

An Underground Catechism
The First Sunday of Christmas
December 29, 2024 (Year C)

Many people today believe that the Twelve Days of Christmas end on Christmas Day. However, for hundreds of years, most people understood that the Twelve Days of Christmas began on Christmas Day and did not end until January 5. These 12 days were important and they were observed by various Christian denominations. In some Eastern European churches, the twelve days of Christmas meant attending daily church services and were a time of rededication and renewal. It was also a time when small, simple, and symbolic gifts of faith were given to children. The twelve days of Christmas were considered a very holy time.

Most of us know the song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” and we know that it contains an absolutely fascinating list of gifts a true love might give to their loved one. These gifts include items such as partridges, turtledoves, French hens, gold rings, leaping lords and dancing ladies; as well as a few other fascinating gifts. Can you imagine what those gifts might cost today?

Just so you’ll know, since 1984, PNC Bank has been tracking the price of giving each gift mentioned in that song. The bank uses the PNC Christmas Price Index with current market rates to calculate how much each gift would cost for today’s ambitious gift giver. For 2024, all those gifts added up cost a whopping **\$209,272.00**. The single most expensive item on the shopping list this year are the ten lords-a-leaping.

However, this list has another kind of value that requires a little history to explain.

During the sixteenth century, serious religious conflicts in England made it extremely dangerous to be a Catholic. To openly practice the Catholic religion was a crime that usually resulted in an awful, truly horrendous, death. Even writing anything supporting the Catholic faith was a crime with ghastly consequences.

That's history.

Here's where history and legend intersect:

The classic Christmas carol – The Twelve Days of Christmas – has been around since the year of our Lord 1780; a very long time ago. In 1780 it was written as a poem and not was set to music until 1909. Again, that's history.

There are several legends surrounding how the words of this poem became a song. And the most prevalent legend incorporates the history we just heard.

Because Catholics in the sixteenth century were forbidden by law from practicing their faith, they had to take their faith underground. And they had to develop a method to teach their children their faith...to ensure that children learned the Catholic faith from their parents.

The legend says that when Catholic parents learned of the poem, The Twelve Days of Christmas, they adopted it as a "catechism poem" or an "underground catechism poem". It became a memory aid to help children learn; it could NOT be written down. That would be a crime. What children could learn from the "underground catechism" was a deep, symbolic meaning of their Christian faith and the values of hope and love and grace.

Almost all of us know today's version of the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas". Let's revisit it to hear an alternate meaning of the verses.

Verse 1: On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me: a partridge in a pear tree. The meaning of this first verse – Jesus Christ is the partridge symbolizing God's love for us. A partridge is a bird that will willingly sacrifice itself to protect its young. I know of no other bird that does this. The pear tree symbolizes the cross.

Verse 2: On the second day, my true love gave to me two turtledoves. These two birds represent the Old and New Testaments which symbolize the complete story of our Christian faith and God's plan for salvation.

Verse 3: On the third day, my true love gave to me: three French hens. They symbolize faith, hope, and love and draw inspiration from 1 Corinthians 13.

Verse 4: On the fourth day, my true love gave to me: four calling birds. These symbolize the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and they serve as the foundation of the New Testament which call us to understand Jesus' life and teachings.

Verse 5: On the fifth day, my true love gave to me: five golden rings. These represent the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Old Testament > Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These five books of the OT give us the history of man's fall from grace.

Verse 6: On the sixth day, my true love gave to me: six geese a-laying. Each day of those six days represents a day of Creation as recorded in the book of Genesis: (1) the heavens and the earth; (2)

the sky and the seas; (3) the land and the plants; (4) the sun, moon, and stars; (5) the fish and the birds; (6) the animals and people.

Verse 7: On the seventh day, my true love gave to me: seven swans a-swimming. These represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as listed in the twelfth chapter of Romans verses 6-8. These gifts are prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion.

Verse 8: On the eighth day, my true love gave to me: eight maids a-milking. These symbolize the eight (8) Beatitudes that Jesus teaches us in Matthew 5.

Verse 9: On the ninth day, my true love gave to me: nine ladies dancing. These nine ladies reflect the fruit of the Spirit as described in Galatians. These are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Verse 10: On the tenth day, my true love gave to me: ten lords a-leaping. This is probably the easiest of all the gifts to understand. This is the symbol for the Ten Commandments.

Verse 11: On the eleventh day, my true love gave to me: eleven pipers piping. This symbolizes the eleven faithful apostles who continued to spread the Gospel after Judas' betrayal.

Verse 12: On the twelfth day, my true love gave to me: twelve drummers drumming. These represent the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed. These are fundamental beliefs that encompass **God's nature**, **Jesus' life**, and the **Holy Spirit's work**. These form the bedrock of our Christian faith.

Of course, there are other legends and stories surrounding the Twelve Days of Christmas song. One legend tells us that it was not just Catholic parents but other Christian parents that taught their children this kind of catechism. There is even a story that refutes all of it. That's often what happens when older times and legends intersect.

But regardless of legends or stories or other histories, revisiting this classic Christmas carol can uncover for us a rich mix of symbols related to our faith. It provides a way to re-examine old familiar teachings with new eyes. A catechism is a summary of the principles of the Christian religion. Most denominations have one; ours begins on page 844 of the Book of Common Prayer. It expresses our hope, our trust, and our belief in the One who loves us more than we can ever ask or imagine; the one we call Jesus Christ. This study of our faith, this learning about our Savior is a lifelong undertaking.

The "12 Days of Christmas" is much more than a catchy holiday song – it's a powerful reminder of the history and traditions that shape our faith. So the next time you hear that song playing in the background, take a moment to reflect on its deeper meaning and embark on your own spiritual journey through the 12 Days of Christmas.

Thanks be to God.

Alleluia, alleluia.