

Irish Christmas Traditions

A distinctive feature of Christmas decorations is the large candle placed in the front window and lit on Christmas Eve. According to one belief, this candle served as a symbol of welcome to Mary and Joseph who sought shelter on that first Christmas Eve. The lighting of the candle is an ancient ritual during which prayers are said for the departed and the privilege of striking the match was usually given to a daughter named Mary. It also could be lit by the youngest family member and snuffed out by someone named Mary. For centuries it has been a practice in Irish villages to set the kitchen table after the evening meal on Christmas Eve. On it is a loaf of bread filled with caraway seeds and raisins, a pitcher of milk and a large lit candle. The door is left unlatched, offering hospitality to the Holy Family or to any traveler that might be on the road. This flickering symbol also served as a signal in times past to any priest seeking shelter and protection that he was welcome in this house and that it was safe to say Mass there.

The glossy-leaved holly with its clusters of red berries, popular as a door decoration in North America can be traced to early settlers from the south of Ireland, who came to the United States during the Great Potato Famine. Holly grows wild in the south of Ireland and at Christmas time houses are lavishly decorated with it. In some areas, due to English influence, it is Father Christmas who the children wait for to fill their stockings on Christmas Eve. In other areas of Ireland, due to western influences, you'll find Santa Claus instead.

During the centuries when it was a crime to be Catholic and practice one's faith, the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was written as a "catechism song" to help young Catholics learn the beliefs of their faith. It was a memory-aid when being caught with anything in writing that adhered to the Catholic faith could not only get you imprisoned, it could get you hanged. The gifts in the song are hidden meanings to the teachings of the faith. The "true love" mentioned doesn't refer to an earthly suitor, it refers to God himself. The "me" who receives the presents, is every baptized person. The meanings of the twelve gifts are: A Partridge in a pear tree = Jesus Christ, the son of God, Two turtle doves = The Old and New Testaments, Three French hens = Faith, Hope and Charity, the theological virtues, Four calling birds = The four Gospels and/or the four Evangelists, Five golden rings = The first five books of the Old Testament, Six geese a-laying = Six days of creation, Seven swans a swimming = The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven Sacraments, Eight maids a-milking = The eight Beatitudes, Nine ladies dancing = The nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit (also listed as the nine classifications of angels), Ten lords a-leaping = The Ten Commandments, Eleven pipers piping = The eleven faithful apostles, Twelve drummers drumming = The twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed.

I'll close with Nollaig Shona Duit (null-ig hun-a dit') which is Merry Christmas in Irish.

This article was condensed from Irish Christmas Traditions found on the website and last updated in April 2003