

Celebrate Christmas to the fullest with these Catholic traditions

Christmas is such a big deal—God coming to meet us in the world, in the flesh—that the Church celebrates it not just one day, nor even 12 days, but for an entire season lasting anywhere from 16 to 22 days. (It ends with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which moves around.)

What can your family do to fill all that time—and more importantly, to fully celebrate the mystery of Christ's birth? Here are more than 21 traditions and practices to consider trying this year, plus a few more ideas that aren't specifically Catholic, but just plain fun.

Who knows? Maybe some of these ideas will become an annual tradition for your family.

1. Go to Midnight Mass

The very word *Christmas* comes from the Old English words *Crīstes mæss*, or Christ-Mass. From ancient times, Mass has been at the heart of the celebration of Christ's birth. Accordingly, Christmas is a holy day of obligation, on which the Church calls all Catholics to celebrate Mass.

Your parish might celebrate one of four different Masses, each with its own set of readings: the Vigil Mass (held Christmas Eve), Midnight Mass (the "Mass of the Angels"), Dawn Mass (the "Mass of the Shepherds"), and Christmas Day Mass (the "Mass of the Divine Word"). You will hear different readings and liturgical prayers at each of these Masses.

Midnight Mass (these days usually celebrated well before

midnight) features the classic Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke, and is the most elaborate celebration of Christmas, and many parishes pull out all the stops for it. At some point in the life of your family, your kids should get to experience it. While it may be later and longer than a typical Mass, it is often less crowded, and families do bring young children. If your little ones attend, bring a blanket so they can lie down in the pew.

[Many of the strategies that work for a regular Sunday Mass](#), including previewing the readings with your kids, will also help make your Christmas Mass a more pleasant and meaningful family experience.

2. Read or chant the announcement of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the Roman Martyrology

You can find this text, which is most appropriately sung or chanted on Christmas Eve, at the [website of the U.S. Catholic bishops \(usccb.org\)](http://www.usccb.org). “The announcement of the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord from the Roman Martyrology draws upon Sacred Scripture to declare in a formal way the birth of Christ,” the USCCB explains. “It begins with creation and relates the birth of the Lord to the major events and personages of sacred and secular history.”

3. Add figures to your manger and bless it

If you have left your manger set or nativity scene mostly empty during Advent (except for the animals, of course!), then you can make a big deal out of adding the angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and other figures on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. For a Christmas morning surprise, add the baby Jesus to the manger before your kids wake up. You may also

want to place the three kings someplace else in the house so that they can “journey” to the manger after Christmas.

If you haven’t already, bless your nativity scene, using [the blessing found at the USCCB website](#).

4. Pray before the baby Jesus

“No one, whether shepherd or wise man, can approach God here below except by kneeling before the manger at Bethlehem and adoring him hidden in the weakness of a newborn child.” So says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#563).

Encourage your kids to imitate the shepherds and wise men by kneeling before the baby Jesus in the nativity scene at your church or at your home, either after Christmas Mass or right away on Christmas morning, before opening gifts. You can find a brief [Prayer Before a Creche](#) here, or encourage your kids to make up their own prayer.

5. Make your own nativity play

If your parish doesn’t sponsor a nativity play (or even if it does), make your own nativity play at home. This can be a big production (find ready-made scripts online) with costumes and props and so on, or it can be as simple as Mom and Dad (and older siblings) acting out the Christmas story extemporaneously. Young children can be given simple roles to play.

Whether it’s Oscar-worthy or spur-of-the-moment (it’s amazing what you can do with a few sheets and a blanket), re-enacting the Christmas story is a great way to teach children the true meaning of Christmas. And it might just be a deeply moving experience for the adults involved, too.

6. Decorate and bless your Christmas tree

If you have held off on buying a Christmas tree (or kept it as an [Advent tree](#)), then decorate your Christmas tree on Christmas Eve as a sign and celebration of Christ's arrival. (Take down your [Jesse Tree ornaments](#) first!) If you are just getting started with your family Christmas traditions, make your own homemade Christmas ornaments (see below for ideas).

The Church has a blessing for just about everything—including Christmas trees! You can find [the blessing at the USCCB website](#), or make up your own.

7. Make and light a Christ candle

If your family has enjoyed lighting the Advent wreath, extend the practice by making a Christ candle. Purchase a large white candle, ideally one made for liturgical use (at least 51 percent bees' wax), and decorate it with the *chi rho* (the first two letters in the Greek word for *Christ*) along with the year. Place it in the center of your Advent wreath and light it throughout the Christmas season as a reminder that Christ is the light of the world (John 1).

8. Celebrate the Festival of Lessons and Carols

The Festival of Lessons and Carols is a service of Scripture and song that originated at King's College, Cambridge, in 1918. The service consists of nine Scripture lessons which recount the Fall, the promise of a Messiah, the Incarnation, and the Great Commission; each lesson is followed by a song that reflects on the lesson's message, and a brief prayer. Today, the service is broadcast worldwide by the BBC on Christmas Eve, and churches around the world celebrate

different versions.

Check to see whether the Festival of Lessons and Carols will be offered by churches in your area. Otherwise, you can use the [simple version offered by the USCCB](#) to conduct your own service, or catch it on the BBC World Service; you can find broadcast information at the [King's College website](#).

9. Do more works of mercy

The message of the Gospel and the call of the Church is unambiguous: fully celebrating Christmas means reaching out to the poor, the oppressed, and all those in need of our help. Model the true spirit of Christmas for your kids by seeking out opportunities to help others throughout the whole Christmas season.

- Pray for Christians being persecuted around the world.
- Give away things you do not need (and maybe some things that others might need more than you), and renew your commitment to Christian stewardship and simple living.
- Consider year-end gifts to charitable organizations that help those in need; let your kids help choose a recipient. Better yet, pool your money as a family and decide to give it to a family or organization in your community.
- Donate goods to your local food shelf, St. Vincent de Paul Society or other charity. Make it a family field trip.
- Commit to at least one work of mercy as part of your family's resolutions for the New Year.
- Observe January as poverty awareness month by using the interactive resources at [Poverty USA](#), a Catholic initiative.
- Lobby on behalf of migrants and refugees; the first full week of January is observed as [National Migration Week](#)

by the Church in the United States.

10. Organize a Christmas caroling party

Arrange a group to sing Christmas carols at your local jail, hospital, or nursing home. (Reach out to the organization's volunteer coordinator.) It's a great way to evangelize and do a work of mercy at the same time!

11. Mark the feasts of the first martyrs

Right on the heels of Christmas, the Church gives us a trio of martyrs' feasts. First comes the feast of the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, on December 26. This is followed on December 27 by the Feast of St. John the Evangelist (traditionally considered a "white martyr," even though he died a natural death), and then on December 28, we remember the Feast of the Holy Innocents (the infant-martyrs killed by King Herod as he sought to destroy the Christ child).

What are we supposed to take away from this juxtaposition? Perhaps it is a good reminder that Christmas is more than soft pastels, stars, a cute baby, and Hallmark sentiments. We need Christmas—that is, we need the saving Christ—because we live in a dark and violent world. These feasts also remind us that following Christ means forfeiting our lives in one way or another. Christ has only just arrived on the scene, and already we are called to follow him.

Be sure to note these feasts with your kids. You can find additional resources for celebrating at the USCCB Christmas website:

[Feast of St. Stephen](#)

[Feast of John the Evangelist](#)

[Feast of the Holy Innocents](#)

12. Celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family

The Feast of the Holy Family follows quickly on the heels of Christmas (usually on the following Sunday). You can use the occasion to celebrate your own family by making a very simple “family tree” with photos of each person. Talk with younger children about what it means to be a family. Include the date of your wedding anniversary as the “birthday” of your family. This might also be a good time to [consecrate your family to the Holy Family](#).

13. Celebrate Mary and world peace on January 1

January 1 is not only New Year’s Day, but the Octave Day of Christmas, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, and the Church’s World Day of Peace.

Celebrate the Solemnity of Mary and the Octave of Christmas by attending Mass (it’s such an important day, Catholics are obliged to celebrate Mass). When you get home from Mass, incorporate a special Mary-themed treat into your New Year’s Day meal; you will find a whole list of ideas at [Catholic Cuisine](#).

You can share the pope’s message for the World Day of Peace by downloading the full text of his message or a shorter summary from the [USCCB World Day of Peace](#) web page. Also consider [praying a rosary](#) for world peace.

14. Do a family “examen” of the year

On January 1, use the format of the [Ignatian Daily Examen](#) to do an “examen” of the life of your family in the past year. If

praying the examen is too formal, go through your calendar month by month, talking about the biggest events. Or go through family photos month by month. As you share memories, talk about the high points and the low points.

15. Bless your home and household on Epiphany

It is traditional to bless your home and household on the Feast of the Epiphany, perhaps because of the Biblical reference to the three kings entering the home where the Holy Family was staying in order to worship the Christ child there. You can find an [Epiphany blessing of the home](#) in *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* (or at the USCCB website).

A more traditional form of the Epiphany blessing involves using blessed chalk to write the letters C, M, and B, plus the year, above the main entrance to the home (or above the door to each room in the house), like so: 20 + C + M + B + 16. The letters are the initials of the traditional names of the three magi: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. They also represent the Latin words *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means: “May Christ bless the house.” Of course, the + represents the cross.

For more family ideas for the Feast of the Epiphany, see *Six Family Traditions for the Feast of the Epiphany*.

16. Send the magi on a journey through your house

If you have a manger set, bring out the three kings on Christmas Day—but instead of placing them at the manger right away, put them somewhere else in your house so that they can journey to the manger over the twelve days between Christmas Day and the traditional date for the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6).

You can have the three kings move to a different room or area of your house on each day. Let your kids search for them every morning; when they find them, say to your kids: "The wise men are searching for Jesus in ____ (the dining room, your bedroom, etc.). How can we show the magi that Jesus is present in this place?" Brainstorm examples of Christian behavior in the particular place, then close with a short prayer:

"O holy magi, help us to see Christ in this place, and make it holy in all we say and all we do here. Amen."

16. Hold a procession of the magi

On the Feast of the Epiphany, read the Gospel account of the visit of the three wise men (see [Matthew 2:1-12](#)), then have your children march through the house holding the figures of the three kings and singing "[We Three Kings](#)."

17. Eat King's Cake

A popular Epiphany tradition in many cultures, the King's Cake (or King Cake) is a sweet cake in which a small figure of the baby Jesus is hidden. Searching for the baby Jesus in the cake imitates the Magi's search for the baby Jesus. You can find great recipes for King's Cake, along with some cultural background, over at [Catholic Cuisine](#).

18. Celebrate Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night is a largely forgotten traditional celebration held on the twelfth night of the Christmas season, January 6—the traditional date of Epiphany before the liturgical reforms of Vatican II.

Over at Catholic Cuisine, they have a complete and

comprehensive plan for a [Twelve Days of Christmas themed dinner feast](#) that features twelve courses, including partridge in a pear tree pie. You can also find an extensive history, as well as some traditional ways of celebrating, at [Fish Eaters](#).

19. Celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord marks the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

It's also the perfect time to remember your kids' baptisms, and to talk about what that means: "Did you know you were baptized, too, just like Jesus?" Tell the story of your child's baptism. What was the most memorable moment? Why did you ask to have your child baptized? What promises did you have to make? Pull out anything related to your kids' baptism: a baptismal gown, candle, pictures, or video.

Using fabric markers, make a tablecloth celebrating baptism containing the baptismal dates of everyone in the family; bring it out for meals on the anniversary of each person's baptism.

20. Wish people a merry Christmas

Model the Christmas spirit for your kids by wishing people a merry Christmas throughout the whole Christmas season. Yes, you'll get looks by mid-December, but just remind them that if stores can start Christmassing in October, you're entitled to celebrate the *real* Christmas season in its fullness!

Non-religious (but fun) Christmas

traditions

21. Eat a special Christmas Eve dinner

Different families develop their own Christmas Eve meal traditions, but if you are looking for a traditional meal to latch onto and you happen to be of French descent, consider holding a [réveillon](#), a long dinner full of sumptuous foods. If you are Italian, try the [Feast of Seven Fishes](#), a meal featuring seven courses of seafood. Poles, meanwhile, celebrate a [Wigilia](#) meal.

Naturally, Wikipedia has a complete rundown of [traditional Christmas dinners](#) from different nationalities.

22. Cut your own Christmas tree

“Cut your own” tree farms are proliferating; many offer other fun winter activities besides picking and cutting your own tree. If the weather is nice, you can make a day of it. You can find a Christmas tree farm near you at [this website](#).

23. Make your own Christmas tree ornaments

If you’re just getting started with your family Christmas traditions, try making your own Christmas tree ornaments. If you have kept your tree as a super-simple Advent tree, then this might be a good activity for later in the day on Christmas Day.

There are so many great ideas for homemade ornaments online, we’re not going to attempt to provide a complete guide here. However, if you’re going to let your young children be involved (a great idea!) and if you care at all what your tree looks like, you’re going to want to choose simple decorations that are going to look pretty good no matter how your kids do

with them. Some suggestions that caught our eye:

- **Classic or fancy paper chains.** Google “fancy paper chain” for a cool twist on this classic childhood ornament. If you go classic, personalize your paper chain with words (Christmas greetings or Bible verses) or art from each family member.
- **Ribbon chains.** Like a paper chain, but made from ribbons.
- **Natural ornaments.** Go foraging outdoors for natural objects to make into Christmas ornaments (respecting natural environments and any applicable laws). Ideas for natural ornaments include pine cones (decorated or plain), shells, dried grasses braided into decorative ropes, stones (polished and hot-glued to string or hangers), dried flowers, sea glass, twigs fastened together to make stars and snowflakes, and so on.
- **Strings of fruit and popcorn.** String cranberries, popcorn, and other dried fruits and nuts (dried orange wheels, shelled peanuts), then bring the strings outside for a tasty Christmas treat for the wild critters around your house.
- **Salt dough ornaments.** Homemade salt dough is easy to make and fun to play with; when the dough hardens, you can paint it to make your own ornaments.
- **Paper snowflakes and other ornaments.** For a twist, try making 3D paper stars and snowflakes.
- **Edible ornaments.** Candy canes, gumdrops, and other hard candies look pretty strung on a tree.

24. Christmas Eve luminaries

In Spanish-speaking countries and parts of the southwestern United States, it is traditional to set out luminaries—candles set in paper bags weighted with sand—on Christmas Eve. It is said that the lights are meant to invite Christ, the light of

the world, into the home. Probably the tradition is just as much about making a pretty and interesting light display in a season of darkness.

25. Watch a Christmas classic

Let's face it, from the original cartoon version of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* to *It's a Wonderful Life* to *The Nativity Story*, certain movies and television shows have a way of working their way into our hearts. Pass the popcorn, and pass on a Christmas movie-watching tradition to your kids.

And on that note, we'll leave you with one of the classic scenes from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*...the one where Linus explains "what Christmas is all about":