



THE HOLY NIGHT

CARLO MARATTA

Dominicana wishes all its friends
a Holy and Happy Christmas

DOMINICANA

Vol. XVIII

DECEMBER, 1933

No. 4

CHRISTMAS — CHRISTIAN OR PAGAN?

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EVERY Christian church throughout the world anticipates; merchants, butchers, bakers and candlestick makers prepare; children behave; brewers, distillers and bootleggers become sanguine; enmities and animosities are forgotten; problems of great moment are left in abeyance; the ennuye are less bored; the world becomes a better place in which to live—the birthday of Christ is at hand. “Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad, let the sea be moved, and the fulness thereof: the fields and all things that are in them shall be joyful. Then shall all the trees of the woods rejoice before the face of the Lord, because he cometh.”¹ For hundreds of years the feast of Christmas has brought with it a spirit of joy and happiness unequalled in any other feast or holiday celebrated by man. Unrestricted by boundary lines of nations or empires, Christmas is as universally as it is joyously celebrated.

In attempting to discover the date on which Christ was born, many controversies have arisen. There is as yet no satisfactory answer given to the problem. The date commonly accepted by all Christendom is the twenty-fifth of December. Perhaps the absence of any observance of Our Lord's nativity in Bethlehem may be accounted for by the fact that in the early days of the Church the day on which a saint left this exile was computed as his birthday. The day on which he was born to the

¹ Ps. xcvi, 11-13.

flesh was often forgotten. To the world at large, Christ's nativity in Bethlehem may have been forgotten, but it is difficult for us to imagine that Mary who pondered many things in her heart could have ignored from year to year the day on which her Creator became her Son.

"The first evidence of the feast of Christmas is from Egypt. Around the year 200, certain Egyptian theologians attempted to assign not the year alone but the day of Christ's birth, placing it on the 20th of May in the 28th year of Augustus."² From this period onward similar attempts were made to assign the day and the year. The present assignation of the day on which the feast is celebrated was made in 337 during the reign of Pope St. Julius I.

If one were able to step back to the days when paganism ruled supreme in the Eternal City; when the Druids and roving hordes warred for the very right to exist, he would find at that season of the year when blood is chilled by snow, and flesh pierced by icy wind, the pagans who had not as yet witnessed the coming of the Light of the world, preparing for festivities much in the same manner as the world today prepares for the commemoration of the night on which Christ was born. A superficial investigation of these pagan festivals reveals a striking similarity to that of Yuletide as we know it today. Many writers have attempted to prove that our Christmas is nothing more than a borrowed pagan feast, taken unto itself by the Catholic Church during the fourth century. To prove their contention they point to the *Saturnalia* of the Romans which was celebrated for a period of seven days, extending from the 17th to the 23rd of December. This was followed by the *Brumalia*, or, as it is occasionally called, *Dies Invicti Solis*, Day of the Unconquered Sun, a feast celebrated on the 25th of December, allegedly the shortest day of the year.

The manner in which these feasts were celebrated and the customs we know to have been in vogue during these celebrations seemingly tend to strengthen the argument that Christmas is nothing more than a Christianization of these pagan feasts. Many of these customs have come down to us as a heritage; and it is interesting to note that we upon whom the Conquering Son has shone do the same things, revel in the same festivities at the

² *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Christmas."

same time of the year as did the worshippers of the unconquered sun.

That a part of the same spirit prevalent in the modern day celebration was to be found in ancient times is gleaned from a letter written by Seneca, a pagan, previous to the coming of Christianity to Rome. It was in the year 39 A. D. that he wrote the following lines to his friend, Lucilius: "It is now the month of December and the greatest part of the city is in a bustle. Loose reins are given to public dissipation; everywhere you may hear the sounds of great preparations as if there was some real difference between the days given to Saturnalia and those for transacting business."³

The festivities held in connection with the *Saturnalia* and *Brumalia* were very wild and lascivious, so wild that they were regarded by the Fathers of the Christian Church as the very essence of heathendom, which was by no means meant to be a compliment. Tertullian is quoted as saying, in 220 A. D.: "By us who are strangers to sabbaths and new moons, once acceptable to God, the Saturnalia and Brumalia are frequented; gifts are sent hither and thither, and there is noise of games and much feasting." A few years after the feast of Christmas had been established, Martin, Bishop of Bracae, forbade participation in these games, undue feasting, and the observance of many of the festive customs, stating that they were of pagan origin and not to be associated with the Christian Christmas.

Ah, but Saturn's day drew to a close. The feast of the unconquered sun was overclouded. The pagans lost the key to Europe and most of the civilized world; paganism was reprobated; an event worthy of commemoration was known to men, for in her fulness of time the Sun of Justice took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and cast His light before men. "And the Light shineth in the darkness."⁴ He whom the chosen people of earth expected and whom the newly chosen people of earth follow, was born of a woman.

This coming of the Emmanuel—the God with us—is worthy of commemoration, for on that day the door of salvation began to open for us. We do not claim to know why it did not seem so important to the early Christian, unless what we have already said be correct, that they gave little thought to a birthday here

³ *Epistulae*, XVIII.

⁴ *John*, i, 5.

in this exile, their chief concern being their admission into the kingdom prepared for them from all eternity. Certainly it has been a universal holiday since the fourth century. What did the Church do in that century? She declared that December 25th was to be made solemn with Mass and other religious ceremonies in remembrance of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Other than this the Church did not do.

But in order to raise it to a more conspicuous position, the people brought over customs to surround the Christian feast; and these customs have become such a part of it as to seem to warrant the belief that their origin is to be found in the feast itself. Among the customs may be enumerated the giving of gifts at this season of the year; but the Romans did that long before Christ came. The decoration of homes and buildings with laurel and evergreen was also known in pagan times. The Druids used evergreens as a protection as well as a decoration in the outdoor groves where they performed their rites. Mistletoe was of particular importance to them. To them likewise we probably owe the outdoor carols that are so popular. To induce the Druids to leave their comfortable dwellings for the chill air of a winter night, musicians and singers went about in festive spirit. The modern Christmas-tree seems to be merely a substitute for the custom of transplanting living cherry or agroit trees from the outdoors to a large receptacle indoors. They were transplanted some time before, and permitted to bloom. In other places fir trees were used, and decorated with roses, candles and sweets. We might all have enjoyed these December festivities, following ancient customs; but there would have been no Christmas had Christ not come and dwelt amongst men.

It is therefore easily deduced that the practices which are common to us do not constitute the essence of Christmas, but only an accidental aspect of its observance.

Today the pendulum of human actions would seem to be swinging back to the time when the holidays of midwinter were celebrated with no thought of knowing a Babe born in a stable. No day in the year is heralded with so much panoply, with so much eagerness, with so much advertising. The world assumes an anticipatory mood months in advance; and all to what end? The purposefulness of it seems to be a manifestation in an acute form of the present day ills of the world—selfishness and ingratitude. Ingratitude for the gift of a Babe who was born that

we might rejoice. Rejoice in the mere trading of material gifts? No, rejoice in Him. Modern day methods of high pressure salesmanship, and the abundance of material gifts with which this country has been blessed, have combined in an effort to overshadow the true meaning of Christmas. They would give us Christmas without Christ.

The Church from its earliest days has been most vigilant and watchful in keeping Christ in Christmas. The initiation of pagan customs into this feast to the exclusion of the essence of the feast has been prohibited; even the observance of some customs of pagan origin have been condemned in no unmistakable terms. We see a particular condemnation of a pagan custom which had become too intimately connected with Christmas, couched in the following words: "If anyone, therefore, shall hereafter dare to follow this custom, he shall be deposed if he be a cleric; if he be a layman, let him be segregated."⁵

The Church, in instituting the feast of Christmas, had in mind only the greater honor and glory of the King of Kings and of His heavenly Father, Who so loved the world as to give to it His only begotten Son. True it is that at this season of the year the Church would have her children rejoice and partake of that peace of which the angels sang on that far-off Christmas when an Infant was laid in a manger beneath the chalky hills of Bethlehem. She would have us come to adore our Creator and to give to Him, in our own humble and simple way, honor, glory and love after the manner of the simple shepherds who heard the heavens resound with the reverberating rejoicings of the celestial throngs.

Upon certain of the customs from which spring so much of the joy and happiness that we find intimately bound up with Christmas, the Church does not frown. She is not displeased at the happiness which radiates from a small child at the sight of a Santa Claus—who is none other than St. Nicholas, Bishop of Bari, "whose mitre has degenerated into a hat trimmed with doubtful fur; and his embroidered cope has become a red jacket." The Church would have us revel in the rich heritage of the poor man of Assisi—the Christmas crib. In our exchange of gifts she would have us offer a pure heart to Him Who gives us Himself.

Surely the magnitude of the feast of Christmas may be approximated by the fact that the Church robes her ministers in

white and permits each of them to offer a triple sacrifice on that day. She withholds nothing from her liturgy that could enhance the celebration. Her one purpose is to make mankind realize that it now possesses its Saviour. She sings of joy and of peace; but taking her cue from a choir of angels she promises them only to men of good will. She would have us be conscious that we have our Emmanuel—our God with us. She would impress on us that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.”

⁵ *Council of Trullus, A. D. 706.*