

ON THE RECKONING OF TIME: ANCIENT CHRISTMAS “GUESTIMATES”

“Bah, humbug!” That is what some of you will think of this week’s column. This year, I received my first “Merry Christmas” greeting on the 2nd day of December. I struggled how to respond as now Thanksgiving and Christmas are barely distinct! No, the greeting was not an intentional snub of Advent, but I can’t help but **feel sorry for Advent**. I myself am an equal opportunity offender. We have a concert this coming week. I call it a “pre-Christmas” concert, though I fully expect Christmas music. We increasingly anticipate the season as I reflect over the past three decades. I added an afternoon Christmas Eve Mass—in theory “competing” with Midnight Mass—though in actuality they draw very distinct crowds. We could easily add yet another Eve Mass and likely bring in a sizable congregation, making me wonder if offering three Masses on Christmas Day is anachronistic. Advent is our **most forgotten** liturgical season, having been completely overshadowed. What a shame, as it is about patient waiting, joyful anticipation and prayerful preparation.

Truthfully, the Church has never pretended to know the **exact date** of Christ’s birth. For instance, the 3rd century writers Origen, St. Irenaeus, and Tertullian fail to include Christmas or its date on their lists of feasts. We fully acknowledge that the Emperor Aurelian, worshipper of the Sun God had introduced a feast of *Sol Invictus* on 25 December, the day of the sun’s “rebirth” after the Winter Solstice. Not only that, they gathered on the very hill where the Vatican is presently located to celebrate the birth of the Unconquered Sun, near to where the bones of Saint Peter were laid to rest. Christians appropriated elements of this day in assigning the birth of Jesus to this same day and for justifiable reasons.

Jesus was seen as the “sun of justice” as recorded by the prophet Malachi (3:20) and the date for the birth of Jesus was **first attested** in the *Depositio martyrum* written in ca. 336 A.D. The key document states: “VIII kal. ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudæa,” translated “on the eighth before the calends of January, Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea.” In the ancient system of computing time, the eighth day before the calends of January is 25 December. That same ancient reckoning is memorialized in Latin on our Cathedral’s cornerstone. *Ante Diem Quartum Nonas Iunias A.D. MCMVII* (the fourth day before the nones of June) translates to June 2, 1907. When was December 25 finally chosen? A Christmas homily preached by Pope Liberius I on December 25 is preserved— he was pope from 352-366 A.D., and so the tradition is a venerable one.

To complicate matters further, it is not only the date, but the year of his birth that is confusing! The brilliant 6th century Scythian (today’s Romania) monk named **Dionysius Exiguus** (the latter word a nickname meaning “the little”) is responsible for one of the greatest mix-ups in Church history. He was a gifted linguist, translating many texts from Greek to Latin and was well-versed in Canon Law, providing key compilations of texts. The Pope tasked him with calculating an Easter table. Perhaps he extended his expertise to one field too many. Working off the complicated Easter dates tables, he took an existing Easter Table (listing the yearly movable dates) and replaced the dating from the founding of Rome to the birth of Jesus, making his birth the foundational point of reference. God bless him for that, but his math was wrong! He fixed, erroneously, 25 December of the year 753 “from the founding of Rome” (*Ab urbe condita* in Latin) as the birth of Jesus. Historians now know that his **calculation was off by a few years!** Nor did he include the year “0” between 1 B.C. and 1 A.D. Don’t ask— my head is already spinning enough!

Pope Emeritus Benedict wrote in *The Infancy Narratives: Jesus of Nazareth*: “the census took place at the time of King Herod the Great, who actually died in the year 4 B.C.” He notes that the census may have been carried out over a period of a few years, further complicating matters. By the 8th century, the Venerable Bede was acutely aware of the error, but it stands to this day and there is no compelling reason to change it now! **Let sleeping dogs lie!** But this goes much deeper than an historical dating of the birth of Jesus. For Christians, marking sacred time has a deeper meaning. As the patristic scholar Paolo Siniscalco observed: “Unlike pagan chronology, Christian chronology was also a philosophy of history,” so that “the convert, in abandoning paganism, was compelled to enlarge his historical horizon; he was likely to think for the first time in terms of universal history.” (Encyclopedia of the Early Church Vol. 1, p. 166.)

In modern scholarly language, the designation A.D. (Anno Domini) has been replaced with C.E., the “Common

Era.” Excuse me, but “What event marks the beginning of the common era?” Of course, the answer can only be “the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.” We **mark sacred time** in reference to the birth of our Lord and Savior, for he is the Lord of time and the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, the beginning and the end. The nexus among science, astronomy and theology is fascinating and we owe a great debt of gratitude to scholars who calculated centuries ago with remarkable accuracy the foundational events of salvation history.

- My college-aged niece is finishing a semester abroad in Paris, where, unwittingly, she is gaining a first-hand education in French politics. Once, looking out a restaurant window, she was amazed how foggy it was until she quickly realized it was tear gas! The next time you complain about gas prices, look across the ocean to France, where it **exceeds \$7** per gallon!
- I love seeing the customary homage paid to the Blessed Mother on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. The pope travels to the toniest neighborhood in Rome (the Spanish Steps) to pray at the base of the 40-foot Cipollino marble **Column of Mary Immaculate**, erected following the proclamation of the Dogma in 1854. The column sits atop a large base populated by four Old Testament figures (Moses, Isaiah, David and Ezekiel) each of whom providentially foretold of the Virgin Mary in some fashion.
- Congratulations to UST’s **Catholic Studies Department** on the occasion of its 25th anniversary of preparing countless vibrant new Catholic leaders, lay and ordained. The model has been replicated around the nation. While secularization has thoroughly permeated many Catholic universities, Catholic Studies provides hope. Consider subscribing to *Logos*, the outstanding Catholic Studies quarterly journal. It will stretch your Catholic mind in the best sense.
- Forty bowl games...eighty teams, **not** including the Championship Game. That’s right– **eighty teams** “earned” postseason bowl bids in Division I Football. It’s my annual rant, but I refuse to take seriously a game called the “Belk Bowl.” And what in heaven’s name is a Belk, anyway? My favorite this year–the “Bad Boy Mowers Gasparilla Bowl” featuring Marshall vs. South Florida. I.Can’t.Wait!
- With December-February **heating bills** averaging in the **\$10,000 per month** range, your assistance in helping to defray costs associated with heating our Church is most appreciated. Special envelopes are in the pews and please know of my deepest gratitude.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector