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## THE ORIGIN OF SOME CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

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SO much of the joy of the Christmas season is wrapped up in the customs which are associated with it that it is eminently worth while to see whence these have been derived. The happy spirit of Christmas morning, when enmities are forgotten and all the world has a friendly greeting, is truly in keeping with the event to which the day is dedicated. The love which flows from Bethlehem's cave enters the hearts of men and makes them joyful and happy because they are so much loved of God. Their rejoicing is manifested in their holiday attire, the gaily decorated homes, the tinselled trees. Charity, kindness and generosity give evidence of the joy man feels at this season. Christmas stripped of its happy associations might still be a great feast but for many the spirit of Christmas would be lost. These customs have indeed become very much a part of the season yet it is interesting to consider that many of them are of greater antiquity than the feast which is the reason for our joy.

There were among the pagans several midwinter festivals which they naturally abandoned when Christianity was introduced among them. Each of these feasts had its own customs and practices which remained even after the feasts had been discontinued. The fact that these customs have been brought down through the centuries might lead to the suspicion that our feast of Christmas was introduced to take the place of the pagan festivals. Some writers claim that this was so. That it could not have been is immediately evident from a brief consideration

of a few of these pagan feasts and their relation to the feast of the Nativity.

Before the fourth century there was no special feast assigned for commemorating the birth of Christ.<sup>1</sup> In some sections as early as the second century there was observed a feast of the birth and baptism of the Saviour on the 6th of January but this observance was confined to a small community in the East. About 337 or shortly thereafter, the feast of the Nativity was introduced at Rome with the celebration on the 25th of December. This feast gradually came to be observed in other localities and later became universal. The 25th of December may or may not have been the actual day of Christ's birth. Arguments have been advanced in favor of it and other arguments against it and in favor of other days. One writer declares that there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned the birthday of the Redeemer. Very exact calculations were worked out in favor of the 25th of December but certain facts not taken into consideration render the result untrustworthy. However, the day on which we celebrate Christmas seems more probable and has more in its favor than any other day. There lies in the dispute over the determination of the date of Christmas further possibility of the influence which the pagan festivals had in the institution of our feast. Fr. Martindale shows that while these celebrations may have had something to do with the choice of the date for Christmas, the same instinct which set them at the winter solstice would have sufficed to set our feast there also, without any deliberate desire to supplant or adapt the pagan feasts.<sup>2</sup>

Some of our Christmas customs are traced back to the feasts which were observed among the Romans, and others to the celebration of the Yule among the Northern peoples.

The Romans had two festivals at this time of the year. The first of these was the Saturnalia, a celebration which began on the feast of Saturn, the 17th of December, and continued for seven days. Saturn was for them the divinity who presided over the sowing of the seed. On the day of his feast religious cere-

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<sup>1</sup>W. F. Dawson, *Christmas: Its Origin and Associations* (London, 1902) says that Clement I writing to the faithful urged them to keep diligently the feast-days, and especially the day of Christ's birth. This would be evidence of a celebration in the first century, but unfortunately no documentary reference is given and other writers do not mention it.

<sup>2</sup>C. C. Martindale, S.J., "Christmas," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, III, 724 ff.

monies paid him honor and asked his favorable regard to the winter sowing which had just been finished. The remaining days of the Saturnalia were spent in merry-making. Ceremonial baths, pageantry, sumptuous banquets, lavish gifts distinguished this joyful season. Often the presents were wax tapers or dolls made of clay or pastry. Slaves were freed for the time of the festival and sat in the first place at table while the masters served them. It is in this Roman holiday that we find the origin of the traditional Christmas dinner, the exchange of Christmas presents, the burning of candles in the homes at Christmas time, the calls made on New Year's Day, and the generosity toward the poor which is so evident during the Christmas season. The pagan feast in the course of time degenerated into a period of wild abandon and unrestrained license until the authorities were forced to forbid the celebration about the year 200 B. C. After the suppression of the feast many of the customs were still carried on. While the feast itself could have had nothing to do with the determination of Christmas, as its celebration had been stopped many centuries before, the customs had remained and these attached themselves to the new Christmas feast. They developed a Christian significance in later times which all but obscures their pagan origin and their original purpose.

The other of the holidays observed at Rome was the feast of *Natalis Invicti*, the Birthday of the Unconquered. This day was dedicated to the triumph of light over darkness, and was supposed to be the day on which the sun had been born. Its observance on the 25th of December establishes it as a possible forerunner of our holy day. It was a feast of only minor importance and consequently needed no substitute when Christianity was introduced. In 1700, Filippo del Torre first saw its importance in connection with Christmas. He called attention to the relation between the natural fact of the change wrought in the heavens by the sun's ascent which was the reason for the pagan feast, and the supernatural revolution ushered in by the birth of Christ which is the occasion of our celebration. The writings of the Fathers and the liturgy abound with references to Christ as "the Sun of Justice," "our new Sun," "the true Son," "the Light of the world."<sup>3</sup> None of our Christmas customs is mentioned as originating from this feast but it is important because of the coincidence in date and signification.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. K. A. H. Kellner, *Heortology*, (London, 1908), p. 151.

These feasts which the heathens observed in the midwinter had a very definite purpose other than their religious meaning. The glad festivities which accompanied these days were meant to provide a recreation during the dark, dull days of the season. This was especially true of the Yule which was one of the most important festivals among the votaries of Druidism. Their feast had been instituted to atone in some way for the inclemency of the winter weather by giving an opportunity for a joyful and happy celebration. The Yule could have had little influence on the institution of the feast of the Nativity because its celebration was confined to the Northern countries while Christmas was first celebrated at Rome and in the East. From there it was brought to the other parts of Christendom. The Druids conducted their religious ceremonies in the forests, hence their name of the Religion of the Grove. The good spirits whose presence at the rites was most devoutly wished were supposed to take special delight in the shelter of trees. At the winter festival there was little shelter offered by the trees in the groves so the Druids gathered evergreens and decked their bowers, hoping thus to persuade the spirits to attend and to show their pleasure by a favorable disposition toward the devout worshippers. This is probably the origin of the use of evergreens, holly and Christmas trees, but this use has not come to us directly from the Druids. Their custom seems to have died out either with their religion or soon afterwards. The present use of Christmas greenery appears to have begun toward the end of the seventeenth century. It may have been a revival at that time of the Druidical custom. A more natural explanation is that evergreens, holly and Christmas trees are the most practical foliage which can be obtained for decorating homes and churches at Christmas time.

There was also among the Druids a special veneration for the mistletoe. The reason for this veneration is not clear but it was most likely because they considered that the mistletoe was nature's way of supplying the spirits with shelter during the winter on the otherwise leafless trees. How mistletoe came to have its present use and signification is not known but it evidently has no intimate connection with Christmas.

The Druids showed a decided preference for the night over the day, and their ceremonies and festivals during the Yuletide were held at night. In order to summon the people and to persuade them to venture out into the cold night some unusual

means was needed. For this reason musicians were sent through the neighborhood to sing and play as a sign that it was time for the rites in the grove. The rites were called Wakes, and the musicians got their name, Wakeths, or Waits, from the Wakes. This custom is continued to the present day, not so much in this country as in England, where the Christmas Waits go about in the evenings for two or three weeks before Christmas. The songs sung by the Druidical Waits have not been preserved so the carols sung by the present day Waits owe nothing to the Druids. The carols are the continuation of the song of the shepherds on the first Christmas night, and in this custom there is a mingling of one which was heathen with another which is Christian.<sup>4</sup>

The customs thus far considered are the social customs of Christmas. These are observed even among non-Christians and most of them have little relation to the fundamental meaning of Christmas. There is a parallel between the origin and practise of these customs and one which is found among the Chinese who have become Christian. They were accustomed to celebrating their pagan feasts with the shooting off of fire-crackers. They have brought this custom over to their new religion and now celebrate the feasts of the Church in the same manner.

There is another class of Christmas customs which are entirely Christian in origin and meaning. Among these are the three Masses of Christmas Day, the Mass at midnight, and the Christmas crib. It has been the custom almost since the time the feast was established to celebrate three Masses on Christmas. These three Masses are explained by St. Thomas as signifying the threefold birth of Christ: that from all eternity in the bosom of His Father; the birth in time from the flesh of the Virgin Mary on Christmas Day; and the birth through grace in the hearts of men. The Mass at midnight commemorates the eternal birth of Jesus, which was hidden from man in the darkness before creation. This is signified in the Mass by the words of the Introit: "The Lord hath said unto me: Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee." The second Mass celebrated at dawn recalls the spiritual birth of Jesus, first in the hearts of the shepherds and then in all Christians, a birth full of grace and mercy. In the Introit of this Mass are the words: "A light shall shine upon us this day"; and the Gospel recounts the announce-

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<sup>4</sup> John Cleland, "Essay on the Origin of the Musical Waits at Christmas," *The Way to Words by Things*, (London, 1766, p. 78.)

ment of the glad tidings to the shepherds and their hastening to adore the new-born King. The third Mass offered in the broad day celebrates the corporal birth of the Saviour, according to the words of its Introit: "A child is born unto us, and a Son is given to us." Again, we may consider that the Mass at midnight is offered in commemoration of the corporal birth of Jesus, which according to tradition took place in the cave at Bethlehem in the middle of the night, as a sign that He came to dispel the darkness of our ignorance. The Gospel of this Mass tells the story of how Mary and Joseph were forced to seek lodging in a stable and that there Mary brought forth her divine Son. The third Mass too may be taken as a memory of the eternal birth of the Word, which considered in itself is more wonderful than the other two and dazzles by its splendor the eye of the angels. In the Gospel we have St. John's account of the generation of the eternal Word.<sup>5</sup>

St. Francis of Assisi originated the custom of setting up a crib in the church. Before his time provision had been made in the liturgy for reenacting the scene at Bethlehem. St. Francis took this practise and made it popular. He set up the first crib in a grotto at Greccio in the vale of Rieti and there he held devotions with the people of the neighborhood.<sup>6</sup>

While it is evident historically that our feast owes practically nothing to the pagans, the great difference in meaning and purpose is even more evident. Their festivals were times of merriment instituted for the purely natural reason of counteracting the dullness of the winter season. The spirit of our feast is one of joy, prompted by the fulfilment of the prophets concerning the Redeemer's coming. It is a holy joy and a sanctified rejoicing. Far from our feast's owing anything of its essence to the heathens, the event we commemorate struck the death blow to the very foundations of all heathendom. The birth of Christ marked the death of paganism.

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<sup>5</sup> Saint Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, 3a q. 83, a. 2 ad 2um.

<sup>6</sup> Dom Otto Haering, O.S.B., *Living with the Church*, (New York, 1930), p. 9.