

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Many of us are familiar with the song: *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. This popular song is often seen as simply a nonsense song for children, whereas actually it is a song of Christian instruction with hidden references to the basic teachings of the faith. Dating to the 16th century religious wars in England, it was designed to aid the memory of the catechism secretly to the children. Each of the “*days*” represents some aspect of the Christian Faith that was important for children to learn.

In the not-so-tolerant past, music and poetry were often used as media of expression for ideas that were not in fashion with the contemporary powers that be. Mother Goose rhymes were disguised political commentaries of their day. “*The Twelve Days of Christmas*” was written along similar lines. The English began writing carols in the 15th century, but later the Puritans suppressed these religious songs altogether. After Christmas was restored in England, festive songs praising feasting and good will developed. “*The Twelve Days of Christmas*” became popular as a kind of Catechism song to teach trines of the faith.

So what does the song represent?

The “true love” mentioned in the song refers to God the Father who in love sent His only Son to be our brother. “*God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life*”(John 3:16).

The “me” receiving the presents is symbolic of every baptised person. “*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life*” (Tit 3:5-7).

The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose birthday we celebrate on December 25, the first day of Christmas. In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge that protects from injury and acts as a decoy to predators from her helpless nestling, recalling the expression of Christ’s sadness over the fate of Jerusalem: “*Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered you under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but you would not have it so...*” (Lk 13:34).

The Two Turtle Doves represent the Old and New Testaments, which together bear witness to God’s self-revelation in history and the creation of a people to proclaim the story of salvation to the world.

The Three French Hens represent The Three Theological Virtues: 1) Faith, 2) Hope, and 3) Charity (love). “*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love*” (1 Cor 13:13).

The Four Calling Birds represent the Four Gospels: 1) Matthew, 2) Mark, 3) Luke, and 4) John, which proclaim the Good News of God’s reconciliation of the world to Himself in Jesus Christ.

The Five Gold Rings represent the first Five Books of the Old Testament, known as the Pentateuch: 1) Genesis, 2) Exodus, 3) Leviticus, 4) Numbers, and 5) Deuteronomy, which give the history of humanity’s sinful failure and God’s response of grace in the promise of a Saviour who would crush the head of the serpent. “*And I shall put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel*” (Gen 3:15).

The Six Geese A-laying represent the six days of creation, which confess God as Creator of the world (Gen 1) *Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had completed the work that He had been doing. So on the seventh day He rested from all His work. Therefore God has blessed the seventh day and has set it apart as holy, because on that day He rested from all the work of creation that He had done. This is the history of the heavens and the earth, when they were created, at the time when the LORD God made earth and heaven.* (Gen 2:1-4).

The Seven Swans A-swimming represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: 1) prophecy, 2) ministry, 3) teaching, 4) exhortation, 5) giving, 6) leading, and 7) compassion. “*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully*” (Rm 12:6-8) “*To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, who gives them to each one, just as He determines.*” (1 Cor 12:8-11).

The Eight Maids A-milking represent the eight Beatitudes: 1) Blessed are the poor in spirit, 2) those who

mourn, 3) the meek, 4) those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, 5) the merciful, 6) the pure in heart, 7) the peacemakers, 8) those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. (Mt 5:3-10).

The Nine Ladies Dancing represent the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit: 1) love, 2) joy, 3) peace, 4) patience, 5) kindness, 6) generosity, 7) faithfulness, 8) gentleness and 9) self-control. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”* (Gal 5:22).

The Ten Lords A-leaping represent the Ten Commandments: 1) Thou shall have no other gods before me; 2) You shall not take the name of the LORD in vain; 3) Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy; 4) Honour your father and mother; 5) You shall not murder; 6) You shall not commit adultery; 7) You shall not steal; 8) You shall not bear false witness; 9) You shall not covet you're your neighbour's house; 10) You shall not covet your neighbour's wife (Ex 20:1-17).

The Eleven Pipers Piping represent the eleven Faithful Apostles: 1) Simon Peter, 2) Andrew, 3) James, 4) John, 5) Philip, 6) Bartholomew, 7) Matthew, 8) Thomas, 9) James, who was the son of Alphaeus, 10) Simon the Zealot, 11) Judas who was the son of James (Lk 6:14-16). The list does not include the twelfth disciple, Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus to the Jews.

The Twelve Drummers Drumming represent the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostles Creed: 1) I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. 2) I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. 3) He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. 4) He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and was buried. He descended into hell. 5) On the third day he rose again. 6) He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. 7) He will come again to judge the living and the dead. 8) I believe in the Holy Spirit. 9) The holy Christian church, the communion of saints. 10) The forgiveness of sins. 11) The resurrection of the body. 12) And life everlasting.

How interesting and sad that a song written to secretly remind Christians about the doctrines of their faith was disguised so well that, after 400 years, the secular world identifies with this carol more than Christians do, who are mostly unaware of its origins and meanings. The freedom to exercise our great faith in this country is a great blessing. Let us forever cherish it and sing it from the rooftops!