

- When Elizabeth I was crowned as Queen of England in 1558, the very first thing she did was to reverse the reestablishment of Catholicism as the official religion of the realm, a decision made by her half-sister and predecessor, Queen Mary.
- You'll remember that their father, King Henry VIII, had broken from the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church in 1534 and formed the Church of England in response to the pope's refusal to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon.
- Henry's immediate successor, Edward VI, brought on the formal adoption of Protestantism during his reign from 1547 to 1553, but that was brought to a halt under the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, who ruled from 1553 until 1558.
- Queen Mary was convinced that she was to bring the true faith back to England, but she died before her mission was fully accomplished, and her half-sister, ironically known as "Good Queen Bess" very quickly moved to suppress Catholicism upon ascending to the throne.
- Thus, from 1558 until 1829, Roman Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. Moreover, not only were Catholics not allowed to practice their faith, but many were imprisoned and eventually martyred for the Faith, especially many priests.
- While ultimately this period of English anti-Catholicism is a sad episode in Church history, many saints were borne out of the Church's suffering, including martyrs such as St. Edmund Campion, who was hung, drawn and quartered by "Good Queen Bess" simply for being a Catholic priest and for refusing to renounce his Catholic faith.
- In addition to producing many saints and martyrs, this period of English history also produced some very notable literature and music.
- One very notable Christmas carol that came from this era is the song *The 12 Days of Christmas*, which was published in England in 1780.
- While on the surface this may seem like a nonsensical children's song, many historians contend that it was actually written by English Catholics as a means of catechizing their children on the basic elements of the Faith.
- In this song the "true love" bestowing one gift each day for 12 days is our Lord, and each of the 12 gifts symbolizes an element of our faith, making it easy for children to learn the basic tenets of Catholicism.
- The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus Christ on the cross. Two turtle doves are the Old and New Testaments. Three French hens stand for faith, hope and love. The four calling birds represent the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
- The five golden rings recall the Torah or Law, the first five books of the Old Testament. The six geese a-laying stand for the six days of creation.
- The seven swans a-swimming represent the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Knowledge, Counsel, Understanding, Piety, Courage and Fear of the Lord. The eight maids a-milking are the eight beatitudes.
- The nine ladies dancing are the nine fruit of the Holy Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control. The ten lords a-leaping are the Ten Commandments.
- The eleven pipers piping stand for the eleven faithful disciples. The twelve drummers drumming symbolize the twelve points of belief in the Apostles' Creed.

- Moreover, the 12 days of Christmas were understood to begin on Christmas Day and finish on January 5<sup>th</sup>, the final day before the great feast of Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup>, which is the manifestation or shining forth of Christ – the Word made flesh – to the entire world.
- And thus, this Christmas carol, *The 12 Days of Christmas*, was meant to help draw the connection between these two great feasts of Christmas and the Epiphany. You see, the Epiphany is a feast that does not stand alone and cannot be understood apart from Christmas.
- The Epiphany of our Lord, which we now celebrate on the Sunday closest to January 6<sup>th</sup>, is a further unfolding of the Christmas mysteries. The Epiphany is a further unfolding of the mystery of our Lord's Incarnation.
- Indeed, the Epiphany shows us not only that God became man by being born of the Virgin Mary. The Epiphany reminds us that Christ has come as a king to rule every human heart.
- Thus, in this feast we get the first sense of Christ's kingship, not because of anything that Jesus does, but rather we get the first inkling of His kingship in the way He is treated.
- You see, the fact that God became man in the Incarnation is a mystery precisely because our intellects cannot grasp how a tiny babe can be our Sovereign Lord. When we consider our Lord's nativity, our senses perceive only a tiny baby sleeping in the lap of the Virgin Mary.
- But with the coming of the magi at the Epiphany, we see this tiny Christ child being treated as the King that we know by faith He is! In the Epiphany we see that Kings from far off lands, who probably know very little about Judaism, are drawn to adore Him.
- And they come bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh: gifts befitting a king! And as a king, His life is not to be completely hidden.
- While the mystery of the Incarnation, which is the mystery of our infinite and eternal God stepping into the limits of time and humanity, is difficult to grasp, God the Father wasn't about to keep it hidden! He wanted the world to know how much He loves us.
- And today's feast of the Epiphany celebrates this showing forth of God's love to the entire world.
- A little more than a week ago at Christmas we celebrated the fact that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in fulfillment of the great Jewish prophecies of the Old Testament.
- And now in the Epiphany we celebrate the fact that Christ came not just for the Jewish people to whom He owed His human heritage, but that He came for us all.
- We see this in the fact that the magi who come to do homage to the newborn King of the Jews were not Jews, but were gentiles from the East.
- Thus in the first reading we are told to "rise up in splendor," for our light has come. He is the light that shines in the darkness; the light the darkness cannot overcome. Christ is the light that dispels the thick clouds of sin and darkness that cover the peoples.
- As Catholic, we know that not only did Christ come to earth some 2000 years ago, but that He remains with us in our midst. We know that Jesus truly is *Emmanuel*, which means "God-with-us." He continues to be manifested to us, most especially in the Eucharist.
- Every time the priest prays the words of consecration at Mass, every time we see him elevate the host before our eyes and hear the bells ring, our Lord is being made manifest to us once again. As such, every Mass is its own Epiphany! Every Mass shows us that God loves us and is always with us!
- My friends, the Epiphany is not simply a call to meditate on the Incarnation and God's goodness in becoming man. It is the call to go to Jesus, to adore Him, to do Him homage, and ultimately to be obedient to Him.

- And so at the beginning of this year when so many of us are disposed to take stock of ourselves and make resolutions, let us make the resolution to be loyal subjects to Christ our King, by living our Catholic faith with integrity.
- Let us give Him the best gift we can give: not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but the gift of living our lives in faith, hope and true charity. May God bless you this coming year.