Liturgically, the Christmas Season extends from Christmas Day until the third Sunday after Christmas. During this season, there are several significant feast days celebrated by the Church:

**December 26: Saint Stephen, the first martyr**

Why, one day after Christmas, does the Church direct us to the person of Saint Stephen, the first martyr? Isn’t this an inappropriate juxtaposition? The editor of *Magnificat* magazine offers an interesting reflection:

Lest we be tempted to sentimentalize the mystery of Christ’s birth, the Church today sets before us the example of Stephen, first of martyrs, icon of the Crucified. Bethlehem is the prelude to Calvary. We may not merely stand adoring at the crib; we must also follow to the cross (“Prayer for the Morning, December 26,” *Magnificat*, 16.10 (2014): p. 396).

Just recently, Pope Francis spoke in a similar vein:

Today the liturgy recalls the witness of Saint Stephen. Chosen by the Apostles, together with six others, for the diaconate of charity in the community of Jerusalem, he became the first martyr of the Church. With his martyrdom, Stephen honored the coming into the world of the King of kings, offering to Him the gift of his own life. And so he shows us how to live the fullness of the mystery of Christmas.

The Gospel of this feast gives a part of Jesus’ discourse to his disciples in the moment in which He sends them on mission. Among other things, He says, “You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved.” (Mt 10:22). These words of the Lord do not disrupt the celebration of Christmas, but strip it of that false saccharine-sweetness that does not belong to it. It makes us understand that in the trials accepted on account of the faith, violence is overcome by love, death by life. To truly welcome Jesus in our existence, and to prolong the joy of the Holy Night, the path is precisely the one indicated in this Gospel: that is, to bear witness in humility, in silent service, without fear of going against the current, able to pay in person. And if not all are called, as Saint Stephen was, to shed their own blood, nonetheless, every Christian is called in every circumstance to live a life that is coherent with the faith he or she professes.

Christ came into the world to save us from our sin, by his birth, life, death, and resurrection, we come to new birth. The Collect for the Mass of Saint Stephen says that we “celebrate [his] heavenly birthday.”  It is for this birth, our birth to eternal life, that Christ was born into this world. Psalm 17 reads: “...let your hand, O Lord, rescue me from men, from men whose reward is in this present life...as for me, in my justice I shall see your face and be filled, when I awake, with the sight of your glory” (v. 14a, 15). Our ultimate goal, our ultimate reward, is not to be found in this life, but in the Beatific Vision of God in heaven.

**December 27: Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist**

Saint John, the "beloved disciple," is honored as both Apostle and Evangelist. He was the youngest of the Twelve chosen by Jesus, and is the author of the Gospel of John, the three epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation. Though willing to give his life for Christ in martyrdom, he was the only Apostle not to be martyred. He died around the year 100. Saint John wrote and preached about the "Word of God made flesh" - emphasizing that Jesus is true God and true man.  He passed on the final discourse of Jesus to His Apostles, recording the new commandment of Jesus: "'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'" (John 14:34-35). In his First Letter, he gives us the beautiful line: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16), and goes on to say, "We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also (1 John 4:19-21).

**December 28: The Holy Innocents**

King Herod, in an effort to destroy the newborn Messiah, sent his soldiers into Bethlehem to kill all male children under the age of 2. These infants are remembered as the "Holy Innocents" and honored as martyrs for Christ: "These children cry out their praises to the Lord; by their death they have proclaimed what they could not preach with their infant voices" ("Proper of Saints, December 28, Morning Prayer, Antiphon 2," *The Liturgy of the Hours: According to the Roman Rite,*New York: Catholic Book Pub., 1975, p. 1275, print). Saint Quodvultdeus writes: "They cannot speak, yet they bear witness to Christ. They cannot use their limbs to engage in battle, yet already they bear off the palm of victory" ("Office of Readings, Second Reading," ibid., p. 1273). They remind us that the ways of the world and the evil of the world cannot overcome the love of God and the salvation won by Jesus Christ: "they died for Christ, and now in the glory of heaven as they follow him, the sinless Lamb, they sing for ever: Glory to you, O Lord" ("Morning Prayer, Canticle of Zechariah," ibid., 1276).

**First Sunday after Christmas (or Dec. 30 when Christmas falls on a Sunday):** The Holy Family

"[Jesus, Mary, and Joseph] returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:39-40). The Holy Family stands as a model for our own lives. Blessed Pope Paul VI, offers three thoughts on the significance of Nazareth:

First, we learn from its silence. If only we could once again appreciate its great value. We need this wonderful state of mind, beset as we are by the cacophony of strident protests and conflicting claims so characteristic of these turbulent times. The silence of Nazareth should teach us how to meditate in peace and quiet, to reflect on the deeply spiritual, and to be open to the voice of God's inner wisdom and the counsel of his true teachers. Nazareth can teach us the value of study and preparation, of meditation, of a well-ordered personal spiritual life, and of silent prayer that is known only to God.

Second, we learn about family life. May Nazareth serve as a model of what the family should be. May it show us the family's holy and enduring character and exemplifying its basic function in society: a community of love and sharing, beautiful for the problems it poses and the rewards it brings; in sum, the perfect setting for rearing children - and for this there is no substitute.

Finally, in Nazareth, the home of a craftsman's son, we learn about work and the discipline it entails...I would remind everyone that work has its own dignity. On the other hand, it is not an end in itself. Its value and free character, however, derive not only from its place in the economic system, as they say, but rather from the purpose it serves ("Proper of Seasons, Office of Readings, Second Reading, Holy Family," ibid., p. 428).

All three lessons continue to be as relevant today (perhaps more so!) as they were when Blessed Paul VI communicated them in the 1960s. Consider the continued loss of silence and prayer, how difficult it truly is to find quiet for meditation, and to focus our lives on what is most important. Consider the continued attack on the family and the damage this has caused to couples and, most especially, to children. And so we pray, in the words of the Collect for the Mass of the Holy Family: "O God, who were pleased to give us the shining example of the Holy Family, graciously grant that we may imitate them in practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity, and so, in the joy of your house, delight one day in eternal rewards."

**January 1: Mary, Mother of God**

The Octave of Christmas brings us the beautiful Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. This title, applied to Mary in the early centuries of the Church, came under attack in the 5th century, when certain people argued that while Mary may be recognized as "Mother of Christ" (in Greek, *Christotokos*), she should not be called Mother of God (*Theotokos*), for how could God have a mother? The controversy was resolved in 431 at the Council of Ephesus, when the bishops of the Church affirmed the title, *Theotokos*. They recognized that this title protected an essential truth about who Jesus is: one divine Person (the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity) with two natures (divine and human). Mothers give birth to persons, not natures. Mary does not give birth to "the human nature of Jesus," she gives birth to Jesus *the Person*, who is the Son of God. Hence, Mary is rightly called the Mother of God. And so we honor Mary and, in doing so, glorify her Son, our Lord and God: "O pure and holy Virgin, how can I find words to praise your beauty? The highest heavens cannot contain God whom you carried in your womb" ("Proper of Seasons, January 1, Mary, Mother of God, Office of Readings, Second Reading Responsory," ibid., p. 485).

**Second Sunday after Christmas (or January 6): the Epiphany of the Lord**

The traditional date of the celebration of the Epiphany was January 6 (this is the source of the traditional "Twelve Days of Christmas"). In the United States, the Feast is now typically celebrated on the Second Sunday after Christmas. Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning "to reveal" or "to make manifest." The feast celebrates three events in the life of Jesus: the adoration of the wise men (sometimes called "magi" or "kings"), the baptism of Jesus (see below), and the Wedding at Cana. These three events are all occasions where something is revealed and made manifest. "The magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations" (CCC, no. 528). At the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus miraculously changes water into wine. Saint John concludes his record of the event by saying: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and *manifested his glory*; and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11; emphasis added).

**Third Sunday after Christmas: the Baptism of the Lord**

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord completes the Christmas Season. It celebrates Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River, and is intimately connected the the "revelation" and "manifestation" of Christ celebrated at the Epiphany. Here, the Father speaks from heaven, and the Holy Spirit descends upon the Son, manifesting to us the highest mystery of our faith: the Holy Trinity. This is the mystery of the innermost life of God, which, prior to the coming of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, had not been fully revealed.

The baptism of Jesus also stands at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, and brings His "hidden life" to a close. "The baptism of Jesus is on his part the acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's suffering Servant. He allows himself to be numbered among sinners; he is already 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world'" (CCC, no. 536). In addition to the manifestation of the Trinity, the baptism is also the "manifestation ('Epiphany') of Jesus as Messiah of Israel and Son of God" (CCC, no. 535).