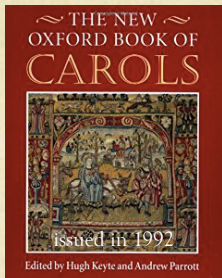


# The Twelve Days of Christmas: Both a Beloved Song and a Great Debate

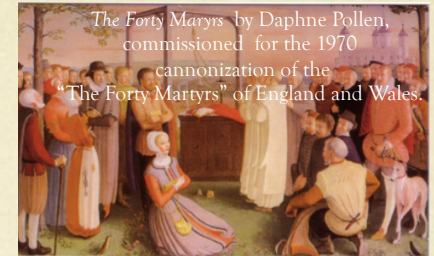


How old is it? From where does it come? And why do we sing it?

*The Twelve Days of Christmas*, considered among the most **charming carols**, is a “cumulative song” where successive verses add to the complexity of meaning. We sing it in groups, sometimes in rounds. Yet how often do we delve into the true message of *The Twelve*?

In recent years an article, citing no sources, asserted that due to a strong Anglophone association, the song must have been composed to convey the truths of **Catholic Catechism** during the **British persecution of Catholics** from 1558 until 1829.

Scholars realize, however, that followers of the **Church of England** (founded by **King Henry VIII** when the Pope refused his request for divorce) embraced the very same dogma represented by the **Catholic Catechism**. Antipathy for Catholics did not stem from disagreement of doctrine. Instead, Catholics were punished for not recognizing the English King (or Queen, as was the case once King Henry VIII's daughter, **Queen Elizabeth I** assumed the throne in 1558) as the Head of the Church. Courageous Catholics refused to make this acknowledgement (they honored the Pope in Rome as we do), and consequently endured horrific scenes such as the one captured in this painting, “The Forty Martyrs.”



The theory that *The Twelve Days of Christmas* serves as a secret method of communication is, therefore, complicated. The song does, however, hold linguistic clues to a much older and more rich history. According to “**The New Oxford Book of Carols**” (1992) **the song is French in origin**, dating to the medieval era or earlier. In the children's book “*Mirth without Mischief*” (1780), the song is cited as “performed before King Pepin.” Celebrated as the son of Charles Martel, the father of Charlemagne, and a Carolingian who united the Franks, King Pepin reigned in the 8<sup>th</sup> century throughout France. Other scholars cite the song as unmistakably Southern French, where it would have been traditional to sing of “**un perdrix dans un poirier**” or “**partridge in a pear tree**,” in lilting tones, in time with dance music. Curiously, partridges were unknown to the British until the French introduced them to their neighbors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Regardless of how you might like to interpret the song's appeal through either prism of French or English languages, the symbolism with which we infuse the twelve gifts, given with gusto over the twelve days, becomes more dear when we consider a **Catholic significance**. We are encouraged to think of “My **True Love**” as God, Himself, presenting the baptized with gifts. We are also told the “**Partridge in a Pear Tree**” is Jesus Christ, because this valiant bird is willing to sacrifice itself to protect others. The “**Pear Tree**” makes oblique and charming reference to the apple tree of Eden.

We hope you delight in discovering (and debating!) the symbolism of the following gifts. Most especially, we hope you will draw your own. . .

Sources : [www.lisashea.com/lisabase/writing/medieval/twelveofdaysofchristmas.html](http://www.lisashea.com/lisabase/writing/medieval/twelveofdaysofchristmas.html)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve\\_Days\\_of\\_Christmas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Days_of_Christmas)

[www.catholicnewsagency.com/resources/advent/customs-and-traditions/the-history-of-the-twelve-days-of-christmas-](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resources/advent/customs-and-traditions/the-history-of-the-twelve-days-of-christmas-)

[www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/activities/view.cfm?id=540](http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/activities/view.cfm?id=540)

[www.historymyths.wordpress.com/2012/12/29/myth-102-twelve-days-of-christmas-song-has-a-secret-meaning/](http://www.historymyths.wordpress.com/2012/12/29/myth-102-twelve-days-of-christmas-song-has-a-secret-meaning/)





Isle of Man *The Twelve Days of Christmas* Postage Stamps by Artist Catherine Rowe



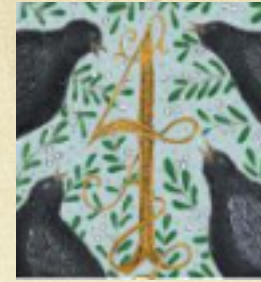
A Partridge in a  
Pear Tree,  
Jesus Christ



Two Turtle Doves,  
Old and New Testaments



Three French Hens,  
Gifts of Faith, Hope, Charity



Four Calling Birds,  
Gospels of Matthew, Mark,  
Luke and John



Five Golden Rings,  
First Five Books of the Old Testament



Six Geese A-Laying,  
Six Days of Creation



Seven Swans A-Swimming,  
Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit



Eight Maids A-Milking,  
Eight Beatitudes



Nine Ladies Dancing,  
Nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit



Ten Lords A-Leaping,  
Ten Commandments

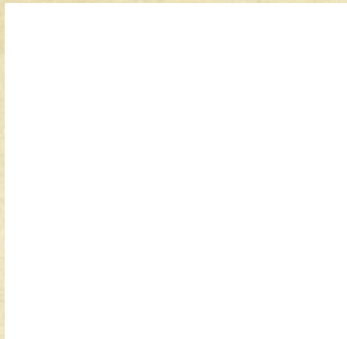


Eleven Pipers Piping,  
Eleven Faithful Apostles

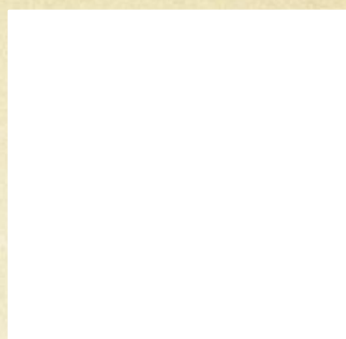


Twelve Drummers Drumming,  
Twelve Points of Belief  
in the Apostles Creed

How would you render the *The Twelve Days of Christmas*? We can't wait to discover your vision. . .



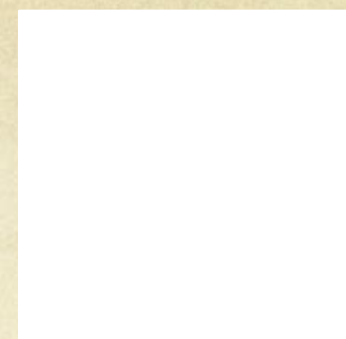
**A Partridge in a  
Pear Tree,  
Jesus Christ**



**Two Turtle Doves,  
Old and New Testaments**



**Three French Hens,  
Gifts of Faith, Hope, Charity**



**Four Calling Birds,  
Gospels of Matthew, Mark,  
Luke and John**



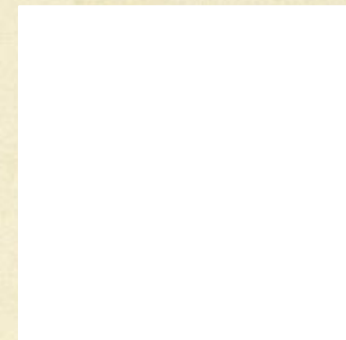
**Five Golden Rings,  
First Five Books of the Old Testament**



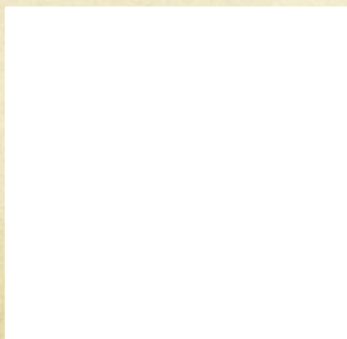
**Six Geese A-Laying,  
Six Days of Creation**



**Seven Swans A-Swimming,  
Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit**



**Eight Maids A-Milking,  
Eight Beatitudes**



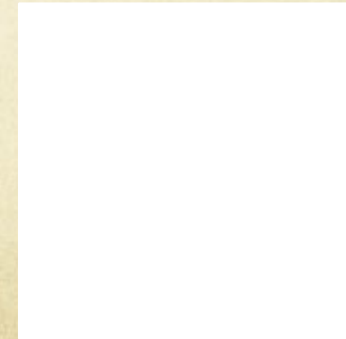
**Nine Ladies Dancing,  
Nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit**



**Ten Lords A-Leaping,  
Ten Commandments**



**Eleven Pipers Piping,  
Eleven Faithful Apostles**



**Twelve Drummers Drumming,  
Twelve Points of Belief  
in the Apostles Creed**



# What to Keep in Mind as You Analyze *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. . .

**Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit:** Wisdom, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, Fear of God (Wonder/Awe)

## **Eight Beatitudes:**

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**Nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit:** Charity, Joy, Peace, Patience [Forbearance], Goodness [Kindness], Mildness, Fidelity, Modesty, Continence [Chastity].

**Eleven Faithful Apostles:** Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Jude (brother of James).

## **Twelve Points of Belief:**

We believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

Under Pontius Pilate, Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried.

Jesus descended to the dead and on the third day He rose again.

Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit.

in the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints.

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.



*The Sermon on the Mount* by Cosimo Rosselli (1481, the Sistine Chapel) depicts Christ teaching his Apostles.