

Celebrating the Saints and Feasts of Advent and Christmas

Dec. 6: St Nicholas

Tell the story of St. Nicholas: St. Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in the fourth century. He was imprisoned during the persecution of Diocletian and later fought to defend the faith from heresy at the Council of Nicaea. He was known for his great generosity to the poor and was a special protector of the innocent and wronged. When he heard of a man with three daughters who was too poor to provide them with a dowry, he went by night to his house and secretly threw three bags of gold coins in through the window, each on the night before each one of the daughters came of age, so that they could marry. So, today he is the patron of finding a good spouse. In one version of the story, he threw the bags down the chimney, where they fell into the stockings that the daughters had hung over the fire to dry. In another story of St. Nicholas, he convinced some thieves to return what they had stolen, and so today is a patron of robbers - he helps them to repent and change, and he is a protector against theft and robbery. During a trip to the Holy Land, a violent storm blew up; St. Nicholas prayed and the storm calmed, and so he is also a patron of sailors and those who work on the sea. St. Nicholas also intervened on behalf of the innocent who were unjustly accused.

Following the Dutch custom, children might put out their shoes or hang their stockings from the mantel on the vigil of this feast, and, if they have been good, find in them the next morning St. Nicholas cookies. Children who have been naughty get straw — a gentle reminder that Advent is a time to strive hard to be very good so that we will be ready for Jesus when He comes. On St. Nicholas's Feast Day, it is customary to serve Speculaas cookies, a spicy Dutch cookie, cut into shapes relevant to the life of St. Nicholas (coins, mitres, ships, balls, money bags), and painted with colorful icing:

Speculaas Cookies (makes 3 dozen depending on size)

Cookie:

1 Cup (2 sticks) sweet butter, at room temperature	1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
2 cups dark brown sugar	1/8 teaspoon ground ginger
2 eggs	1/8 teaspoon cardamom
Grated rind of 1 lemon	1/8 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons cinnamon	4 cups flour
1 teaspoon ground nutmeg or mace	1 teaspoon baking powder

Icing:

Powdered sugar	A little beaten egg white for consistency, if desired
Water	Food coloring
Lemon juice	

In a large bowl, cream the butter with the sugar until fluffy. Stir in the eggs one at a time, blending thoroughly after each addition. Stir in the lemon rind. Sift the spices and salt with the flour and baking powder, and stir gradually into the butter mixture. Wrap in waxed paper or plastic wrap and chill for several hours or overnight. On a floured surface, roll out the dough to about 1/8 inch, or for larger figures to about 1/4 inch. Cut into shapes (Bishop, Bishop's staff, Bishop's mitre, ship, coins, etc.) and bake at 350 degrees until lightly browned (don't overbake). When cool, mix together icing ingredients and paint cookies as desired.

Dec. 8: Immaculate Conception

Read Luke 1:26-39 (the Annunciation) and talk about how God prepared Mary to be the mother of Jesus. He also prepares us for Jesus to come if we say "yes" as Mary did. Information on the Immaculate Conception can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church #487-511. If you have a statue of Mary, put it in a prominent place on this day with a vase of flowers for our Mother.

Dec. 9: St. Juan Diego & Dec. 12: Our Lady of Guadalupe

Tell the story of St. Juan Diego & Our Lady of Guadalupe. If you have an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, or any image of Mary, put it in a prominent place with a vase of flowers for our Mother.

Guadalupe is, strictly speaking, the name of a picture, but the name was extended to the church containing the picture and to the town that grew up around the church. It makes the shrine, it occasions the devotion, it illustrates Our Lady. It is taken as representing the Immaculate Conception, being the lone figure of a woman with the sun, moon, and star accompaniments of the great apocalyptic sign with a supporting angel under the crescent. The word is Spanish Arabic, but in Mexico it may represent certain Aztec sounds.

Its tradition is long-standing and constant, and in sources both oral and written, Indian and Spanish, the account is unwavering. The Blessed Virgin appeared on Saturday 9 December 1531 to a 55 year old neophyte named Juan Diego, who was hurrying down Tepeyac hill to hear Mass in Mexico City. She sent him to Bishop Zumárraga to have a temple built where she stood. She was at the same place that evening and Sunday evening to get the bishop's answer. The bishop did not immediately believe the messenger, had him cross-examined and watched, and he finally told him to ask the lady who said she was the mother of the true God for a sign. The neophyte agreed readily to ask for sign desired, and the bishop released him.

Juan was occupied all Monday with Bernardino, an uncle, who was dying of fever. Indian medicine had failed, and Bernardino seemed at death's door. At daybreak on Tuesday 12 December 1531, Juan ran to nearby the Saint James convent for a priest. To avoid the apparition and the untimely message to the bishop, he slipped round where the well chapel now stands. But the Blessed Virgin crossed down to meet him and said, "*What road is this thou takest son?*" A tender dialogue ensued. She reassured Juan about his uncle, to whom she also briefly appeared and instantly cured. Calling herself *Holy Mary of Guadalupe* she told Juan to return to the bishop. He asked Mary for the sign he required. She told him to go to the rocks and gather roses. Juan knew it was neither the time nor the place for roses, but he went and found them. Gathering many into the lap of his *tilma*, a long cloak or wrapper used by Mexican Indians, he came back. The Holy Mother rearranged the roses, and told him to keep them untouched and unseen until he reached the bishop. When he met with Zumárraga, Juan offered the sign to the bishop. As he unfolded his cloak the roses, fresh and wet with dew, fell out. Juan was startled to see the bishop and his attendants kneeling before him. The life size figure of the Virgin Mother, just as Juan had described her, was glowing on the tilma. The picture was venerated, guarded in the bishop's chapel, and soon after carried in procession to the preliminary shrine.

The coarsely woven material of the tilma which bears the picture is as thin and open as poor sacking. It is made of vegetable fibre, probably maguey. It consists of two strips, about seventy inches long by eighteen wide, held together by weak stitching. The seam is visible up the middle of the figure, turning aside from the face. Painters have not understood the laying on of the colours. They have deposed that the "canvas" was not only unfit but unprepared, and they have marvelled at apparent oil, water, tempera, etc. colouring in the same figure. They are left in equal admiration by the flower-like tints and the abundant gold. They and other artists find the proportions perfect for a maiden of fifteen. The figure and the attitude are of one advancing. There is flight and rest in the eager supporting angel. The chief colours are deep gold in the rays and stars, blue-green in the mantle, and rose in the flowered tunic.

Sworn evidence was given at various commissions of inquiry corroborating the traditional account of the miraculous origin and influence of the picture. Some wills connected with Juan Diego and his contemporaries were accepted as documentary evidence. Vouchers were given for the existence of Bishop Zumárraga's letter to his Franciscan brothers in Spain concerning the apparitions. His successor, Montufar, instituted a canonical inquiry,

in 1556, on a sermon in which the pastors and people were abused for crowding to the new shrine. In 1568 the renowned historian Bernal Díaz, a companion of Cortez, refers incidentally to Guadalupe and its daily miracles. The viceroy, Enríquez, while not opposing the devotion, wrote in 1575 to Philip II asking him to prevent the third archbishop from erecting a parish or monastery at the shrine. Inaugural pilgrimages were usually made to it by viceroys and other chief magistrates. Processes, national and ecclesiastical, were laboriously formulated and attested for presentation at Rome, Italy in 1663, 1666, 1723, and 1750.

The clergy, secular and regular, has been remarkably faithful to the devotion towards Our Lady of Guadalupe, the bishops especially fostering it, even to the extent of making a protestation of faith in the miracle a matter of occasional obligation. Pope Benedict XIV decreed that Our Lady of Guadalupe should be the national patron of Mexico, and made 12 December a holiday of obligation with an octave, and ordered a special Mass and Office. Pope Leo XIII approved a complete historical second Nocturne, ordered the picture to be crowned in his name, and composed a poetical inscription for it. Pope Pius X permitted Mexican priests to say the Mass of Holy Mary of Guadalupe on the twelfth day of every month, and granted indulgences which may be gained in any part of the world for prayer before a copy of the picture.

The place, called *Guadalupe Hidalgo* since 1822, is three miles northeast of Mexico City. Pilgrimages have been made to this shrine almost without interruption since 1531-1532. A shrine at the foot of Tepeyac Hill served for ninety years, and still forms part of the parochial sacristy. In 1622 a rich shrine was erected, and in 1709 a newer, even richer one. There are also a parish church, a convent and church for Capuchin nuns, a well chapel, and a hill chapel all constructed in the 18th century. About 1750 the shrine got the title of *collegiate*, a canonry and choir service being established. It was aggregated to Saint John Lateran in 1754. In 1904 it was created a basilica, with the presiding ecclesiastic being called abbot. The shrine has been renovated in Byzantine style which presents an illustration of Guadalupan history.

Dec. 13: St. Lucy

St. Lucy reminds us that Christ is the Light of the world because her name comes from the Latin word for light — *lux*. Light plays a role in the customs of her Feast Day. In Italy, torchlight processions and bonfires mark her day, and bowls of a cooked wheat porridge known as *cuccia* is eaten because, during a famine, the people of Syracuse invoked St. Lucy, who interceded by sending a ship laden with grain (much as St. Joseph also did for the people of Sicily). *Cuccia* can be made so that it's savory or sweet. The wheat is most often simply soaked overnight, rinsed, simmered in water to cover by 2 inches for 3 hours or until tender, and then served with milk and sugar, much like oatmeal is. Or it can be a bit more elaborate:

Cuccia (sweet)

1 pound whole wheat

Dried orange peel, grated

10 ounces fig honey or other flavorful honey

Chopped walnuts

Soak the grain in cold water for 24 hours, rinse it, and then boil it in water for three hours or until tender. Let it cool, then drain and return it to the fire with the honey, orange peel, and walnuts.

Some of the loveliest St. Lucy's Day customs are Swedish: in Sweden, the oldest daughter of a family will wake up before dawn on St. Lucy's Day and dress in a white gown for purity, often with a red sash as a sign of martyrdom. On her head she will wear a wreath of greenery and lit candles, and she is often accompanied by "starboys," her small brothers who are dressed in white gowns and cone-shaped hats that are decorated with gold stars, and carrying star-tipped wands. "St. Lucy" will go around her house and wake up her family to serve them special St. Lucy Day foods, such as saffron buns and *Lussekatter* (St. Lucy's Cats), shaped into X's, figure-8s, S-shapes, or crowns.

Lussekatter (makes 10-12 buns)

1/4 teaspoon saffron threads

5 cups all-purpose flour

8 ounces (1 cup) milk

1 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon yeast

1/2 cup sugar

1/2 cup sugar

2 large eggs, beaten

4 ounces (1 stick) butter

1 beaten egg white for egg wash

Using a mortar and pestle, pound saffron threads to break down strands. In a small saucepan, heat milk to lukewarm. Mix yeast with 1/4 cup milk and 1 tablespoon sugar. Set aside. On low heat, melt butter in saucepan with milk. Add crushed saffron. Let cool. In large bowl, mix together flour salt and remaining sugar. Stir yeast into cooled milk mixture. Mix into dry ingredients, beating to mix well. Add beaten eggs. Knead in bowl for 5 - 7 minutes. Turn onto floured board and knead another 7 - 8 minutes. Put dough in lightly greased bowl, turn to coat all sides, cover and put in warm, draft-free place to rise for about 1 hour. When dough has risen, knead lightly to push out air and divide into small pieces (about 10 - 12). Using the hands, roll each small piece into a strip about 8 - 10 inches long. Shape each strip into an 'S' or a figure 8. Place on lightly buttered cookie sheets. Cover with clean cloth and let rise again until double in bulk, about 1 to 1 1/2 hours. Preheat oven to 375°F. When dough has risen, brush lightly with egg white. Bake in preheated 375° F oven for 15 minutes, or until lightly browned. Let cool on wire rack.

Dec. 26: St. Stephen

St. Stephen's day is December 26. One this day it is traditional to read his story from the Acts of the Apostles (Ch. 6 and 7) and give gifts to the poor.

Dec. 27: St. John the Evangelist

St. John the Evangelist comes December 27. On this day a hot spiced punch or cider is served to recall the story about God's miraculous protection of St. John the apostle. Men who were trying to murder St. John gave him poisoned wine to drink. He drank it, but, protected by God, he did not die.

Jan. 1: Mary, the Mother of God

On New Year's Day, the Octave of Christmas, formerly called the feast of the Circumcision, put an image or statue of Mary in a prominent place in the home. Bring Our Lady a vase of flowers. On this day, the family might pray together and write out their resolutions for the coming year and put them away in a sealed envelope, to be examined next New Year's Eve. This is also the World Day of Peace - read the message for this day from our Holy Father - he writes a new one each year, and prays for peace. When writing your resolutions, consider how you might bring more peace to your family life and community life. Pray together for peace in the world, and ask for Mary's intercession, on this her feast day.

Jan. 6: Epiphany

With January 6 comes Epiphany. Read Matthew 2:1-12. Knowing well now the significance of this great showing forth of the King of all kings, we act out the lesson. The little children dress as the Magi and bear their gaily wrapped gifts (the invisible penances of Advent) to "Bethlehem," represented by the family creche under the tree. They meet Herod on the way, hear the scribes read the prophecy about the newborn King of the Jews (from the Mass for the day), and after delivering their gifts and promising Him their loyalty, end their evening with a party — crown cake, gumdrop jewels and all.

Epiphany Cake

There are many traditions surrounding Epiphany. One very popular tradition involves hiding small items in cake. On the night before the feast of Epiphany, a special cake would be served with three beans hidden within, two white beans and one black one. Whoever found the beans would be the Kings at the Epiphany feast. Dressed in fine robes, they would preside over the feast and before leaving would hand out small gifts, equivalents of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

In the royal courts of the Middle Ages, Epiphany Cakes would contain a bean for the king and a pea for the Queen. Whoever found the bean and the pea would be the King and Queen of the feast. A traditional 'Christ Cake' is popular in many countries of the world. A tiny ceramic statue of Christ would be baked into the cake. Whoever found the statue would be especially blessed throughout the coming year.

Two Easy Cake Recipes for Epiphany Cake

White Cake:

2 1/4 cup white flour

1 1/2 cup sugar

3 teaspoons baking powder

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup shortening

3/4 cup milk

1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla

1/4 cup milk

2 eggs

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease lightly and flour two 8x8 inch cake pans or one 9x13 inch pan.

Mix together the flour, sugar, baking powder and salt in a large bowl. Drop in the shortening. Pour in the first quantity of milk and vanilla. Mix at medium speed with an electric mixer until well blended. Add the remainder of the milk and the eggs, beat for 2 mins. Add beans, money, or small figure, stir gently. Pour into the pan or pans and bake for 25 minutes. Cool in pan for 10 mins and turn out onto a cake rack, or serve from the pan.

Easy White Icing

1/4 cup butter, melted and cooled
1/4 cup cream

2 teaspoons vanilla
3 cups icing sugar, sifted to remove lumps.

Combine butter, cream and vanilla in a large mixing bowl. Slowly add sugar until the icing is thick, smooth and spreadable. Add more sugar or a few drops of cream to get the desired consistency. Spread on cool cake.

Chocolate Cake:

1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa
1 cup hot strong coffee (you can use instant)
1/2 cup shortening
1 1/2 cup sugar
2 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla
1 1/2 cup white flour
3/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease lightly and flour two 8 inch round cake pans. Combine the cocoa and hot coffee in a small bowl or cup, mix well and set aside. Put the shortening, sugar, eggs and vanilla in a large mixing bowl and beat until they are light and fluffy. Stir or sift together the flour, salt, baking powder, and baking soda. Add a third of the dry ingredients to the shortening egg mixture, blend in. Add half the cocoa mixture to the batter. Mix in. Repeat with dry ingredients, then remaining cocoa mixture, ending with dry ingredients, blending well after each addition so that the batter is smooth and evenly chocolate colored. Add beans, money, or small figure, and stir gently. Pour into prepared cake pans and bake for 25 minutes until a toothpick inserted in the centre comes out clean, with a few fudgy bits sticking to it. Allow to cool in the pans for 5 minutes and turn out onto racks to cool completely.

Easy Chocolate Icing

6 ounces semisweet chocolate (either squares or chips)

1/2 cup sour cream
1/8 teaspoon salt

Melt the chocolate over simmering water or in the microwave. Add the sour cream and salt and stir until thoroughly blended. Spread on cool cake while icing is still warm.