

# Unity of Faiths: Christianity

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## Introduction: The Founder of the Faith

Christianity is a religious faith. There are branches or sects including the Roman Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox and Anglicans. Its teacher is Jesus. Jesus was a Jew born as the son of a Carpenter, Joseph, and his wife Mary.

This founder of the Christian faith is, in the English-speaking world, primarily known as Jesus. He is also known by other names including Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, Jehovah, the Lamb of God or Pascal Lamb, Immanuel, and Esu.

The name Jesus means “God saves”. The name Christ means, “anointed one”. Jesus of Nazareth refers to the place where Jesus came from. The Pascal Lamb name refers to the fact that Christ sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity as lambs were sacrificed during Passover. During the middle ages, scholars created the hybrid “Jehovah” as a translation of the Hebrew word YHWH (Yahweh). Immanuel, the prophesized name (1) means “God with us”.

Sai Baba states that, “In Christianity, the term “Esu” (Jesus) is used to describe Christ. This term also signifies the oneness of Divinity. The inner significance of the term “Esu” is the recognition of the One Divine in all beings.” (2)

During Jesus’ lifetime, what would become Christianity was much more informal: a movement, not an institution, based in the intimate relationship between a spiritual leader and his devoted followers. (3) Many Christians still feel that their relationship with Jesus is a personal and intimate relationship.

Christ appears in dreams and visions to many devotees and saints now as throughout the centuries. This includes persons experiencing his final physical wounds (Stigmata). People experience the Christ consciousness in meditations, healings and receive personal guidance through prayers and contemplation. There are seminaries, nunneries, communes, monasteries, friaries and other spiritual and community living retreat centers (4) dedicated to the focused study and silent assimilation of Jesus’ Grace.

## Historical Facts about the life of Jesus and the Church created in His Name

The coming of Christ, as a leader who would come and wisely lead His people, was prophesied in the Old Testament (5). Jesus Christ was born approximately 2,000 years ago perhaps between 6 B.C. and 4 B.C. He was

created by God, entered into womb through Spirit, and took up a visible human form.

His mother's name was Mary. The Holy Spirit came to her as announced by the Angel Gabriel. She was pregnant with Christ. Her intended Joseph, also, had a prophetic dream about the events associated with the visit of the Holy Spirit to Mary. They married.

"Now it happened that at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be made for the whole inhabited world...So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee for Judea, to David's town called Bethlehem..."(6). The small family crossed the desert and made it to Bethlehem of Judea only to find out that all the rooms in the inn were full. They found space in an animal shed and Christ was born, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.



Angels appeared to the shepherds in the fields announcing the birth of the Lord. They traveled to the birthplace to pay their respects. That night, in the sky a star shone bright. This star, because of its unusual brightness, eventually brought, from the east, a Group of Persian Astronomers or Magi, to the Baby's side, bearing gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. These Wise Men believed that the star was a sign that the King of the Jews was born.

Joseph had a dream that the Baby was in danger and so fled to Egypt with his new family. King Herod, who, believed the child would replace him, had all the boys in his governing region two-years old and under killed. After King Herod's death the family returned to Israel to the region of Galilee back to that small town named Nazareth. (7)



When Jesus was twelve, he traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover with his mother and father. When they were to return home Mary and Joseph could not find their Son. They searched for two days and on the third day found him in the Temple in deep debate with the teachers and priests. His wisdom, even at such a young age, was remarkable. The years from twelve to thirty are known as the hidden years because not much is know about the life of Jesus during this time.



John the Baptist, Christ's cousin, initiated Him by baptizing Him in the Jordan River. For John the Baptist, as preacher, the way to repentance was to purify yourself by washing away your sins with water. Jesus was moved by John's work and for his part, John, recognized Him as the Savior.

After this baptism Jesus was guided to the desert where He fasted for forty days and forty nights. The devil tempted the Lord. The Devil withdrew into the desert, when, his attempts to lure Christ away from His path failed. Angels then brought

nourishment to Jesus. Jesus returned from the wilderness prepared to begin his ministry.

Jesus was approximately thirty years old when He began His teaching and probably thirty-three years old when He died. During this period He performed healings, miracles, raising people from the dead, and exorcism. Included in the miracles were His calming the seas, walking on waters, turning water into wine and multiplying food for the multitude.

When The Lamb of God traveled He drew crowds. He and His twelve disciples traveled around the countryside spreading the Good News. Parables, or short stories that provide a lesson by comparison, were His favorite teaching method. For example: “Jesus compared His words to seeds scattered by a farmer. Some of the seeds fell on the path and were stepped on. Some fell on rocky ground or among thorn bushes where seedlings could not grow. Finally, some fell on good soil and grew into corn. Jesus said that people who heard and understood his words were like the good soil.” (8)

Jesus loved all races, creeds, and stations of people. He encouraged people to take care of one another especially the poor, the sick and the vulnerable. His sermons filled those around him with such joy. During His life Jesus informed the disciples that He was only on earth for a short time.

Three of the disciples - Peter, John, and James- traveled with Christ to a mountain to pray. “On Mount Tabor-the Mount of Transfiguration, as it came to be called-they watched Jesus’ face change while he was praying, and saw his clothes shine with dazzling brilliance. What they were privileged to see there, as if through a prism, was a condensation of the glory that shone through Jesus’ entire life.” (9)

Near the end of His teaching and the last week of His life He traveled back to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. A large crowd greeted him as He entered the city. Jesus prepared for and celebrated a Passover feast with His disciples. Christ was arrested, prosecuted, crucified, and buried only to, on the third day, rise again from the dead.

We revel in the Grace and Glory of a God who “...so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ that who so ever believes in Him shall have everlasting life...” (10) The gift of Love and courage that was the message of Christ fills hearts to the brim, allows flight of soul, and creates a peace that passeth all understanding. Glory be to the Father...

The church, defined as a community of Christian believers, began to form after Christ’s death and resurrection, as apostles and Jesus’ relatives tried to interpret for others, the meaning of the life of Christ. These early interpretations and stories about the life of Jesus began being communicated in an oral tradition, which, was later written.

Some of these writings, called Gospels, formed into a book called the New Testament. This was added to the Old Testament of the Jews and is called the Bible. The Bible, some sixty books, forms the basis for the study of Christ’s life and teaching.

“Acts 11:26 tells us that the term ‘Christian’ was first used in the Syrian City of Antioch after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.” (11) The

people who gathered, worshipped and studied the values of Christ, were often persecuted and some put to death. Eventually the religion was legalized and in some places like Armenia became the state religion.

Much controversy surrounded and still surrounds the interpretation of the material left for study. This, tension, created rifts in thinking and this resulted in behavioral responses to those rifts. Fighting or separating from the main body of the church occurred and today Christianity is divided, as mentioned above, into different belief systems or sects.

Given, all this working and reworking by the faithful of the body church, still one fact remains. Christ's ideas are still alive and subject to wild debate after 2000 some years. The indomitable Spirit, which is God, guides the faithful in their quest to understand the truth that remains the foundation of the church, Jesus Christ.

### **Names of Major Christian Saints**

The act of singling out one member of the Body Church from another member by assigning them a title such as saint is not done by all sects of Christianity. For example, there are sects such as the Roman Catholics who have official processes for acknowledging, evaluating, and assigning the title of saint. There are also sects who worship in ways that, like the Quakers, emphasize in worship style and acts, that all are equal. The Quakers say that all are the same in the eyes of the Lord.

Therefore, several persons recognized for their saintly behavior or acts are: Mary, the Mother of Jesus; Joseph the Father of Our Beloved; The Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ; Saint Francis of Assisi; Martin Luther King, Jr.; and Saint Pio. For, the purpose of example, and in the context of this discussion, two persons are examined, that is, Mother Mary and Saint Pio.

### **The Life and Significance of Two Saints**

#### **St. Mary**



Mary, the mother of Jesus plays a vital role in the Christian religion and is thought to play a vital link between the human and the spiritual worlds. Even the idea of a virgin birth as miracle (Luke) announced by the angel Gabriel allows for a remarkable opening into the relationship between God and man. This, as other Marian acts, exemplifies the wonder of communication possibilities.

Having suffered at the loss of her son she was blessed again by the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost after the resurrection with the tongue of fire or Lord's Spirit. Not much is written about Mary in the scriptures from that point onward. There are Christian traditions that support extended historical recollections of her life. For example, there are Orthodox traditions that hold that Mary died and body and soul were assumed directly into heaven. (12)

Since then, in all regions of the world, like Jesus, Mary establishes a personal relationship with humans. She inspires hundreds of thousands. People from all faiths are known to venerate and communicate with this Holy Mother. The study of Mary is known as Mariology.

Mary is also called Saint Mary or Mother Mary. She appears in visions and apparitions. Throughout the world today Mary heals, consoles, and teaches. Her visions are known to draw large crowds. These participants report seeing great lights, and/or the sun moving in the sky, and/or their prayer beads turning a color like pink, and/or smells of roses, and/or rose petals floating from the sky. From Texas to Medjugorje people are wonderstruck and inspired to renew their faith.

Many of the pilgrims who visit these apparition sites say that this movement calls to the lesson not just Christians but others as well. The miracles of healing and conversion back to God are common experiences described. Mary calls for all souls to return to their source and connect in prayers and other acts to God.

Many Christians are moved by the spiritual relationship that Mary offers. The Mother caring for her dear ones and interceding on their behalf makes devotees feel lifted and inspired. The Mother who devoted her life to the care of their Lord Jesus.

From a holy tableau in Knock, Ireland in 1879 to a Church top in Zeitoun, Egypt, 1968-1971, Mary's silent appearances are also provocative. She appears as Our Lady of Sorrow in Chicago, Illinois in 1968 as a weeping statue and in 1483, as a weeping young child in El Torn, Spain. Mary, the Lady of Peace and Prayer, appears to a church sexton of Cuapa, Nicaragua, in 1980, in a cloud while he was fishing and asks for the rosary to be prayed everyday. She also appears as the Queen of Peace daily to six young Croatian visionaries in Medjugorje, Herzegovina, 1981-Present.

In regions so diverse she traverses time and space to bless and bring her brand of hope comfort and instruction. Many turn to her for relief and guidance. Mary's saintly mission is alive and feeds the soul of those who follow her example.

## St. Pio



Canonized a saint on July 16, 2002, Padre Pio da Pietrelcina was

officially acknowledged by the Roman Catholic Church. Saint Pio is known to all faiths as a lover of humanity. He has vowed to work and wait at the gates of heaven until all his children have arrived. In his life he placed a special focus on helping those in need and those who suffer.

Born on May 25, 1887, at Pietrelcina, Italy; Saint Pio was the son of Grazio Forgione and Maria Giuseppa DeNunzio. His baptized name was Francesco. At sixteen years of age he entered a Capuchin friary. These Capuchin monks are the followers of St. Frances of Assisi. Saint Pio was ordained a priest on August 10, 1910. He spent

the rest of his life in the Capuchin Friary at San Giovanni Rotando living in a small cell or room.

“On September 20, 1918, while kneeling in prayer in the choir loft in the friary chapel, in San Giovanni Rotando, Padre Pio [i.e. Saint Pio] received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ - a visible wound in his left side, bleeding wounds on his feet and hands - which he bore until his death fifty years later.” (13). Saint Pio died on September 23, 1968 at the age of eighty-one.

During his life this saint was known to bi-locate, appearing at other places where he was needed for healing or helping, while, he was physically in his cell in the friary. His great ecstasies while performing mass were famous and drew a faithful following. There were miracles associated with his healings. Even today his devotees place articles on his glass enclosed, blood stained gloves and report great wonders like children coming out of long term comas, chronic diseases cured, or family unity restored.

Saint Pio beckoned everyone to find the Lord in prayer. He himself spent much time in prayer and communion with his waking visions of Jesus, Mary, and others including satan with whom he was known to do battle. Also, he encouraged charity and his selfless service to others knew no bounds. He, through his devotees, raised a hospital in the small Italian village where he lived, so, the poor villagers would receive health care and would not have to travel far for it. He protected others during world war two, as, this story reveals:

“Several persons were huddled, during an air raid on Pescara, in a room on the ground floor of a four-story structure, clutching a picture of Padre Pio and sobbing, ‘Padre Pio, save us! Padre Pio, help us!’ The building took a direct hit and a bomb crashed through the upper three stories, tore through the ceiling into the room where the occupants were invoking Padre Pio, and fell to the floor with a terrific thud - without exploding.” (14)

Saint Pio’s Grace touched many, so deeply that they spent the rest of their lives in the Lord’s service. One such American devotee was Vera Calandra, who dedicated her work to raising and perpetuating a large Padre Pio/Saint Pio center in Barto, Pennsylvania. The following is her story:

After being introduced to the life of Padre Pio through reading a book, Mrs. Vera Calandra traveled to San Giovanni Rotando, Italy in 1968 to meet the priest “who worked miracles.” She brought two of her small children with her, one very sick little girl named Vera Marie.

Mrs. Calandra had two audiences with Padre Pio where he blessed her and her children, placing his sore wounded hands on their heads. Upon their return to Pennsylvania and yet another consultation at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, the Calandras were informed that Vera Marie had made “great improvements” and that her prognosis seemed good. The doctors had removed Vera Marie’s bladder during one of the many operations she had undergone prior to her pilgrimage to Padre Pio. Their discovery upon her return was a “rudimentary bladder” growing in place of the one they had removed. A Miracle! (15)

## Core Values of Jesus' Teachings

### The Kingdom of God

One of the primary core values of Jesus focuses on the phenomena of The Kingdom of God. This foundational concept of Christianity is the central theme of Jesus' teachings in the gospels. The phrase, the Kingdom of God, repeats in the New Testament more than a 100 times. It, the Kingdom of God theme, occurs throughout the gospels and is frequently defined through His parables. "Asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was to come, he gave them this answer, 'the coming of the Kingdom of God does not admit of observation and there will be no one to say, "Look it is here! Look it is there!" For look, the kingdom of God is amongst you'." (16) The kingdom of God is here for all, and can be manifested within each person with the understanding that God is our Father.

### Good Samaritan



Love is another core value. It is often written that Christ's most important commandments were, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." (17) Jesus taught that God loved all races and all classes regardless of whether they were rich or poor. The parable of the Good Samaritan explains the importance of love and compassion

for all. The story tells of a man traveling to Jericho who was robbed, beaten and left for dead. A priest and Levite saw him and did not stop to assist him. Then a Samaritan came by, took compassion on seeing him, taking care of his wounds and made sure he was cared for until healed. (18)

### Prodigal Son



Jesus demonstrated the value of compassion by his kindness and willingness to forgive everyone no matter what they may have done. Through his teachings and example he showed that all were of value to him. He rejoiced when his children, no matter their transgression came home to Him. This is beautifully described in the parable of the prodigal son. In the story a son took his share of his inheritance and squandered it in far off lands. After losing everything he returns to his Father asking for forgiveness. His father welcomes him with open arms, bathes him, dresses him in his finest clothes and has a feast in his honor. His other son who has worked hard all along on seeing this feels unfairly treated and protests to the father. His father replies " my son you are with me



always and all I have is yours, but it was only right that we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.” (19)

### Sermon on the Mount



One of the most important sermons spoken by Jesus was in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in the gospel of Matthew. These teaching share his core values on humility, charity and brotherly love.

*“How blessed are the poor in Spirit: the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”*

Poor in spirit means to be humble. Humility brings openness and an inner peace, allowing one to do the will of God.

*“Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance.”*

By being gentle and kind we are showing obedience to God’s will and this will bring us peace in this world and the next.

*“Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.”*

By our humility we are grateful to God for his blessings and this realization causes us regret and sadness for wrongful actions.

*“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for uprightness: they shall have their fill.”*

A continuous desire for justice and moral perfection will lead one to a fulfillment of that desire as transition to holiness.

*“Blessed are the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them.”*

Love, compassion, and forgiveness towards one’s neighbor will bring inner and outer peace.

*“Blessed are the pure of heart: they shall see God.”*

To be pure of heart is to be free of selfish intentions and self-seeking desires.

*“Blessed are the peace makers: they shall be recognized as children of God.”*

By imitating God’s love of man, the peacemakers become children of God.

*“Blessed are they who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.” (20)*

Jesus stated many times that those who follow him will be persecuted. He promised his disciples that their reward would be the Kingdom of Heaven. These blessings show us the core values Jesus embraced. He emphasized the need for humbleness and to develop a childlike attitude so his teaching could be better understood and practiced. Through humility and purity we can recognize that we are born as children of God and that we have the potential to let go of limitations of human existence and become one with God.

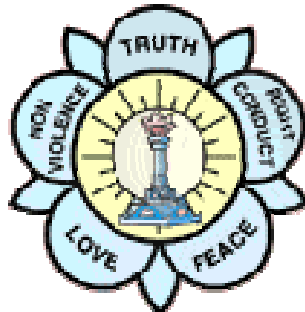
[Comments on each of the Beatitudes (21)]

## The Adulterous Woman

Jesus taught us not to focus on others faults but on our own inward path. When a woman was brought to him after being condemned to be stoned to death for committing adultery Jesus said to those that convicted her ‘Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Jesus said to the woman ‘Has no one condemned you?’ and when she replied ‘no’ he said ‘Neither do I condemn you’ ‘go away, and from this moment sin no more.’ (22) He is reminding us to be careful before judging others as we are not free from faults and have no right to cast the first stone. He encourages us to pay attention to our own lessons and teachings not others. He also demonstrated forgiveness.

Sai Baba states that Christ was a master born with a purpose. His mission was to restore love, charity and compassion in the heart of man. Jesus taught about the principle of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Baba said, “Christ’s basic teachings were related to promotion of compassion, sympathy, love, sacrifice and fellowship among human beings.” (23)

## Similarities between core values of Jesus’ and Baba’s teachings



### Sathya (Truth)

**JESUS:** *I am in the Father and the Father is in me* (24)

**BABA:** *Every individual is a spark of the effulgence of God. God is dancing in every cell of every being. Do not doubt this or ignore this, or dispute this. This is the Truth, this is the entire truth, this is the only Truth. The Universe is God. All this is He, His Body ... Overcoming the tempers by the development of spiritual discipline; one must discover the Truth of oneself and others, namely God. SSS 8:42,221;Hyderabad, 4-4-73* (25)

Both spiritual leaders teach that the essence of the Lord, which is the supreme Truth, is in everything and everyone. The value for humans is that we are conscious of that Truth. The spark of the effulgence radiates from all to all. It is our duty to discriminate and express the truth.

## Prema (Pure Love)

**JESUS:** *And now I give you a new commandment; Love one another. As I have loved you. So you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples. (26)*

**BABA:** *Give Joy to all, Prema or Love is the means to achieve this ideal. When Love can bring even God nearer to you, how can it fail, where man is involved? That is the reason why Sai has declared: Start the day with Love; spend the day with Love, fill the day with Love; end the day with Love. This is the way to God. (27)*

It is said that if you Love everyone you will see God in everyone. The divine invites us to see all as love and serve all as love. We should fill every moment with the love that the Lord offers us.

## Dharma (Righteousness)

**JESUS:** *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (28)*

**BABA:** *“Dharma purifies the mind and leads you to God. It creates a taste for the Name and Form of God, you will naturally respect and obey the command of God. His Word, which is found in the Scriptures. Have the Name on the tongue and Form in the eye; and the demon, called Aasa, unending desire, will fly from your mind leaving joy and content therein. This kind of constant dwelling on the indwelling God will promote Love for all beings. You will then see good in others and you will strive to do good to others.” (29)*

Our Lord in all forms tells us to strive for right conduct and in so doing we draw righteousness to us. Good conduct should be performed in all aspects of our lives. We are blessed when we desire only God. When our actions are dedicated only to Him with no attachment to results He promises we shall see Him in all His Glory.

## Shanti (Peace)

**JESUS:** *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God. (30)*

**BABA:** *Ambition to earn fame in the world, to gain some position of authority over fellowmen, to lead luxurious life-this can never ensure Shanti, Mental Peace. Mental Peace is the result of quite different attainments. Wealth cannot command it nor authority commandeer it! It must be won the hard way through Meditation, Namasmara and the nine steps to the presence of the Almighty. It must be won on Earth, to which man rightfully belongs; and, not on any other heavenly body towards which he may dare navigate.(31)*

The Son of God knows the bridge to the father. Those who seek peace build the path that leads to the Divine. Personal behavior, our spiritual practice,

directed inwardly and towards others wins us the peaceful expression of His Knowing.

### **Ahimsa (Non-violence)**

**JESUS:** *If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (32)*

**BABA:** *The attitude of forbearance (titiksha) refuses to be affected or pained when afflicted with sorrow and loss and the ingratitude and wickedness of others. In fact one is happy and calm for one knows that, these are the results of one's own actions now recoiling on him and one looks upon those who caused the misery as friends and well wishers. One does not retaliate nor does he wish ill for them. One bears all the blows patiently and gladly. (33)*

Baba and Jesus guide us on the path of non-violence. They ask us to take peace and understand its nature. We must study the true forces that bind us and dissolve the negativity that keep us from knowing the unique nature of non-violence. Non-violence means establishing right action on thought, word and deed.

### **Significance of Christian symbols**

Christianity has many symbols that reduce the main ideas or experiences to one signature. Among these symbols are the Body and Blood of Christ, the cross, the fish, the chalice, and the trinity. The following discussion describes the symbols and explains their meanings.

The Thursday before the crucifixion of Jesus, He called His disciples together for what was perhaps a traditional Passover meal. Before eating, Christ washed the feet of the disciples. As he humbly washed their feet he commanded that they love one another as He loved them. Feet washing ceremonies throughout Christendom honor the Lord's act.








Also, during this Last Supper, He shared bread and wine with them saying, "Then taking a cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and share it among you, because from now on, I tell you, I shall never again drink wine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' He did the same with the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you.'" (34). When Christians celebrate a ritual known as communion they celebrate this event.

Members of this faith feel so blessed with the form that was Jesus that the form itself is worshiped. Many adore the baby Jesus form and honor it in nativity scenes depicting the birth of the Lord. Some worshipped this form and experienced ecstasy while in the act of worship, for example, St. Theresa of Lisieux or St. Pio.


Crosses and statues venerate the crucified form. Persons like Theresa Neumann of Konnersreuth, Bavaria, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Pio experienced the suffering of the Body of Jesus with wounds like those of the crucifixion. Great healings and mystical experiences often follow those who express the stigmata. There are persons all over the world, who even today, bear the marks of their risen Lord. There are also persons who do prayers each day and devotions to the Five Wounds.

The cross, whether depicted with the crucified Christ or designed without a body representing the resurrected Jesus, is a dear and popular symbol. Church steeples with crosses announce that this is a Christian church. Folks feel blessed to use or wear the symbol embroidered on cloth, made into statues or amulets.

While there are sects that believe that Jesus was crucified on a stake most Christians believe that it was on a cross (+). A cross is a geometrical figure consisting of two lines or bars perpendicular to each other. The cross is

depicted in many ways, for example there is the Latin Cross  , the Greek Cross  , The Jerusalem Cross  , the Russian or Eastern Cross  , the Maltese Cross  , the Celtic Cross  and the Chi Rho Cross (the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek-)  . (35)

The cross as symbol represents Christ's sacrifice at Calvary. The cross also reminds Christians of Jesus' victory over sin and death. It is believed that through his death he conquered death itself. He died to take away the sins of the world.

The Fish is another popular symbol in Christianity. "The Greek word for fish is 'ixthus' or 'ictus.' The Christian fish symbol that many Christians place on their car is known as the 'ixthus.' Five Greek letters form the word 'ixthus,' and those letters inside the fish form an acrostic, which is a message that Christians clearly identified with. The first letter represented the word Jesus. The second letter represented the word Christ, the next two, God Son, and the final letter represented the word Savior. This adds up to 'Jesus Christ is God's Son, the Savior.' During early Christianity, Christians were often put to death for practicing their faith, so they worshiped in secret places. A fish painted on the outside door of a house let other Christians know that they would be safe and welcome inside." (36) 



The Chalice, another Christian symbol, was the cup, dish or plate used by Jesus at the Last Supper. This object is said to possess untold miraculous powers. Books, plays and other forms of entertainment depict the search for the Holy Grail sometimes thought of as the Chalice.

Objects of service used during communion services are also called chalices. In modern times the cup that holds the wine, or blood of Christ, is held sacred and given the name of Chalice. Sometimes the chalices are kept in sacred places or tabernacles following the belief that this, in reality holds the blood of Christ.

The Trinity represents the three aspects of God that is the Father, Son and The Holy Spirit as One. “The term [was] first coined by third century north African theologian named Tertullian in order to account for the Father, Son, and Spirit all identified in the new testament with (or as) God; The concept eventually evolved into the official doctrine that says that God is three coeternal and coequal Persons, all joined in a single Godhead. “ (37)

In the final section of the Divine Comedy, Dante puts the three-in-one thesis poetically:

That light supreme, within its fathomless  
Clear substance, showed to me three spheres, which bare  
Three hues distinct, and occupied one space.

The first mirror the next, as though it were  
Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame  
Breath equally from each of the first pair. (38)

### **Major Holy Days, their Spiritual Significance, and Rituals**

There are so many reasons for Christ’s followers to rejoice and therefore many holy days and festivals. Since, there is diversity in the many Christian sects, not all celebrate the same days. Chosen for discussion is a sampling of the many holidays, then, more specifically, five commonly celebrated ones.

The Christian calendar evolved from its relationship with the Jewish founders and related festivals, to its relationship with an ever expanding and influencing modern world. Therefore, the dates assigned to certain holy days or special days will be specific dates. Christmas, for example, is on a specific day, December 25th. “Others festivals are called moveable feasts. Easter is one of these. It is based on the appearance of the springtime full moon and can change more than a month each year.” (39)

The holy days of Christianity commemorate the seasons, the events in the life of the family, and the events in Jesus’ life. An example of a special day that spotlights an earth cycle or seasonal theme is the Harvest Home or Harvest Festival. It is reminiscent of the agricultural aspect of the Jewish celebration of Sukkoth. The focus of this holiday expresses the sentiment, that, the Lord’s children are grateful for the food, protection, and shelter He delivers. In some rural congregations the first sheaf of wheat is collected, made into bread, and used as the communion bread.

Days of celebration in a family members life cycle include but are not limited to: baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial. Baptism is the rite of purification with water, a preparation for entry into the body church. An infant, child, or adult is either anointed with or dunked in water.

The confirmation ceremony, where a previously baptized person confirms that they want to be a member of the church, is a very holy day and cause for much celebration. The marriage ceremony unites a couple and establishes their external expression of personal commitment to each other. And, finally, the death ceremonies are remembrance of the life given by God and promises made through Jesus Christ.

Holy days surrounding the remembrances of the life of the Son include but are not limited to Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week beginning with Palm Sunday and including Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and ending in Easter Sunday, Ascension Day, and Pentecost. Advent heralds the arrival of Jesus. The “coming” or advent is celebrated for four Sundays before Christmas.



Christmas, one of the sweetest days in the calendar, recalls the glories surrounding the birth of Jesus. The body church meet to give thanks and honor those glories. Songs, plays, sacred readings, and rejoicing mark the day. Children receive gifts of toys symbolizing the gift that was the Lord Himself born to us on earth.

Twelve days after Christmas, or January 6<sup>th</sup>, is Epiphany or the remembrance of when the bright star shone in the sky to point the way to the Christ Child. For some Christians, this is the end of the twelve days of Christmas celebration. Epiphany is called by some, Three Kings Day. On that day men dress up as kings and with other church members march through the streets rejoicing in dance and song. Lent and Holy Week including Easter Sunday are discussed below, separately.



Ascension Day or forty days after Easter, is a festival of joy recalling the ascension into heaven of the Lord Jesus. Ascension day always falls on a Thursday. Ten days after that Pentecost occurs. Pentecost, the Greek pentekost meaning fiftieth, was the Jewish holiday that fell on the fiftieth day after Passover. While Christ’s disciples and family gathered to observe this holiday they were filled with the power and glory of the Holy Spirit.

In addition, for most of the devoted, an especially sacred and holy day is Sunday. This day is known as the day of Light and is a day of rest and worship. (40) Sunday is a day to reflect on the week and contemplate and rejoice in the glories of God. “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” (41)

On Sunday Christians go to church where they share communion. Communion is partaking of the bread and wine, which represents the body and blood of Jesus. In church the faithful sing songs, read scriptures or sacred texts, and listen to sermons about Jesus or Christian life. Families often spend the day together.

Of the holidays that are mentioned above, perhaps the most notable are those that depict Christ’s birth and death. As Christmas was discussed previously Easter is discussed presently. Lent, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday,

Good Friday, and Easter Sunday surround the death and resurrection of the Nazarene.

Lent is the Christian observance of prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter. These holy days last for forty days before Easter, excluding Sundays. They begin on Ash Wednesday and end on Good Thursday or Saturday. Lent means, in Old English, spring because Easter falls in the spring. More orthodox sects use the Latin word *Quadragesima* (i.e. forty days) or a language appropriate derivative of the same. Traditionally, just as Christ fasted and prayed in the wilderness before He began His ministry, so do his devoted, in preparation to receive His teachings.

Palm Sunday is a day charged with excitement. The followers of the Lord Jesus greeted Him on His donkey, laying down on the path before Him, their cloaks and palm fronds. Christ, along with His disciples and others, arrived in Jerusalem as the crowds shouted, “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who is coming in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heavens!” (42) Others who heard these cries shouted who is this man and they were told that He was the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.



On Palm Sunday people go to church and are given small crosses of palm branches or palm leaves or willow twigs to commemorate the day. Some gatherings create plays depicting Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. During this Sunday's service special theme songs are sung and passages explaining the significance of the day are read out of the scriptures. Holy communion is shared and alms for the poor are collected.

The Thursday of holy week or the day before Christ's crucifixion is known as Maundy Thursday, from the Latin *mondeo*, “I command”. During the washing of the disciples' feet as discussed earlier, Jesus commanded His disciples to, “Love one another...as I have loved you.” His verbal gift so simple and full that the church's foundation rests squarely on the command.



The feet washing over, they sat down for their Passover feast or their Last Supper together. They shared the symbolic bread and wine. The group proceeded to the Mount of Olives, where the disciples were to keep watch while Christ prayed alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. A group of soldiers came for him. A disciple Judas pointed Him out. Several trials were to follow.

Christians often mark Maundy Thursday by performing deep contemplation, meditation, and prayer. Many end their Lenten fasting on this day. Some faithful, also, go to church to prepare for the days ahead with special services. In some settings the followers wash each other's feet. The emphasis during the observance of this day is on 1. Christ's commandment - to Love, 2. The Eucharist (sharing of the bread and wine), and 3. The betrayal of Jesus.





Good Friday is known as the day Jesus gave up His life for the good of all. On this day Christ was tried, convicted, and sentenced to hang on the cross. They put a crown of thorns on His head and forced Him to carry a heavy wooden cross to Calvary or Golgotha (Place of a Skull), the execution grounds. He was crucified or hung on the cross. Near the hour of His death a great storm came upon the land and the sky grew dark.

The roman soldiers pierced His side to see if He was dead. A man, Joseph of Arimathea, who was watching the crucifixion, offered his burial cave. His body was wrapped in Linen and placed in the tomb. There were some who insisted that a stone be rolled in front of the opening to the cave. They were so adamant because Jesus Christ insisted that He would rise again from the dead.



Good Friday is a day for quiet thought and prayer especially between midday and three o'clock. This was the time when Christ hung on the cross. A solemn day marked by austerities. Some congregations express their feelings on this day by carrying a cross silently through the streets to the church. Many churches are stripped of their seasonal colors and hang a solitary cross in the front altar.



Given that Christ was a Jew and because at sundown, the day Jesus died, the Sabbath began, no preparation for His Burial could be made. The dawn of next day after the Sabbath, or the dawn of Sunday morning, women went to anoint the body and rewrap it with linen. When they got to the cave an earthquake occurred and the stone in front of the cave was rolled away.



Two angels, then Christ Himself, told the women that He was not dead but was raised from the dead. The women told the disciples and others this news. Jesus also appeared to followers on the road to a small village called Emmaus. At first He did not reveal Himself but shared with them that things that took place in Jerusalem did so for a reason. When they finally recognized Him at supper He disappeared.

Easter is a day of rejoicing and celebration, for as the old hymn says, '...up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o'er His foes...' (43) Among many the commemoration of this event begins with a vigil on Saturday night and for others the vigil begins at sunrise the next day. People gather to sing songs of His Grace, they listen to stories told about the resurrection, and many folks joyously process in the streets proclaiming His Glories. The communion is also shared as a remembrance of He who gave such a gift.

On Easter day families gather together sharing meals and communal love. The egg, a sign of rebirth, is symbolically eaten. Chocolate eggs or brightly colored boiled eggs are shared with



children. Eggs are often hidden in the grass for children to find.

### A Simple Christian Song

Christians are fond of music. "...Come into His presence with songs of joy." (44) The faithful sing or/and play music to God and the musical form is known by many names including hymns, chants, gospel songs, Psalms, instrumentals, anthems, requiems and cantatas.

People who follow Christ's teachings are inspired to incorporate those ideas into verse and vibrational tension. Chants repeating the name, or confessional phrases, or Bible quotes are familiar to many. Some music recalls the life history of the Sweet Soul. The depth and richness of the music brings the faithful closer to their Lord and gives rise to their expression of Love for He who knew no boundaries.

The song below inspires us to look deep into our hearts. We must contemplate on the glory and love that is God and by so doing we acquire trust, joy, and hope. The song suggests that the process of praising Him will in itself allow us to know His glory.

*"Words: Henry J. van Dyke, 1907. Van Dyke wrote this hymn while staying at the home of Harry A. Garfield at Williams College, Massachusetts. It was first published in the *Presbyterian Hymnal* in 1911. It also appeared in the *Poems of Henry van Dyke*, 1911.*

*Music: Hymn to Joy, from the 9th Symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven; adapted by Edward Hodges, 1824.*



### JOYFUL, JOYFUL, WE ADORE THEE

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

All Thy works with joy surround Thee, earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,  
Stars and angels sing around Thee, center of unbroken praise.  
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea,  
Singing bird and flowing fountain call us to rejoice in Thee.

Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blessed,  
Wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest!  
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother, all who live in love are Thine;  
Teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals, join the happy chorus, which the morning stars began;  
Father love is reigning o'er us, brother love binds man to man.  
Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife,  
Joyful music leads us Sunward in the triumph song of life." (45)

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