

The Origin of the Twelve Days of Christmas

Most people are familiar with the Christmas song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas." It seems to be a delightful nonsense rhyme set to music, but it had a quite serious purpose when it was written. It is a good deal more than just a repetitious melody with pretty phrases and a list of strange gifts.

Roman Catholics in England during the period 1558 to 1829, when Parliament finally emancipated Catholics in England, were prohibited from any practice of their faith by law . public or private. It was a crime to be a Catholic.

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" was written in England as one of the "catechism songs" to help young Catholics learn the tenets of their faith - a memory aid. The song's gifts are hidden meanings to the teachings of the faith. The "true love" mentioned in the song doesn't refer to an earthly suitor; it is God, our one true love. The "me" who receives the presents refers to every baptized person.

The other symbols mean the following:

1. Partridge in a Pear Tree = Jesus Christ
2. Turtle Doves = the Old and New Testaments
3. French Hens = the Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity
4. Calling Birds = the Four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
5. Golden Rings = the Pentateuch or Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
6. Geese A-laying = the six days of creation
7. Swans A-swimming = the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Knowledge, Understanding, Strength/Fortitude, Counsel, Piety, Fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2-3a) *OR* the seven Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, Holy Orders
8. Maids A-milking = the eight Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12)
9. Ladies Dancing = the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control (Galatians 5:22-23)
10. Lords A-leaping = the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17)
11. Pipers Piping = the eleven faithful apostles: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James (Luke 6:12-16)
12. Drummers Drumming = the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed