Catechism Song: “12 Days of Christmas”

Legend has it that this song was written during a time of persecution in England between 1558 and 1829 as a catechism song for young Catholics who were forbidden to practice their faith. Each number signifies a teaching of our Faith. The song can be understood on two different levels - the literal meaning of the words, which appear harmless enough to a stranger, and the hidden meaning behind those words which expressed the religious beliefs of a people who could have been killed on account of their Catholic faith.

1st Day

- “True Love” represents God and “me” the baptized soul. The “partridge in a pear tree” is Jesus, symbolically shown as a mother partridge pretending injury to lure predators away from her nestlings. The mother dies to protect her young.

2nd Day

- “Two turtle doves” are the Old and New Testaments of the Bible;
- Noah brought two of every kind of species into the Ark;
- When Mary and Joseph presented the Child Jesus in the Temple, they offered two turtle doves (Luke 2:24).

3rd Day

- “Three French Hens” were beautiful and costly birds in those days. They represent faith, hope and charity, which can be given by God alone;
- They also represent the three persons of the Blessed Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- And also the three days Christ spent in the tomb.

4th Day

- The “Four Calling Birds” are the four Gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

5th Day

- The “Five Golden Rings” are the first five books of the Bible known as the Law, Torah or Pentateuch;
- and the five wise and five foolish virgins.

6th Day

- The “Six Geese A Laying” are the six days when God created everything.
7th Day

- The “Seven Swans A Swimming” represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and Fear of the Lord; Seven are appointed to assist the Apostles (Acts 6:3);
- Peter asks Jesus whether he should forgive his brother seven times (Matthew 18:21, Luke 17:4) and Jesus answers that he should forgive 70 times seven, i.e., forgive with no limit;
- The Israelites marched seven days around Jericho with seven priests blowing seven horns (Jos 6:1); the seventh year is the year of the Sabbath;
- The Seven Sacraments: Baptism, Confession, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick;
- The seven Deadly Sins: Pride (Ecc 10:15), Covetousness (Luke 12:15), Lust (Eph 5:5), Anger (Jos 1:19), Gluttony (Galatians 6:8), Envy (Story of Joseph in the Old Testament), Sloth (Revelation 3:15);
- The seven Sorrows of Mary: the Prophesy of Simeon, the Flight into Egypt, the Loss of the Child Jesus in the Temple, Mary Meets Jesus on the Way to Calvary, Jesus Dies on the Cross, Mary Receives the Dead Body of Jesus from the Cross, Mary Places the Body of Jesus on the Tomb Awaiting the Resurrection.

8th Day

- The “Eight Maids A Milking” represent the eight Beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel.

9th Day


10th Day

- The “Ten Lords A Leaping” represent the ten commandments which guide our lives;
- The ten lepers cleansed by Jesus.

11th Day

- The “Eleven Pipers Piping” represent the 11 faithful Apostles, not including Judas.

12th Day

- The “Twelve Drummers Drumming” represent the 12 points of belief in the Apostles’ Creed;
• The 12 Tribes of Israel;
• The 12 Apostles.