

The Great Tree Celtic & Christian

Excerpt from *The 13 Days of Christmas*

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There is a belief by some that the Great Tree of Christmas is not a worthy Christian symbol because of its roots in the Celtic world. This is hardly the case. Christianity at its best sees symbols found in world cultures as yet another way to tell the story of an eternal, universal and ever-present Christ.

Moving north of the Alps**, Christians met the Celtic world with its emphasis on the Great Tree as a primary way of experiencing Spirit. To help the Celts understand Jesus the Christ, Christians showed how the World Tree was an outer expression of the universal Christ. The integration of the Tree and the Christ, rather than impoverishing either tradition, the two threads were woven together to make a radiant fabric.

Celtic: The Great Tree was an image of the world axis, connecting the three worlds: Upper, Lower and Here (the middle world).

Christian: The Christ is the axis holding together past, present, future, all dimensions above, below and here, present in every place across the Cosmos.

Celtic: The god Odin, sacrificing himself to gain wisdom, hangs on the World Tree to die.

Christian: Jesus the Christ died hanging from a wooden pole made sacred by this death.



Celtic: The Oak was their original sacred tree. After the oak forests of Europe were decimated, the fir or evergreen became the sacred tree. Both oak and fir were known to draw lightning strikes, resulting in their limbs being set ablaze. From such burning branches, the Celts harnessed fire—one of the greatest of all gifts for people in these frigid winter lands. Because these trees were “fire-bearing”—they became sacred, for fire was for them the very essence of life.

** The Celtic culture at its height spanned from Ireland to Turkey but did not extend below the Alps.

Christian: Jesus the Christ is the fire-bearer of love and generosity which is essential for all relationships to to both live and thrive.

Celtic: During their most sacred festivals, the Celts would give thanks to the Spirit world by creating bonfires, setting ablaze the wood of their sacred tree. The Winter Solstice was the most important of these festivals. At this moment, the Celts believed they were obligated to gift back to the Spirits - the great gift the Spirits had given them – fire harnessed from the limbs of the sacred tree. Burning this wood as an offering they intended to insure the sun's re-birth.

Christian: Understood that Jesus the Christ's birth is an eternal moment that happens again and again in each human heart in every age. We need not fear. Christians make fires in the night (or 'light' a tree) to proclaim a great spiritual truth: the time of the deepest dark is the moment when fresh radiance is born anew.

Celtic: During the daylight hours before the night of the Winter Solstice, one Celtic tradition was to decorate the village's sacred oak tree, by hanging fruits (apples and pears) in its limbs from that year's harvest or dried fruits from past years. This decorating of the barren oak honored the tree's believed re-birth at the Winter Solstice.



Christian: Seeing the Celts decorate their sacred tree with fruits during the daylight hours of December 24, Christians recognized this ritual as a restoration of the Tree of Life at the center of the Garden of Eden found in the *Book of Genesis*. So Christians took up decorating The Tree with fruits on the 24th. They named this day as the Feast of Adam and Eve, and celebrated that in the presence of the Christ, *The Tree of Life* lives and *The Garden* is open to all. Over the centuries, what began as apples and pears being hung in the limbs of the Tree, eventually became what we see today, Trees decorated with all manner of ornaments.

Eight Months with The Great (Christ) Tree - if you wish-

The history of cutting a tree or purchasing a cut tree to have in one's home began with the Victorian era as an emphasis on the personal and the individual began to overtake the sense of village and community. Before that era, each village had its 'sacred tree' located in the town square or near the parish church. For eons, the emphasis had been on the community's tree that was honored in various ways during the great feasts.

If the feast called for a fire made from sacred wood, a bough or boughs were cut from the village tree. Or boughs that fell from the sacred tree during the year were collected and saved for these festival fires.

Today, we are beginning a long journey to harmonize the authenticity of the individual within the vitality of family and community. It is too early to tell what our future expression will be. Early signs point to a dramatic shift. Many today are concerned about conservation of earth resources and the large outlay of money on "Christmas." As a result, the popularity of cutting a tree or purchasing a cut tree to have in one's home is diminishing.

This may be a moment to consider planting a "sacred" tree outside your house, in a shared communal space or perhaps on the grounds of your church. While oak and fir were the sacred trees to the Celts, which might be yours? For my family, it would be the Cedar of Lebanon. However, these trees, which may live a thousand years or more, grow at about an inch a year. Planting one today would gift an 8 foot tree to your descendants some fifty years from now.

Then again, perhaps you already have a tree in your yard that has special significance for you. I am aware that some have a tradition of planting a tree at a child's birth. Also the Maori of New Zealand bury the placenta after childbirth at the foot of a tree, with the belief that the tree and the child will grow together.

If you already have a personal or communal 'sacred' tree, or if you wish to have a cut tree, a bough or to purchase a cut tree, what follows are suggestions of how the Tree may be used in celebration and as a prayer focus from November to June.

Cutting a tree or a bough from a tree means that you are inviting a living being into your home and heart – to die in your presence. May the Tree's sacrifice open within you the gifts of wonder, generosity and the aroma of life in the midst of the

deep and the dark. As the Tree is giving its life so that you may have more life, please treat its death with honor and respect. When the time comes to ‘take down’ the Tree, consider ways you may use the Tree rather than dispose it as rubbish.

If you have chosen to have an artificial tree in your home, let your creativity flow. Its presence with you is still an invitation to wonder, generosity and the aroma of life. Perhaps you might also have a chosen ‘sacred’ Tree outside. And/or consider cutting a bough from a ‘sacred’ Tree and placing near your artificial tree.

I look forward to hearing your ideas and creativity. On January 7 2021, you will receive an online survey. Please share how you have used these ideas and your creativity with an artificial Tree. I plan to learn from you, and incorporate more ideas into the final edition of this book.

What follows is the calendar I keep, making the Great Christ Tree a significant spiritual piece in my home and heart from early November until late June. I share my rituals to spur your own thinking and creativity. What’s the purpose of these rituals? For me, they are a way to bring intention and mindfulness to the cycle of night and day, cold and heat, and that everything in creation is alive, has a consciousness, and can deepen my experience of The Christ.

The use of sacred objects for prayer and meditation is one of two royal ways to engender a deep stillness of mind and heart. This way is named *kataphatic* prayer. Its twin – which does not use sacred objects - is named *apophatic* prayer. Both are wondrously deep spiritual practices.

It is likely that each of us has a strong preference for one style over the other. Practicing the form that is not one’s preference, for a while, can offer rich spiritual growth. Beware of any teaching that says one of the two forms has more value than the other. There is no ‘one’ royal road to deep spiritual practice. Oneness is always a dialogic movement between two seeming opposites.

As you review this calendar, I hope that you may find a piece or two here that awakens a freshness in your own life. And, what does not call to you, please pass it by! Equally, what does call to you, please linger a while and notice how your own creativity opens.

November 2 (sunset) to December 20/21 (day before the Winter Solstice)

Part of my work is to restore Christian feasts to their original anchor in the cycle of nature in the Northern Hemisphere. Advent originally began with sunset on November 2nd and continued until Christmas Eve. Restoring Advent to its nature rhythm as the ‘holy dark’ season between All Saints/All Souls and the Feast of Christmas allows the weeks of November and December to be the time that we might bring again the ‘sacred’ tree into our reflection, prayer and celebrations.

The Great Tree can be a potent element of wonder and a leaven to our spirit in the midst of the dark season (Northern Hemisphere). Let us use the Tree to help us decorate the dark.

Today, we tend to fit activities into our life when we have the time. One way to honor the gift a tree brings us is by having a set day on the calendar when you acquire or set up your tree.

I traditionally use one of two feast days to acquire my tree. Both feasts have personal significance and are connected to my Advent prayer. By acquiring the tree on one of these feasts, I make an intention that the tree’s presence will awaken me – help me be more mindful - of certain virtues. At the Blue Door Retreat, the Tree was a 12-15 foot Noble Fir.

Dec 6 - Feast of St Nicolas: whose life exemplified care and generosity for the poor. Nicholas was known for his special care of girls in providing them a dowry so that they would not have to be sold into slavery. (This practice is the genesis of the custom of placing candy in children’s shoes – after they have gone to bed - on the night of Dec 5 as the Feast of St. Nicholas begins.)

Dec 12 - Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe: the dark, pregnant Madonna who reminds me that dark times are potentially Spirit’s pregnancy within us.

Dec 21/22 - during the daylight hours before the evening of the Winter Solstice, I carefully trim the tree and place unlit beeswax candles and some 2,000 white electric lights in an otherwise unadorned tree.

Careful (!) There is an intricate process to use in making a cut tree safe for burning real candles in its boughs. Please email annie@quadratos.com to learn how to do this.

Winter Solstice (nighttime) a small community gathers near sunset. We have a simple meal of a hearty soup, salad and bread. After the meal, we take about 20 minutes of quiet as each person reflects and then writes prayers for the world on parchment paper. The prayers are then rolled and bound with a red ribbon. Each person then ties or lays their prayer on a bough of the tree, and lights a beeswax candle in the tree near to where the prayer is lain.

After all the prayers are placed and candles lit, we sing Christmas carols. An hour later, we extinguish the candles and turn on the electric lights in The Tree. The evening ends with our giving toasts (with cider, wine or other spirits) in honor of the Christ, all peoples and each other.

Dec 24 (daytime) spend the day placing Christmas ornaments on the tree.

Dec 24 (nightfall) – as the Great Feast of Christmas begins, we light the now fully adorned Christmas Tree and sing or play a particular Carol that I have avoided playing (or hearing) during the Advent Season. (For me, the song is Mahalia Jackson’s version of Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.)

Dec 25 - after being lit at sunset on the 24th, the tree remains lit through the night, and all the way until bedtime on the 25th. This is only one of two times when the Tree remains lit for 24 plus hours.

Dec 26 to Jan 5 (sunset) relight the Tree each evening. In its radiance after dark each night, reflect on the celebration of the particular day – of The 13 Days –that is just beginning.

Jan 5 (daytime) remove Christmas ornaments from the Tree along with red and green decorations. Replace with images of wisdom, radiance and one’s royal nature along with “Mardi Gras” decorations – the colors green, purple and gold - or the colors of your country’s royal family.

Jan 5 (sunset) light the Tree now adorned for the Epiphany/Magi Season. In my tradition, the Tree remains lit through this night and the next day until bedtime on January 6.



Epiphany Season/Weeks of January – one night each week of January celebrate one or two members of the family gathered around the Epiphany/Magi Tree. Name each one's giftedness, talents and inner radiance. Perhaps serve her/his/their favorite meal or desert. Consider having a crown (of their choosing) for each to wear on their special evening.

Jan 31 (evening) spend time expressing gratitude to The Christ for this Tree's life and the grace of wonder and love it has imparted in its dying. Then with mindfulness and feeling, turn off the Tree's lights for the final time.

Some prefer to keep the Epiphany/Magi Tree decorated until the day before the opening of Lent.

Feb 1 (daytime) remove all ornaments and lights from the Tree. Gather together the prayers written on Solstice Night, place them in a basket or bowl. Remove the Tree from the house. Place it outside in a secure space. Cut a few branches from the tree to be the wood for the St. Brigid-Candlemas Day fire.

Feb 1 (sunset) Set the St. Brigid-Candlemas fire with reflection and thanks for the gifts received during Celtic winter (from sunset November 2) and your wishes as Celtic Spring (Feb 2 to May 1) begins.



Feb/March (before Lent opens) – strip the branches from The Tree trunk. Choose the largest branch, and nail it to the trunk to make a Lenten Cross for your home.

Burn a branch/bough to make the Lenten ash for anointing. Bundle the remaining branches for wood to burn in the Easter, Pentecost and Summer Solstice fires.

Bring the Tree Cross into your home as a prayer focus for Lent and Easter. Place the basket/bowl holding the Winter Solstice prayers at its foot.

Place a second bowl with the Lenten ash, from the burned branch, near the Tree Cross. Consider repeated anointing with the ash (one of the earth's most nutrient rich substances for growth) throughout Lent as part of one's prayer for deeper awareness and increased willingness to grow in oneness.

Opening of the Three Days of Easter: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday (sunset) use wood from the sacred tree to set the Easter Fire after sunset on Thursday.

[To know more about The Three Days of Easter, see my work, Gateway to Oneness.]

50 Days of the Easter Season – decorate the Tree Cross with fresh flowers – changing them often and saving the 'dead' flowers to burn in the Pentecost Vigil Fire.

May 1 (daytime) celebrations with the flower strewn Tree Cross as Celtic Summer (May 1 to August 2) begins.

Pentecost (after sunset on Saturday) use wood from the sacred tree and remains of the Easter Season flowers to set the Pentecost Vigil Fire.

June: Feast of St John & Summer Solstice (evening) – use the remaining wood from the sacred tree, including the Tree Cross itself for the St John Day or Summer Solstice fires. Also at this time, burn the prayers that were written on the Winter Solstice.

This could also be a time to write Summer Solstice prayers, place them in a bowl/basket and pray them for the next six months. At the Winter Solstice, these written prayers are burned in the Solstice Fire.

We continually move between the re-birth of radiance at the Winter Solstice (Feast of Christmas) and the re-birth of the holy dark at the Summer Solstice (Feast of St. John).

May the rhythm of dark to light to dark ever hold us.

Ah'mein!