

The Twelve Days of Christmas

One English Christmas carol well-known worldwide today is, however, more than a repetitious tune with pretty phrases and strange gifts. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is a song with different levels of meaning.

From 1558 to 1829, the Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. During this period, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was written in England as a catechism song for young Catholics. The hidden meanings of the song's gifts were intended to help the children remember lessons of their faith. Instead of referring to an earthly suitor, the "true love" mentioned in the song refers to God Himself. The "me" who receives the presents is symbolic of every baptized person. The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus Christ. In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge which feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings. The meaning of the other symbols are:

Two Turtle Doves - the Old and New Testaments

Three French Hens - Faith, Hope, and Charity

Four Calling Birds - the four Gospels

Five Golden Rings - the first five books of the Old Testament, which give the history of man's fall from grace

Six Geese A-Laying - the six days of creation

Seven Swans A-Swimming - the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit

Eight Maids A-Milking - the eight Beatitudes

Nine Ladies Dancing - the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit

Ten Lords A-Leaping - the Ten Commandments

Eleven Pipers Piping - the eleven faithful disciples

Twelve Drummers Drumming - the twelve points of belief in the Apostles Creed (cf. Newsletter of the Catholic Medical Mission Board, December 1988)

(The above is excerpted from A Handbook of Catholic Sacraments, written by Ann Ball and published by Our Sunday Visitor.)