

# THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

The Christmas Season celebrates the redemptive mystery of Jesus Christ from another viewpoint. Whereas the Easter Triduum focuses on the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, Christmas focuses on the incarnation (becoming man) as a necessary condition for his redemptive suffering. It also counters the heresy that Jesus was not truly human.

The Christmas Season celebrates not only the birth of Christ but also his manifestation to the world. It lasts from the Vigil of Christmas (Dec. 24) through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (the Sunday after Jan. 6, unless Epiphany is celebrated that day).

## Historical Development

The Eastern and Western Churches developed the season with different emphases, but sharing the theme that the incarnation is a manifestation of the Son of God to the world.

- East – originally celebrated the manifestation of the Son of God in the birth and baptism of Jesus on Jan. 6 (Epiphany). After the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, the Birth of Jesus was celebrated on Dec. 25 and the Baptism of Jesus on Jan. 6.
- West – developed Christmas during the 4<sup>th</sup> Century as a very historical celebration of the birth of Jesus on Dec. 25. Jan. 6 was a doublet of Christmas, with the addition of the Magi (an element not present in the East). Dec. 25 – Christ comes in humility; Jan. 6 – Christ comes in great joy and glory.
- Gaul (France) – celebrated a three-fold manifestation of Jesus: Magi / Baptism / miracle at Cana. This was eventually adopted by Rome and is reflected in our January readings (Epiphany / Baptism of Jesus / 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C; prior to the 1969 Roman Missal, Epiphany and the two Sundays after it).

## Date of Jesus' Birth

When the BC/AD calendar was proposed in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, there was an error in calculating the year Jesus was born. Since Herod died in 4 B.C. by our present calendar, Jesus was probably born around 6 B.C. We don't know the exact year.

Although Luke's Gospel suggests a Spring birthdate (since the shepherds were in the field), the Church chose Dec. 25 for theological significance, celebrating Christ as the Light of the World in place of solstice-related pagan festivals.

- Since before Christianity, Romans celebrated a midwinter feast – the Saturnalia on Dec. 17 – eventually extending it to a week-long festival ending on Dec. 23, the winter solstice.
- In 274 A.D., the Emperor Aurelian introduced the Feast of the Invincible Sun on Dec. 25 to replace the Saturnalia; Christmas may have been set on this same date to counter this Sun feast.
- Northern Europeans celebrated midwinter/solstice festivals to entice the gods to allow spring to come again; various evergreen traditions stem from these feasts.