What are the Twelve Days of Christmas?

In most of the Western Church, the "Twelve Days of Christmas" are the 12 days beginning with Christmas Day itself and concluding with the vigil of Epiphany on the traditional calendar. (The traditional observance of Epiphany was on January 6, so January 5 would be the last of the 12 days). Epiphany, of course, honors the visit of the Wise Men (also called "Magi" or "Kings") to worship the baby Jesus (see Mt 2:1–12).

We should note that in some traditions, the "Twelve Days of Christmas" begin instead on the evening of December 25 with the following day, December 26, considered the "First Day" of Christmas. In these traditions, the 12 days thus include Epiphany itself (January 6).

Symbols from the song

Developed from an English hymn in 1645 called "In Those Twelve Days", each number is a symbol for a truth of the Faith and was often used as a teaching tool. Before the invention of the printing press, carols were a way to communicate the Christmas story and pass it from one generation to another. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was written for English Catholics to illustrate the truths of their faith during a time of persecution

One partridge in a pear tree = The one true God, or God's gift of love to mankind: the advent of Jesus and His death on the cross

Two turtle doves = The two Testaments, Old and New

Three French hens = The three Persons of the Trinity, or the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity

Four colley (or calling) birds = The Four Evangelists, or the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Five golden rings = The five books of the Pentateuch (in the Bible)

Six geese a-laying = The six jars of water at Cana (Jesus' first miracle), or the six days of creation

Seven swans a-swimming = The Seven Sacraments, or the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit

Eight maids a-milking = The Eight Beatitudes

Nine ladies dancing = The nine choirs of angels, or the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit

Ten lords a-leaping = The Ten Commandments

Eleven pipers piping = The eleven faithful apostles (or the eleven stars seen in the Old Testament)

Twelve drummers drumming = The Twelve Tribes of Israel (or the Twelve Apostles), or the twelve points of belief in the Apostles' Creed

Twelfth Night

The merrymaking celebration called "Twelfth Night" (that is, the twelfth night of the Twelve Days of Christmas) traditionally took place throughout parts of Western Europe on the evening of January 5, the vigil of Epiphany. It was observed by feasting, plays, and all kinds of tomfoolery. Some of its distinctive customs apparently had their roots in celebrations that pre-dated the coming of the Christian faith to that area of the world.

The customary fare for Twelfth Night feasting in England featured "wassail," an ale-based drink mixed with honey and spices. It was served in large bowls passed among family

members and friends with the greeting “Wassail!” which comes from the old English phrase “Waes hael,” meaning “Be well!”

Also important for Twelfth Night celebrations was the “Kings’ Cake,” in honor of the visit of the “Kings” who came to worship Our Lord. A bean, coin or little figure of the Christ Child was baked into the cake, and then slices of the cake were distributed. Whoever found the object in his or her piece was chosen to rule as “king” or “queen” over the festivities.

Since the Mardi Gras season traditionally begins with Epiphany, this cake became part of those celebrations in French homes, including those in the Gulf Coast region of the U.S.

A final note: William Shakespeare’s play **Twelfth Night, Or What You Will** (written c. 1601) was written to be performed on this holiday.