

The Twelve Days of Christmas, secularized in a popular song, was an ancient sacred and festive celebration of Christmastide. The twelve days began with Christmas on December 25th and ended on January 6th, the feast of Epiphany. The song is a very old traditional English Christmas carol which first appeared in print in 1780.

Although no written account exists authenticating any tie to the history of Christianity, the legend persists that during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when the Roman Catholic Church and any practice of that faith was strictly forbidden, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” emerged in England, using seemingly secular images to teach children their catechism in secret, through song.

This version of the meaning of the lively old carol was first encountered as an insert to a church bulletin at Catholic Mass in 1991. Whether the stuff of history or merely legend, it remains thought provoking, for here “true love” refers to God, and the repetition emphasizes the constant renewal of His gifts to us:

THE REAL STORY OF THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

On the First Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree.

The partridge is Christ. A mother partridge will pretend injury to lure predators away from her defenseless nesting babes, just as Our Lord protects us from Satan. The pear tree symbolizes the salvation of mankind.

On the Second Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me two turtledoves.

The two turtledoves represent the Old and New Testaments. Also, Jewish couples of modest means, such as Mary and Joseph, offered two turtledoves—pigeons—rather than a lamb in sacrifice to God when they presented their newborn child in the Temple.

On the Third Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me three French hens.

The three French hens, known for their beauty and rarity, represent the gifts of the Magi—gold, frankincense and myrrh—and the three virtues, faith, hope and charity.

On the Fourth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me four calling birds.

The four calling birds, originally “colly” (coaly) birds, meaning blackbirds, signify not only the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and their Gospels but also the four Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

On the Fifth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me five gold rings.

A ring has no beginning and no end but is continuous. It reminds us of God's eternal love, "as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end," and of our circle of faith and love for our neighbors. The number five represents the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah.

On the Sixth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me six geese a-laying.

The six geese a-laying represent the six days in which God created the world.

On the Seventh Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me seven swans a-swimming.

In Judaism seven was a number of perfection. The seven swans remind us that on the seventh day God rested, just as we are meant to rest and worship on the Sabbath. Also, in Catholic tradition there are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, seven corporal works of mercy, seven spiritual works of mercy, and seven deadly sins.

On the Eighth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me eight maids a-milking.

The eight milkmaids represent the eight beatitudes recounted by Christ. (And in the Middle Ages, the eight occasions during the year when the faithful could take Holy Communion.)

On the Ninth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me nine ladies dancing.

The nine ladies dancing are the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit and the nine choirs of angels.

On the Tenth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me ten lords a-leaping.

The ten lords a-leaping represent the Ten Commandments.

On the Eleventh Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me eleven pipers piping.

The eleven pipers are the eleven faithful Apostles at the time of Our Lord's resurrection and ascension into heaven.

On the Twelfth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me twelve drummers drumming.

In Judaism twelve was the number of completion and fullness. The twelve drummers are the twelve Minor Prophets, the twelve precepts of the Apostle Creed, the Twelve Apostles (the original eleven plus Matthias, who replaced Judas), and the Twelve Tribes of Israel.