THE FIRST DAY OF CHRISTMAS IS TOMORROW

I want to wish you the Merriest of Christmases today, Wednesday December 25, but according to the song, the First Day of Christmas is the day *after* Christmas, December 26.

Ancient Christians celebrated "The Holidays," as our militant secularists insist on referring to them now, starting with the day after the birth of Jesus and ending on January 6th with the visit of the Magi in Matthew 2:11 known as the Epiphany. Start with 12/26 and end with 1/6 and you get: the Twelve Days of Christmas.

You may be really tired of hearing Christmas songs by now, including this one, yet you may still be wondering what the heck partridges in a pear tree and eight maids a-milking have to do with the birth of the founder of Christianity.

So I thought we might take a break from Serious Thoughts About World Events, and take a look at the song's origin, meaning, and myth.

The earliest printed version of The Twelve Days of Christmas is in a children's book published in London in 1790, *Mirth Without Mischief*. It is called a "memory and forfeits" game played by children in the form of a song, where the leader recites a verse, each player in turn repeats it, the leader keeps adding verses until a player's memory fails him/her and has to forfeit a piece of candy (if a girl, a kiss on the leader's cheek).

Kids in 18th Century England, however, learned the game from French kids, who had been singing their version, "In Those Twelve Days" since at least 1625. We know the song was originally French, as for example, partridges were introduced into England from France in the 1770s.

Even though The Twelve Days of Christmas was a kids' song-game, it nonetheless had a deep religious meaning. Unlike the PC Happy Holidays of today, centuries ago Christmas was above all a religious celebration. All of the song's twelve gifts are Christian symbols.

On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me...

A Christian's "true love" is God.

A partridge in a pear tree...

The partridge is Jesus; the pear tree stands for the Cross. The French revered the mother partridge, which would feign injury to draw predators away from her nest and willing to sacrifice herself for the life of her children, and used the bird as a symbol for Jesus who lamented in Matthew 24:37: "O Jerusalem... How often would I have sheltered thee under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but thou wouldst not have it so."

Why a pear tree? Because it's a song in English full of alliteration: partridge-pear, two-turtle, maids-milking, swans-swimming, lords-leaping, pipers-piping, drummers-drumming.

On the second day...two turtle doves...

The sacrifice Joseph and Mary made for Jesus (they actually sacrifice two turtle doves in Luke 2:24). The French original refers to the two gifts of the Old and New Testaments.

On the third day...three French hens...

The three things that abideth of I Corinthians 13:13 -- faith, hope, and charity. In the French original, the three persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost.

On the fourth day... four calling (in the English original, "colly" or black) birds...

The four Evangelists and their Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.

On the fifth day... five golden rings...

Not rings on your finger, but ring-necked pheasants in keeping with the bird theme of the first seven verses; the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament known collectively as the Books of Moses.

On the sixth day... six geese a-laying...

The six days of Creation.

On the seventh day... seven swans a-swimming...

The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, much discussed by Augustine and Aquinas: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord.

On the eighth day... eight maids a-milking...

The eight Beatitudes or those who are blessed from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:3-10 (the poor in spirit, who mourn, the meek, who thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, who are persecuted for righteousness).

On the ninth day... nine ladies a-dancing...

The nine fruits of the Holy Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no

law."

On the tenth day...ten lords a-leaping...

The Ten Commandments.

On the eleventh day... eleven pipers piping...

The eleven loyal Disciples. We all know what happened to the twelfth.

On the twelfth day...twelve drummers drumming...

The twelve points of The Apostle's Creed.

That's the meaning. Now on to the myth.

It's that the Twelve Days is a Catholic protest song, a secret catechism sung by English Catholics after Elizabeth I abolished "the old worship" in 1559, forbidding the open practice of Roman Catholicism (finally repealed by Parliament in 1829).

Yet all twelve enumerated gifts of the song were believed in common by both Catholics and Anglicans -- there is nothing in it exclusively Catholic needing to be secret and hidden. Further, the song originated in France, not England.

I have to tell you it was my son Jackson who gave me the idea to write this. The most wonderful Christmas present a man can have is his family and I am truly blessed with mine - my wife and our two wonderful sons. Christmas gives us the opportunity to reflect upon and appreciate the blessings we all have in our lives. Merry Christmas -- all the way to January 6th.