

A Candle Is Lighted

Celebrate the Year and the Faith. Ideas for Advent and Christmas.

By P. Stewart Craig.

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{This is beginning of a fascinating book recently produced by the Grail in England, We are sure many of our own readers will find the information illuminating and the suggestions well worth following through.}

"Bank holidays are a poor exchange for the feasts of the Church. It means that people's noses are now kept much longer to the grindstone than they ever were in the days when the civil year was based on the liturgy. It means too that a popular, vivid, visual way of teaching the faith has almost disappeared. Those who work with young people, in schools or any sort of youth organizations, or those with families of young children are the only ones who can ensure that this way of making religion real does not vanish completely. Many of the Church's feasts were celebrated in a childish, obvious even 'crude' way. This ought to be a recommendation, rather than a drawback. When boys and girls drift away from their faith, the reason almost always is that this faith has never been a reality to them. The popular celebrations that obtained so long in this country did indeed help to make the faith real then to those who took part; it could do so again."

In this book the Grail sets out to help everyone who works with young people by showing how these feasts of the Church were once celebrated, how they could be revived, adapted, selected, and how, in some cases, entirely new methods of celebration can be created.

Footnotes in a book of this sort would be inappropriate and would also give an impression of false learning. While the information given here has been taken from various sources, there are five books to which acknowledgment must be made.

They are: Brand's "Popular Antiquities",
Hone's "Every-day Book",
Fosbrooke's "British Monachism - Manners and Customs of the Monks and Nuns of England",
Gueranger's "Liturgical Year",
and Strutt's "Sports and Pastimes of the People of England".

THE FAMILY.

THERE is a whole school of thought that sniffs at the idea of encouraging Catholic customs in the home — or anywhere else, for that matter. Customs like the saying of the rosary together, the decorating of an altar in May seem to them too childish for consideration. For them the doctrines of the Church are sufficient, without these extras. And indeed the doctrines of the Church are enough for anyone. They are like straight, unwinding roads that lead into eternity; only on either side of these roads are hedges and ditches and meadows and all sorts of flowers. The ultra-catholic Catholic

is not interested in these flowers or fields. Still, such things are to a road what Catholic customs are to the faith; they adorn it, enliven it, they help to keep one on the journey.

It is not strange that all sorts of devotional practices have sprung up round Catholicism, sometimes practices that may seem rather trifling until one realizes that customs cannot be worthless that have evolved from the faith of the people through many hundreds of years, sometimes through well over a thousand years. What family is there that does not use certain sayings and phrases that have significance only for those belonging to the circle? What family exists that has no peculiar customs, nicknames, rites, birthday ceremonial that outsiders cannot be expected to appreciate? I can remember an unfailing ritual that was observed among us as children when we ate porridge. First, you ate it all round the edge until half of it was gone and then straight across until the red and blue figure of Tom the piper's son showed himself on the bottom of the plate, complete with pig and pursuing policeman. Why we did that I have no idea and I doubt if anyone can account for the curious rites they observed as children. Those rites are not necessary for family life, but they adorn it and enliven it. And since the Church is not an institution but a family that ranges from God and God's mother and thence to the saints and thence to the souls in purgatory and from them to ourselves, is it astonishing that spiritual family rites and customs have sprung up? It is surprising how few people think of this. But the parents who do enter into these spiritual family customs can give their children treasures, whose value they may not realize until eternity. And not only parents can do this, but anyone who works with young people and children, whether in school or clubs or any type of organization.

There is nothing forced in this idea: why does the church in her liturgy allot the various days to the honor of her saints, or to events in the lives of Christ and of Mary, if she does not wish us to celebrate them in some way?

These feasts are fixed, but the way they can be celebrated can vary — and does vary tremendously from place to place.

With the passing of time the festivities and the customs of the day have also changed, still the essence remains the same. At Christmas, for instance, Jesus is the center of the day, and everywhere in the world Christians will show their love to the new-born Child in their own way, whether this be with carol singing, erecting cribs, hanging Advent wreaths, placing lighted candles in the windows, leaving empty places at the table for the holy Family, or by making it a special festive day for children, their own or other people's.

Before the reformation, we had in this country of Britain a vast number of celebrations springing from the Church's feasts and days of devotion, while much more of the civil year than one realizes is still conducted according to the liturgical calendar. Before the reformation, the smallest things all had their connection with a feast day. Holy Rood day, September 14th, (the Finding and Exaltation of the Holy Cross) was the first day to go 'nutting', collecting nuts. On Saint James's day, (July 25th) the first apples of the crop were blessed and the first oysters might be eaten. Saint Martin's day, (November 11th) was the signal for the slaughter of all cattle to be dried for winter meat. In the days of Saints Simon and Jude, (October 28th) and of Saint Barnabas, (June 11th) you took good notice of the weather, because storms were always expected on these days. On the feast of Saint Bartholomew, (August 24th) the fairs began.

Many customs like these were swept away at the reformation, and of those which survived — and in the remoter parts of the country naturally much more survived than in the towns — people came at last to forget the origin.

Not unnaturally, a certain amount of superstition had certainly been present in some of those who had celebrated these feasts before, but now, when the liturgy and the faith were swept aside, superstition swelled until one finds Saint Luke's day (October 18th) for instance celebrated in this country of Britain in the early 19th century in this way: "Let any number of young women, not exceeding seven, assemble in a room by themselves just as the clock strikes eleven at night. Take a sprig of myrtle, fold it in a piece of tissue paper; then light up a small chafing-dish of charcoal and let each maiden throw in it nine hairs from her head and a paring of each of her toe and finger nails. Then let each sprinkle a small quantity of myrrh and frankincense in the charcoal, and while the vapor rises, fumigate the myrtle with it. Go to bed in silence while the clock strikes twelve, and place the myrtle under your head. Say:

'Saint Luke, be kind to me,
In dreams, let me my true love see.'"

Saint Mark's day (April 25th) fared worse than Saint Luke's. In Yorkshire, the people would sit and watch in the church porch on the eve of his feast, watching from eleven o'clock until one in the morning. The third year (for it must be done three times), they were supposed to see the ghosts of all who would die in the next year pass by into the church in the order of time in which they were doomed to depart. Those who would not die, but have a long sickness, would go into the church, but presently return. "When anyone sickens that is thought to have been seen in this manner, it is presently whispered about that he will not recover, that such-and-such a one, who has watched Saint Mark's eve, says so. This superstition is in such force that if the patients themselves hear of it they almost despair of recovery."

Because the origin of many of the customary celebrations of feast days was forgotten one can find ludicrous explanations vouchsafed to various rustic ceremonies, some of which have survived practically to our own days. The Oxfordshire May procession, for instance, in which the village girls would walk in procession bearing a garland of flowers and affixed to it two dolls, a large and a small doll, dressed in contemporary clothes, is given a pagan Roman origin; as though there had never been hundreds of years in which the most natural thing in the world in the month of May would have been a procession with the images of Mary and her Son! Plough Monday, the first Monday after Twelfth Night (the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th), on which a plough bedecked with ribbons was borne through the streets, a custom surviving until a hundred years ago, is certainly a relic of the time when ploughs were blessed, just as crops were blessed and hounds and fishing boats and herb gardens were blessed.

There are many places in England now where May processions still take place; where cart-horses, beribboned and be-decked, walk proudly, with stiffly-plaited manes; where farmers' carts, newly painted and adorned, vie with each other; where anyone may walk in some sort of festive tress, where the local bands play, the boy scouts and the girl guides walk, and all the local organizations.

They collect money, and now it goes to the neighboring hospitals. But it is all a relic of processions in honor of our Lady, though now she has no place in it.

And what else is the crowning of the May queen but the transference to the handsomest girl of the district of a ceremony that once centered round our Lady's statue?

It is, however, entirely in keeping with the Church's custom that where she found pagan festive days with a deep hold on the people she Christianized these days. Thus in some cases the feasts and the celebrations around them can indeed spring from a pagan origin. Christmas day itself, December 25th, was chosen to coincide with a pagan festival. Certainly the one-time celebration of Saint Valentine's day in this country (February 14th), marked by the drawing of lots bearing the name of your patron saint for the year, is derived from Roman festivities in honor of Juno. All Souls day, Halloween, 'Soul-mass', All-hallows evening also Christianized the pagan custom of giving food to the dead. (All Saints or All Hallows Day is November 1st. Therefore, 'All Hallows' E'en, is the evening before, or October 31st. All Souls Day is November 2nd. In different localities, different customs were practiced on these various days.)

Some of the customs once generally observed are easy to understand. Fire has always been a symbol of immortality, so it is not strange that on All Souls' day bonfires were lighted all over the hillside. Nor is it unusual that on this day the people of the Western Islands of Scotland should paint crosses of tar on their cottages and on their fishing boats: nor that the boys of Lanark, Scotland, used on Palm Saturday to parade the streets with a willow tree in blossom ornamented with daffodils and box-branches.

Not all the traditional celebrations woven round the liturgy and corrupted after the reformation are easy to explain. Who knows what Hoke day is (the 'Hoke' or 'high' Tuesday in the third week of Easter – perhaps a memory of some liturgical celebration of a local battle victory), or Mace Monday, the first Monday after Saint Anne's day (July 26th)? Or why Saint Luke's day (October 18th) was called in Yorkshire "Whip-dog day"? Or what the origin was of going "a-gooding" on Saint Thomas's day (July 3rd)? Or why the country people spent Easter Monday "lifting" or "heaving," as it is variously called, when everyone who met the chosen lifters was seized by the arms and raised high into the air three times? It is said to have been derived from celebrating Christ's resurrection, but no one really knows.

Similarly, why should bushes of gorse and furze be set on fire to celebrate Saint Peter's feast (June 29th), or Saint John the Baptist's (June 24th), and why did all the village men leap over the flames until the fires sank? Or why did all the people of Western Scotland bake Saint Michael's bread at Michaelmas (Saint Michael's Feast-day on September 29th) and insist that all the strangers they met should share it with them?

Far back, all such customs must have arisen in the liturgy, even though they became, some of them, absurd and gross, and now are forgotten almost entirely. That they did corrupt, apart from the Church, is not surprising, but that they should be left in oblivion is wrong. There are many feasts of the Church, which could be celebrated now in a much more lively fashion than they are.

Obviously, no one can press for an artificial revival of all that prevailed in the fourteenth century. Fairs and theaters will never open again only when Saint Bartholomew comes round on August 24th. No one will wait for Holy Cross (September 14th) day before picking the first nuts. But what one can do, and what an attempt is made here to do is to revive some of these celebrations as they stand, to take what seems best from some, to adapt others, or even in some cases to create new ways of celebration.

ADVENT TO CHRISTMAS.

ONE hardly thinks of things like holly and mince pies as having any religious significance. Yet they have. Churches and houses, particularly the windows of houses, were decorated the week before

Christmas with ivy, bay, holly, rosemary, cypress, and any evergreen. And this, say some, as a reminder of the prophetical description of our Lord as the branch, the stem rising from the root of Jesse, the thirsty plant. Others, however, hold that it is reminiscent of the branches cut down by the Jews and strewn in front of Christ when they hailed him as the Son of David, and indeed, in many parts of the country these branches were left until Good Friday.

Mince meat, with its spices, fruit and peels, is supposed to remind anyone of the gifts brought from the east by the Wise Men. Be that as it may, it was for long the custom to make mince pies in the form of a manger. What is more, every boy and girl used to be given the Christmas dough, a little pastry figure representing the Christ child, a figure no doubt as crude as the gingerbread man who can still be seen, but for all that, serving some purpose of instruction. That the innocuous mince pie did help to remind people of Christ's being born in a stable and being adored by the kings is plain enough when one reads of the puritans who "inveigh against the mince pie as an invention of the scarlet whore of Babylon, an hodge-podge of superstition, popery, the devil and all his works."

In view of this sour attitude, it is not surprising to find occasional protests, like this written in 1661:

"Christmas, farewell; thy days, I fear,
And merry days are done.
If thus they keep feasts all the year
Our Savior shall have none.

Gone are those golden days of yore
When Christmas was a high day,
Whose sports we now shall see no more;
'Tis turned into Good Friday."

THE ADVENT WREATH.

This could once be found hanging up in homes all over Christian Europe. Its symbolism is obvious enough — a wreath bearing four candles, which are gradually lighted as Advent advances and the birthday of 'the Light of the world' draws closer. The wreaths are not difficult to make. Twist some wire into a strong circle about a foot or 18 inches across. If you have no wire, roll newspapers into spirals, bind them with string and make the circle from that. Then twist strips of evergreen round the circle, the more the better, and secure it with purple ribbon (have also white ribbons ready, for later the purple ribbons give place to white). Yew is the best evergreen to use because of its feathery leaves, but box, privet, ivy cypress, holly, will do. Laurel is often used because of its association with victory, and Christ's coming is a victory over sin. Tie at equal distances round the wreath the four purple ribbons and tie the ends together. It is from this that the wreath should be suspended from the ceiling.

On the first Sunday in Advent, the wreath is hung and four candles are fixed among the green. Someone explains to the others the meaning of it. "Advent lasts four weeks. Each week brings us closer to Christ, who is the light of the world. The little flame of the candle is the symbol of his coming. We could also think of the people who do not realize that Christ is coming and who do not believe it, even if they know." The youngest person present lights the candle and an Advent hymn is sung.

On the second Sunday of Advent, this is repeated, only two candles are lighted, on the third Sunday three, on the fourth four; and on Christmas-day, the purple ribbons change to white. The waiting is over, Christ has come upon earth.

SAINT NICHOLAS DAY, December 6th.

This saint is the patron of schoolboys and schoolgirls. It is well known that his feast is celebrated in many European countries by children putting out their shoes in the evening, only to find them in the morning filled with sweets and little gifts, presumably by Saint Nicholas. In some countries Saint Nicholas visits families himself on December 6th and holds a cross-examination of the children, and those who in his opinion deserve it, receive a present, while those who do not, go without. In Rumania on this day parents would have a talk with each of their children in turn, telling them all the good things they had noticed in them, praising them generously where praise was earned, and with equal justice pointing out the faults in them that needed to be corrected.

In this country of Britain, the festivities in honor of Saint Nicholas took a somewhat different turn. Here they centered round the 'boy bishops' — boys chosen from the church choirs, who on December 6th were allowed to rule over their fellows, who led processions round the villages, singing and dancing, who were given a place of honor in the village church during this season, and who even went about complete with cope and miter and episcopal staff. It is clear that though its origin became obscured, and ultimately the boy bishops were forbidden, the custom is based on the truth that 'a little child shall lead us': that Christ, though a child in the manger, yet held the whole world in the hollow of his hand. In any family or any school or youth group, one of the younger members might well be given the powers and privileges of the 'boy bishop' for that day while all the others should undertake to obey him and to follow him. It was customary — and could still be — to have a 'boy bishop' not only on Saint Nicholas but also on 'Childermas', that is on Holy Innocents-day, December 28th.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, December 8th.

In mediaeval days when the building of a great church or cathedral was a work of love and devotion on the part of all the craftsmen who took part in it, it was very often the practice to make a window of stained glass, called a Jesse window, which portrayed the lineage of Christ from Jesse, the father of David, through Mary, the one spotless human creature.

Nowadays it is not generally possible for us actually to take part in the making of such a beautiful and lasting act of homage, but it would be possible to give honor to our Lady on the feast of her Immaculate Conception in a similar way by planting a rose bush or tree, which would also symbolize the root which rose out of Jesse and flowered through the agency of the mystic rose, Mary. The Jesse windows showed the ancestors of Christ as the leaves and branches coming from the central stem and then at the top of the stem there were shown Mary and her Child. At the ceremony of the planting of the rose tree, the symbolism of root, stem and flower should be explained and the caring for the plant through winter and spring until the time of flowering should be the responsibility of one or a group of the family or club members.

CAROL SINGING.

A great many people seem to think that no carols exist beyond "Good King Wenceslaus" and one or two others. "The Oxford Carol Book" would be a revelation to them with its collection of lesser known songs for all the liturgical seasons — for carols are not necessarily Christmas songs — there

are others for Easter, and for Passion-tide as well. Many of the old, lesser known carols have a simple rhythm and if necessary, they could easily be sung to tunes more familiar.

It is worth a little trouble to find some of these obscure carols and it is surprising how often one's local public library can help in the matter. Here for example is a translation of a carol, which comes from Carmichael's translation of "Ortha Nan Gaidheal," the standard collection of Hebridean folk songs.

That night the star shone
Was born the Shepherd of the flock.
Of the Virgin of the hundred charms,
The Mary Mother.

The Trinity eternal by her side,
In the manger cold and lowly.
Come and give to her of Your means,
To the healing Man.

The foam-white breastling beloved.
Without one home in the world,
The tender holy Babe forth driven,
Immanuel!

Ye three angels of power,
Come ye, come ye down;
To the Christ of the people
Give ye salutation.

Kiss ye His hands,
Dry ye his feet
With the hair of your heads;
And O! You world-pervading God,
And ye, Jesu, Michael, Mary,
Do not ye forsake us.

Where there is a large family, or in any youth group, it should be easy enough to get together a party of carol singers.

Traditionally, they should sing on the three Thursdays before Christmas and on Christmas-eve. It is worth mentioning that there are other places than people's houses at which carols could be sung — why not in orphanages, hospitals, institutions of one sort or another?

Christmas is the Feast of Lights, so all the singers should be armed with candles. What is more they ought to take with them a crib, or at least two figures, our Lady and the Child. These could be fixed securely on a shelf set on a pole, which one of the singers carries. This custom of bearing the images with the carol singers, so obviously Catholic, was flourishing in this country as late as the middle of the nineteenth century. It is mentioned too, by Archbishop William Ullathorne, when he describes the old women in Yorkshire who used to trudge from house to house, collecting halfpennies while they showed their images to the families and sang "The Seven Joys of Mary." This song, which is included in "The Oxford Carol Book", might well form an essential feature in any caroling expedition.

THE CRIB.

It is curious that the fascination of the crib never fades, even though the figures grow old and chipped and the background, with its brown paper rocks, sprinkled with glittering silver, becomes more fantastic every year. It is a fascination that few can resist.

Though people may smile at the extravagances and tinsel and silver paper of some church cribs, yet they still take their turn in the queue to light a candle and to gaze into the manger. Children never try to resist the lure of the crib. To them its chief attraction lies in the fact that it tells a story, and a story with a baby in it. Children, left to themselves, are perfectly at home at the crib.

They will lift out 'the bambino' to nurse and kiss it — often with the disapproval of the sacristan — for by Epiphany the bambino's face will be kissed quite colorless and his swaddling clothes smeared with finger-marks. Children hardly see the figures in the grotto as puppets; for them it is all real, as real as it was to the peasants of 14th century Germany, who used to take turns at rocking the Christ-child to sleep in his crib, or like the little Dutch boy who took the bambino for a ride on his bicycle.

In some churches, and in some countries, cribs are judged simply by their size and magnificence, so that the Christmas crib is not complete unless it grows in grandeur every year. The retinue of the three kings becomes more magnificent, the shepherds grow in number, their flocks increase rapidly. But the curious thing is that, despite all this distraction the three central figures are hardly ever dwarfed. Fashions in cribs have come and gone, but the human trinity round which they center never changes.

It is often thought that Saint Francis made the first crib, but the devotion is far older than that. It goes back to the first days of the Church, when the actual site of Christ's birth and the clay manger in which he lay were venerated in Bethlehem. In time, a silver manger was substituted for the clay one, and a basilica was built over the site. Copies of this crib spread to Rome and over the Christian world.

Veneration expanded with the centuries. The crib that was used at Christmas might be a model of the clay manger, or a painting or a mosaic of the Nativity. Various ceremonies grew up around it, until by the 13th century they had evolved into theatrical drama and opera combined, with a snatch of folk-dancing thrown in. Then Pope Honorius III stopped the whole thing, and sixteen years afterwards Saint Francis of Assisi was allowed to make a wooden manger, to fill it with hay, to tether an ox and ass nearby, and to gather round it a group of people who sang songs and carols in honor of the birth of the Christ-child. That is the beginning of the crib, as we know it.

Nowadays the custom of having a crib in the home has been considerably revived. What might more often be seen, however, is the crib made at home by the different members of the family, instead of the repository article. It is possible to buy designs for cribs, and to make them up yourself. What is better is to try to design your own crib figures and to make them entirely. They may be drawn and glued on wood, carved or modeled; they may be made after the fashion of puppets; if there are children in the family, then their dolls may be utilized.

What is important is to have some means whereby the crib-makers are represented at the crib they have set up. This may be done by adding additional figures; or small flags bearing the makers' names can fly outside the crib.

There have even been cribs in which ingenious people have stuck among the straw cut-out, full-length photographs of themselves. Not that that particular effect was very beautiful, but at any rate,

it did convey something of the truth which the setting up of any crib should convey — that we number ourselves among the people who acknowledge Christ and who worship him.

THE CHRISTMAS CANDLE.

It seems to have been the habit on Christmas-eve to try to turn night into day. Before candles came into general use, enormous logs, Christmas blocks, as they were called, were lighted and so long as they burned, all meals taken in their light and warmth were as festive as the family purse allowed. With the coming of candles, the light of the Christmas block was added to by outsize candles, which decorated the dining tables. These candles were lighted for meals every day until Twelfth-day (Epiphany), the official end of Christmas. (We finish it now on the Sunday following Epiphany day — the Sunday of Our Lord's Baptism.)

There is no reason why we should not substitute as many candles as we can get for electric light during these twelve Christmas days.

Christmas is the Feast of Lights, and the very novelty of having all meals at a candle-lit table cannot help but bring it more clearly to one's mind. During these twelve days, too, it can be a regular reminder of the coming of Christ, if at all meals one place is left empty for Christ, and the largest candle of all burns before it.

THE CHRISTMAS PLAY.

As children, we were all able to concoct plays of one sort or another. They were plays with plenty of dressing up, much singing, little scenery or props. But there is something about these plays — crude, pitiful, absurd as they were — that keeps them in the mind when memories of real plays, with real actors, in real theaters, have long since gone.

There were two reasons for this, I think. The first and obvious one is that as children we did not merely act the story, we lived it; it meant something to us, we were in deadly earnest about it. And the second reason — which helped to make possible the first — is that there was no audience looking on. The play was not given for the sake of an audience, but for its own sake. It ceased to be a play, impersonation; it became reality.

The only requirements for making a home-produced nativity play a success are the very ones that went to make the success of the children's plays — that the story you are acting should be real to you, should mean something. If you want to have a nativity play at home, with all the family joining in, then it is no good trying to deal objectively with the story of the first Christmas. An impartial play about Christmas will be a useless play.

Then, be firm and have no audience, no one to watch and criticize how you acquit yourself. Audiences spell self-consciousness to those who act, and self-consciousness makes impossible any real "living" of the play. It is only when everyone present is joining in that it can become real, that it can be lived, that it can indeed become real adoration.

But how to set about the actual play?

First, cut the cast to suit your circumstances. If need be you can act it with three people — a narrator, one angel, one shepherd. But if your family or friends run to it, you can have angels and shepherds by the dozen. If you insist, get people to represent our Lady and Saint Joseph. However, it is generally far more satisfactory to use the Christmas crib as the center of the play. If you are at all interested in producing a Christmas play at home, then it is fairly certain that you will already

have a crib put up somewhere in the house. So this does not call for any difficulty. Then divide up the available people into angels, shepherds, wise men, people of Palestine — and on these last you can ring enough changes to suit any sort of family, with members of any age.

Dress up for the play. The most stolid and bovine people can be transformed into new beings simply by dressing up. Whether the dresses look at all oriental is of no importance; in any case, few of us have more than a vague idea of what was worn in the days of Christ. The main thing is that those who take part are helped to get out of their ordinary, everyday selves; and few things are more helpful for this than setting aside the dress of everyday. With the new dress, a new character is put on.

The basis of the play lies ready in the words of Saint Luke. One person might read the story slowly and with care while the others act what is being read. No one can lay down rules about this. In one family, they may like to mime the Gospel story; in another, the narrator will have to be content with lengthy pauses while angels and shepherds and Palestinians hold impromptu conversation for as long as the spirit moves them. It is important to keep as much of the dialogue as possible spontaneous. This is not a stage play; there is no audience to satisfy. This is really an act of prayer.

And though indeed a stage play can also be a prayer, still all the same, a stage play must be practiced, rehearsed, perfected. Not so the play at home. Let it be rough and ready, with little or no stage craft, certainly with no conscious striving for polish or perfection.

Sing as many carols as you know. Putting it at the lowest level, a carol will always fill up any unexpected hitch in the play. Putting it higher, carols can make the play into a real prayer. Here the story is acted for its own sake, to make it a reality, so that those who are joining in may live it and make an adoration of it.

There is plenty of precedent for this sort of homely play. When Saint Francis of Assisi re-introduced the crib into Europe, he did it with a little play, acted spontaneously by a group of brothers and himself. Saint Teresa of Avila often acted the Christmas story with her nuns. Every Christmas-eve Saint John of the Cross and the friars held a nativity procession in the monastery. They took a statue of our Lady, and two of them carried it from cell door to cell door, asking for shelter for Mary and her Child. Those within had to refuse, and would join on to the end of the procession as it went from door to door, always being refused. Then at last the procession wended its way into the chapel and presently the statue of the Christ-child would be laid in the straw of the manger. So immersed were those who took part, so much did they live the story, that it is related that on more than one occasion John of the Cross, unable to contain himself for joy that Christ was born, plucked the child from the manger and danced round the chapel, holding it in his arms.

CHRISTMAS TO LENT.

THE feast of Christmas continues until Twelfth-night (Epiphany on January 6th); though in many parts of the country people spoke of "the twenty days of Christmas." At any rate, those twenty days were full of celebrations of one kind or another. A popular tag summed up the ordinary person's feelings at this time:

"Blessed be Saint Stephen,
There's no fast upon his even!"

Between Christmas and Candlemas (February 2nd, forty days after His Birth the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord and the Mosaic Purification of Our Lady) there seems to have been only

one somber day. This, curiously enough, was "Childermas," — Innocents' day December 28th. It is true that the 'boy bishop' might be leading his troop through the streets, but all the same this was everywhere considered a day of ill-omen. No one would dream of marrying on Childermas, nor of buying nor wearing new clothes, nor, indeed, of beginning any new undertaking. The coronation of Edward IV was even postponed in 1461 so as to avoid Childermas. Nor could this be considered a cheerful day for the children themselves: "...it has been a custom, and yet is elsewhere, to whip the children upon Innocents' day, that the memory of Herod's murder of the Innocents might stick the closer; and in a moderate proportion to act over the cruelty in kind..."

Still, apart from this, feast days followed on each other's heels — Saint Stephen's on December 26th; the Circumcision (called "Singene'en" in Scotland, because it was celebrated by much caroling and when, according to popular belief, even the bees could be heard singing in their hives) on the eighth day, January 1st; Saint Agnes' day, January 21st, when girls prayed to get husbands, and at whose Mass it was once the custom to bring a lamb (an Agnus, after whom Saint Agnes was named) into the church at the Agnus Dei ('Lamb of God') of the Mass; a custom still obtaining now on Easter Sunday in some parts of the world; Twelfth-night, the festival of the kings, the Epiphany on January 6th; Candlemas — our Lady's 'churching-day', when again one sees how great a part is played in the celebrating of feasts by lights, lanterns, candles and fires on February 2nd, the Feast of the Presentation; Saint Valentine's day, February 14th, the feast of lovers, one which has survived in a corrupted form practically to our own day.

Rejoicing gathered itself for a last fling on Collop Monday (or Shrove Monday, the Monday before Ash Wednesday), when all the meat and bacon that might not be eaten in Lent were finished off. On the 'egg feast', the Saturday before Shrove Tuesday, eggs were similarly treated. On Shrove Tuesday itself further Lent-forbidden foods were eaten, and on this day the pancake bell rang early in the morning as a signal for the first frying and again at night, after which second bell no more pancakes were eaten, and the bell called people to confession, to be shriven before the fast of Lent should start.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.

In the fruit-growing counties of England, "apple-howling" was regularly observed.

Boys went from orchard to orchard, surrounding the trees, singing to the accompaniment of a pipe:

"Stand fast, root, bear well, top,
Pray God send us a good howling crop;
Every twig, apple big,
Every bough, apple enow." (Enow is old English for 'enough'.)

Then they shouted in chorus, and rapped the trees with their sticks. This, again, was probably a pagan rite that the Church took over and turned into the blessing of fruit trees, since popular belief lingered persistently that the wind of New Year's-eve was responsible for the fruitfulness of orchards, and that an east wind meant much fruit. The Church has many prayers for every sort of crop, and there seems no reason why people with a garden and fruit trees or fruit bushes of any kind should not ask on this last day of the year for a good crop. Here is the Church's prayer for the fruits of the earth, which could be said:

"Pour down Your blessing, we beseech You, O Lord,
upon Your people, and on all the fruits of the earth,
that when collected they may be mercifully distributed
to the honor and glory of Your Holy Name."

CIRCUMCISION: NEW YEAR'S DAY.

The Feast of the Mother of God.

This was the day of the giving of gifts, husbands to wives, masters to servants, parishioners to their priests. Moreover, it was a day to go visiting. "On the first day of this month will be given more gifts than will be kindly received or gratefully rewarded. Children, to their inexpressible joy, will be dressed in their best bibs and aprons, and may be seen handed along streets, some bearing Kentish pippins, others oranges stuck with cloves, in order to crave a blessing of their godfathers and godmothers." It is pleasant to think that the day of Christ's naming should be the occasion of honoring godparents; and it would be easy enough in any family with small children to invite the godparents to some celebration, or in the case of grown-ups, to visit or to write to those who have been their sponsors. Godparents undertake a considerable responsibility at the font, so what could be more appropriate than some sort of acknowledgment of it, on this day?

TWELFTH DAY, EPIPHANY, January 6th.

In Staffordshire, fires were lighted on this day "in memory of the blazing star that conducted the three magi to the manger in Bethlehem." In Irish homes, there was the same insistence on light. In a sieve of oats, surrounded by twelve burning candles, a single large candle was lighted. But generally speaking, all the festivities of the day were based on the idea of kingship and bent on honoring the three kings, so that lots were drawn to determine who should be the king for the day. Here was one way of marking the day. An Epiphany cake was made, traditionally of flour, honey, pepper and ginger, and a halfpenny (or some other token) put in it. When it was baked, it was cut into as many pieces as there were members of the family, while portions were also assigned to our Lord, to Mary and to the three Magi. These were given to strangers, preferably to people in need. Whoever found the halfpenny in his piece of cake was saluted as king, placed in a chair of honor, and three times raised up to the ceiling, on which with his right hand he drew a cross. A carol was sung and the king ruled the party that followed.

An Epiphany party might easily become a feature of this day in any Catholic youth club or school or family. After a brief re-telling of the story of the Wise Men, those arranging the party could follow the custom of having in the cake three beans, each of which will represent a king. On their being chosen, the three kings rule the party, which should end with a carol-singing procession and the giving away to someone in need of some food which had been held back for this purpose.

CANDLEMAS, February 2nd.

This is one of the oldest feasts of our Lady (her Purification in the Temple), and in Rome in the 7th century, it ranked next to the Assumption. Everyone received a candle, which had been blessed at Mass, and afterwards walked in procession with it. The procession recalled the journey of Mary and Joseph to the temple, the burning candles, Simeon's words that the child in his arms was a "light for the revelation of the gentiles."

And how appropriate is this symbolic burning candle! "A candle is made of wick and wax; so was Christ's soul hid within the manhood; also the fire betokens the Godhead; also it betokens our Lady's motherhood and maidenhood, lighted with the fire of love."

If anything still remained of the Christmas candle, or the Christmas block, it was lighted on this day. Now-a-days, one could light up the Christmas candle and these smaller candles whenever the family are together, or at meal-times, or let them burn before a statue of our Lady.

This day was called the "Wives' feast," and "Our Lady's-churching," and it is in memory of this that even today women carry a candle at their churching, (when they come to the church after a successful delivery of a child,) even though of course theirs is a ceremony of thanksgiving, and Mary's was that of ritual purification in fulfillment of the Mosaic Law.

SAINT VALENTINE'S DAY, February 14th.

There are records in Great Britain, of Saint Valentine's-day being celebrated in the country as long ago as 1446, but how Saint Valentine came to be the patron of lovers no one seems to know for certain.

On this day "an equal number of maids and bachelors get together, each writes their true or feigned name upon separate billets, which they roll up and draw by lots, the girls taking the men's billets, the men the maids; so that each of the young men lights upon a girl that he calls his valentine and each of the girls upon a young man whom she calls her valentine. Fortune having thus divided the company into so many couples, the men give balls and treats to their valentines and wear their billets several days upon their sleeves," — possibly giving rise to the saying that so-and-so wears his heart upon his sleeve. In Scotland, it was not only the men who gave gifts to their valentines; the giving was mutual.

This is a feast that has been, and still can be, celebrated in adapted form. In a family or group, lots are drawn for a valentine, but the names of various saints are written on papers and lots drawn. The saint then becomes one's patron for the day or the octave. Where children draw lots, one should tell them something of their saints; where older people are concerned they should discover all they can about their patron, because during the octave they ought in some way to imitate their valentine.

SHROVE TUESDAY, 'FASTEN EVEN'.

This day was a general holiday, particularly for apprentices, and it would have been strange if it had not frequently become a day into which people tried to cram all the pleasure they would soon have to forego.

In Norwich, as probably in other cities, processions were made to symbolize the rapid approach of Lent. In 1440, say the Norwich records, such a procession was instigated by a certain John Gladman, who was known "as a man ever true and faithful to God." Crowned as king of Christmas, his horse bedecked with gilt and every sort of finery and tinsel he was preceded in the procession by twelve other horsemen, each representing a month of the year and each dressed appropriately. Last in the procession, following after the glittering king of Christmas, came Lent, a horseman dressed from head to foot in white cloth and herring skins, mounted on a horse with trappings of oyster shells — and this "in token that sadness should follow, and a holy time." Thus they rode through Norwich, and many others of the townspeople joined in, dressed in every sort of fantastic dress, all of them "making mirth, disports and plays."

That they ate pancakes everywhere is merely because eggs and butter and milk had to be finished off before the fasting began, and the making of pancakes, the beating of the batter, the frying and tossing of the pancakes, could be a festive affair.

There seems no reason why one should not have a party on Shrove Tuesday. Few people have the faintest idea why pancakes are eaten, so these could be made and the reason for them explained.

Now, when butter and eggs and milk are all allowed in Lent one might let the party include a last ceremonial tasting of whatever those taking part intend to give up during these forty days — sweets, sugar, cigarettes, whatever it may be. In Kent, it was once the custom to make two effigies on Shrove Tuesday, and to burn them to ashes as a sign that good living was now over and done with and that a stricter time was at hand, and at a Shrove-tide party there could be a short explanation of Lent, while it might very well end up with the whole group going to confession.
