

## THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

This season is rich with many liturgical celebrations: ADVENT, “which begins with evening prayer 1 of the Sunday falling on or closest to 30 November and ends before evening prayer 1 of Christmas” (GNLYC V, 40). The CHRISTMAS season proper, has AN OCTAVE of its own. The Feast of THE HOLY FAMILY is on the Sunday after Christmas; SAINT STEPHEN, First Martyr on December 26; SAINT JOHN, APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST on December 27; and the HOLY INNOCENTS on December 28. January 1 is celebrated as the SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD, followed by THE EPIPHANY. Feast of The BAPTISM OF THE LORD is celebrated on the Sunday following January 6.

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

An annual commemoration of the Nativity in the East centered on January 6 and in the West, it centered on December 25 and was focused on the actual nativity of Jesus.

*Advent:* The development of a liturgical season to prepare for Christmas has its origins in the West. The season reflects on both, the end time i.e. the second coming of Christ, and prepares for the celebration of Christmas, the commemoration of the first coming of Christ.

Our information on Advent begins the Synod of Saragossa (380), when the laity are reminded of their obligation to be in church on a daily basis from December 17 through January 6. The beginning of Advent’s core December 17–December 24 a Christian ascetical practice soon became the celebration. The season of Advent took on a penitential dimension, with the use of the color purple, and the *Gloria* and the *Alleluia* were not chanted in the Eucharistic liturgies.

In the 7th century, the composition of the poetic “O Antiphons” is used to prepare for the solemnity of the nativity.

*Christmas:* The origins of the Western Christmas feast are difficult to determine. According to the Chronograph of 354 Christmas can be dated back to 336. This dating and evidence provides the basis for one of two main theories.

*The first theory:* In 274, the emperor Aurelian re-established a specifically Roman version of the sun festival related to the winter solstice. The popularity of this festival and the long history of sun worship in Rome provided fertile ground for a Christian feast of the unconquered sun, which described Jesus, as the “Sun of Righteousness.”

*The second theory:* The birth of John the Baptist six months prior to Jesus, based on the story of the annunciation to Mary in Luke 1:36 where Gabriel announces that Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy. John’s birth would fall at the summer solstice with his conception at the autumn equinox, while Jesus’ birth would fall at the winter solstice with his conception at the spring equinox. This dating leads to rich theological

symbolism. The dating of Christmas in North Africa is supported by two anonymous writings, *De pascha computus* (c. 243), and *De solstitiis et aequinoctiis* (4th century).

Epiphany: The Western feast of Christmas, was adopted in the Eastern Church in Cappadocia and Antioch in the 4th century, in Egypt in the 5th century, and in Jerusalem 6th century approx. The West adopted the celebration of the Eastern Feast of the Epiphany in the 4th century in Rome.

The meaning of Epiphany is *manifestation*. The manifestations of God consist of many different aspects of the feast being celebrated together as complementary theophanies. In Egypt, it was apparently on the baptism of Jesus.

The Epiphany in the West was a very different celebration. By the 5th century, many dimensions developed. The three miracles of the Magi, the baptism, and the wedding at Cana were stressed. During the time of Augustine and Leo, the feast celebrated the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, whom the Magi represent.

*Excerpts taken and adapted from  
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Article written by Lizette Larson-Miller*