

How to Celebrate
Holy Days
of Obligation



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CAPAM

Why We Have Holy Days

It's part of human nature to set aside certain days to mark events or to honor people. On a personal level we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. On a secular level we celebrate the founding of our country, birthdays of important people, and the contributions of certain groups such as veterans or laborers.



PHOTO BY KAREN CALLAWAY

Holy Days of Obligation are important days in the Catholic Church that honor special events or special people. Throughout the year, there are specific feasts of Our Lord, Our Lady, and the saints that we observe as "solemnities." On these days, Catholics are obliged to attend a holy day Mass on the day itself or a vigil Mass the evening before. That's why these special days are called Holy Days of Obligation.

On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.

— Canon 1247

How Holy Days Got Started

There was never a time in the history of the Church when there weren't holy days. The early Christians observed the Jewish holy days, which commemorated important events in Jewish history and tradition.

As Christianity grew, observance of the Jewish holy days fell out of practice, and other special days that helped people to recall important events in the life of Jesus were established. Over time, holy days honoring the apostles, martyrs, and Our Lady were added.

Holy days were often celebrated as festivals with special foods, music, processions, and customs. No one had to tell people they were obliged to participate in the feast day. The holy days were woven in the fabric of their lives as opportunities to renew and enrich their faith.

Throughout the Middle Ages, these feasts became so popular that each bishop established local holy days; some countries had dozens of feast days. It was in 1911 that Pope Pius X established eight official Holy Days of Obligation for the Universal Church, and two more holy days were added to the Church calendar in the 1917 Code of Canon Law.

Did You Know? Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation — yet it has the character of one, as a good number of Catholics attend Mass and celebrate the beginning of Lent in a special way.

Obligation vs. Celebration

Over time, the sense of obligation overtook the sense of celebration with many of these holy days. The idea of having to go to Mass an extra day during the week was something that we "had" to do, rather than something that we "wanted" to do. Part of the problem is that many Catholics no longer understood the reason for the holy day and how to make it special.

How Many Holy Days of Obligation

The answer depends on where you live. Canon 1246 in the Code of Canon Law lists ten holy days, but only the Vatican observes all ten. They are:

- * Mary, the Mother of God (January 1)
- * The Epiphany (January 6)
- * St. Joseph (March 19)
- * The Ascension of the Lord (40 days after Easter)
- * Corpus Christi — The Body and Blood of Christ (Thursday after Trinity Sunday)
- * St. Peter and St. Paul (June 29)
- * The Assumption of Our Lady (August 15)
- * All Saints Day (November 1)
- * The Immaculate Conception (December 8)
- * The Nativity of the Lord (December 25).

How to Celebrate Holy Days

If you are going to reclaim holy days, you have to make them a priority. First, make sure you understand the meaning of the feast day. Then, you can find new ways to incorporate Catholic traditions into your observance of the day. Here is a little background on each of the holy days, with ideas for how you can turn a day of “obligation” into a day of “celebration”:

January 1:

The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Since ancient times, the first day of the year was celebrated as special, but the religious meaning of the day was often overlooked. Before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the holy day on January 1 was called the Feast of the Circumcision, commemorating Jesus’ submission to Jewish Law. After the Second Vatican Council, the feast was changed to honor Our Lady as the Mother of God. In 1967, Pope Paul VI decreed that January 1 would also be a day of prayer for World Peace.

While the secular world celebrates New Year’s Day, you can put a Catholic emphasis on New Year’s traditions. For example, the New Year’s tradition of visiting friends and neighbors can be tied to Our Lady’s

Are There?

In each country, the bishops can decide to move the celebration of some holy days to Sundays. In the United States, these “moveable” holy days are:

- * Mary, the Mother of God (January 1)
- * The Ascension of the Lord (40 days after Easter)
- * The Assumption of Our Lady (August 15)
- * All Saints’ Day (November 1)
- * The Immaculate Conception (December 8)
- * The Nativity of the Lord (December 25)

There are, however, a few modifications. Whenever January 1, August 15, or November 1 falls on either a Saturday or a Monday, there is no obligation to attend Mass. Some dioceses have also moved the Feast of the Ascension to the Sunday before Pentecost.

Visitation to her cousin, Elizabeth. The tradition of making New Year’s resolutions can be tied to the early Christian practice of reflecting on past mistakes and resolving to improve oneself in the coming year. In recognition of Our Lady as the Queen of Peace, you could set aside time during the day to pray for peace in your home, in your communities, and in the world.

The Feast of the Ascension

Traditionally, the Ascension was a day for processions, picnics, pageants, and special foods that celebrated the rising of Jesus into Heaven. People processed through the neighborhoods around the church with a statue of Jesus. Children re-enacted the scene of the Ascension in pageants. In some places, it was a day for mountain climbing with a picnic lunch. The traditional food for the Ascension was poultry (because Christ “flew” to heaven), and pastries made with yeast (because they “rise”). The evening of the Ascension was the beginning of nine days of prayer in anticipation of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. It might be fun to incorporate some of these traditional activities into your family or parish celebrations of the Ascension.



PHOTO BY KAREN CALLAWAY

August 15:

The Feast of the Assumption

The belief that Our Lady was taken up into heaven bodily is one of the oldest Christian beliefs, and over the centuries, a variety of customs developed to celebrate the day. In some countries, women with the name Mary opened their homes to friends and neighbors in honor of Our Lady. In other countries, people brought flowers, herbs, and vegetables to Mass to be blessed. In Italy, a statue of Our Lady was carried in procession to the church. In many countries, Assumption Day is still a public holiday, celebrated with picnics and parties. Some celebrate the day as Our Lady’s heavenly birthday.

From a spiritual standpoint, the Feast of the Assumption is our assurance that someday, through the grace of God, we will join Our Blessed Mother in heaven. Finding new ways to celebrate this summer-time feast can help to emphasize the significance of this Catholic belief.

November 1: All Saints' Day

This feast day honors all of the saints in heaven. It was first celebrated in Rome in 610, when Pope Boniface IV dedicated the Pantheon to Our Lady and all the martyrs. The feast day was later moved to November 1 and expanded to honor all the saints.



PHOTO BY KAREN CALLAWAY

Traditionally, special foods for this feast day came from the fall harvest. In some countries, it was traditional to eat cakes and drink cold milk. Church bells rang to praise and thank God for the example of the holy ones. Children dressed in costumes to imitate their favorite saints. Plays depicting the lives of the saints were performed. On the evening of All Saints' Day, people would visit cemeteries to decorate the graves of loved ones with flowers and candles.

In a world where authentic heroes are few and far between, celebrating All Saints' Day is a wonderful way to remind ourselves that we can model our lives after these holy people.

December 8: The Feast of the Immaculate Conception

This is one of the most confusing holy days. Many people mistakenly believe that it celebrates the conception of Jesus; in fact, it commemorates the conception of Our Lady, nine months before her birthday, on September 8, and acknowledges the Catholic belief

that Mary was preserved from Original Sin. Celebrated in England as early as the ninth century, this feast first appeared in the Universal Church calendar in 1476. After Pope Pius IX proclaimed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of the church in 1854, it became an official holy day.

Because the feast of the Immaculate Conception takes place during Advent, it is a quieter feast. It is a good day to reflect on Our Lady's submission to the will of God, to pray the Joyful and Glorious mysteries of the Rosary, and to read the *Magnificat*, the special prayer of Our Lady (Lk.1:47). Our Lady, under the title of the Immaculate Conception, is also the patroness of the United States — so her feast would also be a good day to pray for government leaders and world peace.

December 25: The Nativity of Our Lord

No other holy day is as steeped in faith and tradition as Christmas. Nativity scenes, Christmas carols, Christmas Eve suppers, the breaking of the Christmas wafers, midnight Mass, and hundreds of other time-honored holiday foods and customs reflect the great joy in the hearts of those who celebrate the birth of Jesus.



PHOTO BY KAREN CALLAWAY

The greatest challenge for people today is not how to celebrate this holy day, but rather how to preserve the spiritual nature of this feast in the midst of a secular world.

Reclaiming Holy Days

No mechanisms in today's society exist to support your holy day celebrations, but don't be surprised if other people notice what you're doing and ask you about it. There is a hunger in our world for spiritual meaning and purpose in life, a constant need to cele-

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brate what is good and holy. By reclaiming Holy Days of Obligation, you may start a groundswell of interest and enthusiasm in your home, your parish, and your community.

For More Information:

Holy Days of Obligation on the Web
www.osv.com/OSV4Me

How to Celebrate Christmas as a Catholic (pamphlet), Our Sunday Visitor

Ball, Ann. *Catholic Traditions in the Home and Classroom*, Our Sunday Visitor

Thigpen, Leisa and Paul. *Building Catholic Family Traditions*, Our Sunday Visitor

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