

TRACING THE TRADITIONS

Columns on the traditions, prayers and practices of the Christian faith. Articles are written from the Roman Catholic perspective; however, most can be used by all Christian denominations for informational purposes.

Articles Currently Available:

From Hauntings to Hallows: Tracing Halloween

Witches, toads and souls of the dead.

Definitely Halloween stuff.

Most of us know Halloween dates back to pagan harvest celebrations, the end of the year and feasts of the dead. But did you know that All Saints Day and All Souls Day share these pagan roots? And that many notions we now associate with Halloween rose out of practices tied to All Souls Day on Nov. 2? ...

Turning cartwheels: Tracing the Advent wreath

It's Advent: time for turning cartwheels.

Centuries ago, before Christianity arrived in northern Europe, farmers lived in fear of winter. In that harsh, northern climate, December days were short and cold, when nothing grew. People feared that the sun would never return from its sojourn south on the horizon. ...

Purple, Pink, not blue: Tracing the colors of Advent candles

Pink and purple, violet and rose.

It's Advent and, one by one, we light them. The Advent candles.

Advent is the first season of the church year, preparing us for the coming of Christ at Christmas. But Christmas colors are red and green. Where did purple come from?

From magic to star-gazing: tracing the message of the Magi

"Dear Wisemen, Why did you give frankincense, gold and myrrh to such a small baby? Jesus' family needed food, clothing and shelter. Why didn't you take the family home and give them those things?"

Morgan, a fifth grader at a Catholic school in northern Wisconsin, sent this question to me as part of a Christmas essay contest. It's a practical question about the Nativity and the Gospel readings of the season.

Who were the wise men and why did they bring those gifts? ...

Saul to Paul: Not only the names were changed

"The names have been changed to protect the innocent."

We've all heard that TV catch phrase about captured criminals. Their lives were changed – maybe for their own good, but certainly for the good of others.

In the Bible, names were also changed – signifying a total change in that person, for their own good and the good of believers. The change is called "conversion."

Fish and muskrats:

Tracing the tradition of meatless Fridays

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent and that means no meat on Fridays.

However, that leaves plenty of fish. And muskrats and beaver tail. ...

Echoes of Palms: Tracing the Tradition of Ashes at Lent

"Repent and believe the Good News."

With these words, we will begin the season of Lent, as we receive ashes on Ash Wednesday.

The practice of covering one's self with ashes is ancient. There are many instances in the Old Testament where people used ashes and dust (*eper* and *afar* in Hebrew) to symbolize penance, mourning and humiliation. Job sat in an ash heap and bemoaned his fate (Job 2:8), and David's daughter Tamar poured ashes on her head when her brother cast her out. (2Sam 13:19) and all of Nineveh wore sackcloth and ashes to repent before God (Jon 3:6). ...

Take the full moon, add an Emperor or two: Tracing the date for Easter

Why is Easter so early some years? So late on others?

Blame it on the moon. Specifically, blame it on the Paschal moon.

As a matter of fact, there is a formula to deciding the date of Easter, but it's complicated. And it means Easter can come as early as March 22 – which it hasn't since 1818 – or as late as April 25 – which it won't again until 2038. ...

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From clouds and doves to rushing flames: Tracing the symbols of the Spirit

With a rush of wind and gushing flames, the Easter season draws to a dramatic close with Pentecost.

Christ's Paschal Mystery was the key that unlocked the power of the Spirit, who brings the divine gifts that build up the church. Through the Spirit, we are baptized and confirmed, filled with the grace for our personal missions in the world. These graces and gifts lead us to envision the Holy Spirit in many ways. ...

From Abel to Jesus: Tracing the Good Shepherd image

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. This is because of the Gospel reading from John's chapter on the discourse of Jesus about the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd is one of the oldest titles given to Jesus by the church. Images of Jesus as a beardless, young man carrying a sheep have been found in fourth century Christian catacombs in Rome. (In the ancient world of Rome and Greece, youth symbolized immortality, explaining the lack of a beard on these images of Jesus.) ...

From angels to rosary beads: Tracing the Hail Mary

Greetings and salutations!

That's the basic purpose of the first part of the most famous Marian prayer: "the Hail Mary."

The prayer is really about the highlights of the life of Mary, Mother of God. Parts date to the earliest days of Christianity and can be found in the Gospel of Luke.

"The Hail Mary" goes by several names: ...

Is it all about St. Francis? Tracing the traditions of pet blessings

"All creatures of our God and King lift up your voices, let us sing: Alleluia, alleluia!"

Can a dog give glory to God? Can a cat praise the creator of the universe?

Yes, according to St. Francis ...

Tombstones to purgatory and beyond:

Tracing the traditions of praying for the dead

As Halloween draws near, tombstones spring up in yards and skeletons dangle from trees.

Halloween may seem like a holiday about death, but it is really only about the start of extra prayers for the dead.

And visits to the cemetery encouraged for the next month.

In November – the month of All Souls – we traditionally pray for the dead. ...

Angels and oxen: Tracing the traditions of Nativity sets

In Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major, there is a chapel under the main altar. Inside, there is a vessel containing five boards of sycamore wood of Middle Eastern origin. These boards are venerated as the manger of Jesus. Since the fifth century, this grotto chapel has represented the cave at Bethlehem. At a corresponding grotto in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, there is no crib or manger. ... Even though this replica Cave of Bethlehem has existed for 1,400 years, modern Nativity sets don't go back that far. They started with St. Francis of Assisi. ...

Tracing the Latin Mass, Part I – From Jesus to Luther

"Why was the Mass said in Latin? Wasn't Jesus Jewish?"

To answer those questions requires two steps: exploring the early Mass and answering why it was offered in Latin for so many centuries.

First, did Jesus speak Latin?

He may have, but not in everyday speech. ...

Tracing the Latin Mass, Part II

From the Reformation to Vatican II

"Why was the Mass said in Latin for so long? And what *happened* to Latin?"

When Pope Benedict XVI issued his apostolic letter, *Summorum Pontificum*, on July 7, he relaxed restrictions on using the 1962 Latin Mass. This means most Catholics stand a good chance of hearing Mass in Latin at a parish near them, soon.

However, the Latin Mass is not familiar to many Catholics raised since the 1970s. So its reappearance raises questions. To answer them requires two steps: understanding the influence of imperial Rome, and the Protestant Reformation. ...

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