Feast of the Holy Innocents: Part of the Christmas Octave

Every day of the Christmas octave is filled with meaning that reflects back on the Nativity, not just the birth of Christ but the impact, the reality of the birth.

Octaves can be traced back to the Old Testament, when certain celebrations such as the feast of Booths (Lv 23:33ff.) and feast of the dedication of the temple (2 Chr 7:9) lasted eight days. At one time there were 15 feast days on the Church calendar that included octaves, but since 1969, only Christmas and Easter are extended with the additional days of celebration. The Christmas octaves were introduced into the liturgical calendar soon after the date of Christmas was established in the late fourth century. This tradition continues today with octaves beginning on Christmas and ending seven days later on Jan. 1. The liturgies on these days honor individuals who loved Jesus without question. Some are martyrs, others holy men, women and even infants; all gave their lives to the one who, like us, was born as a babe.

DEC. 26 The liturgy on the day after Christmas tells us of St. Stephen – how he was stoned to death for speaking the truth about Christ and thus became the first martyr and the first saint. He gave up his life believing in the divinity of the child born on Christmas.

DEC. 27 This day we celebrate St. John the Evangelist, the same John who was the only apostle at Calvary, who laid his head on Our Lord’s chest and through his Gospel shows us how to live in the manner of Christ.

DEC. 28 The liturgy calls us to reflect on the Holy Innocents: children under age 2 who were slaughtered by the tyrant Herod because he feared one of them might be the newborn rival king

(Jesus). In our era, abortion continues to murder the innocents.

DEC. 29 It is St. Thomas Becket, the English archbishop, we commemorate on the fourth day of the octave. In 1170, he was murdered because he defended the Church from domination by King Henry II.

First Sunday after Christmas The calendar proclaims the feast of the Holy Family – that Jesus, Mary and Joseph are the model family for the world to emulate. God came to earth to be part of a human family, born as an infant to be protected, educated and nurtured by Mary and Joseph. This small family stayed together, respecting and loving one another despite tragedies and pain. Their love and faith in God never wavered. Twenty-one centuries later, families are still influenced by their holiness.

DEC. 31 The life of Pope St. Sylvester I (d. 335) is celebrated this day. He was selected as pope immediately after Constantine ended the persecution of Christians and thus oversaw the first era of peace on earth. Pope Sylvester supported the Council of Nicea in 325 where the Church proclaimed Jesus as both human and divine, consubstantial with the Father. He approved the Nicene Creed, still recited at every Sunday Mass.

JAN. 1 On this final and actual octave day, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. This is a holy day of obligation on which we honor the role of Mary in the salvation history of mankind. Her fiat to the angel, love of her Son and love of God have no equal among mortals. The Gospel reading this day (Lk 2:16-21) announces that the child carried by Mary was circumcised and given the name Jesus on the eighth day after his birth.

All these feasts have fixed dates on the Church calendar except for the feast of the Holy Family, which takes place on

the first Sunday after Christmas. If another of the octave feast days falls on that Sunday, with one exception, it is preempted by the feast of the Holy Family and the other feast is not celebrated during the octaves. For example, this year the feast of the Holy Innocents, Sunday, Dec. 28, is preempted by the feast of the Holy Family. The one exception is the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. If that solemnity falls on the first Sunday after Christmas, then the Holy Family is moved to and celebrated on Dec. 30.

Each of these feast days within the octave continues the joys of Christmas Day and helps us in our attempt to understand the mystery of the Incarnation. In times past, the individuals described in each of the octave days were considered as *comites Christi*, companions of Christ, meaning each has a special relationship with Our Lord. Their placement on the Church calendar, near the birth of Christ, is not accidental.