

How Long is the Catholic Christmas Season?

While retail stores may be discounting Christmas decorations and putting up Valentine's Day displays by December 31, Catholics are just getting started on their Christmas celebrations. This is good news for families who want to unplug from the commercial holiday sales season by taking Advent seriously as a time of prayerful anticipation, reflection, and repentance.

Just how long is the Christmas season? Well, it depends on what you mean by "Christmas season." The Church marks the end of the Christmas season on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (usually the second Sunday of January). However, others measure the Christmas season differently, and even within the Church, the various feasts and observances can get a little tricky. Like, what is the "Octave of Christmas"? And what about the famous Twelve Days of Christmas—do we do those? And how come some people keep their Christmas tree up until February?

Here is a rundown of the different ways of measuring "Christmas time."

Christmas Day

After sunset on December 24 – sunset December 25

For the Church, Christmas Day begins not at midnight, but with the celebration of Mass following sunset on Christmas Eve. This follows the ancient Jewish way of keeping liturgical time. (This way of marking "sacred time" is also the reason you can attend Sunday Mass on Saturday evening.) Similarly, Christmas Day ends (liturgically, anyway) at sunset...a good excuse for bundling the little ones off to bed!

Octave of Christmas

December 25 – January 1 (inclusive)

An octave extends the celebration of a feast or solemnity for eight days. During the Octave of Christmas, for example, all the readings and prayers during the celebration of Mass are related to the birth of Christ. Octave celebrations got their start in the Church way back in the fourth century. The "octave day" (eighth day) of Christmas is January 1, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God—a holy day on which all Catholics are obliged to celebrate Mass.

The Twelve Days of Christmas (Christmastide)

December 26 – January 6 (or Epiphany)

Amazon and other retailers run "12 Days of Christmas" sales during the twelve days leading up to Christmas, but traditionally, the twelve days of Christmas begin on December 26 and end on January 6, the traditional date of Epiphany. (Other traditions mark the twelve days beginning Christmas Day and ending January 5, the day before

Epiphany.) Many Christians continue to celebrate Twelfth Night with special foods and traditions.

Since 1970, Roman Catholics have celebrated Epiphany on the first Sunday after the Octave of Christmas (that is, the first Sunday after January 1) . . . which kind of messes up the whole twelve nights tradition. However, the twelve days of Christmas and Twelfth Night are not official liturgical celebrations, but more of a popular tradition.

The Christmas Season (for Catholics)

December 25 – The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Roman Catholics (and some other Christians) mark the end of the liturgical Christmas season with the celebration of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which falls on the Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany (usually the second Sunday of January). Ordinary Time begins the day after the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Fun fact: Centuries ago, the baptism of Christ was the primary event celebrated as part of the feast of the Epiphany, along with the visit of the Magi and other events from the childhood of Jesus. *Epiphany* means “manifestation” or “appearance.” So while the baptism of Christ marks the beginning of his public ministry, it is also part of his “manifestation” or “appearance”—one of the events signaling that God has broken into human history in a unique way.

Bonus! The Presentation of the Lord

December 25 – February 2 (The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord)

But wait, there’s more! The Church circles back around to the Christmas season forty days after Christmas, on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. The Law of Moses required first-born sons to be dedicated to the Lord, so Mary and Joseph dutifully brought the baby Jesus to the Temple for his dedication and circumcision (Luke 2:22-38). In some countries (and some households), it is traditional to keep Christmas decorations up until this feast.

This feast is also traditionally known as Candlemas; centuries ago, the feast was accompanied by a candlelight procession and a blessing of beeswax candles from the home.

Every day is Christmas

For Catholics, every day is, in the most basic sense, Christmas. That’s because every day, the Word becomes flesh in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist; and through the sacraments, the people of God become of the Body of Christ in the world. Just as Mary’s “yes” made her an instrument of God’s incarnation in the world, by our “yes,” we too birth the Son of God into the world.