

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTMAS

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*Long ago God spoke
to our ancestors
in many and various ways
by the prophets,
but in these last days
he has spoken to us by a Son.
—Hebrews 1:1-2*

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas did not come early in the development of Church celebration. Neither Tertullian nor St. Irenaeus, early Church scholars, include it in their list of official Church feasts. Origen, another early Christian scholar, notes that only sinners celebrate birthdays, not saints. So it is that there are only three birthdays celebrated in the Roman calendar: Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist. For a long time Christmas was eclipsed by Holy Week and Easter because for Christians, death was regarded as the real “birthday” into eternal life.



Saint Irenaeus c. 130 – c. 202 AD

The first traces of a liturgical feast of Christmas are found in Egypt around 200 AD, but the celebration of Christmas was not common in the early Church until the mid-fourth century. Initially it was celebrated on January 6th along with the Epiphany, but gradually Christmas became a separate feast assigned to December 25th. Some early Church Fathers viewed that date as the actual day of Christ’s birth, but it would have been improbable for a census to be held or for shepherds to be in the fields at night during that time of year.

The choice of this date is more likely related to the winter solstice. The Romans observed a solstice festival called *Natalis Invicti* (the Unconquered Sun) on the 25th, leading some to theorize that the same date was deliberately chosen as a mean of Christianizing a secular feast. Others focus on the theological significance of winter solstice as the turning point when the days begin getting longer and warmer, a fitting reflection of the arrival of the Light of the World. As it says in the gospel of John: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

THE THEOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS: GOD WITH US

*And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means,
“God is with us.”*—Matthew 1:23

We are told that “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” but in time absence tends to erode the three great virtues of faith, hope, and love. For centuries the Hebrews searched the world for God. The psalms reflect the mixed results of exhilaration and exasperation when God is sought from a distance. The Israelites discovered God in nature: “The heavens are telling the glory of God.” Yet, they also found God mysteriously absent from their lives: “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’” In time, it became

clear that humans need to meet God “in person.”

For centuries God’s people relied on words to foster faith. The wisdom of the prophets and the stories of their ancestors proclaimed that God was with them. As any married couple knows, however, words are not enough to keep love alive. The Catholic bishops echoed this truth in a document called *The Theology of Celebration*: “People in love makes signs of love, not only to express their love, but to deepen it. Love never expressed dies.” For God’s love to remain alive, it had to be realized, not just in words, but in the flesh.



The birth of Christ marks the coming of God in human flesh: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The Incarnation marks the end of dualistic theologies that pit the body against the spirit and the human against the divine. Once God enters the world in the person of Christ, we witness the dawn of a new era in which the human body is holy, a sacramental vessel of divine grace and presence. The Incarnation teaches us that God is a personal God, that is, a God who works through persons. That is why the Church is called “the body of Christ.”

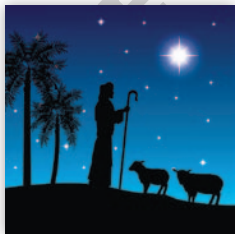
THE CELEBRATIONS OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

The Church's liturgical calendar reminds us of an important truth: Christmas is not a day, but a whole season. The cultural celebration of Christmas ends on Christmas day when the buying is mostly done. The liturgical season of Christmas, however, begins on December 25th and ends with the Baptism of the Lord. Christmas, then, is an ongoing present—a gift that keeps on giving!

CHRISTMAS VIGIL

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. —Luke 2:8

On Christmas Eve, sandwiched between the last liturgy of Advent and midnight Mass, the Church celebrates the Christmas Vigil. Vigils are important ritual reminders that good things come to those who watch and wait. Like the shepherds on hillsides, we realize that God does not usually arrive “on schedule” or with pomp and circumstance, but in the obscure places and unexpected moments. We keep vigil so that the Lord will not arrive unnoticed, unwelcomed and unheralded.



CHRISTMAS DAY

Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy that is for all the people. —Luke 2:10

In Old English, Christmas is *Cristes Maesse* or the “Mass of Christ.” *Maesse* or *missa* comes from the Latin word *mittere*, which means to send. Christmas is also “the first Noël,” or first birthday. After Jesus is born, all births take on added significance because all children are born as other Christs and sent into the world like him. We are reminded of this at the end of every “Christ Mass:” *Ite Missa Est*, “The Mass is ended, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”



ST. STEPHEN, ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST, AND THE HOLY INNOCENTS

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children.

—Matthew 2:18

The three days after Christmas are marked by three notable feast days. On December 26th the Church honors St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. On the 27th, she celebrates St. John the evangelist, the beloved disciple who proclaimed the good news that “God is love.” Finally, on December 28th, the feast of the Holy Innocents commemorates the children, two years old

and under, who were ordered killed by Herod in order to eliminate the threat posed by the Christ.

THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. —Luke 2:40

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, in their faithfulness to God's word and their unity in God's love, are the model for all Christian families. The Church celebrates this day, not just to honor the holy family, but also to foster their emulation. This day acknowledges the holiness of all families who commit themselves to live in the ways of God and embody the unity of Christ.



MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. —Luke 2:19



The Church sets aside every New Year's Day to acknowledge the pivotal role that Mary played in God's plan for our salvation. We honor the woman who became a vessel for the divine by opening her life and her heart to the Spirit of God. Like Mary, each of us is a sacred vessel that is pregnant with God

in the Spirit and empowered by grace to give birth to Christ in the world.

EPIPHANY

They set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising. —Matthew 2:9

The Epiphany celebrates the universality of Christ's message, the truth that the Lord is born for Jews and Gentiles alike. All those who seek the Lord are guided in faith to the place where Christ is born in their lives. As we walk by the light of Christ, we experience "epiphany moments," sudden insights into God's plan or revelations of God's presence in our world.



THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." —Mark 1:11

The Baptism of the Lord is like the "God housekeeping seal of approval" on Christ's mission. In a very mystical fashion, Jesus is confirmed as the preeminent ambassador of God's kingdom. In a similar way through baptism, each of us is named as a beloved child of God and sent forth with God's approval as a prophet to proclaim the kingdom of peace and justice.

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The early Christian church condemned the practice of decorating trees at Christmas, citing Jeremiah 10:3:

“For the customs of the peoples are false: a tree from the forest is cut down...people deck it with silver and gold.” Ancient peoples viewed trees as signs of rebirth, immortality, and ways to ward off evil spirits. Thus, Tertullian protested the fact that early Christians mimicked the pagan practice of decorating their homes with wreaths and lamps.



According to one legend, St. Boniface cut down an oak tree in the presence of newly baptized Christians to demonstrate that such pagan practice was giving way to Christianity. After being cut, the tree split into four pieces to show an evergreen growing from the stump: “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse.” The Christmas tree is also symbolic of the wedding of the divine and human realms, for a tree at once reaches into the earth and points toward the heavens.

THE CHRISTMAS CRÈCHE

Francis of Assisi is credited with fashioning the first Christmas Crèche to honor the birth of Christ. Francis was visiting the mountainside town of Greccio, Italy

and obtained permission from the pope to celebrate Christmas there in a special way. The Franciscan hermitage chapel was too small for the congregation, so he set up the altar in a niche of rock near the town square. Francis then constructed a manger that included live animals. According to one story, a couple offered their newborn infant for the manger. Another account says that a soldier who had given up war to follow Christ had a vision of a radiant infant sleeping peacefully in the manger.



THE THREE MASSES

The Roman liturgy assigns three Masses to the Christmas feast: Midnight Mass, Mass at dawn, and Mass during the day. The evolution of these liturgies is uncertain and likely the result of several factors. The Church in Jerusalem held a yearly midnight vigil in Bethlehem that inspired Pope Sixtus III to celebrate a Midnight Mass. There is also evidence of a custom in Rome in which major feasts were celebrated during the night and again toward dawn. A Mass in honor of St. Anastasia, whose feast was the same day, gradually evolved into a Christmas day Mass. The three Masses were initially reserved for the Pope, but the practice gradually became widespread.

THE CHRISTMAS PROCLAMATION

The Christmas proclamation is a poetic declaration of the birth of Christ placed in the context of salvation history. Its origin is the *Roman Martyrology*, the official Church record of all the saints celebrated in the Roman



Rite. It was a long standing tradition to read or sing the proclamation at the beginning of Midnight Mass, but the practice was discontinued during the Vatican II liturgical reform. Pope John Paul II restored it

to the Vatican celebration of Midnight Mass during the 1980's and many parishes have since followed suit. The proclamation concludes with the climactic declaration: "Today is the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh."

CHRISTMAS GIFT-GIVING

Many people remember Christmas for one particular gift that remains in their memory as a symbol of the magic of life and the love of parents. In the film, *A Christmas Story*, Ralphie falls asleep on Christmas cradling the *Red Ryder* air rifle that he hails as "the greatest Christmas gift I would ever receive." For Christians, Christ is the gift that is remembered as our greatest Christmas present, the one that affirms our faith in the goodness of life and the love of God.

Modern holiday gift-giving can become tainted with competition, status, and self-indulgence. Too often Christmas gifts create separation by implicitly dividing us into the “haves” and the “have nots.” Christ is born in poverty as a sign that the truest gifts are not bought with wealth or status, but are freely given to all God’s children to unite rather than divide us. The faithful imitate God by generously sharing God’s gifts with everyone, especially the poor.

Opening gifts is a highlight of Christmas for children.

For people of faith, opening God’s gifts is also the key to fully celebrating

Christmas. The Lord has given us

many gifts that too often remain unopened

under the tree of life. Christmas calls us to open these gifts gratefully and use them responsibly. On every

Christmas morning, then, we open our eyes and ears, we open our hearts and minds, and we open our hands and lives to the love of God that is born to us in Jesus.



CHRISTMAS IS ALWAYS NOW

*See, now is the acceptable time;
see, now is the day of salvation!* —2 Corinthians 6:2

We often live outside the present moment. We spend our days longing for the past, either a nostalgic fantasy of the “good old days” or a time in our personal history that truly was easier or happier. Other times we project ourselves into an unrealized future, days or events that are anticipated as superior to our current reality. In our eagerness for tomorrow, we reduce the present to a hurdle or obstacle to be overcome: “I can’t wait until Christmas”—or Friday or summer—and ultimately, “one day we’ll be happy in heaven.”



As we live increasingly in the past and the future, the gift of the present slips through our fingers unnoticed, unappreciated, and un-lived.

The birth of Christ changes all that. Through the nativity, each present moment miraculously becomes a potential source of comfort and joy. Christ’s coming does not transform the present into a utopia, magically eliminating regret, waiting, and longing, but it does charge every second of human life with the

redemptive power of grace. Through the incarnation, God is no longer merely transcendent, watching us from a distance, but immanently present in time and space. The Lord's arrival signals that God's kingdom is dynamically among us in the here and now.



It has been suggested that we never stand still, that at all times we are either going forward or backward, making progress or—in the lyrics of songwriter Paul Simon—“slip sliding away.” The coming of Christ adds another graceful possibility to our movement through time. In Christ, we are empowered to move, not just forward or backward, but “now-ward.” In Christ, we learn to live in the moment, utilizing the present to its fullest potential. Like all children of the kingdom, the Christ child teaches us that there is no time like the present, that “now” is a very acceptable time and that “now” is the day of salvation. Christmas changes the way we all live “going now-ward.”

A CHRISTMAS BLESSING

On this day, illumined by
the gospel hope that springs
from the humble stable of Bethlehem,
I invoke the Christmas gift
of joy and peace upon all:
upon children and the elderly,
upon young people and families,
upon the poor and the marginalized.

May Jesus, who was born for us,
console all those afflicted
by illness and suffering.

May he sustain those
who devote themselves to serving
our brothers and sisters
who are most in need.

Happy Christmas to all!

—*Pope Francis*



Understanding Christmas was written by Jerry Welte.

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