



Christmas in Italy

Let's Celebrate an Italian Christmas

This is the first message in a series about Christmas in Italy. Come along as we look at the traditions that are still celebrated--centuries later--and why they are so important: the saints' feast days, foods, decorations, and that little witch, La Befana, to name a few. As Italians, the greatest gift we cherish is *la famiglia*, the family, and the Christmas season is a special occasion to share it with those we love and hold dear. For this we can all be very proud of our heritage and culture.

Everyone looks forward to the holidays. The special foods, the smell of cinnamon in the air from the cookies being baked, wrapping paper littering the dining room table, and of course, the sparkling tree standing in the corner.

So, what's different in Italy during the holidays? It's heavily centered on religious traditions and much less commercialized. We all continue to follow traditions we

learned when young. Nonna insisted the Christmas Eve table had to have 12 different dishes, one for each apostle. The tombola game was brought out and dusted off for some entertainment. And meat on Christmas Eve? Never! Parents or grandparents didn't always explain why we did certain things. They brought these traditions from their homeland and following them was just what was done.

Christmas is one holiday that is celebrated BIG in Italy—it's the most important holiday of the year. It's not a celebration of just one day but a celebration for almost an entire month! Tradition runs deep and each of the twenty regions celebrates the holiday season in its own unique way. But there are common threads that unite them.

The official start of the Holy Season is December 8--**the Feast of the Immaculate Conception**. It's one of the most important feast days and it's celebrated by Catholics worldwide. It's a national holiday and there are processions throughout the Regions of Italy to honor Mary, who is believed to be immaculate, or "free from sin." In Rome, the Pope visits the Piazza di Spagna where a floral wreath has been placed on the soaring statue of the Madonna to honor her. More flowers are placed at the base of the statue when the Pope visits the site.

There is definitely a formal celebration when the Pope makes his visit. To get an idea of what it's like, [here's a video](#).

If you looked at a Roman Catholic calendar, you'd probably see a feast day mentioned for a saint on every day of the year. The Christmas season celebrates three special saints (one will be in another message). Their stories are proof of their unshakable dedication to Christianity and because of their beliefs, ultimately, their martyrdom. They were willing to die for what they believed and for this they are honored.



Let's start with **Santa Lucia**, Saint Lucy. She was born in Syracuse, Sicily, and is the patron saint of the city. Her feast day is December 13. We know she wore a wreath of candles on her head, but why? Her story is an interesting one. She came from a wealthy Sicilian family and she vowed to remain a virgin. Her

St. Lucia is carried in a procession.

mother, however, betrothed her to a pagan. When she refused to marry him, the enraged suitor reported her to the governor for being a Christian. According to the legend, she was threatened with a life of prostitution if she did not give up her Christian beliefs. But even with a thousand men and fifty oxen pulling, they could not move her. They stacked materials for a fire around her and set light to it, but she would not stop speaking, insisting that her death would lessen the fear of it for other Christians. One of the soldiers stuck a spear through her throat to stop her talking, but to no effect. Another gouged out her eyes but they were miraculously restored. Saint Lucy was able to die only when she was given the Christian Last Rites.

Her life was dedicated to helping people. She brought food and aid to Christians hiding in the catacombs, wearing a candlelit wreath on her head for light and to leave her hands free so she could carry as much food as possible. Her feast day is widely celebrated as the Festival of Light as it points to the arrival of the Light of Christ on Christmas Day.

In Syracuse, a silver statue of Santa Lucia with her relics is paraded through the streets before returning it to the Cathedral of Syracuse. There is a Sicilian legend that says a famine ended on her feast day when ships loaded with grain entered the harbor. It is traditional to eat whole grains instead of bread on December 13. **Here's a short video of the procession held in Syracuse.**

In Northern Italy, she brings gifts to good children and coal to bad ones. She comes with her donkey and her escort, Castaldo. Children leave coffee for Lucia, a carrot for the donkey and a glass of wine for Castaldo. They must not watch her delivering gifts or she will throw ashes in their eyes!

What's next? **The Novena** that begins on December 16. The Novena (a series of prayers) is designed to prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas; the last day of the Novena is December 24. Also called the Saint Andrew Christmas, a special prayer is said 15 times every day until Christmas.

Saint Andrew was the very first disciple called by Jesus; he is the patron saint of Amalfi and the brother of St. Peter. St. Andrew was crucified in 60 AD because he refused to accept the gods of the Romans instead of Christianity.



The "X" shaped cross of St. Andrew

The remains of the saint are at rest in Amalfi, where they have been since 1210. Unlike Jesus, he was crucified on a cross in the shape of an “X” as he did not consider himself worthy to die on the same shaped cross as Jesus.

The Novena prayer is a short one and can be said 15 times at once or divided up. This tradition later included children going house-to-house just as the time of prayer was over. They would sing traditional Christmas songs and would be rewarded gifts of sweets or cakes.

There’s one more tradition that Italy honors during December: an additional month's salary! That’s right, Italians get an extra “13th” month of pay at the beginning of December, a Christmas bonus for every worker!

The next message in our series will cover Nativity scenes. Be prepared to be amazed.

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