



The children mentioned in [St. Matthew 2:16-18](#):

[Herod](#) perceiving that he was deluded by the wise men, was exceeding angry; and sending killed all the men children that were in [Bethlehem](#), and in all the borders thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by [Jeremias](#) the [prophet](#), saying: A voice in Rama was heard, lamentation and great mourning; Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

The Greek Liturgy asserts that [Herod](#) killed 14,000 boys (*ton hagion id chiliadon Nepion*), the Syrians speak of 64,000, many [medieval](#) authors of 144,000, according to [Apocalypse 14:3](#). Modern writers reduce the number considerably, since Bethlehem was a rather small town. Knabenbauer brings it down to fifteen or twenty (Evang. S. Matt., I, 104), Bisping to ten or twelve (Evang. S. Matt.), Kellner to about six (Christus and seine Apostel, Freiburg, 1908); cf. "Anzeiger kath. Geistlichk. Deutschl.", 15 Febr., 1909, p. 32. This cruel deed of [Herod](#) is not mentioned by the Jewish historian [Flavius Josephus](#), although he relates quite a number of atrocities committed by the king during the last years of his reign. The number of these children was so small that this crime appeared insignificant amongst the other misdeeds of [Herod](#). Macrobius (Saturn., IV, xiv, de Augusto et jocis ejus) relates that when [Augustus](#) heard that amongst the boys of two years and under [Herod's](#) own son also had been massacred, he said: "It is better to be [Herod's](#) hog [ous], than his son [houios]," alluding to the Jewish law of not eating, and consequently not killing, swine. The [Middle Ages](#) gave [faith](#) to this story; [Abelard](#) inserted it in his [hymn](#) for the feast of Holy Innocents:

Ad mandatum regis datum generale
nec ipsius infans tutus est a caede.
Ad Augustum hoc delatum risum movit,
et rex mitis de immiti digne lusit:
malum, inquit, est Herodis esse natum.
prodest magis talis regis esse porcum.

(Dreves, "Petri Abaelardi Hymnarius Paracletensis", Paris, 1891, pp. 224, 274.)

But this "infant" mentioned by Macrobius, is Antipater, the adult son of [Herod](#), who, by command of the dying king was decapitated for having conspired against the life of his [father](#).

It is impossible to determine the day or the year of the death of the Holy Innocents, since the [chronology](#) of the birth of Christ and the subsequent Biblical events is most uncertain. All we [know](#) is that the infants were slaughtered within two years following the apparition of the star to the Wise Men (Belser, in the Tübingen "Quartalschrift", 1890, p. 361). The [Church](#) venerates these children as [martyrs](#) (*flores martyrum*); they are the

first buds of the [Church](#) killed by the frost of [persecution](#); they died not only for Christ, but in his stead (St. Aug., "Sermo 10us de sanctis"). In connection with them the Apostle recalls the words of the Prophet Jeremias (xxxii, 15) speaking of the lamentation of Rachel. At Rama is the [tomb](#) of Rachel, representative of the ancestresses of [Israel](#). There the remnants of the nation were gathered to be led into captivity. As Rachel, after the fall of [Jerusalem](#), from her [tomb](#) wept for the sons of Ephraim, so she now weeps again for the men children of Bethlehem. The ruin of her people, led away to Babylon, is only a type of the ruin which menaces her children now, when the [Messias](#) is to be [murdered](#) and is compelled to flee from the midst of His own nation to escape from the sword of the [apparitor](#). The lamentation of Rachel after the fall of [Jerusalem](#) receives its eminent completion at the sight of the downfall of her people, ushered in by the slaughter of her children and the banishment of the [Messias](#).

The [Latin Church](#) instituted the feast of the Holy Innocents at a date now unknown, not before the end of the fourth and not later than the end of the fifth century. It is, with the feasts of St. Stephen and St. John, first found in the Leonine Sacramentary, dating from about 485. To the Philocalian Calendar of 354 it is unknown. The Latins keep it on 28 December, the Greeks on 29 December, the Syrians and Chaldeans on 27 December. These dates have nothing to do with the chronological order of the event; the feast is kept within the octave of [Christmas](#) because the Holy Innocents gave their life for the newborn Saviour. Stephen the first [martyr](#) ([martyr](#) by will, [love](#), and blood), John, the Disciple of Love ([martyr](#) by will and [love](#)), and these first flowers of the [Church](#) (martyrs by blood alone) accompany the Holy Child [Jesus](#) entering this world on [Christmas day](#). Only the [Church](#) of [Rome](#) applies the word *Innocentes* to these children; in other Latin countries they are called simply *Infantes* and the feast had the title "Allisio infantium" (Brev. Goth.), "Natale infantum", or "Necatio infantum". The [Armenians](#) keep it on Monday after the Second Sunday after Pentecost (Armenian Menology, 11 May), because they believe the Holy Innocents were killed fifteen weeks after the birth of Christ.

In the [Roman Breviary](#) the feast was only a semi-double (in other breviaries a minor double) up to the time of [Pius V](#), who, in his new [Breviary](#) (1568), raised it to a double of the second class with an octave (G. Schober, "Expl. rit. brev. rom.", 1891, p. 38). He also introduced the two [hymns](#) "Salvete flores martyrum" and "Audit tyrannus anxius", which are fragments of the Epiphany [hymn](#) of Prudentius. Before [Pius V](#) the [Church](#) of [Rome](#) sang the [Christmas hymns](#) on the feast of the Holy Innocents. The proper preface of the Gelasian Sacramentary for this feast is still found in the Ambrosian [Missal](#). We possess a lengthy [hymn](#) in [honour](#) of the Holy Innocents from the pen of the [Venerable Bede](#), "Hymnum canentes martyrum" (Dreves, "Analecta hymnica") and a sequence composed by [Notker](#), "Laus tibi Christe", but most Churches at Mass used the "Clesa pueri concrepant melodia" ([Kehrein](#), "Sequenzen", 1873, p. 348). At Bethlehem the feast is a Holy Day of [obligation](#). The [liturgical](#) colour of the [Roman Church](#) is purple, not red, because these children were [martyred](#) at a time when they could not attain the [beatific vision](#). But of compassion, as it were, towards the weeping mothers of Bethlehem, the [Church](#) omits at Mass both the Gloria and [Alleluia](#); this custom, however, was unknown in the Churches of [France](#) and [Germany](#). On the octave day, and also when the feast falls on a Sunday, the Roman Liturgy, prescribes the red colour, the Gloria, and the [Alleluia](#). In [England](#) the feast was called "Childermas".

The Roman Station of 28 December is at [St. Paul's Outside the Walls](#), because that church is believed to possess the bodies of several of the Holy Innocents. A portion of these [relics](#) was transferred by [Sixtus V](#) to Santa Maria Maggiore (feast on 5 May; it is a semi-double). The [church](#) of St. Justina at [Padua](#), the [cathedrals](#) of [Lisbon](#) and [Milan](#), and other churches also preserve bodies which they claim to be those of some of the Holy Innocents. In many [churches](#) in [England](#), [Germany](#), and [France](#) on the feast of [St. Nicholas](#) (6 December) a [boy-bishop](#) was elected, who officiated on the feast of [St. Nicholas](#) and of the Holy Innocents. He wore a [mitre](#) and other pontifical insignia, sang the collect, preached, and gave the blessing. He sat in the [bishop's](#) chair whilst the choir-boys sang in the stalls of the canons. They directed the choir on these two days and had their solemn procession (Schmidt, "Thesaurus jur eccl.", III, 67 sqq.; Kirchenlex., IV, 1400; P.L., CXLVII, 135). —**Catholic Encyclopedia**