenson

My heritage and grandparents have given me a unique blend of Scotch/Irish Winter Solstice with a Yule log and the Roman Saturnalia, all mixed with “modern” Christianity. Although neither set of grandparents had a tree in the house, they both decorated an outdoor “tree of green” with gifts from the harvest for our wild friends (seeds in cakes of lard, cranberries, popcorn, etc). Small gifts of thanks and good will were exchanged between family members and close friends. Midnight mass or “prayer of thanks” (depending on the weather) was a ritual common to both sides of the family. Above all was the hope of spring, better times ahead, saving grace and thanks for making it through the current year.

“Thank you Creator for all the opportunities you have provided me with this year. I ask only for patience, tolerance and understanding toward all that you have created and the wisdom to grow and live with it in harmony and peace.”

TNT