

CLIFF NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

When was Jesus Christ born?

Neither the New Testament nor the early Church fathers mentioned the date of Jesus' birth, although they offer details of the circumstances surrounding His birth. For the early Church, enduring persecution, it was simply not important relative to the more important event of Christ's death and Resurrection. It was only as they realized the significance of the Incarnation, God entering into Creation and the human condition that the date of Christ's birth began to seem important. Not until the year 336 do we find the first mention of a celebration of Christ's birth. Speculation on the proper date began in the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the idea of fixing Christ's birthday started. Quite a controversy arose among Church leaders. Some were opposed to such a celebration.

Origen (185-254) wrote: "In the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners who make great rejoicings over the day in which they were born into this world."

In 525, Pope John I commissioned a calendar for feasts of the Church. Surprisingly, not only did the scholars preparing the calendar get Christ's birth wrong by several years, but His supposed December 25th birthday, was also off. The earliest mention of the observance on December 25th is in the Roman practice of the year 336. This date was probably chosen as a balance to the popular pagan feast of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* (*Birth of the Unconquered Sun*) by the celebration of the birth of the 'Sun of Righteousness' and its observance in the West, made popular by Pope Liberius in 354, seems to have spread outward from Rome after about 360 A.D.

Clement of Alexandria suggesting the 20th of May, the celebration of the anniversary does not appear to have been general till the later 4th century. In 243, an official feast calendar of the time placed the date of Christ's birth as March 28th. Other dates suggested were April 2nd and November 18th. In the East, January 6th was suggested.

Simply speaking, the date chosen had nothing to do with biblical precedent and everything to do with ecclesiastical authority. Although two thousand years have passed, we can at least determine the probable season of His birth, even though all scriptural indications argue against a December or any other winter date.

In Jerusalem and nearby Bethlehem, December and January were the winter months of increased precipitation in Christ's time, when the roads became practically unusable and people stayed mostly indoors. The Gospels note that at the time of Christ's birth, the shepherds were tending their flocks in the fields at night. A common practice of shepherds was keeping their flocks in the field from April to October, but in the cold and rainy winter months they took their flocks back home and sheltered them.

Likewise, the census described in the Gospel of Luke points to an earlier month than December. The Roman rulers knew that taking a census in winter would have been impractical and unpopular. Generally a census would take place after the harvest season, around September or October, when it would not seriously affect the economy, the weather was good and the roads were still dry enough to allow easy travel.

The best "*guess-timate*" for the birth of Jesus Christ would likely be between April and September. But in the final analysis, it is not so important that we celebrate the precise date of the birth of Jesus, but the creation-changing event of God becoming Man ... God entering into the human condition to transform it and bring salvation and redemption: that's the real meaning of Christmas!