



December 25th: The Birth of the True Sun

Our word “Christmas” comes from the Late Old English words *Cristes Maesse*, which signifies “Christ’s Mass”. This designation, *Cristes Maesse*, comes from 1038. Another like it, *Cristes-messe*—also Late Old English—comes from 1131.

Christmas, the feast of the Lord’s Birth, was not one of the original feasts of the Church. The eminent Christian writers St. Irenaeus (d. 140, Lyons), Tertullian (145-220, Rome), and Origen (185-254, Alexandria), representing West and East, make no mention of such a commemoration in their lists of the Christian holy days.

The oldest western Christmas sermon extant is from 383, by St. Optatus, a bishop in Numidia in Roman North Africa. Other sermons witnessing to the western December 25th feast come from Spain (before 384) and Gaul (from at least 461). The Roman Church’s official celebration of Christ’s Nativity on December 25th is certain from before 354, and was very possibly a popular celebration before 336. By this same fourth century, the feast of Christmas on December 25th is found on virtually all the calendars of the West.

Yet, in the Christian East (e.g. Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Greece), the earliest indications of a feast of the Birth of Christ show a January observance, almost always the 6th, on which the Lord’s Baptism was also commemorated. The celebration of the Lord’s Nativity on December 25th was originally a “western thing.” The oldest existing witness to the arrival of the western “December 25th Christmas” comes from a sermon of St. Basil of Caesarea. Inasmuch as he died in 379, we can be certain that the western “December 25th Christmas” was obviously in place in this part of the East from at least this year. Another Eastern sermon for the “December 25th Christmas” was given by St. Gregory Nazianzen in 379-80. From this time, the celebration of the Lord’s Birth on

this date spread throughout the East, gradually supplanting the “Eastern January 6th Christmas”.

An interesting episode in this “spread” is a sermon in Antioch in the year 388, by St. John Chrysostom (347-407). He testifies that many—but not all—Christians in the great city have been celebrating the feast on the 25th of December for 10 years (i.e. from 378). He wanted all the Christians of the city to celebrate the feast on this date. Further, this feast has been kept on December 25th by the Roman Church, he noted. St John had always sought the introduction of the western “December 25th Christmas” into the Antiochene Church, and finally he succeeded.

But why did the western Catholics, and specifically the Roman region, assign the Lord’s Nativity feast to December 25th? To answer this we may step back to earlier days in the Roman Empire. . . .

The cult of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) was but one manifestation of the prevalent paganism until it became the official religion of the Roman Empire under the Emperor Aurelian (A.D. 269-75). On December 25th, 274—the date of the winter solstice in the old Julian calendar—Aurelian proclaimed the sun the patron of the Roman Empire. The religious focus was the worship of the divine spirit who rules the whole universe, whose symbol is the sun. It was a “pagan monotheism”, really. The Emperor adorned his new state *cultus* with great splendor and had a spectacular temple to the sun constructed in Rome; and his coinage bore the inscription “The Sun is the Lord of the Roman Empire.”

Constantius Chlorus, who was the Caesar under the western Emperor Maximian, was a devotee of this “moral monotheistic paganism”. After Aurelian’s death, he was the chief supporter of the *cultus*, even though his seniors, the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian, had reverted to the

older (and increasingly detested) pagan forms centered upon Jupiter, Hercules, and the other dwellers of Olympus. Not surprisingly, Constantius' more famous son and future Emperor, Constantine, adopted this sun-religion, but his own religious evolution moved him to set it aside even prior to his famous "conversion" (September, A.D. 312). But we may be getting a little ahead of our time here. . .

It so happened that, even before Constantine was born, there was a feast of this imperial religion on December 25th called *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (The Birthday of the Unconquered Sun). It is understandable that such a feast should have occurred right on the solstice day (in the old calendar), when the sun began its return to the northern hemisphere, and daylight began to increase. It appears, then, that the "December 25th Christmas" is a sort of Catholic "claiming for Christ" of a date devoted to a "no-god." This substitution of the truth for error was no sudden thing, however. The Church was obviously aware-and painfully so-of her pagan surroundings, and she knew where the truth lay. It is certain that even from the early 200's the title "Sun of Justice" was applied to Christ by the Church. This aside from the solar motifs applied to God-Christ-Messiah in the Bible.

Unfortunately for some, this does not prove that Catholicism is really "simple Christianity" paganized. More reasonably, it is another instance of the essential opposition between the Church and paganism, then as now. "The gods of the nations are demons", our forefathers would cry: "Pagan demonism must go!" (Ps. 96[95]:5 Latin trad.) This was but another application of St. Paul's principle regarding the Eucharist: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons." (I Cor. 10:21) Now it is plain that peace and prosperity are prone to produce "pagan-isms". But a very odd thing it would have been for the Church, once she was freed from the threats of Imperial persecution by the paganism which hated her and which she had to oppose, to go out and embrace that pagan demonism on the

very morrow of her emancipation!

In the fog of false ecumenism which has descended upon Christianity in recent decades, Catholics have almost forgotten this fact: the Catholic Church is the sole bearer of the complete Divine Message to this world. For this very reason, she has an experience of the Living God far more intimate than any other Christian body or any religion/philosophy of the world. This, in turn, begets in her heart a burning Divine Love. There is nothing so creative or ingenious as Divine Charity. This Charity-the Holy Spirit-has always burned in her heart inspiring her, true lover and knower of God that she is, to ever ponder the Mystery of Christ, her Head and to give outward, beautiful, and ingenious expression to what she so lovingly ponders. This explains the appearance in history of a feast like Christmas. Once the Bride of Christ has had the bonds of Imperial persecution broken, she cannot but begin to paint, sing, write, and dance of the Beloved Savior of her heart on the bland gray pages of this world's history, which she and she alone has been given the divine mandate to brighten up. A Catholic may never hide or blush for what God has committed to him. A Divine Revelation, Catholicism can only be opposed to falsehood, pagan or otherwise-until the end of the world.

Therefore, our forefathers used to preach and instruct thus:

"What then do Christians worship, since their objects of worship are different from yours? It is implied already, as the consequence of their rejection of the lie, that they render homage to the truth; and continue no longer in an error which they have given up in the very fact of recognizing it to be an error.

". . . we do not worship the orb of the day . . . The idea no doubt has originated from our being known to turn to the east in prayer. In the same way, if we devote Sunday to rejoicing [it is] from a far different reason than Sun-worship. . . . The object of our worship is the one God." (Tertullian)

"Much more are we forbidden to pay divine honors to some goddess Minerva, if we are not permitted to worship so glorious an object as

the sun. . . . For we sing hymns to the Most High alone, and His Only-begotten, who is the Word and God; and we praise God and His Only-begotten, as do the sun, the moon, the stars, and all the host of heaven, also. For these all form a chorus to the Divinity, and unite with just men in celebrating the praises of the Most High God and His Only-begotten.” (Origen) believing, and even by reasoning with those who are capable. Let us therefore reject this kind of error, which the Holy Church has anathematized from the beginning. Let us not suppose that the Lord Jesus Christ is this sun which we see rising from the east, setting in the west; . . .the Lord Christ is not the sun that was made, but He by whom the sun was made.” (St. Augustine, 354-430)

“But our Lord, too, is born in the month of December . . . the eighth day before the calends of January (i.e. December 25th). . . . But the pagans call it the ‘Birthday of the Unconquered Sun’. Who indeed is so unconquered as our Lord . . . ? Or, if they say that it is the birthday of the Sun, He is the Sun of Justice.” (St. John Chrysostom, 347-407)

“The Manichaeans have supposed that the Lord Christ is that sun which is visible to carnal eyes, exposed and public to be seen, not only by men , but by the beasts. But the right faith of the Catholic Church rejects such a fiction, and perceives it to be a devilish doctrine: both by

And so we pray: Lord Jesus, Infant Son of the Virgin. . .Son of God. . .Bread of Life, present and waiting for us in the Holy Tabernacles of the World: help us to learn a lesson from our history; free us from the paganism of possessions and luxury; may You be our Treasure for whom we reserve the Love of our hearts. Give us the courage to find happiness in the warm rays of Your Love, O True Sun-that we may delight in Your embrace forever in Your Father’s House. Amen! ✨