



While the hustle and bustle of Christmas may end for many people on December 26, throughout Christian history Christmas lasts for twelve days – all the way until January 6 in the new year.

This Church's liturgical feast marking the end of Christmas is called "Epiphany."

In the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, Epiphany celebrates God's revelation that Jesus was the Son of God. It focuses primarily on this revelation to the Wise Men, but also on his baptism in the Jordan and at the wedding feast at Cana.

In the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, Theophany – as Epiphany is known in the East – commemorates the manifestation of Jesus' divinity at his Baptism in the River Jordan.

While the traditional date for the feast is Jan. 6, in the United States the celebration of the Epiphany is been permanently moved to the next Sunday by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), overlapping with the rest of the Western Church's celebration of the Baptism of Christ.

However, the meaning of the feast goes deeper than just the bringing of presents or the end of Christmas, says Fr. Hezekias Carnazzo, a Melkite Catholic priest and founding executive director of the Virginia-based Institute of Catholic Culture.

"You can't understand the Nativity without the Theophany; or you can't understand Nativity without the Epiphany." The revelation of Christ, as the Son of God – both as an infant and at his baptism – illuminate the mysteries of the Christmas season," he said.

"Our human nature is blinded because of sin and we're unable to see as God sees," he also said. "God reveals to us the revelation of what's going on."

Origins of Epiphany

While the Western celebration of Epiphany (which comes from Greek, meaning "revelation from above"), and the Eastern celebration of Theophany (meaning "revelation of God") have developed their own traditions and liturgical significances, these feasts share more than the same day.

"The Feast of Epiphany or the Feast of Theophany, is a very, very early feast," said Fr. Carnazzo. "It predates the celebration of Christmas on the 25th [of December]."

In the early Church, Christians, particularly those in the East, celebrated the advent of Christ on January 6 by commemorating Nativity, Visitation of the Magi, Baptism of Christ and the Wedding of Cana all in one feast of the Epiphany.

By the fourth century CE, both Christmas and Epiphany had been set as separate feasts in some dioceses. At the Council of Tours in 567CE, the Church set both Christmas day and Epiphany as feast days on the Dec. 25 and January 6, respectively, and named the twelve days between the feasts as the Christmas season.

Over time, the Western Church separated the remaining feasts into their own celebrations, leaving the celebration of the Epiphany to commemorate primarily the Visitation of the Magi to see the newborn Christ on January 6. Meanwhile, the Eastern Churches' celebration of Theophany celebrates Christ's baptism and is one of the holiest feast days of their liturgical calendar.

Roman Traditions

The celebration of the visitation of the Magi – whom the Bible describes as learned wise men from the East – has developed its own distinct traditions throughout the Roman Church.

As part of the liturgy of the Epiphany, it is traditional to proclaim the date of Easter and other moveable feast days to the faithful [via a sung or said Proclamation of the Epiphany] – formally reminding the Church of the importance of Easter and the resurrection to both the liturgical year and to the faith.

Other cultural traditions have also arisen around the feast. Dr. Matthew Bunson, EWTN Senior Contributor, has spoken about the "rich cultural traditions" in Spain, France, Ireland and elsewhere that form an integral part of the Christmas season for those cultures.

Lastly, Bunson pointed to the gifts the Wise Men brought – frankincense, myrrh and gold – as gifts that point not only to Christ's divinity and his revelation to the Magi as the King of Kings, but also to his [future] crucifixion. In giving herbs [our oils and minerals] traditionally used for burial, these gifts, he said, bring a theological "shadow, a sense of anticipation of what is to come."

(SR: www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/35171/want-to-know-the-history-behind-the-feast-of-the-epiphany)