

Was Christ born on Christmas or not?



Dear Father Kerper: Someone recently told me that December 25 is definitely not the birthday of Jesus Christ. Was Christ born on Christmas or not? If not, why has the Church always claimed that Jesus was born on December 25? And how could people get so mixed up about something so important?

Before answering your question, we need to consider our contemporary understanding of birthdays and how it differs from that of the early Church. In our culture, we heavily emphasize “marking” the precise anniversary of everyone’s birth date. By doing this we remember and rejoice over the entire life of the person, not just his or her actual birth. For example, when we celebrate the birthday of Washington, Lincoln, or some other heroic person, we ponder his whole life, not just his actual birth.

Early Christians had a very different approach. Indeed, they did not like birthdays at all because such festivals were intertwined with the “old religions,” which dabbled in astrology and the occult.

To distance themselves from old pagan practices, early Christians tended to celebrate the day of a person’s death as his or her “true birthday.” This reflected the Christian belief that a person’s physical birth mattered very little unless it culminated in eternal life, which begins at death. A holy death – not mere birth – deserves great celebration.

In keeping with this approach, Christians began to link the feasts of saints with the anniversaries of their deaths, never with their birth day, except for Mary, the Mother of the Lord (September 8) and Saint John the Baptist (June 24).

This brings us to your question: Is December 25 the “real” birthday of Christ? Yes, if you mean the day on which Christians have celebrated the Lord’s birth almost universally from the earliest times. However, the Church has never definitively taught that Jesus was born on December 25; there is no conclusive documentary evidence and Sacred Scripture mentions no date whatsoever.

This lack of “evidence” should not surprise us in the least. While we place great value on keeping precise records of births, deaths, and marriages, ancient people did not, especially among common people like Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Most people in Palestine probably had no idea of their exact birth dates, and illiterate parents had no way of keeping track of their children’s birthdays. While they may have remembered the season of the child’s birth, they probably forgot the day, even the year.

As to Christ, we must always remember that the Gospels were “written in reverse” – they begin with the final events of Christ’s life: his Passion, Death, and Resurrection. The familiar “Christmas texts” of Saint Matthew and Saint Luke were all written after the Passion accounts. Moreover, if these Christmas stories, which we love so much, had never been written or had been lost, nothing of our faith in Christ would change. After all, the Gospels of Saint Mark and Saint John say nothing at all about the birth of Jesus. For sure, the “Christmas texts” deepen our understanding of Christ and provide wonderful “color” to the story, but they are not essential. Hence, we do not really need to know the date of Christ’s birth.

Now, let us turn to long-established belief that December 25 is indeed the birthday of Christ. The choice of this date was no mere accident or whim. It has a strong theological basis.

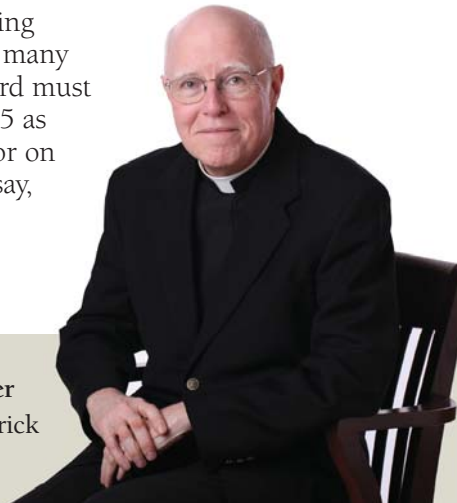
By about 360 A.D. (or even earlier), Roman Christians had begun to celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25. However, Christians in other regions had fixed his birthday on January 6 (in conjunction with the Epiphany). Others had it on April 20 and May 15. Gradually, however, December 25 became almost universal. If Jesus has no birth certificate, why pick December 25? Because of its proximity to the winter solstice, nature's turning point between light and darkness.

Some ancient theologians believed that the events of Christ's life were mysteriously synchronized with the movements of nature. The following text from Saint Augustine is a good example of such thought. He said: "Let us, my brethren, rejoice, for this day [December 25] is sacred, not because of the visible sun, but because of the birth of him who is the invisible Creator of the sun. He chose this day whereon to be born, as he chose the Mother of whom to be born, and he made both day and Mother. The day he chose was that on which the light begins to increase, and it typifies the work of Christ, who renews our interior man day by day. For the eternal Creator having willed to be born in time, his birthday would necessarily be in harmony with the rest of creation." (Sermon On the Nativity of Our Lord, iii)

Saint Augustine and other Doctors of the Church derived the exact birthday of Jesus through classical theological reflection, not through Sacred Scripture. While the speculations of holy theologians like Saint Augustine are certainly worthy of belief, they are not definitive.

Finally, there is another reason for December 25: The "old" Roman religion also proposed a relationship between nature and its own gods. Hence, Romans celebrated a feast called *Natalis Solis Invincti*, which rejoiced over the "rebirth" of the sun at the winter solstice. Many scholars have asserted that Christians simply "baptized" this old pagan festival, replacing the sun with the Son of God.

In terms of worship and prayer, Christmas Day – December 25 – is the only universal focal point of Christians as they rejoice in the birth of Christ, the One who would suffer, die, and rise again. By celebrating the Lord's birthday on December 25, we unite ourselves with hundreds of believing generations spread over many centuries. Surely, the Lord must now regard December 25 as his only true birthday, for on that day alone millions say, "Happy Birthday!"



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