

# The Twelve Days of Christmas.

## The song, the symbols and the history.

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written by John Paul

How many times have your family or friends gathered around a piano or in the living room and sung the words to The Twelve Days of Christmas? Have you ever really understood what it meant, the context it came from, or why anyone in their right mind would give that many odd gifts over a twelve day period? The song is usually seen as a secular song for youngsters with a light reference to the Christian holiday. Rhyming verses and music that repeats with a new day and a new gift added seem to hold the song together and make it easy to follow. However there is a lot more to the song than just the sounds of the words and it ties directly to Christian traditions and values. The song can be taken for what it is or can be looked at from another light and seen as a holder of hidden meanings. Is it the Divinci Code? Well maybe not exactly, but there is definitely an interesting blend of traditions and meanings running throughout the lyrics.



Contrary to popular belief, the twelve days are not the twelve days preceding December 25th, but the twelve days beginning on Christmas day and ending on the Epiphany (January 6th). In the Western church the Epiphany is usually celebrated as the time the Wise Men or Magi arrived to present gifts to the baby Jesus. Traditionally there were three Magi who were called by God to follow a star to the birth place of the new born Messiah. Although the US holiday of Christmas is celebrated on December 25th through traditional gift giving, in some European and Hispanic cultures, January 6th is often the day for giving gifts and is observed as the Day of the Kings. Moreover, in some cultures each of the twelve days are gift days.

The song seems to have evolved over the years and may have been a mnemonic device to teach the catechism to children in medieval times. There is no author attributed to the music but many believe the song came from England and is a celebration song of Christmas.

Many of the symbols of Christianity were not originally religious, but were appropriated from contemporary culture by the Christian Faith as vehicles of worship and proclamation. Even Christmas day is considered a meld of Christian belief and pagan sun worship celebrations that became fused as an allegory representing the sequences of the birth of

Christ and events rather than a documented historical time period. So too the song has references that on one level seem materialistic and light hearted, but on another level could have deeper significance. According to some religious scholars, the “true love” mentioned in the song is not an earthly suitor, but refers to God Himself. The “me” who



receives the presents refers to every baptized person who is part of the Christian Faith. Each of the “days” represents some aspect of the Christian Faith that was important for children to learn. If you look at the verses in the song and then relate them to Christian teachings, you can see more of the symbolic association of the gifts and their religious meanings. Here are the verses of the song, along with the speculations of the words and Christian symbolism.

## On the First Day of Christmas...

 My true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree.

My true love refers to God and the Partridge refers to Jesus Christ, the gift of God's son.

 Two turtle doves..

The two turtle doves refer to the Old and New Testaments.

 Three french hens...

The three french hens refer to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

 Four calling birds...

The four calling birds refer to the four gospels or the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

 Five golden rings...

The five golden rings refer to the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) which gives the history of man's fall from grace. The books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

 Six geese a laying...

The six geese laying refer to the six days of creation.

## 🎁 Seven swans a swimming...

The seven swans swimming refer to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion.

## 🎁 Eight maids a milking...

The eight maids milking refer to the eight beatitudes; blessed are the poor in sight, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

## 🎁 Nine ladies dancing...

Nine ladies dancing refer to the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faith, gentleness, and self-control.

## 🎁 Ten lords a leaping...

The ten lords a leaping refer to the ten commandments.

## 🎁 Eleven pipers piping...

The eleven pipers piping refer to the eleven faithful apostles; Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James brother or Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas brother of James.

## 🎁 Twelve drummers drumming...

The twelve drummers drumming refer to the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed.

Knowing the history and symbolism behind the song may help understand its intended meaning. At the end of the day, whether people know the deeper meaning or not, I feel the real value of the song, like many other Christmas songs, helps to bring together family and friends in the true spirit of the holiday festivities.



## Footnote



There is much dispute regarding the true origin and significance of the song's lyrics with both Christian and secular interpretations. The speculations include French origin, English Catholic and Anglican influences. The song was published in an English children's book, *Mirth without Mischief*, in the 1780's, but was noted as coming from an earlier time. This eStory offers one possible origin but does not rule out others. Regardless of what is known about the song and its hidden meanings, it is a classic American Christmas experience.

## About the author

John Paul is a member of the Blouse House marketing staff.



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