HOLY HEARTS & HOMES

Liturgical Living Newsletter

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"Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common." Acts 4:32

DECEMBER: Month of the *Immaculate Conception*

Pope's Intention: For Christians in areas of conflict.

Let us pray that Christians living in areas of war or conflict, especially in the Middle East, might be seeds of peace, reconciliation and hope.

PRAYER CORNER

Prayer for Persecuted Christians

O God of all the nations, the One God who is and was and always will be, in your providence you willed that your Church be united to the suffering of your Son. Look with mercy on your servants who are persecuted for their faith in you. Grant them perseverance and courage to be worthy imitators of Christ. Bring your wisdom upon leaders of nations to work for peace among all peoples. May your Spirit open conversion for those who contradict your will, that we may live in harmony. Give us the grace to be united in truth and freedom, and to always seek your will in our lives. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

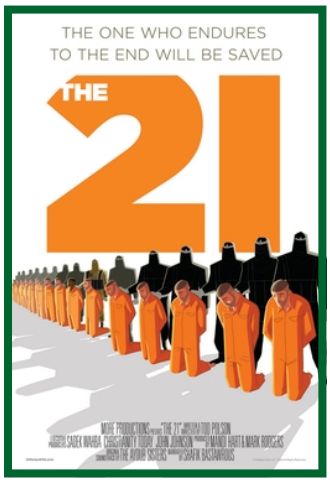
Our Lady, Queen of Peace, pray for us!

Blood That Speaks: The 21 Coptic Martyrs of Libya

December 2025 holds a poignant intention from the Pope: "For Christians living in areas of war or conflict, especially in the Middle East, might be seeds of peace, reconciliation and hope." It is a prayer for those who suffer not only from violence and displacement but from the immense weight of living out their faith in the midst of hostility. For many, being Christian in such regions means carrying a daily cross: threats from extremists, pressure from governments, and the ever-present risk of persecution. When we reflect on the Church's long history of martyrs—those who have spilled their blood for Christ—this intention resonates with powerful examples of faith that sometimes transcend denominational lines.

One striking example is the story of the 21 Coptic Martyrs of Libya. In February 2015, these men—poor laborers from small villages in Egypt—had traveled to Libya in search of work to support their families. While there, they were captured by Islamic State militants and held hostage for weeks. Eventually, the world saw their final moments in a video released by ISIS: the men, dressed in orange jumpsuits, were marched onto a beach along the Mediterranean coast. Behind them stood masked executioners dressed in black. The captives were forced to kneel in the sand, waves crashing beside them, while their killers proclaimed threats against the "people of the cross." Yet the martyrs did not answer with fear or denial. Instead, many of them could be heard calling on the name of Jesus Christ with their last breaths. Their leader,

Matthew Ayairga, though not a Christian before capture, is said to have declared, "Their God is my God," and was martyred alongside them. They were members of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has valid sacraments but is not in formal communion with Rome. Despite their lack of formal communion, Pope Francis recognized the authenticity of their witness and declared that their martyrdom belonged to the entire Body of Christ. With the blessing of Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Francis had their names inserted into the Roman Martyrology, the official catalog of saints and martyrs commemorated in the Catholic Church. This historic act reflects a profound truth: the blood of martyrs knows no denominational boundary. Their sacrifice is not just a testimony of the Coptic Church, but of the universal Church—one in Christ through their final profession of faith. Their legacy has even been carried forward through art and film; in 2025, an animated feature honoring the martyrs was released, with Catholic actor Jonathan Roumie lending his voice, ensuring their story continues to inspire Christians of every tradition.



The Church has always honored those who, in their suffering and even in death, reveal the victory of Christ. In another ancient and solemn example, the Holy Innocents—the infants slaughtered by King Herod in his attempt to kill the newborn Messiah—are remembered as martyrs. Though they never spoke a word of faith, never heard the Gospel, and were not baptized, the Church teaches that they received a baptism of blood, and their feast stands in the liturgical calendar right after Christmas, on December 28th. Their innocent blood was spilled not for their own choices, but because of hatred for Christ, and so they are honored as witnesses to Him.

This December, then, the Pope's intention calls us to see Christians in conflict zones through this lens of martyrdom and witness. They may not all face physical death, but they endure the daily "martyrdom" of harassment, poverty, exile, and fear. When we look to the 21 Coptic martyrs, we see men who proclaimed with their last breath that Christ is Lord. When we recall the Holy Innocents, we recognize that even the smallest and most powerless can give a testimony to Christ through their suffering. Together, their lives proclaim that Christian witness, even in bloodshed, becomes the seed of peace, reconciliation, and hope. As believers, we are called to stand in solidarity with our persecuted brothers and sisters, to pray for them, to defend them, and to let their courage deepen our own faith. In so doing, we join with the Pope's prayer that, in the midst of war and conflict, Christians will not only survive but shine as lights of love and courage—witnesses to the hope that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of Christ.

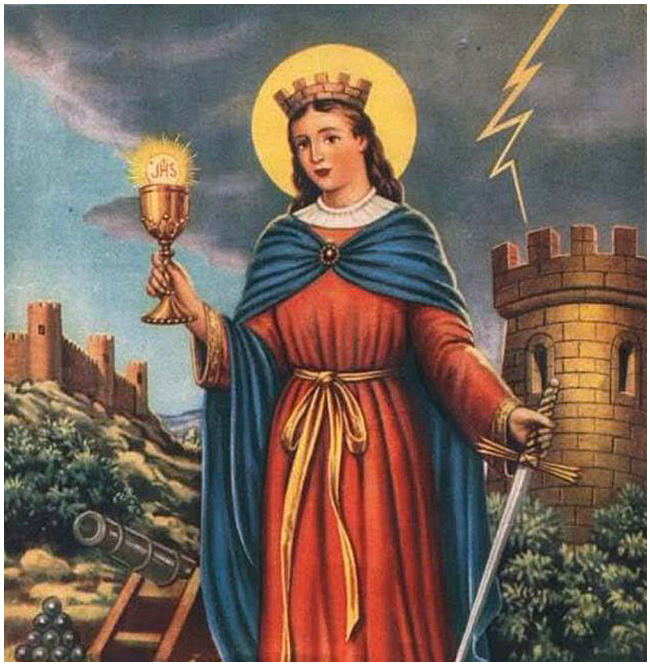
FROM PAGAN ROOTS TO CATHOLIC SYMBOL: THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The Christmas tree, though now a universal holiday symbol, carries layers of history and meaning. In pre-Christian Europe, evergreen branches were used to decorate during pagan feast days, and were displayed during the dark days of winter as signs of life, fertility, and protection from evil spirits. Yet when the Gospel spread through these lands, the Church gave the tradition new meaning rather than discarding it. According to legend, St. Boniface in the 8th century cut down a pagan sacred oak and pointed to the fir tree as a new sign—its triangular shape reflecting the Trinity, its evergreen branches symbolizing eternal life in Christ. By the Middle Ages, Christians used the "paradise tree" decorated with apples and wafers to recall both the Fall of Adam and Eve and Christ's redeeming Eucharist.

Over time, this tree became central to Catholic devotion in Advent and Christmastide. Candles upon its branches proclaimed Christ as the Light of the World, while the evergreen itself spoke of life that never fades. Today, ornaments, lights, and stars continue this catechesis; the lights recall Christ's presence shining in darkness, and the star atop the tree points to Bethlehem, guiding us to the newborn Savior. While the Christmas tree may have distant pagan associations, the Church transformed it into a rich Christian symbol. For Catholics, it stands not merely as decoration but as a proclamation of hope, eternal life, and the joy of God dwelling among us in the Incarnation.

Catholics can bring the meaning of the Christmas tree into their homes by blessing a tree as a family. The head of the household can lead a simple prayer, asking God to fill the home with joy, peace, and the light of Christ. Various Catholic Christmas tree blessings and prayers can be found online, providing families with ideas to make this tradition a meaningful act of faith and devotion during the Advent and Christmas season.

Featured Saints of December



St. Barbara

Feast Day: December 4th
Patron of: artillerymen, miners, engineers, armourers and anyone who works with explosives and cannons

St. Barbara lived in the 3rd century in Nicomedia (modern-day Turkey) and was the daughter of a wealthy pagan named Dioscorus. She was known for her beauty and intelligence, but more importantly for her steadfast faith. Against her father's wishes, she secretly converted to Christianity and devoted herself to God. When Dioscorus discovered her faith, he was enraged. Tradition holds that he imprisoned her in a tower to keep her from practicing Christianity and attempting to marry. While confined, Barbara continued to pray and grow spiritually, even building a third window in her tower to symbolize the Holy Trinity.

Eventually, Barbara's father delivered her to the Roman authorities, and she was tortured for refusing to renounce her faith. According to legend, Dioscorus himself executed her, only to be struck down by lightning immediately afterward—a miracle that became associated with her patronage of those threatened by sudden death. St. Barbara's courage and devotion to God made her a model of steadfast faith under persecution. Over the centuries, she has inspired prayers for protection against danger, storms, and unexpected death, symbolizing trust in God even in the face of extreme trials.

St. Stephen

Feast Day: December 26th
Patron of: deacons, altar servers, bricklayers, casket makers, and those who suffer from headaches

St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr or Protomartyr, displayed unwavering faith and courage that set a lasting example for the Church. Living in first-century Jerusalem, he was one of seven men chosen by the Apostles to serve as deacons, assisting widows and the poor. Known for his wisdom, devotion, and preaching, Stephen performed many works of charity and was filled with the Holy Spirit. His eloquence and miracles drew attention but also provoked opposition from the Jewish council, threatened by his teachings about Jesus as the Messiah.

Brought before the Sanhedrin and accused of blasphemy, Stephen boldly defended his faith, recounting God's faithfulness and proclaiming Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise. The enraged crowd dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death. Tradition holds that Saul of Tarsus, later St. Paul, was among his executioners. As he died, Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," echoing Christ's own words on the cross. His martyrdom began widespread persecution but strengthened the early Church. St. Stephen remains a model of courage, forgiveness, and fidelity, inspiring Christians to witness boldly even in danger.

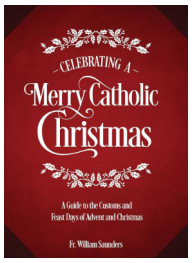
CELEBRATING THE FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

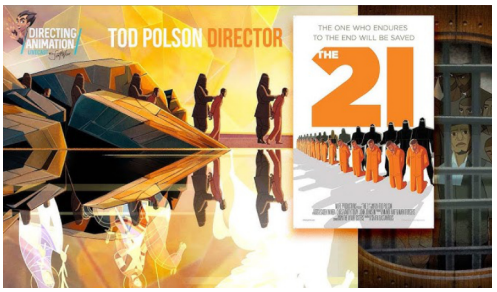
On December 8th, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, honoring Mary's being conceived without sin and her special role in God's plan. One way to celebrate might be to combine prayer, music, crafts, and festive treats that reflect Mary's purity. You could play Marian hymns like Immaculate Mary or Ave Maria. A simple craft could be a "Stained Glass Mary," made by surrounding a black-paper silhouette of Mary with blue and white tissue paper to hang in a window. Decorations might include blue and white flowers, candles, or a small devotional corner with a statue or image of Mary, accented with fairy lights or paper lilies. For food, consider blue and white themed treats like blueberry muffins, white chocolate-covered pretzels, star-shaped cookies, or cookies arranged like a rosary. Adding a short prayer, a decade of the rosary, or reading a children's book about Mary could help connect the celebration to her role in the Nativity.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Celebrating a Merry Catholic Christmas
by Fr. William Saunders

A practical and joyful guide that helps families and individuals embrace the true meaning of Christmas through faith-filled traditions, reflections, and festive Catholic customs. Filled with ideas for prayer, decoration, and celebration, it shows how to make the holiday season both spiritually enriching and warmly memorable.





Movie: *The 21* **by MORE Productions**
Narrated by Jonathan Roumie
(Age Group: Mature, 13+)

The 21 is an animated short film that portrays the martyrdom of 21 Coptic Christians by ISIS in 2015. While the film employs stylized animation and neo-Coptic iconography to depict these events, the subject matter is intense and may be distressing. Parental discretion is advised.

Movie: *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*
(Ages: Family Friendly)

A heartwarming 2007 British film that tells the story of a grieving woodcarver, Jonathan Toomey, who is commissioned by a widow and her son to carve a new Nativity set after theirs is lost. As Jonathan works on the project, he forms an unexpected bond with the family, leading him to confront his own sorrow and rediscover the joy of Christmas.

Movie: *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* **(Age Group: Family Friendly)**

A heartwarming holiday film based on Barbara Robinson's 1972 novel, directed by Dallas Jenkins (director of The Chosen). The story follows the unruly Herdman siblings—Imogene, Ralph, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys—who are notorious for their misbehavior. When they unexpectedly take the lead roles in their town's annual Christmas pageant, their unconventional portrayal of the nativity story challenges the community's perceptions and brings a fresh, heartfelt perspective to the holiday tradition.

Movie: *The Three Wise Men*
(Ages: Family Friendly)

A heartwarming animated Christmas special narrated by the legendary Andy Griffith, offering a poetic retelling of the Nativity story from the perspective of the three Magi. Presented in rhymed verse, the film combines traditional carols performed by The Brothers Cazimero with an original song by Jonas Myrin, creating a delightful and family-friendly holiday experience.

Have a Liturgical Living idea? Contact: holyheartsandhomes@gmail.com

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