

Here is a book that belongs in every Catholic home, parish, and school library. From Candlemas to the Easter candle, through relics, Mary, the saints, indulgences, the rosary, mystagogia, feast days, laying on of hands, and more, Greg Dues traces the vast riches of the traditions, customs, and ritual practices that make up the Roman Catholic experience.

Dues also covers practical areas such as sacraments and sacramentals, ordinary time, the sanctoral cycle, and the Sunday assembly. Each topic is presented in a clear and engaging manner with plenty of historical background and theological grounding. A comprehensive index rounds out the usefulness of this timely book.

Religious traditions are like memorial stones that mark the spot of people's own Jacob's ladder. They mark a particular place, moment in time, or part of human life made sacred by the meeting of the mystery of God with the mystery of the human creature. People remember this meeting and repeat it by visiting sacred places, keeping certain times holy, saying prayers, observing rituals, eating special foods on certain days, and using particular colors to highlight religious themes.

The actual date of Christ's birth is unknown. The gospels do not record it, nor is there any early tradition to identify it. Modern scholarship identifies only the approximate year, probably 8-6 B.C.E. with adjustments to our modern calendar taken into consideration. There are two traditional dates: December 25 in the Western church and January 6 in the Eastern church. Both have been celebrated by the church as memorials of Jesus' birth, the latter becoming the feast of Epiphany. Neither of them, however, is recognized as the actual date today.

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Once the December 25 date became popular, efforts were made to argue that it was the historical birthday of Jesus. These arguments were based on assumptions surrounding gospel events rather than on historical evidence. They do, however, take into account a growing preoccupation with the solar year and the cycle of seasons. The main assumption is that Zechariah the priest was ministering in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, which falls approximately on September 25 (fall equinox). His son, John the Baptist, would have been born on June 24 (summer solstice): "Your wife Elizabeth shall bear a son whom you shall name John" (Luke 1:1–25). Jesus would then have been conceived on March 25 (spring equinox) and born nine months later on December 25 (winter solstice): "Know that Elizabeth your kinswoman has conceived a son in her old age; she who was thought to be sterile is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:26–38).

Most Christmas traditions associated with evergreens and trees are related somehow to pre-Christian practices. The use of evergreens and wreaths as a symbol of life was popular already among the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews. Teutonic and Scandinavian peoples worshipped trees and decorated houses and barns with evergreens at the new year to scare away demons.

The Christmas tree, as did so many other Christmas traditions, originated in Germany. There it was first called the Paradise Tree. The Christmas tree seems to have resulted from the combination of two traditions: a prop from a popular morality or mystery play of the Middle Ages with a festival of lights from pre-Christian times.

Another tradition was popular at the same time and place as the Paradise Tree. As the winter solstice approached, Germanic peoples celebrated a festival of lights as they had done ever since pre-Christian times centuries before. After their conversion these people

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Encyclopedia Britannica 1911

CHRISTMAS (*i.e.* the Mass of Christ), in the Christian Church, the festival of the nativity of Jesus Christ. The history of this feast coheres so closely with that of Epiphany (*q.v.*), that what follows must be read in connexion with the article under that heading.

The earliest body of gospel tradition, represented by Mark no less than by the primitive non-Markan document embodied in the first and third gospels, begins, not with the birth and childhood of Jesus, but with his baptism; and this order of accretion of gospel matter is faithfully reflected in the time order of the invention of feasts. The great church adopted Christmas much later than Epiphany; and before the 5th century there was no general consensus of opinion as to when it should come in the calendar, whether on the 6th of January, or the 25th of March, or the 25th of December.

The earliest identification of the 25th of December with the birthday of Christ is in a passage, otherwise unknown and probably spurious, of Theophilus of Antioch (A.D. 171-183), preserved in Latin by the Magdeburg centuriators (i. 3, 118), to the effect that the Gauls contended that as they celebrated the birth of the Lord on the 25th of December, whatever day of the week it might be, so they ought to celebrate the Pascha on the 25th of March when the resurrection befell.

The next mention of the 25th of December is in Hippolytus' (c. 202) commentary on Daniel iv. 23. Jesus, he says, was born at Bethlehem on the 25th of December, a Wednesday, in the forty-second year of Augustus. This passage also is almost certainly interpolated. In any case he mentions no feast, nor was such a feast congruous with the orthodox ideas of that age. As late as 245 Origen, in his eighth homily on Leviticus, repudiates as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Christ "as if he were a king Pharaoh." The first certain mention of Dec. 25 is in a Latin chronographer of A.D. 354, first published entire by Mommsen.¹ It runs thus in English: "Year 1 after Christ, in the consulate of Caesar and Paulus, the Lord Jesus Christ was born on the 25th of December, a Friday and 15th day of the new moon." Here again no festal celebration of the day is attested.

There were, however, many speculations in the 2nd century about the date of Christ's birth. Clement of Alexandria, towards its close, mentions several such, and condemns them as superstitions. Some chronologists, he says, alleged the birth to have

¹ In the *Abhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1850). Note that in A.D. 1, Dec. 25 was a Sunday and not a Friday.

occurred in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, on the 25th of Pachon, the Egyptian month, *i.e.* the 20th of May. These were probably the Basilidian gnostics. Others set it on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi, *i.e.* the 19th or 20th of April. Clement himself sets it on the 17th of November, 3 B.C. The author of a Latin tract, called the *De Pascha computus*, written in Africa in 243, sets it by private revelation, *ab ipso deo inspirati*, on the 28th of March. He argues that the world was created perfect, flowers in bloom, and trees in leaf, therefore in spring; also at the equinox, and when the moon just created was full. Now the moon and sun were created on a Wednesday. The 28th of March suits all these considerations. Christ, therefore, being the Sun of Righteousness, was born on the 28th of March. The same symbolical reasoning led Polycarp² (before 160) to set his birth on Sunday, when the world's creation began; but his baptism on Wednesday, for it was the analogue of the sun's creation. On such grounds certain Latins as early as 354 may have transferred the human birthday from the 6th of January to the 25th of December, which was then a Mithraic feast and is by the chronographer above referred to, but in another part of his compilation, termed *Natalis invicti solis*, or birthday of the unconquered Sun. Cyprian (*de orat. dom.* 35) calls Christ *Sol verus*, Ambrose *Sol novus noster* (*Sermo vii.* 13), and such rhetoric was widespread. The Syrians and Armenians, who clung to the 6th of January, accused the Romans of sun-worship and idolatry, contending with great probability that the feast of the 25th of December had been invented by disciples of Cerinthus and its lections by Artemon to commemorate the *natural* birth of Jesus. Chrysostom also testifies the 25th of December to have been from the beginning known in the West, from Thrace even as far as Gades. Ambrose, *On Virgins*, iii. ch. 1, writing to his sister, implies that as late as the papacy of Liberius 352-356, the Birth of the Virgin was feasted together with the Marriage of Cana and the Banquet of the 4000 (Luke ix. 13), which were never feasted on any other day but Jan. 6.

Chrysostom, in a sermon preached at Antioch on Dec. 20, 386 or 388, says that some held the feast of Dec. 25 to have been held in the West, from Thrace as far as Cadiz, from the beginning. It certainly originated in the West, but spread quickly eastwards. In 353-361 it was observed at the court of Constantius. Basil of Caesarea (died 379) adopted it. Honorius, emperor (395-423) in the West, informed his mother and brother Arcadius (395-408) in Byzantium of how the new feast was kept in Rome, separate from the 6th of January, with its own *troparia* and *sticharia*. They adopted it, and recommended it to Chrysostom, who had long been in favour of it. Epiphanius of Crete was won over to it, as were also the other three patriarchs, Theophilus of Alexandria, John of Jerusalem, Flavian of Antioch. This was under Pope Anastasius, 398-400. John or Wahan of Nice, in a letter printed by Combefis in his *Historia monothelitarum*, affords the above details. The new feast was communicated by Proclus, patriarch of Constantinople (434-446), to Sahak, Catholicos of Armenia, about 440. The letter was betrayed to the Persian king, who accused Sahak of Greek intrigues, and deposed him. However, the Armenians, at least those within the Byzantine pale, adopted it for about thirty years, but finally abandoned it together with the decrees of Chalcedon early in the 8th century. Many writers of the period 375-450, e.g. Epiphanius, Cassian, Asterius, Basil, Chrysostom and Jerome, contrast the new feast with that of the Baptism as that of the birth *after the flesh*, from which we infer that the latter was generally regarded as a birth according to the Spirit. Instructive as showing that the new feast travelled from West eastwards is the fact (noticed by Usener) that in 387 the new feast was reckoned according to the Julian calendar by writers of the province of Asia, who in referring to other feasts use the reckoning of their local calendars. As early as 400 in Rome an imperial rescript includes Christmas among the three feasts (the others are Easter and Epiphany) on which theatres must be closed. Epiphany and Christmas were not made judicial *non dies* until 534.

² In a fragment preserved by an Armenian writer, Ananias of Shirak.

Funk and Wager 1954

CHRISTMAS, the Christian religious festival Mass celebrating the nativity of Christ, commonly observed annually by the Western churches on Dec. 25, and by the Eastern churches on Jan. 7. The date of the Western Christmas fell on a day which the Romans was sacred as the *natalis invicti solis* Mithraism and to the Angles of early Britain was *modra niht*, or mother's night, in connection with their druidism. Before the 5th century there was no common acknowledgment of Dec. 25 as the Christmas, and there was no agreement on the date of Christ's birth. Even in the earliest mention of the day there is nothing to indicate that it was kept as a festival. In 1644 the Christmas observance was forbidden by Act of the English Parliament, but Charles II revived it at the Restoration, though the people of Scotland and some of the colonies of New England adhered to the Puritan rule not to observe the day. To-day it is commonly observed with religious services, greetings, gifts and hospitality, in the last of which the entire population, irrespective of religious affiliations, joins. Various folk-lore traditions give color to the celebrations in different European countries. See also NICHOLAS, ST.

Funk and Wagner 1947

CHRISTMAS, in the Christian Church, an annual festival, held on December 25, to celebrate the Nativity, or birth of Christ. The origin of the festival is unknown. Scholars believe that it is derived in part from the pre-Christian rites of Germanic and Celtic tribesmen held in celebration of the winter solstice. Christmas festivals, generally observed by Christians since the 4th century, include a number of heathen customs such as the use of holly, mistletoe, Yule logs, and wassail bowls. The use of Christmas trees probably originated among the Romans of pre-Christian times from whom it spread to the Germanic peoples and thence to the peoples of the British Isles. In later times Christmas celebrations acquired a wide secular and social significance, expressed in many countries in the exchange of presents, the sending of greeting cards, and the suspension of school and work. Early Dutch settlers brought to the New World the custom of celebrating St. Nicholas' (Santa Claus') day on Christmas Eve.