



The Nativity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

The Feast of Christmas was not a separate Church feast for the first four centuries of Christian history. It was celebrated with Epiphany in the one great feast of God's appearance on earth in the form of the human Messiah of Israel. The celebration of the Nativity began to be celebrated as such on the 25th of December to offset the pagan festival of the "Invincible Sun," which occurred on that day. It was established by the Church quite consciously as an attempt to defeat the false religion of the heathens. Thus, we discover the troparion of the feast making a polemic against the worship of the sun and stars, and calling for the adoration of Christ, the True Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2), who is Himself worshipped by all elements of nature.

Adapted from The Orthodox Faith, Vol. II: Worship, by Fr. Thomas Hopko.

Feast of Nativity

by the Late Very Rev. Nikon D. Patrinos

The date of birth of Christ was the object of speculation from the early 3rd century, various churchmen suggesting different dates. However, the celebration of the anniversary of Christ's birth does not appear to have become widespread until the 4th century. The earliest mention of observing the Nativity of our Lord on December 25 is in a calendar tabulating the practice in Rome in the year 336. According to some scholars, this date was perhaps chosen to counteract the pagan feast of the nativity of the Invincible Sun, Christ being denoted as the 'Sun of Righteousness'. From Rome the celebration of the Nativity spread to the rest of the West.

In the East it was the feast of the Epiphany on January 6 that primarily commemorated the Baptism of Christ. But in the later part of the 4th century, Epiphany Day was connected with the Nativity, especially in Syria and by the middle of the 5th century most of the Eastern Churches had adopted December 25 as a separate feast of our Lords' Nativity. However, the Church of Jerusalem celebrated on January 6 both Nativity and Baptism until 549, and in the Armenian Church January 6 is still observed as Christmas Day.

The feast of the Nativity has been popularly observed in the West with joy and merry - making both characteristics of the Roman festival of the Sun and other pagan feasts it replaced. Today's Christmas tree, adopted in recent years by the Orthodox in many parts of Europe and America, was imported to England in the 19th century by Albert, the Prince Consort, together with other German customs.

from A Dictionary of Greek Orthodoxy Hellenic Heritage Publications

Pope Saint Leo the Great (+ 18 February 461) warns the Christians against sun-worship

Christmas was established on the day of the pagan festival "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti" (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun). Pope Saint Leo the Great spoke to those who have brought elements of sun-worship into Christianity:

"Having therefore so confident a hope, dearly beloved, abide firm in the Faith in which you are built: lest that same tempter whose tyranny over you Christ has already destroyed, win you back again with any of his wiles, and mar even the joys of the present festival by his deceitful art, misleading simpler souls with the pestilential notion of some to whom this our solemn feast day seems to derive its honour, not so much from the nativity of Christ as, according to them, from the rising of the new sun!

Such men's hearts are wrapped in total darkness, and have no growing perception of the true Light: for they are still drawn away by the foolish errors of heathendom, and because they cannot lift the eyes of their mind above that which their carnal sight beholds, they pay divine honour to the luminaries that minister to the world. Let not Christian souls entertain any such wicked superstition and portentous lie.

Beyond all measure are things temporal removed from the Eternal, things corporeal from the Incorporeal, things governed from the Governor. For though they possess a wondrous beauty, yet they have no Godhead to be worshipped. That power then, that wisdom, that majesty is to be adored which created the universe out of nothing, and framed by His almighty methods the substance of the earth and sky into what forms and dimensions He willed. Sun, moon, and stars may be most useful to us, most fair to look upon; but only if we render thanks to their Maker for them and worship God who made them, not the creation which does Him service.

Then praise God, dearly beloved, in all His works and judgments. Cherish an undoubting belief in the Virgin's pure conception. Honour the sacred and Divine mystery of man's restoration with holy and sincere service. Embrace Christ born in our flesh, that you may deserve to see Him also as the God of glory reigning in His majesty, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit remains in the unity of the Godhead for ever and ever. Amen."

Pope Saint Leo the Great (+ 18 February 461)