Imbolg (also known as Candlemas, Oimelc, Lady Day, and Bridemas) falls on February 1 or 2. At this time winter starts to lose its grip (unless you live in Winnipeg) and, in warmer climes, symbolizes the quickening of the earth. This is a fire festival, with the emphasis on light rather than heat. Lambs are being born now, bringing with them a fresh supply of milk which in former times helped the people make it through the winter. Imbolg, in fact, is translated as in the bagi.. teat. [Note: Some have translated this to mean in the belly, refering to pregnant animals, but I feel that since many animals are being born at this time, in the bag" makes more sense.

Imbolg is one of the Cross-quarter days, which in Wicca are termed the Greater Sabbats. In some traditions the Mother Goddess has recovered from the Yule birth of the Sun, while in others the crone (or cailleach) of winter is being transformed into the maiden of spring (in mythology hags turn into beautiful women at crucial periods of transformation. The God is a young boy, as witnessed by the now noticeably longer days. This is the traditional time of year for initiations and the renewal of vows. Purification is also a large part of this season. The Tide of Lustration (Imbolg/Beltaine) is a period to be devoted to meditation and spiritual growth rather than material effects as the power, though positive, is entirely spiritual and therefore hidden. Its word is Purification.

This is the festival of the goddess Bride (pronounced breed), also known as Brighid, Brigantia (northern England, and Brigindo (eastern France. She is the patroness of healing, smithcraft, and poetry, which represent the mysteries of renewal, transformation, and inspiration. She is also associated with fertility as she presides over the birthing of lambs. In Celtic mythology she is described as the daughter of the Dagda and was at one time wife to Bres, the half-Formorii ruler of the Tuatha Danann. Later she married Tuireann and had three sons: Brian, Lochar, and Locharba, who later gained infamy for the killing of Cian, Lugh’s father. As the years went by her importance grew until she took on Danus attributes of Great O Goddess and Progenitrix of the Celtic races.

Bride is more commonly revered in the British Isles as St. Brigid, whose legends borrow extensively from the goddess. St. Brigid was actually an historic person, living from 450-523 c.., and founding an abbey in Kildare in the sixth century. She is referred to as Mary of the Gael" and the foster mother of Christ. There are more sacred wells to her in Ireland than even St. Patrick, and her legends are many. She was born at sunrise, the house in which she was living blazing into flame which reached to heaven. A pillar of fire rose from her head when she took final vows. She was the midwife to the Virgin Mary and helped find the boy Jesus by using divination when he was lost in Jerusalem. She also was said to have diverted Herod's soldiers so that the Holy Family could escape into Egypt. Attributed powers include breathing life into the dead, multiplying food and drink for the needy, and turning her bath water into beer.

There are legends associated with St. Brigid that indicate she may have been involved with the pre Christian religions. Her father was said to have been a Druid and she had supposedly been taught by a wizard" (another druid). The monastery at Kildare had a sacred flame which was never allowed to go out, was only tended by women, and could not be breathed upon (it had to be tended with a bellows). For nineteen days it was tended by the maidens, but on the twentieth it was tended by the goddess (saint) herself. This flame, lit in the sixth century, was only extinguished once in the thirteenth century before the banishment of the monasteries by Henry VIII which killed the flame for good. Irish scholar R. MacAlister theorizes that St. Brigid may have been a priestess of Bride who had converted to Christianity.

In Ireland a person acting as the Bride comes to the door, disguised and carrying a box of rushes. Ritual words are exchanged, then crosses (called Bride's crosses) are made with the rushes to bring blessings on the household.  Last year's crosses are burned and replaced with the new, emphasizing the purification theme as all Yuletide decorations had to have been taken down and burned by Imbolg. At this time we clear out of our lives what is extraneous or detrimental to make way for the new season. Blessed be!