



Fact of Faith

Continuing the Celebration: The Christmas Season Ends January 8

“Jesus was born in a humble stable, into a poor family. Simple shepherds were the first witnesses to this event. In this poverty heaven’s glory was made manifest.”

(*Catechism for the Catholic Church*, no. 525)

On December 24, we celebrate the conclusion of four weeks of preparation for the coming of Jesus during Advent. But, for the Church, December 24 is also the beginning of the next season in the liturgical year. The Christmas season—which lasts two weeks this year—runs from the Nativity of the Lord until the Baptism of the Lord (January 8th this year).

The first eight days of the Christmas season are the Octave, and we celebrate many feasts during that time, concluding with the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, on the octave day. Other feasts include

- Feast of St. Stephen, the first martyr—December 26
- Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist—December 27
- Feast of the Holy Innocents—December 28
- Feast of the Holy Family—celebrated on the Sunday in the Octave (December 31st this year)

The octave day is also recognized by the Vatican as the World Day of Peace. As the *Directory on Popular Piety and Liturgy* from the Holy See notes:

Since 1967, January 1 has been designated “world day for peace.” Popular piety has not been oblivious to this initiative of the Holy See. In the light of the new born Prince of Peace, it reserves this day for intense prayer for peace, education towards peace and those values inextricably linked with it, such as liberty, fraternal solidarity, the dignity of the human person, respect for nature, the right to work, the sacredness of human life, and the denunciation of injustices which trouble the conscience of man and threaten peace. (no. 117)

The Christmas season continues through the Solemnity of the Epiphany (January 7th this year), which marks the arrival of

visitors—identified in Scripture as magi—bearing gifts for Jesus. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “In the magi, representatives of the neighboring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of Incarnation. The magi’s coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations” (no. 528).

While we don’t know much about the magi, Scripture tells us that they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Perhaps the oddest of these three gifts is the myrrh, as it is a resinous tree sap which is usually used in healing liniments and as an embalming ointment. The presentation of this gift at the beginning of Jesus’s life on earth, foreshadows his death.

Finally, we close out the Christmas season with the Baptism of the Lord.