
About Christmas Carols

Tonight, you are asked to join with St. Mary's and go caroling. It's a custom that antedates you by several hundred years. It's holy, and wholesome, and something to be retained in our Christmas celebrations.

The word "carol" comes from the Greek (choraulein) and referred to dancing, accompanied by the playing of flutes. It was very popular among the Greek and Roman peoples. The Romans brought the custom and names to Britain, where the carol became a ring-dance accompanied by singing. Chaucer describes such a ring-dance in his Romance of the Rose. Gradually the word "carol" was applied to the song itself.

While a hymn is essentially solemn, a carol is familiar, **playful** or festive, and always simple. The first hymns of the Nativity were written in the 5th century, soon after Christmas was fully established as an annual feast. Today we retain some of them in the Divine Office. But the birthplace of the true Christmas carol was Italy. There, in the 13th century among the early Franciscans, St. Francis of Assisi was the first to introduce the joyous carol spirit which soon spread all over Europe. He had a particular devotion and affection for the mysteries of the holy childhood of Jesus. His Franciscan friars contributed a large number of lovable Italian Christmas carols. And from Italy the carol quickly spread to Spain and France, and finally through Europe. In Germany, in the 14th century, a great many popular Christmas carols were written largely under the inspiration of the Dominican mystics: John Eckhardt, John Tauler, and Blessed Henry Suso.

The Mystery carols form a large group of mediaeval Christmas songs delightfully describing all manner of legendary events supposed to have happened to the Divine Child. The Shepherd carols relate the message of the angel, the song of the heavenly hosts, the visit of the shepherds to the manger, and often describe their prayers and gifts. Many of these carols carry refrains imitating shepherds' instruments. Noels are still another group of French origin. Their refrain has the sense of "news" announced.

The earliest known English carols usually employed both rhyme and alliteration. Most of them were tender and devout, praising the Divine Child and His Mother. Always they told the story of the Nativity, and brought a religious feeling to the hearts of all because they expressed adoration, praise, love, gratitude, wonder, and joy. The earliest example was written at the beginning of the 15th century. It is a lullaby of great simplicity and tenderness, in which appear the lines:

A maiden mother meek and mild
In cradle kept a knave child
That softly slept; she sat and sung:
Lullay, lulla, balow,
My bairn sleep softly now!

Caroling, you see, is part of our Faith handed down through the ages. At times, men made laws forbidding it, in an effort to destroy the Faith. By us, caroling should be loved and kept alive. Join the carolers, and keep Christ in Christmas.

Another Christmas custom at Notre Dame is to give the collection taken at the Masses before vacation to the poor, and to the orphans who have appealed to the Bulletin for help. This is a season for kindness to those less fortunate than ourselves. Dig deep!

Notre Dame Christmas Spiritual Bouquet Cards now available at the pamphlet racks.

Tonight at 6:45 -- Novena to the Sorrowful Mother in Sacred Heart Church.