

Ponderings for Epiphany
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The traditional date of Epiphany is January 6, but in the Roman Catholic dioceses of the United States it is celebrated on the Sunday between January 2 and January 8. This year (2021) it occurs on January 3. The word “epiphany” is from the Greek and means a “revealing” or a “manifestation.” It refers to the great manifestations of our Lord’s incarnate nature as truly God and truly man, “God in flesh made manifest.” His birth, the visit by the Magi (the three kings) to adore Him, His baptism in the Jordan River where the Father revealed Him as his beloved Son, and His first miracle at the wedding at Cana. At one point in Church history all of these events were celebrated on the Epiphany, but now the liturgical calendar assigns particular feasts or proper days for each.

In our day, the Solemnity of the Epiphany primarily celebrates the visit of the Magi representing our Lord’s manifestation to all the Gentiles (the non-Jewish people of the world) and the corresponding call of the Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ. The celebration of the Epiphany predates even the celebration of Christmas, and is thus one of the oldest festivals on the Church’s calendar, dating from at least the third century.

There are several distinctive customs associated with Epiphany. On Epiphany the crèche, or nativity scene, is finished off with the addition of the figures of the three Magi that have not been added before this date. Many families move the figures of the Magi from place to place around their home as they make their way to visit the Christ Child. Some families, in imitation of the gifts of the Magi to the infant Jesus, exchange gifts on this day as well as Christmas, thus giving it the name in some places of “Little Christmas.” Christmas decorations should not be taken down until after the Epiphany, and may even be left until after the feast of the Baptism of the Lord that officially ends the liturgical observance of the Christmas season, Jan. 10 this year.

Another popular Epiphany custom is the blessing of homes, using blessed chalk for that purpose. The Gospel tells us that the Magi found the Christ child “on entering the house.” You can bless those who come in and go out of your house by inscribing above the door (using the blessed chalk): the first two numbers of the year + C + M + B + and the last two numbers of the year (20+C+M+B+21). Tradition tells us that the letters stand for the names of the magi: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. The letters may also mean the Latin phrase “*Christus mansionem benedicat*,” or “May Christ bless this dwelling.” A liturgy for blessing your home can be found on the web here: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/objects/blessing-of-the-home-and-household-on-epiphany.cfm>

The evening before the traditional date for Epiphany, January 6, is the 12th Day of Christmas, and is often called Twelfth Night. A popular British custom for Twelfth Night is to toast the day with a drink called wassail. A traditional recipe for wassail uses the following ingredients: 1 gal apple cider, 8 cinnamon sticks, 1 washed, sliced lemon, 1 washed, sliced orange, 1 tbsp cloves, 1 tbsp allspice, 1 gal white wine, 2 cups rum. Simmer the nonalcoholic ingredients together for 1-2 hours, and then add the wine and rum about 10 minutes before serving hot.

In many cultures spicy foods (such as those containing curry) are eaten on the Epiphany in commemoration of the Magi who came from the Orient where spicy foods are popular. One such food is spice cake, sometimes eaten for dessert on Epiphany, while other cultures recommend eating ginger laden foods, such as ginger snaps, for dessert.

Another popular tradition found in many cultures is the baking of an Epiphany cake, often a fruitcake or a spice cake, into which a bauble (such as a coin, charm, or a hard bean) is secretly inserted. The person who finds the trinket in his or her piece of cake is crowned King or Queen of the feast, and is given special deference, privileges and gifts.

Regardless of how else you choose to celebrate this day, participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and in prayer, especially prayers and devotions in contemplation of the manifestation of our Lord to the world, should take pride of place. Happy Epiphany!