

CHRISTMAS AND ITS MASSES

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IN the Roman Basilica of St. Mary Major there is exposed beneath the high altar a magnificent crystal urn, set in rich bas-reliefs of gold and marble. In that urn are piously preserved some pieces of the wooden crib in which our Lord first manifested Himself as the Promised Redeemer of a ruined race. At Rome also, in the Church of the Agonizing, is venerated a portion of the swaddling-clothes in which His Mother wrapped Him, while at the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere the spot whence there shot forth at His birth a miraculous fountain of oil is marked near the main altar. These pious relics are a precious link with that great event which divided the world's history into two signal periods, the event which was to mean and has indeed meant the turning point in history—the birth of Christ.

Christmas day is the central feast in the first cycle of the ecclesiastical year, and it is celebrated with high solemnity through the entire Christian Church. A very noteworthy fact, however, concerning its observance is that not until the fourth century do we find it being celebrated with proper liturgical festivity. It is a matter of wonderment that so solemn and so significant a festival as the anniversary of the birthday of Our Saviour should have been passed over without any recognition or honor by the early Christians. A possible explanation for this apparent neglect on the part of the early Church may be seen in the fact that there was much controversy and uncertainty as to the exact date of Christ's birth. Even in Jerusalem, where one might reasonably expect to find a trustworthy tradition in the matter, the reverse is the case as will be noted later.

As regards the historical celebration of Christmas there is no mention made of it in the list of feasts drawn up by Tertullian and Origen in the third century. In the fourth we find the definite establishment of the feast but here again there is evident a divergence of opinion as to the exact date upon which it should be celebrated. Since tradition was silent as to the date of Christ's birth there arose two distinct opinions upon this point and they were tenaciously defended,

the one by the Western Church, and the other by the Eastern Church. In the West custom assigned the twenty-fifth of December as the day upon which the birth of our Lord was to be commemorated, while in the East the sixth of January was thought to be the proper date. The Western Church no doubt commemorated the date of His coming to the Jews and the Eastern, His manifestation to the Gentile world, though this is not the basis of their contentions.

Finally, by a decree of the Holy See towards the end of the fourth century the Oriental Church was ordered to conform to the Roman tradition and so in the year 379 we find the Bishop of Constantinople, St. Gregory Nazianzen, and his flock, celebrating the feast of Christmas on the twenty-fifth of December for the first time. The Church in Antioch began the annual solemnization of the feast according to the Roman custom in the year 386, as the direct result of an eloquent appeal made to the Christians there by St. John Chrysostom. His sermon, which he delivered upon the occasion of the introduction of the feast into the Antiochene calendar, is still extant. The Roman custom was not adopted by the Christians in Egypt until the first or second decade of the fifth century, while the Church at Jerusalem did not cast aside the Eastern tradition until about the sixth century. The Armenian Church heeded the papal decree ordering it to conform its celebration of Christmas to the practice of the Mother Church, but upon its subsequent separation from the center of Christendom it reverted to its former custom and even to the present day the sixth of January is its Christmas day.

We have already stated what the Roman tradition in the matter was and yet there are many chronological difficulties in the way which prevent us from declaring that the twenty-fifth of December was the precise date upon which the Son of God was actually made man. An eminent authority, Doctor K. A. Heinrich Kellner, in considering the time as to when Christmas was first observed in Rome, states that "it did not come into existence suddenly, but would require time, and, like other festivals, a considerable period would have to elapse before it became general and gained official recognition."¹ Whatever be the exact date of Christ's birth we know that from the year 354, in the pontificate of Liberius I, the twenty-fifth of December became the official date for the celebration of the feast of Christmas.

It is thus seen that the feast of Christmas advanced through several stages of development until its final approval. It is interesting

¹ *Heortology* (London, 1908), p. 150.

to consider how this great feast was celebrated in the liturgy of the Church. The unique aspect of the Christmas liturgy, and that which will alone be considered here, is the liturgical custom, now universal in the Latin Church, of allowing to every priest the privilege of offering up the Sacrifice of the Mass three times, a privilege enjoyed on but one other occasion in the year, that is, on the feast of the Commemoration of the Dead, All Souls' Day, as it is familiarly called. This latter privilege came into existence as recently as the tenth of August, 1915, being granted by Pope Benedict XV.

This privilege of celebrating three Masses on Christmas day is of the highest antiquity. Both the Gelasian and Gregorian sacramentaries make mention of the *trina celebratio*, "triple sacrifice," and these service-books represent the liturgical usages of the seventh and eighth centuries respectively. Reference to it is also found in the eighth homily of St. Gregory the Great, which is read in the Office of Matins for this feast. We find what might be considered the origin of this practice in the liturgical celebration of Christmas at Jerusalem in the fourth century. The Christians there were accustomed to assemble at three distinct intervals for the commemoration and celebration of the liturgical Offices of Christmas day. The first assembly took place on the vigil of the feast in the Sacred Grotto of the Nativity, in Bethlehem. After the solemn services, which, we think, terminated in the celebration of Mass at midnight by the Bishop of Jerusalem in this venerable sanctuary, the great procession of clergy, monks, and faithful wended its way in the early hours of the morning to the Basilica of the *Anastasis*, or Resurrection, which was richly decorated for the occasion. Here the monks remained for the second liturgical service which consisted of the chanting of psalms and antiphons, and afterwards went, as the laity had already done, to take some short repose. Later on in the morning, about daybreak, the bishop, clergy, monks, and laity convened once more in the great Church of the Martyrium on Mount Golgotha, and there took place the third service which marked the day's festivities.

At Rome the custom was more definite since, from 432, it had the force of law. The first of the Three Masses was celebrated at midnight in the *Oratorium Praesepe* of the Church of Saint Mary Major and its celebrant was the Supreme Pontiff. Father Herbert Thurston, S.J., says, "This midnight or very early mass, with the ordinary daily sung mass at the Lateran Basilica, or at the high-altar at St. Mary Major, seemed to call for special recognition in the liturgy, and we have the two separate sets of prayers which St. Gregory

retained in his Missal for the first and third Masses of Christmas Day."²

The second Mass, that of the *Aurora*, or Daybreak, as it is called, was celebrated again by the Pope in the "royal chapel" of the Church dedicated to Saint Anastasia, Martyr. Primitively this Roman Basilica, built at the foot of the Palatine Hill, was the parish church of the imperial government and bore the name of *Anastasis*, or Resurrection, in honor of the Basilica at Jerusalem of the same dedication. Some liturgiologists deduce from this fact a possible reason for the selection of this church as the "station" for the second Mass since it recalled the custom observed by the Church at Jerusalem in this same regard. Saint Anastasia, let it be noted, suffered martyrdom during the persecution of Diocletian on the twenty-fifth of December and thus she enjoys the unique distinction of having a special commemoration in the second Mass of Christmas.

The third Mass was offered up at the Basilica of St. Peter, but in 1187, at the command of Pope Gregory VIII, the solemnities were transferred to Saint Mary Major. From Rome the custom of the Three Masses spread into France and gradually it became a universal custom in the Latin Church. Whilst the feast of Christmas, however, is of universal observance, only priests who follow the Latin rite have the privilege of celebrating three Masses on that feast-day and those who do not follow this rite, such as priests of the Oriental and Mozarabic rites, do not enjoy this privilege.

There is more, however, at the bottom of this singular practice than mere historical precedent and here, as in all things else, we see the clear mission of liturgical observance, to raise men's hearts and minds towards the invisible things of heaven, or as the beautiful Preface of the Christmas Masses so sublimely puts it: "It is truly meet and just, right and availing unto salvation, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto Thee, O holy Lord, Father almighty, everlasting God; for when by the mystery of the Word made flesh the light of Thy glory hath shone anew upon the eyes of our mind: so that while we acknowledge Him as God seen by men, we may be drawn by Him to the love of things unseen. . . ."³ In gratitude and grateful remembrance to Almighty God for this Sign of Salvation, the Light which manifests God to us, there is offered to

² "Christmas and the Christian Calendar," *American Ecclesiastical Review* XX (1899) Dec. p. 19 ff.

³ Translation of Dom Gaspar Lefebvre, O.S.B., in his *Daily Missal*

the Most Holy Trinity "the homage of a triple sacrifice." And this is indeed as it should be.

For thousands of years the world awaited this Light of the world in anxious expectation. This pre-Christian era, marking the period that elapsed between the fall of Adam and the nativity of Jesus Christ tells in some respects a sad and dark story. The Church commemorates these expectant years in the ecclesiastical season of Advent when, in the spirit of the Israelites, by liturgical prayers and ceremonies, she recalls to the minds of the faithful how miserable would be the state of humanity had the Incarnation not taken place and how necessary it is for us to prepare the way of His coming and make straight His path. In penitential spirit the Church arrays her ministers of the altar in somber colored vestments, emblematic of penitence, and its liturgical chants are slow, solemn, and subdued, suggestive of the sorrowful and repentant spirit which should be manifest throughout the Christian world. Yet this sorrow is not of despair and this repentance is not without its reward and when Christmas day finally dawns how great is and ought to be the jubilation.

This day of December which Holy Mother Church so fittingly celebrates is momentous in history, indeed its very turning point, and the Church celebrates it singularly by the triple sacrifice of the Mass. She thus honors the Most Holy Trinity, the Author and Finisher of our salvation and of our deliverance from the bondage of sin and eternal death. And should it not be so? Should there indeed not be this homage of a triple sacrifice? If there be no salvation, no remission of sin, no ultimate return to God Almighty, unless through the Incarnation of the Son of God, how grateful should we not be and how expressive should not our thanks be for the fulfillment of all these things in us and for the heralding of these "tidings of great joy" which have brought so much grace and peace and blessedness to humanity. It is because of all this, because the mystery of the Incarnation has meant and still means so much to man, raising him up within reach of Divinity, that it is allowed to offer up the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass three distinct times upon the feast of Christmas, so that a greater share of graces and blessings may be extended to the faithful of Christ.

Saint Thomas Aquinas gives us yet another reason for this triple sacrifice of Christmas day, a mystical signification it is true, but one suited to the promptings of human nature. He says, "On Christmas Day, several masses are said on account of Christ's threefold nativity. Of these the first is His eternal birth, which is hidden in our regard;

and therefore one mass is sung in the night, in the *Introit* of which we say: The Lord said unto Me: Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee. The second is His nativity in time, and the spiritual birth, whereby Christ rises as the day-star in our hearts, and on this account the mass is sung at dawn, and in the *Introit* we say: The light will shine on us today. The third is Christ's temporal and bodily birth, according as He went forth from the virginal womb, becoming visible to us through being clothed with flesh: and on that account the third mass is sung in broad daylight, in the *Introit* of which we say: A child is born to us."⁴

Such is the feast of the birth of our Lord in its historical and liturgical structure. Yet this feast is not something ancient; it is of perennial signification, because, like the Incarnation itself, it never ceases to be. The God-Man ever continues to affect that union between Himself and humanity for which He was born on that first Christmas night in the humble stable of Bethlehem.

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 83, Art. 2, ad 2um. (Translation of English Dominicans)

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A CAVE

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Hollowed by the hand of man,
 To harbor lowly beasts, so mild.
 Hallowed by the Will of God,
 There Mary came to lay her Child.