

Christmas

The Nativity of the Lord, also known as Christmas, is a special time each year when the Christian faithful celebrate the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a time to celebrate the Word of God becoming flesh in order to redeem humanity and our fallen world. On Christmas day, we celebrate the Son of God who walked among us and look forward to the salvation He won for us on the cross. In other words,

Christmas too is celebrated as a feast of our redemption, even though the focus of attention is on the incarnation and the ‘marvelous exchange,’ and not on the passion and resurrection. But the paschal mystery itself also finds expression in the Christmas liturgy as the citation for the second reading of the Mass during the Day shows and as the second reading of the Midnight Mass makes even clearer: ‘Jesus Christ...gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds’ (Tit 2:14).¹

While we joyfully celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas, we do so ultimately because through His incarnation he redeems the world. The Nativity of the Lord attests to the love of God for His people. This love is so strong that the Father sent His Son into the world to sanctify and redeem it. In this way, Christmas ultimately points to the celebration of Easter, when on the cross and in the resurrection, the power of God’s redeeming love is fully manifested. Christmas begins the story of God with us in the flesh. This story culminates in the events of Easter when that same flesh, born of the Virgin Mary, becomes wounded for our sake and dies in order that we might have life. Yet, even that is not the end of the story, for Christ rose from the dead so that we might live and with His glorified and resurrected body He ascended so that we too on the last day might be glorified as well. Christmas is an important time, for in it we are reminded of God’s wonderful love for us attested to in the sending of His Son to redeem the world.

It is known that the birthday, or Nativity, of Christ was celebrated on December 25th as early as 336 A.D. in the city of Rome.² The reasons for its introduction are debated. There are, however, two main reasons advanced by scholars: 1) The introduction of the Solemnity of the Nativity of Christ so as to revival the pagan feast of the “Unconquered Sun-God” which was being practiced in Rome. 2) The attempt early by Christians to calculate Christ’s birth:

The Christ-as-sun symbolism...caused them to pay special attention to the equinoxes and solstices. One opinion was that John the Baptist was conceived at the autumn equinox and born at the summer solstice. But since according to Luke 1:26 Christ was conceived six months after John, he was conceived at the spring equinox (March 25) and was therefore born on December 25.³

¹ Adam, Adolf. *The Liturgical Year: Its History & Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*. (New York: Pueblo Pub. Co, 1981) 128.

² Adam, 122.

³ Ibid., 123.

Whatever the exact reason for the establishment of Christmas on December 25th, we know that by 336 A.D. this practice had been firmly established.

The Nativity of the Lord, like the Triduum, is a rather complex celebration. Liturgically, Christmas begins at the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve. The vigil Mass is followed by a “Mass during the Night.” This “Mass during the Night” has traditionally been referred to as “Midnight Mass;” however, due to the celebration of this Mass before midnight throughout the parishes and cathedrals of the world, including the Papal Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica, the name was changed to “Mass during the Night.” This is further followed by a “Mass at Dawn” and a “Mass during the Day.” Both of these are on Christmas Day. Thus, on Christmas Day there are three Masses celebrated.

The historical development of these three Christmas Day Masses (“Mass during the Night,” “Mass at Dawn,” and “Mass during the Day”) is rather interesting. This practice of celebrating three Masses on Christmas is unique to the Roman Catholic Church, and can be traced back to the 6th century. Beginning in the 4th century, the only mass on Christmas was the festal Mass celebrated by the pope in St. Peter’s Basilica in the morning. In the 5th century, the Midnight Mass was added. This Mass stemmed from the papal practice of celebrating a Mass at midnight in the chapel of the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. The chapel was a replica of the cave in which Christ was born and since the 7th century claims to contain the relics of the manger. The third Mass was introduced in the 6th century when the pope celebrated Mass at the church of St. Anastasia near the Palatine on December 25th, the feast of St. Anastasia in the East. This church was significant at this time because it was made the imperial church after the Byzantine Greeks conquered Rome. The pope more than likely celebrated this mass out of respect for the Byzantine governor. It is through these three papal celebrations that the three Christmas Day masses entered into Roman practice.

The Vigil Mass

The readings for the Vigil Mass show the Lord’s delight for His people.

- ❖ First Reading: Isaiah 62:1-5 – The Lord delights in you.
- ❖ Second Reading: Acts 13:16-17, 22-25 – Paul bears witness to Christ, the son of David.
- ❖ Gospel: Matthew 1:1-25 – The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

In these reading we see the Christ child has come. In them we begin our celebration of the incarnation of the Son of God. The Opening Collect attests to the redemption we look forward to:

O God, who gladdens us year by year
as we wait in hope for our redemption,
grant that, just as we joyfully welcome
our Only Begotten Son as our Redeemer,
we may also merit to face him confidently

when he comes again as our Judge...⁴

This collect speaks of our hope for redemption in Christ so that when we are judged at the last day, we may stand with Christ in the company of all the heavenly hosts. Of interest in the Vigil Mass is that in the Creed, all are to kneel at the words “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate” so as to attest to the importance of the incarnation for our redemption.

“Mass during the Night”

The readings for the “Mass during the Night” speak of the Son who is given to us.

- ❖ First Reading: Isaiah 9:1-6 – A son is given to us.
- ❖ Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14 – The grace of God has appeared to all.
- ❖ Gospel: Luke 2:1-14 – Today a Savior has been born for you.

In these readings we celebrate even more clearly Christ’s presence with us. The first reading speaks of the fulfillment of the hope for a messiah promised to Israel. The second reading attests to live a life of grace. The gospel reading begins the Lukan account of the birth of Jesus. It ends with all the heavenly hosts saying “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” The Opening Collect utilizes symbolism of light:

O God, who have made this most sacred night
radiant with the splendor of the true light,
grant, we pray, that we, who have known the mysteries of his light on earth,
may also delight in his gladness in heaven...⁵

The theme of light runs throughout the Advent season. Here it reaches its fulfillment in the Son of God incarnate, who is the light of the world. The symbol of light which overcomes all darkness will be a theme throughout the Christmas season.

“Mass during the Dawn”

The readings for the “Mass during the Dawn” speak of the mercy of the Son who has come to save us.

- ❖ First Reading: Isaiah 62:11-12 – Behold, your Savior comes!
- ❖ Second Reading: Titus 3:4-7 – Because of his mercy, he saved us.
- ❖ Gospel: Luke 2:15-20 – The shepherds found Mary and Joseph and the infant.

⁴ Catholic Church. *The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of The Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II.* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011) 171.

⁵ *The Roman Missal*, 172.

In these readings, we continue to see the symbolism of light and the joy of the Word among us. We see the mercy of God who out of His love for the world sent His Son to be our Savior. The gospel reading continues the Lukan account of the birth of Jesus. In this passage we see the shepherds meeting with the child and their utter amazement. The reading ends with: “Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them. This reading calls us to glorify and praise God who we too have seen and met in the Eucharist this day. The Opening Collect calls us to be illuminated and live a life to the glory of God’s name:

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word,
the light of faith, which illumines our minds,
may also shine through in our deeds...⁶

We see in the Opening Collect the radical life of discipleship and service we are called to live in our love for Christ. Not only do we celebrate Christ’s incarnation and redemption of humanity, but we celebrate our own call to participate with Christ in the redemption of ourselves and the world.

“Mass during the Day”

The readings for the “Mass during the Day” speak to the Word’s dwelling among us and the call for all the ends of the earth to see and proclaim the power of God.

- ❖ First Reading: Isaiah 52:7-10 – All the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.
- ❖ Second Reading: Hebrews 1:1-6 – God has spoken to us through the Son.
- ❖ Gospel: John 1:1-18 – The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The usage of the Prologue from the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18) is a powerful testament to the mystery of the incarnation. Furthermore, it continues the light symbolism. Christ is the light of the world who has come to save it. The reading from John best brings out the prophet Isaiah’s words in the first reading that Christ is He “who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation.” As these readings show us, we are celebrating our own redemption in Christ’s incarnation. The Opening Collect further affirms this:

O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature
and still more wonderfully restored it,
grant, we pray,
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,
who humbled himself to share in our humanity...⁷

⁶ *The Roman Missal*, 174.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

It is because the Son of God entered the world that we are able to take part in the love of the Trinity. By coming in the world, the Son of God took on humanity so that we could share in His divinity. Blessed be God for His kindness and love!

God humbled Himself so that we might be exalted. The Nativity of Our Lord is about our redemption and divinization; it is about our participation in the life of God. We are invited to look beyond the secular symbols to the true heart of Christmas: the invitation by God to enter into relationship with Him. May God give us the strength to accept this invitation that we receive every moment of every day, but which we remember especially in the Christmas season. May our lives reflect the invitation received and may we, when Christ comes in glory again from the Father, “run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming.” Amen.⁸

Sources

Adam, Adolf. *The Liturgical Year: Its History & Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*. New York: Pueblo Pub. Co, 1981.

Catholic Church. *The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of The Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011.

⁸ *The Roman Missal*, 139.