

## CHAPTER 3



# alendar of Medieval Holidays

The medieval world revolved largely around the changing seasons and the activities and observances associated with each of them. Wheat and rye were planted in October, following the autumn harvest. By mid or late November animal fodder was running low, so excess livestock was slaughtered and the meat was salted or pickled to provide food over the winter. During the darkest days of winter, when no farming could take place because the ground was frozen, Christmas festivities provided a welcome break from the drudgery of plowing and planting. Where the weather allowed, spring crops were planted from early January through Easter. By the beginning of May, the first crops were available and the mud-clogged roads had dried out enough that the first traveling merchants reappeared on the roads. This provided an opportunity for May Day celebrations and spring fairs. But there were literally hundreds of other holidays which any given family or village might celebrate.

Below is a fairly complete list of the more important medieval holy days and secular holidays. For saints of local significance, we have included the patron saints of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Spain, and France. Other nationalities had their own patrons, as did virtually every county, town, guild, church, school, and household. You may pick your favorite as an occasion to

hold your own feast or celebration or, if there is no particular theme to your celebration, pick a saint whose special day falls near the time you want to hold your feast. If you wish to hold a Christmas, Twelfth Night, or New Year's celebration, or a medieval wedding, the next three chapters describe customs specifically associated with those particular occasions.

All the calendar dates below are based on the old Julian calendar, which was in use until 1582, when the Gregorian calendar came into official use, although many countries did not adopt the new calendar for decades or centuries afterward. After that time, many of the religious feast days were changed, so they will not all correspond with their modern counterparts.

Scattered throughout the calendar are days marked as Ember Days. These were days of particular dedication to fasting, prayer, and beseeching God for forgiveness of sins. Ember Days take place four times a year, each time on successive Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. The first group of Ember Days occurs during the week following the first Sunday in Lent, the next is in the week after Whitsun (derived from "White Sunday" and celebrated seven weeks after Easter), the third follows Holy Cross Day (September 14), and the last falls on the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday following St. Lucy's Day (December 13).

## January

**1st. Circumcision of Christ.** From 1582 onward, also **New Year's Day**. Prior to that time, the new year began on March 25. As part of the traditional New Year's festivities, dumb shows (mummer plays where no words were spoken) were presented in churches and at feasts in great halls.

**6th. Twelfth Day, or Epiphany.** The twelfth day after Christmas, this was marked by a major feast held on the previous evening, known as Twelfth Night. It formally brought the Christmas season to an end and was one of the most popular celebrations among all levels of medieval society.

**7th. Plow Monday.** Marking the advent of the coming spring's plowing season, Plow Monday was celebrated with plow races where the men of the village competed for the longest and straightest furrows. Children went from door to door begging for small coins and treats.

## February

**2nd. Candlemas, or Purification of the Virgin Mary.** In Ireland, also the **Feast of St. Bridget**. Candlemas marks the day when Mary was allowed to reenter the temple after having given birth to Jesus. On this day, women traditionally proceeded to the local church carrying lighted candles. The traditional color for this festival was white, the symbol of purity.

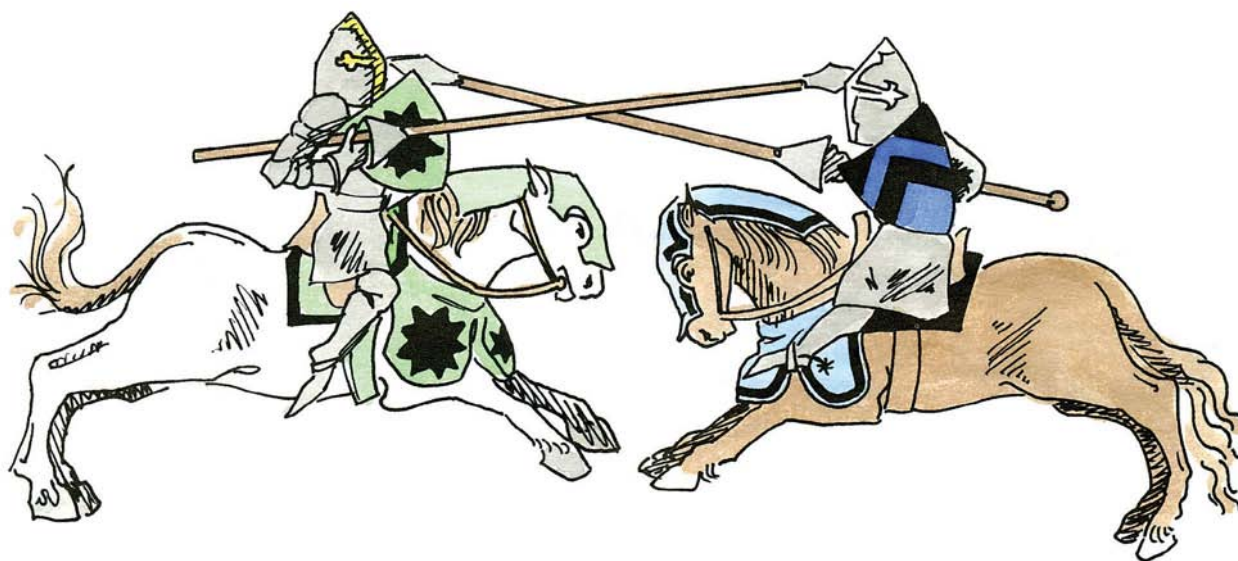
**14th. St. Valentine's Day.** During the Middle Ages, as now, the occasion was a time of declaring one's love and praying to St. Valentine, patron saint of lovers. Local fairs and festivals were often held at this time,

probably as a break from the long, dark months of winter, which were now coming to an end.

**Variable. Shrove Monday.** Falling on the day before Shrove Tuesday, Shrove Monday (six weeks and six days before Easter) was often marked by public sporting events in which entire communities took part. While the nobles held jousting tournaments, villagers participated in games including tug-of-war (usually across an obstacle like a fence, stream, or large mud hole), skipping contests, chasing a greased pig, marbles, climbing a greased pole, and "camping," the rules for all of which can be found in chapter 11. Bull and bear baiting and cock fighting were also popular entertainments now and throughout the warm months of the year. There was also a tradition that people who wished to change their luck would smash their pottery on this day.

**Variable. Shrove Tuesday.** Shrove Tuesday marked the last day before the beginning of the Lenten season. Because many people gave up meat, dairy products, other favorite foods, and sex during Lent as a sign of penance ("Shrove" is derived from "to be shriven," which means to be cleansed of all sin), Shrove Tuesday was often marked by feasting and revelry even in churches, where dinner was eaten from the altar. This tradition continues today in the custom of Mardi Gras, which literally translates from the French as "Fat Tuesday."

**Variable. Ash Wednesday.** The day after Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday was the official beginning of Lent. All Christians attended mass, at which time the priest marked their foreheads with ashes in the sign of the cross. The Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday following Ash Wednesday were Ember Days, when good Christians were supposed to do particularly severe penance, giving up many foods and spending their time praying.



## March

**1st. St. David's Day.** Observed in Wales only, St. David's Day, commemorating the patron saint of Wales, was celebrated with church services and local celebrations. The day was marked by the wearing of a leek (an onion-like vegetable) in the band of one's hat.

**17th. St. Patrick's Day.** Ireland only. Commemorating the patron saint of Ireland, St. Patrick's Day was the high point of secular celebration in Ireland and rivaled Christmas for general merrymaking. St. Patrick's symbol is the shamrock, which is seen as representative of the Holy Trinity. The traditional color for the day was bright green.

**18th. Feast of St. Edward the Confessor.** In England, this was an important observance of the last completed reign of an Anglo-Saxon king prior to the Norman invasion. King Edward was the patron saint of England from shortly after his death until the mid-thirteenth century, when he was replaced by St. George.

**21st. Feast of St. Benedict.** Celebrated primarily among members of the Benedictine monastic order. St. Benedict was widely revered throughout Western Europe and England as the founder of the first monastic house in the Christian faith.

**25th. Feast of the Annunciation and New Year's Day** (prior to 1582 or later in many countries). The Feast of the Annunciation marked the day the Archangel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive Jesus. The traditional color for this feast was white, symbolizing Mary's purity. New Year's festivals were traditionally celebrated with public revelry centering around gift giving and the Feast of Fools. As part of the traditional New Year's festivities, dumb shows (mummer plays where no words were spoken) were presented in churches and at feasts in great halls.

**Variable. Palm Sunday.** The Sunday before Easter. This celebration commemorated Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, when the citizens of the town strewed palm leaves in his path. Because palms were virtually nonexistent in northern Europe and England, parishioners proceeded to church carrying rushes or willow wands in their hands.

**Variable. Good Friday.** The Friday before Easter. Good Friday marked the day of Jesus' crucifixion. The day was spent in prayer and contemplation. The traditional color for this festival was yellow, the medieval color of mourning.

**Variable. Holy Saturday.** The day before Easter.



**Variable. Easter Sunday.** The first Sunday after the first full moon on or after March 21. If the full moon is on a Sunday, the next Sunday is Easter. Easter always falls sometime between March 22 and April 25. This holiday was celebrated by Christians everywhere as the day Jesus rose from the dead, bringing the possibility of salvation from sin. The traditional color for this festival was white.

**Variable. Hocktide.** The Sunday after Easter, Hocktide was a time of paying the taxes, tolls, and rents and collecting debts for the first quarter of the year. The name hocktide is related to getting out of hock, or debt.

## April

**1st. All Fools' (April Fool's Day).** Celebrated since the second century, the custom of playing jokes and general tomfoolery associated with this day may have had its roots in the mocking of Jesus by Roman soldiers and the mob in Jerusalem prior to his crucifixion. Because the weather had usually turned fair by this time, martial sporting events were often held. Among the most popular were archery and quarterstaff contests. Other traditional observances for the feast included the fools' parade, where revelers disguised themselves with costumes and masks and paraded through the town or village, demanding entrance into homes. Not even the homes of





the great and powerful could be shut to the fools' parade, and once inside, the revelers would demand food and drink. This is not unlike the Halloween custom of trick or treating. All Fools' also traditionally marked the beginning of the spring planting season.

**23rd. St. George's Day.** Best known as the slayer of the dragon, St. George was the patron saint of soldiers everywhere and, after the displacement of St. Edward the Confessor in the thirteenth century, the patron saint of England. Public plays were often performed to tell the story of St. George and his victory over the dragon to rescue a maiden, who had been taken prisoner by the beast. The traditional color for this festival was blue.

**25th. St. Mark the Evangelist.**

## May

**1st. May Day. Feast of Saints Philip and Jacob the Apostles.** As the beginning of summer, May Day was a time of great celebration, most of which was held outdoors. Spring flowers were woven into garlands and wreaths, which were tied to wagons and carts and worn around the heads of unmarried women, who traditionally danced around a Maypole erected in the center of the village green. Because the young maidens had thus consented to put themselves on display, May Day became the unofficial beginning of the courting season. The first market and trade fairs were held in early May, both because the first produce was available and because local tradesmen were anxious to sell the items they had made over the long, dark winter. It was also probably the

first time in months that the rough medieval roads were dry enough to be passable by the carts of traveling merchants. May Day was undoubtedly one of the most joyous and boisterous festivals of the year.

**3rd. Holy Rood Day.** This holiday celebrated the discovery of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, ostensibly by the mother of Roman Emperor Constantine during the third century. This was primarily a day of religious observance. A second Holy Rood Day occurs on September 14.

**26th. Feast of St. Augustine.** A religious observance celebrated primarily by members and followers of the Augustinian monastic order.

**Variable. Rogation Sunday.** Falling five weeks after Easter, Rogation Sunday was a time of asking God to forgive sins and bless the land for the coming growing season. The word rogation means beseeching or asking. During the ceremony, parishioners would march around the boundaries of the parish, bearing a cross and banners, asking a variety of saints to intercede with God on behalf of crops, livestock, and, in fishing communities, the bounty of the sea. As a sign of their sincerity, members of the procession would distribute alms to the poor and needy. At the end of the procession, they would assemble at the parish church for mass and communion.

**Variable. Ascension Day, or Holy Thursday.** This Thursday, forty days after Easter Sunday, marked the celebration of Christ ascending into heaven. In England, holy wells noted for their association with saints and



certain healing powers were decorated, or “dressed,” with flowers. Bundles of willow wands tied with blue ribbons were carried to the local church.

**Variable. Whitsun, or White Sunday** (now Pentecost). Falling ten days after Ascension Day and fifty days after Easter Sunday, Whitsun commemorated the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles. The Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday after Whitsun were Ember Days to be observed by prayer, penance, and fasting. After the solemnity of Whitsun, the following week became a time of public fairs and festivals, where Morris dancing and mystery plays were performed. A special Whitsun ale was often brewed and distributed or sold. Popular games were the same as those played on Shrove Tuesday. The traditional color for this festival was red.

## June

**24th. St. John the Baptist. Also Rogation Sunday.** Based on the pagan holiday of Midsummer (the summer solstice), this holiday was supposed to mark the birth of St. John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, who foretold Jesus’ coming. Because St. John preached in the wilderness of Judea, people in many places decorated the outside of their houses with greenery. The traditional color for this festival was white. Despite the church’s attempts to stamp out all pagan traditions, the lighting of a midsummer bonfire on midsummer’s eve (the evening of June 23) survived in even the most staunchly Christian communities. At this time, the fairy folk and ghosts were believed to walk abroad, and the wildflower Saint John’s wort was picked at this time as a charm against illness and bad luck. Surprisingly, the church seems to have tolerated these pagan practices with general good grace. As a rogation Sunday, this was also a time of collecting summer rents and taxes.

**29th. Feast of Saints Peter and Paul the Apostles.**

**Variable. Trinity Sunday.** Falling one week after Whitsun, Trinity Sunday was marked by contemplation of the Holy Trinity (God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and the performance of miracle and mystery plays, which told stories of the Bible from the creation through Jesus’ resurrection. The traditional color for this festival was white.

**Variable. Corpus Christi.** Celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi gave thanks for the sacrament of Holy Communion. The day was celebrated with public festivities, including a procession through the streets of the town, during which

the host (communion wafers) was taken through the streets and religious plays were performed by local guilds and monastic houses. In Coventry, England, a fair was also held in commemoration of Lady Godgifu (now known as Godiva), who rode through the town “clad only in her virtue” (stark naked) in protest of her husband, Earl Leofric, who brutalized and oppressed his subjects. The traditional color for this festival was red.

## July

**7th. Translation of St. Thomas the Martyr.** A distinctly English holiday, this day marked the anniversary of moving the bones of Archbishop Thomas à Becket from their tomb to a shrine in Canterbury Cathedral, following his canonization (elevation to sainthood) in 1174, only four years after his murder.

**15th. St. Swithin’s Day.** This holiday was not widely celebrated, but it was believed that the weather on this day would continue for the next forty days.

**22nd. Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.**

**25th. St. James the Apostle and St. Christopher.** St. James was the patron saint of Spain, where he is known as St. Iago. His day was widely celebrated throughout the country, but nowhere were the celebrations any larger or more devout than in Campostella, where the shrine of St. James is the heart of the cathedral and the culmination point of one of Christendom’s most popular medieval pilgrimages. St. Christopher was the patron saint of travelers, and his feast date was particularly observed by those who were about to undertake



a long journey or who traveled habitually in the course of their work.

**Throughout July.** July was the traditional time for the beginning of religious pilgrimages, and consequently, many outdoor religious services were held during this month to bless those who were undertaking pilgrimages.

## August

**1st. Feast of St. Peter in Chains** (in Latin, St. Peter ad Vincula). Also **Lammas Day**. A commemoration of the miracle performed by God when the chains that bound St. Peter miraculously dropped away while he was imprisoned in Rome awaiting crucifixion. In Lammas Day (possibly derived from “Loaf Mass”) celebrations, thanks was given for a successful wheat harvest; each household took the first loaf of bread baked from the new harvest to the local church to be blessed. During successful harvest seasons the blessing of the bread was customarily followed by a public feast.

**5th. St. Dominic.** Primarily observed by members of the Dominican monastic order in honor of their founder.

**10th. St. Lawrence the Martyr.** This saint's day was particularly popular in France.

**15th. Assumption of Our Lady.** The holiday marked the day when the Virgin Mary was carried into heaven. This was essentially a religious holiday, but there were occasional parades, particularly where the local church or monastery was dedicated to Our Lady.

**24th. St. Bartholomew.**

**25th. St. Louis,** patron saint of France and formerly France's King Louis IX. Although he died in 1270, by 1297 he had already been canonized and almost instantly became France's most popular saint. Celebrations were held throughout France in his honor.

**28th. St. Augustine of Hipo.** Celebrated primarily among members of the Augustinian monastic order in honor of their patron saint.

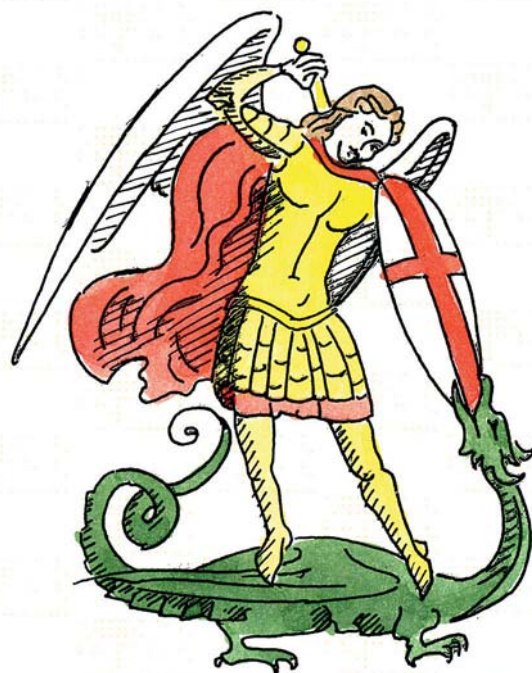
## September

**8th. Nativity of Our Lady.** Ostensibly marking the Virgin Mary's birthday, this holiday was traditionally celebrated as a harvest festival. Harvesting was always blessed by the church, partly as a display of God's blessing on the crops, and partly because, by canon law, the church received one-tenth of the entire harvest. The final cartload of grain to be brought in from the field was



followed to the church with a great procession, accompanied by much singing and ceremony. At a public feast which signaled the end of the harvest in almost every rural community, tables were decorated with dolls made from wheat shafts, the dolls being burned after the feast was over. As the field workers blew off steam with reveling and drinking, harvest festivals obtained a reputation for being excessively rowdy.

**14th. Exaltation of the Cross.** A Holy Rood day. Supposedly the exact date of the discovery of the “true cross,” this day was traditionally celebrated as a part of the harvest season festivities. The following Wednesday,

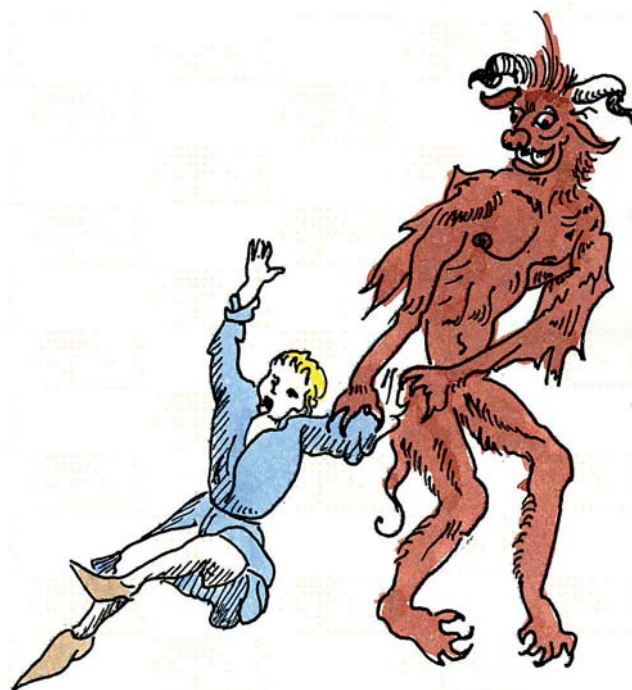




Friday, and Saturday were Ember Days, observed with fasting, prayer, and penance. The traditional color for this festival was red.

**21st. St. Matthew the Apostle.**

**29th. Michaelmas, or the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel.** Important to both church and laity, this feast signaled the end of the harvest and of the agricultural year. If the day fell on a Sunday, it was also a Rogation Sunday when the last rents of the year were traditionally collected, tithes were due, and accounts were settled. It was a time of great public celebration and feasting to mark the harvest. One of the most unique elements of this occasion was the appearance of "horn dancers," a troupe of men wearing or carrying sets of deer antlers, who danced in public marketplaces to the accompaniment of drums and pipes. The tradition of the horn dancers may date back to an ancient pagan custom celebrating the hunt.



## October

**9th. St. Denys' Day,** patron saint of the city of Paris. St. Denys' Day was celebrated throughout France, but primarily in the capital, Paris, both at church services and with parades and festivals.

**18th. Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist.**

**25th. St. Crispin's Day.** Primarily remembered as the anniversary of the battle of Agincourt (1415), when England's King Henry V put the entire combined French army and cavalry, numbering in excess of thirty-five thousand men, to rout with a band of only seven thousand men. Thereafter, it was celebrated in England as a day of military victory. We can assume the French chose to ignore the occasion entirely.

**28th. Saints Simon and Jude the Apostles.**

**31st. All Hallows' Eve.** A time of spiritual unrest, when the souls of the dead, along with ghosts and evil spirits, were believed to walk the land. Church bells were rung and fires lit to guide these souls on their way and deflect them from haunting honest Christian folk. Barns and homes were blessed to protect people and livestock from the effects of witches, who were believed to accompany the malignant spirits as they traveled the earth. Although a rare few continued to divine the future, cast spells, and tell ghost stories in rural communities, woe to anyone who was denounced to the church for engaging in such activities. This may seem like innocent fun today, but it was deadly serious stuff during the Middle Ages.

## November

**1st. All Hallows' Day or All Saints' Day.** The word hallow was simply another word for saint. This feast was dedicated to all the truly holy people in the history of Christianity. The traditional color for this festival was white.

**2nd. All Souls' Day.** A time when prayers were said for the souls of the dead and penance was done to help extricate the dead from purgatory.

**20th. St. Edmund the King and Martyr.** Another uniquely English celebration. St. Edmund had been a ninth-century king of Norfolk, which was then an independent kingdom of Anglo-Saxon England. He was martyred by the Danes in 870.

**25th. St. Catherine's Day.** Famous for surviving torture on a spiked wheel (the Catherine wheel) only to be beheaded, St. Catherine was the most popular female saint of the Middle Ages and was venerated by both men and women. Many guilds, churches, ships, and organizations were dedicated to her name. On her festival day, great processions were held in her honor throughout Europe.

**Variable. Advent.** Beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas, Advent lasted through Christmas Eve. Missing Sunday services during this period would have been unthinkable.

## December

**6th. St. Nicholas' Day.** Precursor to the Santa Claus tradition, the feast of St. Nicholas was observed by the presentation of gifts to children, accompanied by family-oriented merrymaking. Traditionally, the feast of St. Nicholas began more than a month of celebrations, worship services, and feasts revolving around the Christmas season. In cathedrals throughout England and Europe, "boy bishops" were elected in commemoration of St. Nicholas' compassion for children. From St. Nicholas' Day until the Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28), these juvenile mock bishops were allowed to undertake all ecclesiastical duties except delivering the mass.

**8th. The Conception of Our Lady.** This day celebrated St. Anne becoming pregnant with the future Virgin Mary.



**11th. St. Andrew's Day.** Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland, where his celebration was widely observed with both religious services and traditional Scottish games such as the caber toss, throwing the stone, and displays of martial prowess.

**13th. St. Lucy's Day.** The next Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday after St. Lucy's Day were Ember Days.

**21st. St. Thomas the Apostle.**

**25th. Christmas.** The most joyous time of the year, Christmas marked the birth of Jesus and his message of salvation for all who believed in him. The season was celebrated with feasts, dancing, wassailing through the streets, and performances of religious and secular plays, all set amid garlands of holly, ivy, and evergreen.

**26th. St. Stephen's Day.** St. Stephen, a Roman soldier, is considered to have been the first Christian martyr.

**28th. Feast of the Holy Innocents.** Commemorating King Herod's slaughter of thousands of children in an attempt to kill the infant Jesus, this was a day of particular importance for pregnant women, families with sick children, and mothers who had lost children through disease, accident, or stillbirth, which included almost every family during the Middle Ages.

**29th. Feast of St. Thomas the Archbishop and Martyr.** This day celebrated the life and work of Thomas à Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, murdered on this date in 1169 on the order of King Henry II. Only four years after his martyrdom, Becket was canonized. His shrine in Canterbury Cathedral, Canterbury, England, became a place of pilgrimage for people throughout Europe, only exceeded in popularity by the shrines of St. Peter in Rome and St. James in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. The celebration of his feast day, however, was most popular among the English.