
THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS

We are all familiar with the age-old custom of celebrating the anniversary of one's birth precisely on the date each of us was born. So, many Christians must surely find it very surprising that none of the four Gospels pinpoint an exact year and/or day of the nativity of our Lord Jesus. In fact, it took three centuries before early Christians finally decided that the Incarnation of Jesus would be festively celebrated at all, much less on a specific date.

Some church historians suggest that a festive celebration of the Lord's birth may have occurred around 300AD, possibly the churches located in Northern Africa. The first evidence of December 25, itself, as the date for the celebrating the Nativity is found in Roman church writings from the year 336AD. What then is the basis for using December 25 as the date for celebrating this life-event of our Lord?

Many of the early Mediterranean/Middle Eastern religions were heavily based on solar and/or lunar cycles of the year. Even today we continue this practice as we mark the winter solstice on December 21st in our seasonal calendar. In Roman history, the emperor Aurelian established December 25th as a feast dedicated to the Sun god, which itself is derived from Roman celebrations to the Sun that occurred in the time of Caesar Augustus, the emperor at the time of Christ's birth.

Early Christians often adopted one of the many secular, cultural events of their times and made them Christian celebrations. Some scholars suggest that the Christians in the early 4th century used this major calendar event of the time (i.e. the Sun-god festival) and made it the Christian feast of Christmas as counterpoint to the pagan feast and the Arian heresy raging at the time.

Other scholars suggest that the date of December 25th derived from calculations based on March 25, the date early Christians used to celebrate the passion of Christ. To make matters even more confusing, many of the early Christian communities in the East celebrated the Nativity on January 6; what we know today as the feast of the Epiphany. That is still the case today

as most Christian churches in the eastern tradition celebrate January 6 as the feast of the Lord's Incarnation, to them -- the Epiphany of Jesus.

Much more is written on and debated about December 25th as the date for this major feast of the Lord Jesus, based upon cultural, symbolical, sociological and theological perspectives. But, what is more important than the specificity of the December 25th date is its reminder to us of important theological truths such as grace, sin, redemption and the salvation of humanity, arising from this life-altering event – the Birth of Christ.

- Deacon Bartholomew J. Merella, M.T.S.

References: Adam, Adolf, *The Liturgical Year*; Whalen, Michael, *Seasons and Feasts of the Liturgical Year*; Martimort, A.G., *The Church at Prayer: Liturgy and Time*
