

## Christmas

On the evening of December 24, the Church begins its celebration of the Nativity of the Lord. Four Masses are assigned for the Solemnity of Christmas: a Vigil Mass, a Mass during the Night, a Mass at Dawn, and a Mass during the Day. In past centuries, the last three were known as the Mass of the Angels, the Mass of the Shepherds, and the Mass of the Incarnate Word, titles derived from the Gospels assigned to each liturgy.

The celebration of Christmas does not end with these four Masses, however, for the most central mysteries' observances continue beyond a single celebration or day to allow time for extended reflection and celebration. While the secular world seems to want to conclude Christmas the next day, the Church is just beginning to celebrate. The celebration extends through the Octave (eight days) that concludes on January 1, and even beyond through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (see *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and General Roman Calendar*, no. 12).

The days of the Christmas Octave include many special feasts. On December 26, we celebrate the Feast of St. Stephen, the first martyr, followed by the Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, on December 27. On December 28, we remember the Holy Innocents, the sons of Israel massacred by Herod in his futile effort to destroy the newborn King of the Jews. On the Sunday in the Octave,<sup>1</sup> we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, honoring the human family in which Jesus grew to maturity, a model for our families as well. On the octave day itself, January 1, we celebrate Mary, the Mother of God, recalling “the divine, virginal and salvific

motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary” (*Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, no. 107).

The Christmas season continues with the celebration of the Solemnity of the Epiphany, honoring the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah to the Magi from the East, a sign that Gentiles too are called into the unity of God's Kingdom. Though traditionally celebrated as the conclusion of the Twelve Days of Christmas, in the United States, this observance has been transferred to the Second Sunday of Christmas, meaning that it can be celebrated on any day between January 2 and January 8. The Christmas season concludes with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, when, through the descent of a dove, God made manifest that Jesus was his beloved Son, sent for the salvation of the world. When the Epiphany is celebrated on January 7 or 8, this feast is celebrated on the following Monday.



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<sup>1</sup> When there is no Sunday in the Octave, the feast is transferred to the preceding Friday.