

## Religious, Cultural & Ethnic Holidays & Days of Observance

**December 2017/January 2018**

This handout is to call your attention to just some of the many nationally and internationally recognized and/or celebrated diverse days of observance and religious/ethnic holidays that fall within the month of November 2017. We invite you to share it with the students, staff, and faculty you work with across campus. For more information, feel free to visit the Multicultural Resource Calendar located on the Office of Student Life's Mosaic Center website: [http://www.diversityresources.com/aa\\_gsr/index.php?key=adCaO2Shix6u](http://www.diversityresources.com/aa_gsr/index.php?key=adCaO2Shix6u)

Thank you,

The Mosaic: Center for Culture and Diversity & Interfaith Center Staff

**Dec 1- Mawlid (Prophet Muhammad's Birthday):** This occurs on the 12th day of the Muslim month of Rabi ul-Awwal and marks the birth of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, in 570 A.C.E.

**Dec 3-Advent begins:** Advent, which means "coming" or "arrival," marks the beginning of the Western Christian ecclesiastical year. It begins on the Sunday nearest to the Feast of St. Andrew on November 30, and continues through Christmas Eve, encompassing four Sundays. Originally observed with fasting and penitence as a period during which converts to Christianity prepared themselves for baptism, Advent became during the Middle Ages a time to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ. Advent is now a solemn yet joyful season of prayer, reflection, and preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ in his First Advent, as well as a time to ready oneself in anticipation of Christ's Second Coming. The Orthodox Christian churches do not have an Advent season, but rather have Winter Lent, a 40-day Lenten season of fasting, prayer, and reflection ending on Christmas Eve. (See entries for Winter Lent (Nativity Fast): Coptic Orthodox Christian and Winter Lent (Nativity Fast): Eastern Orthodox Christian.)

**Recognizing the Festival/Holiday:** The main symbol of this season is the Advent wreath, which had its origins in the folk practices of the pre-Christian Germanic people. The wreath has three purple candles, which symbolize hope (or prophecy), peace, and love, and one rose candle, symbolizing joy. The candles are set in a circle of evergreen, which represents eternal life. On each Sunday in Advent, the candles are lit progressively as follows, with Scripture reading preceding the lighting of the candles: On the first Sunday of Advent, a purple candle is lit; on the second Sunday, two purple candles are lit; on the third Sunday, two purple candles and the rose candle are lit; and on the fourth Sunday, all four candles are lit. The lighting of the rose candle originally signified the breaking of the Advent fast. Often a fifth white candle will be placed in the center of the wreath. Known as the "Christ Candle," this candle symbolizes Christ's birth and is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Another custom during Advent is to sing carols, a favorite being "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," which anticipates the coming of the Messiah.

**Dec 5- Saint Nicholas Day:** This begins the Christmas season in the Netherlands. On this day Saint Nicholas, "Sinterklaas," arrives. Cities have parades where he comes riding on a white

horse or in a barge or even on a motorcycle wearing a bishop's hat and a red cape. That evening, adults have parties and exchange gifts, while children set out shoes filled with carrots and hay for Saint Nicholas' horse. In the morning, they find the shoes filled with gifts.

**Dec 8- Bodhi Day (Buddha's Enlightenment):** Among Mahāyāna Buddhists, this holiday celebrates Buddha's attaining understanding of the truth of existence, freeing himself from all human suffering, and finding perfect happiness. The date is based on the Japanese Buddhist calendar.

**Dec 8- Feast of the Immaculate Conception:** This celebrates the Roman Catholic belief that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was conceived free from original sin.

**Dec 12-Fiesta de Guadalupe** (fee-esta-guahd-ah-loohpeh): This is the feast day of the patron saint of Mexico. The shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe is Mexico's most sacred religious site. December 12 is the anniversary of the day on which Juan Diego, an Aztec peasant, is said to have seen a vision of the Virgin Mary, who ordered him to go and tell the Bishop of Mexico to build a church on that spot. **Recognizing the Festival/Holiday:** In both Puerto Rican and Mexican communities, this is a day when people go to church for prayers honoring the Virgin. Often a procession is formed to the church and a fiesta is held in the evening, sometimes involving scenes created to depict el milagro (the miracle).

**Dec 12-Hanukkah (12/12-12/20):** This holiday, often misunderstood as the "Jewish Christmas" since it occurs in December, commemorates the victory of the Jewish people, led by the Maccabee family, over the Syrian Greeks in 165 B.C.E. This victory marked the end of a three-year period of religious persecution, restored Jewish independence, and ensured the survival of monotheism (belief in one God). According to legend, when the Jews returned to cleanse their Temple, which had been defiled by pagan worship, they discovered only enough consecrated oil to keep the holy lamp burning for one day. However, the oil miraculously lasted eight days, the time needed to secure a new supply. Hanukkah is celebrated by lighting a candle on each of the eight days of celebration. On the first night, one candle is lit in a branched candlestick called a menorah, and an additional candle is lit each night until the eighth night. This ceremony has given the holiday the additional name of "Festival of Lights." Hanukkah is joyfully celebrated. Special Hebrew hymns, including "Rock of Ages," are sung, family members exchange gifts, and children play with a dreidel, a four-sided top inscribed with the Hebrew letters for "a great miracle happened there." Potato pancakes, or latkes, are a traditional food treat, with the oil used for cooking recalling the oil in the sacred lamp. The holiday ends at sundown on the eighth day.

**Recognizing the Festival/Holiday:** A four-sided top for spinning, called a dreidel, is popular for playing various Hanukkah games. Potato pancakes, called latkes, are a very popular food that can be found in many supermarkets or delicatessens.

**Dec 13-Santa Lucia:** This holiday, also celebrated in states such as Minnesota where there are many Scandinavian communities, honors an Italian martyr named Saint Lucia. Like many winter festivals, its central feature is lights. In Sweden, a young girl wearing a white robe and a crown of seven lighted candles serves special buns and coffee.

**Dec 16- Las Posadas (12/16-12/24):** Las Posadas, celebrated from December 16 to December 24, commemorates Mary and Joseph's effort to find an inn and the events associated with the birth of Jesus. The holiday takes its name from the Spanish word posadas, meaning "a dwelling." A candlelight procession represents the star in heaven that guided the three wise men on their way. After a religious ceremony on December 24, there is a traditional celebration centering on the piñata, a decorated clay container filled with toys and candy. A child is blindfolded, turned around a few times, and given a wooden stick and three chances to break the piñata. When the piñata is broken, the children scramble for the candy.

**Dec 21- Yule:** begins at sundown

**Dec 25- Christmas:** Most Christians observe Christmas to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and it is celebrated as a public holiday in many countries worldwide. Eastern Orthodox Christians who follow the Orthodox New Calendar, such as the Greek and Cypriot Orthodox Churches, observe Christmas on this date. However, other Eastern Orthodox Christians and Coptic Orthodox Christians follow the Orthodox Old Calendar, or Julian calendar, and celebrate Christmas on January 7. The Armenian Apostolic Church observes Christmas on January 6. Christmas is a family-oriented holiday with special foods, colorful decorations, and exchanging of gifts. Families often have their own traditions, especially concerning when gifts are exchanged and what foods are served. Jehovah's Witnesses are among those who do not celebrate this holiday.

**Dec 26- St. Stephen's Day**

**Dec 28- Holy Innocents' Day:** In an attempt to find the infant Jesus and kill him, King Herod ordered the killing of children in Bethlehem. Current research indicates that between 6 and 20 children were killed.

**Dec 31- New Year's Eve**

**Jan 1- New Year**

**Jan 1- Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God:** This is a liturgical feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church on January 1, the Octave Day of Christmas (the eighth day after Christmas).

**Jan 1- World Peace Day:** This is a day devoted to meditating and praying for peace throughout the world.

**Jan 4- Elizabeth Ann B. Seton Feast Day:** This feast honors the first American-born saint and founder of the American Sisters of Charity, the first American order of Roman Catholic nuns.

**Jan 5- Guru Gobind Singh's Birthday:** This celebrates the birth of Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the Sikhs' tenth great master and teacher, who sought to abolish the caste system in India by creating a single community. Guru Gobind Singh's birthday is celebrated on this date according to the Nanakshahi calendar. (See discussion under "Days of Religious Observance" and entry for Vaisakhi : Sikh.)

**Jan 6- Christmas:** The Armenian Apostolic Church, also known as the Armenian Orthodox Church, has one of the oldest traditions in the Christian world. In the early fourth century, Armenia became the first country to accept Christianity as a state religion. In A.D. 506, the Armenian Apostolic Church broke from the Eastern Orthodox Churches, becoming one of the original Oriental Orthodox Churches. In 1923 the Armenian Orthodox Church adopted the Gregorian calendar with one significant difference: the Church celebrates the birth of Jesus on Epiphany rather than on December 25. In the original Christian tradition, the feast of Epiphany celebrated three events that revealed God to mankind: the nativity, the visit of the three Magi, and the baptism of Christ. However, in the fourth century, the Roman Church adopted December 25 as the new date to celebrate the nativity. The Armenian Apostolic Church is the only Christian church that still celebrates the nativity on Epiphany, its original date of celebration. In Jerusalem, the Church continues to follow the Orthodox Old Calendar and celebrates Christmas on the Julian date for Epiphany, or January 19.

**Jan 6- Epiphany:** Twelve days after Christmas the three kings arrived in Bethlehem with gifts for the baby Jesus. Called Twelfth Night in English, it was once celebrated throughout Europe with feasts and frolics. In England today old traditions are reviving in Twelfth Night parties marking the end to the Christmas season. In Spain, Mexico, and other Hispanic countries of the Americas the holiday, called Día de los Tres Magos, or simply Tres Reyes, was never abandoned. Like Jesus, children receive gifts on this day rather than Christmas Day, and families celebrate with big meals, often with specialties such as roast sucking pig. Many countries follow the ancient tradition of baking a cake or bread that conceals a trinket. The person who is served the piece with the trinket is treated as King or Queen for the day.

Cakes differ regionally. In Spain the cake is roscon des reyes, literally, "big doughnut of the kings" because the large cake, flavored with orange-flower water and decorated with sugar and fruits, is shaped like a doughnut. In Portugal, a similar cake is called bolo do rey, King Cake. Southern France has a crown-shaped cake decorated with jewel-colored crystallized fruit. In Paris, however, they make Galette des Rois, a puff pastry tart filled with almond frangipan. It is brought to the table decorated with a paper crown. As each piece is cut, a child hidden under the table calls the name of the guest to whom it should be served, so there can be no favoritism about who gets the trinket. The person who receives it also gets the crown, and as King or Queen, the right to be indulged for the rest of the day. In the United States these traditions thrive in the King Cake of Louisiana, a cinnamon-flavored oval braid that appears around January 6th and plays a starring role at parties during the pre-Mardi Gras season. Indeed, most office workers bring in a King Cake every Friday. The person who gets the trinket, traditionally a bean or pecan, now a plastic baby, has to provide the King Cake for the next party. Traditionally King Cake was simply decorated with sugar in the Mardi Gras colors of purple, signifying justice, green for faith and gold for power. Now, bakeries offer toppings such as blueberry, lemon and German chocolate so the colored sugar is often less dominant.

**Jan 6- Three Kings Day (Día de los Tres Reyes):** This traditional holiday corresponds to the Christian Feast of Epiphany. It commemorates the arrival in Bethlehem of the three kings, or

Magi. Traditionally, children leave straw or grass under their beds and find a gift in its place in the morning. In the Dominican Republic, the holiday is known as Día de los Santos Reyes.

Recognizing the Festival/Holiday: For both Epiphany and Three Kings Day, it is common to eat cake containing a trinket, sometimes shaped like a cross, or to give some kind of sweet candy.

**Jan 7- Christmas:** Christmas is celebrated on this date, set according to the Julian calendar, by the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt and several Eastern Orthodox Christian communities (e.g., Russian, Serb, and Ukrainian Orthodox Christians). Christmas is also observed on this day by Rastafarians, who follow the Ethiopian calendar, which has its roots in the Coptic Orthodox tradition. In Gregorian leap years, Coptic Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on January 8. (See discussion under Days of Religious Observance.)

**Jan 14- New Year:** This date marks the observance of New Year's Day according to the Julian calendar by several Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches (e.g., Russian, Serb, and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches).

**Jan14- Pongal:** This four-day harvest festival is celebrated in southern India and marks the beginning of the spring season. The celebratory dish is pongal, a creamy pudding made with rice, moong dal (split mung beans), jaggery (cane sugar), milk, ghee (clarified butter), and cardamom, cooked in a festive brass pot and topped with toasted cashews, raisins, and chopped fresh coconut.

**Jan14- Makar Sankranti:** This is a harvest festival that marks the beginning of spring in India. Hindus make pilgrimages to holy rivers to bathe and purify themselves of their sins. In the state of Gujarat in northwestern India, people fly colorful kites as offerings to the Sun God. This harvest festival is known as Pongal in southern India.

**Jan 19- Epiphany:** This day commemorates the visit of the three kings, Magi, to the infant Jesus. Coptic Orthodox Christians and several Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate Epiphany on this day based on the Julian calendar. The Armenian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on this day in Jerusalem, where Armenian Orthodox Christians still follow the Julian calendar. In Gregorian leap years, Coptic Orthodox Christians celebrate Epiphany on January 20. (See entry for Armenian Orthodox Christmas and discussion under Days of Religious Observance.)