

Is Christmas a Pagan Feast?

ISSUE: Does Christmas have pagan roots? Why do Catholics and Christians celebrate Christmas on December 25?

RESPONSE: Christmas is the celebration of Our Lord Jesus Christ's birth, not a pagan feast. However, history indicates that the Church chose December 25 to evangelize the pagans of the ancient Roman Empire, who celebrated the feast of the "invincible sun" on that day. Following the biblical wisdom not to "lay on any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary" (Acts 15:28), the Church apparently chose Dec. 25 to "baptize" the Romans' worship, redirecting it toward the true "invincible sun" (cf. Ps. 84:11), Jesus Christ, who "abolished death and brought life and immortality to life through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10; cf. Rom. 5:15-21, 6:9-11).

DISCUSSION: There are various arguments as to why Christmas is celebrated on December 25, but scholars agree that the strongest claim regards the baptism of pagan worship in ancient Rome.¹ The Romans celebrated the *dies natalis Solis Invincti* (birthday of the invincible sun). On December 25, 274 A.D. the Roman emperor Aurelian declared the sun-god the principle patron of the empire and dedicated a temple to him. December 25 marked the winter solstice in the old Julian calendar, the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. The sun appears to be waning, but yet is not overcome. Its invincibility is shown because the days begin getting longer after the winter solstice.

The Church apparently recognized an excellent opportunity to evangelize. Remember that the Roman Empire was the dominant world power at the time. Because of its governmental and cultural influence, it made sense for the Church to target Rome and redirect its worship. Some of the Church Fathers began contrasting Christ with the winter solstice and, from the beginning of the third century, "Sun of Justice" appears as a title of Christ.²

It makes sense that the Church took advantage of the "sun" imagery associated with the Roman feast. After all, God had referred to Himself as a "sun and shield" who "bestows favor and honor" (Ps 84:11, and, in Zechariah's Canticle, Jesus is described as "the dawn" who gives "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death," guiding "our feet into the way of peace" (Lk. 1:78-79). In addition at the Transfiguration, Jesus' face "shone like the sun, and His garments became white as light" (Mt. 17:2).

Christ is indeed the true invincible sun, because sin and death could not overcome Him (Rom. 5:15-21; 6:9-11; 2 Tim. 1:10). The Church redirected the Roman worship away from *created* realities like the sun, which symbolized Christ in some sense, to Christ Himself, *through whom everything was created* (Col. 1:15-17).

This act of baptizing pagan customs is by no means isolated to Christmas. Many think that any association with things pagan is anti-Christian and blasphemous. St. Paul, though, taught and acted differently. When he came upon Athenians who worshipped "an unknown God," he did not chastise them for idolatry and ignorance: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. . ." (Acts 17:22-23).

St. Paul redirected them away from created realities (Acts 17:29) to the Creator (Acts 17:24-25, 30-31). He told them about God's plan of salvation and, though some mocked him, "some other men joined and believed" (Acts 17:32-34). If Paul could do this, and do it successfully, why not the Church in later centuries, which designated Dec. 25 to evangelize the Romans to Jesus?

There are other examples. In fact, using rings in wedding ceremonies is a custom that most Protestant critics of Catholicism have adopted. In addition, the common practices of the bride wearing white and receiving flowers also have pagan origins.

In contrast, Scripture teaches us that idolatrous pagan worship is wrong and should be categorically rejected. For example, on another occasion, Paul cures a man in Lystra who could not walk (Acts 14:8-18). As a result of the cure, the crowds began calling Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes,” Greek gods worshipped by pagans of this period. Paul and Barnabas then rent their garments, an action associated with protests against blasphemy, and explained to the people that they were only men, not God.

¹ See Cyril Martindale, “Christmas: Origin of Date,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908, pp. 726-27. See also C. Smith, “Christmas and Its Cycle: History,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967, p. 656.

² Smith, “Christmas and Its Cycle: History,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 656.

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OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

Advent and Christmas in a Catholic Home; Helen McLoughlin; St.Raphael Press, P.O. Box 271, Lancaster, CA 93584

The Bible and the Liturgy; Jean Danielou, S.J.; University of Notre Dame Press.

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