

## **IMBOLC, CANDLEMAS, or OIMELC**

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Midwinter (early February) was the time of many ancient Pagan festivals, which have continued under Christian guises. The wild Lupercalia of ancient Rome was replaced by the austere Festival of the Purification of the Virgin, or Candlemas. Modern America's midwinter celebration is Groundhog's Day, an Erisian holiday which has shed all serious religious and cultural pretensions.

The Celtic Imbolc, or Brigid, is a time for purification and new beginnings. Besides being a time of warming and melting snows, Imbolc is a time of mental and physical cleaning, as well as spiritual renewal. Imbolc anticipates spring, although the vernal equinox is seven weeks away. The word Imbolc refers to the pregnant condition of ewes at Midwinter. Their fertility was a good sign to the ancient Celts who depended on sheep for food and clothing.

This sabbat is also called Brigid in honor of this Celtic Triple Goddess. Brigid is anything but dainty and symbolizes a strong woman leading and providing for her people. She is a war Goddess and a patron of martial arts, and her soldiers were the brigands or outlaws as the Christians called them. She is also the goddess of fire, poetry, fine arts, smithcraft, and the healing arts including midwifery.

South and east of the British Isles ancient Romans celebrated the Lupercalia in honor of Lupa, the she-wolf who nursed Romulus and Remus who were considered Rome's founding twins. Orgiastic rites were performed to honor her in the Grotto of the She-Wolf to insure fertility in the coming year. After these rites, naked youth traveled to neighboring towns to purify them according to Barbara Walker in *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* .

The Christian clergy had very different ideas about what kind of actions constituted purification and tried to suppress the Lupercalia. Failing to do this, they substituted the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, or Candlemas, in its place. Many Lupercalian customs, other than the orgies, continued as part of Candlemas celebrations. These included extinguishing the old hearth fire and lighting a new one, and replacing old candles with new ones.

### **Personal Rituals**

Wiccans who seriously reduced their activities during the dark time starting at Samhain are now physically rested and mentally prepared to begin the new year's activities. Negative personal relationships and bad habits that were reviewed and mediated upon during the dark time can be ritually discarded at Imbolc. Those personal relationships deemed worth saving can be renewed, and it is a good time to start new relationships. It is also time to clean out your physical environment including cluttered personal altars, overflowing desks, and closets. Work can start on new ritual tools, and other additions to our lives and/or houses. Light a new fire in your hearth. Buy or make next year's candles and consecrate them. Invite Brigid to visit your home by making a bed for her by the hearth or other comfortable area. Light a red candle and ask her to visit the place you have created for her. Fix Brigid's strong image in your mind as you begin to take bold new actions to change your life.

## **Coven Rituals**

Wash and repair your ritual garments before the ritual. Cleanse yourself both physically and mentally beforehand, too. A ritual bath or sweat lodge cleans your skin, and moderate fasting can purify your digestive tract. Focused meditation helps you remove old self-imposed limitations. At the Imbolc sabbat go skyclad or wear white during the purification part of the ritual. Don your clean and mended robes after the group purification. Otherwise wear brilliant red clothing and jewelry as this is a festival of light that celebrates the return of the sun with colors of fiery red and pure white. Starhawk recommends using the Imbolc Sabbat to publicly renew old pledges or commitments and to make new ones.

However Imbolc or Brigid is celebrated, we have reached a time of year when we feel the coming spring in our bodies. Outside the weather is the same as it was in early January, but the increasing daylight after work encourages us. We are a part of Nature's cycles of birth, death and rebirth symbolized by the ever changing seasons. No matter how urbanized we become, we cannot completely detach ourselves from feeling the impact of Nature's journey toward spring. Finally, resolve to be strong and enjoy life during the coming year.