

## THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL.

CHRISTIANS are accustomed to hail the advent of the Christmas festival with peculiar gladness; for it is a commemoration of the event which, more than all others, brought joy to the whole world,—the anniversary of the day whereon was inaugurated the great work of man's redemption. The birth of Christ marks the commencement of the Christian era. Christmas comes first and foremost in the ecclesiastical cycle: it ushers in all the other festivals of the year; it is preceded by a period of special preparation, and is celebrated with solemn rejoicings. St. Chrysostom styles Christmas the mother of all festivals, since from it all others take their origin; for had not, he adds, Christ been born according to the flesh, He had not been baptized, which is the Epiphany; neither had He been crucified, which is our Paschal festival; neither had He sent down the Holy Spirit, which is our Pentecost.

It may, therefore, appear strange that so important a feast should for three centuries and a half have held no place among the festivals of the Church. Yet such is the indisputable fact: during the early ages of Christianity the Feast of Christmas was entirely unknown. No day was set apart for its solemn celebration; no liturgy was in existence for the special commemoration of the Saviour's birth; no public ceremonies summoned the faithful to kneel in spirit before the Crib of Bethlehem. The only official notice of the feast was a commemoration of the Nativity on the 6th of January, as an adjunct to the three other mysteries solemnized on that day.

The Baptism of Christ was the mystery originally kept on the 6th of January, The commencement of His public ministry, and announcement to be the Son of God, was held to be an event of far greater magnitude than His coming into the world. It was supposed, moreover, to possess a more cosmopolitan signification, as being not confined to the Jewish nation, but a proclamation to the whole world of a Redeemer. Hence the Epiphany, or Manifestation, was considered to be of so much greater importance than the birth of Christ that to the latter no special day was assigned. The Epiphany is spoken of by the Fathers as the Day of Baptism—*Principium et causa hujus festi baptismus Christi est*; and it was one of the three days on which baptism was administered to catechumens. To this public appearance of Christ at His baptism as the Son of God was united the commemoration of His first public miracle, the conversion of water into wine at the marriage banquet of Cana. The appearance of the Star and Adoration of the Magi were also added, and a commemoration of the Nativity made.

Thus the Epiphany became a collective festival, denoting a fourfold manifestation: (1) The appearance of God manifest in the flesh at the Nativity; (2) The appearance of the Star that guided the Magi to Bethlehem when Christ was manifested to the Gentiles; (3) The glorious manifestation of His Divinity and of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity at His baptism; (4) The manifestation of His supernatural power at the marriage of Cana. In consequence of this manifestation in four different ways and on four different occasions, the festival was called in the West *dies epiphaniarum*, or *apparitionem*. Only through the influence of the Latin Church was the commemoration of Christ's birth introduced in the East, where the Epiphany was kept as a triplex festival: (1) Epiphania, the appearance of the Star; (2) Theophania, the manifestation of the Holy Trinity at Our Lord's baptism; (3) Bethphania, the manifestation of divine power in the house (*beth*) of Cana. St. Jerome declares the Epiphany is venerable, not because of Christ's birth in humane flesh (for in this he was hidden), but because He was openly declared to be the Son of God. St. Chrysostom says: "Not the day of His birth is the day of His real appearance, but the day of His baptism, and the manifestation of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity."

Not until the middle of the fourth century was the Nativity separated from the Epiphany by the Latin Church, and a day set apart for its celebration, the two feasts being called respectively *Prima* and *Secunda Nativitas*. The error of the Manichees, who denied that Christ was born in the flesh, very probably induced greater importance to be given to His Nativity, and led to its being made a distinct festival.

In reference to the day, Clement of Alexandria mentions the opinion of some who placed the birth of Christ on the 20th April, and of others who assigned to it the 26th of May. St. Epiphanius and Cassian state the general belief to be that it was on the 6th of January. Calculating the birth of Christ from the Crucifixion, which was supposed to have taken place on the 9th of April, a book entitled "*De Pascha Computus*," published either in Italy or Africa in 243, gives the 29th of March as the date of the Nativity. But this date was not in accordance with the popular belief that Christ suffered on the 25th of March—a belief so deeply rooted in Gaul that we find it recorded that as late as the fifth and sixth centuries the Passion was commemorated on the 25th of March, and the Resurrection on the 27th, quite irrespective of the movable solemnities of Good-Friday and Easter Day. The accepted tradition was that in the spring equinox the world was created; on the same day mankind was redeemed by the death of Christ; and that the Annunciation and Incarnation of the Eternal Word took place on the same day (March 25); whence nine months would bring us to the 25th of December, the day of His birth.

St. Augustine mentions as an undoubted historic fact that Christ was born on the 25th of December. The first proof of the observance of the feast of the Nativity on that day is found in a Roman calendar drawn up in the year 336, in which is read: *viii kal: Jan: (December 25) natus Christi in Bethleem Judee*. It was during the pontificate of Pope Julius I. (337-352) that the appearance of Christ in the flesh (*natalis in carne*) was separated from the Epiphany, and appointed for solemn commemoration on the 25th of December. We learn from St. Ambrose that his sister Marcellina made her profession in Rome on the day of Our Lord's Nativity, in presence of Pope Liberius, who preached on the occasion on the mystery of the day. This must have taken place in 353 or 354, as Liberius left Rome in the latter year.

The observance of Christmas as a distinct festival was not introduced into the East until a later period. St. Jerome and many writers of his time speak of the Nativity and Epiphany being kept on different days in the Western Church. Addressing the consecrated virgins in the cloister at Bethlehem on the 25th of December, St. Jerome bids them remember that on this day Our Lord was born. People here, he says, assert that "He was born on the 6th of January; and they ask, who should know better than those who live on the very spot where He was born? But let us hold fast the tradition we have received from our forefathers, while we condemn not their opinion; for the teaching of the Apostles is nowhere better known than in our city of Rome, where they were received when driven out of Judea."

St. Basil, preaching in Cappadocia about the year 372, mentions the Nativity and Baptism of Our Lord as being both kept on the 6th of January; while his brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, preaching in the same place on St. Stephen's Day, 386, says: "Yesterday we celebrated the birth of Him who was made sin for us." Hence we may conclude that during the interval the change already made in the ecclesiastical calendar in the West had spread to the East. The precise time of its introduction can not be determined, as it was not simultaneous throughout the churches of the Orient. St. Chrysostom, in a Christmas sermon delivered at Antioch in 386, says that ten years had not yet passed since his hearers had come to the true knowledge of the day of Christ's birth, which had been kept on the Epiphany until the Latin Church gave them better information. At the time when he spoke the Christmas festival was not kept either in Jerusalem or Alexandria. In the latter metropolis it was introduced only in 431.

By some it is conjectured that Christmas was fixed on the 25th of December for the purpose of affording a Christian substitute for the *Saturnalia*, or feasts of rejoicing, celebrated by the pagans at the winter solstice. After the shortest day the sun was supposed to enter upon a new and victorious course, and the succeeding days were kept in honour of *sol novus, natalis invicti*. St. Gregory Nazianzen's exhortations to his people on the Nativity seem directly intended to warn them against falling into the same abuses as the heathen. He bids his hearers beware lest, whilst observing the joyous festival, they should indulge in the luxury and intemperance which mark the pagan feasts. Conformity with the habits and customs of the heathen world around them, from which their Christian profession obliged them to be wholly separate, was a danger to which converts were continually exposed. The fast of the kalends of January observed in the Latin Church was perhaps intended no less as a means of deterring Christians from taking part in the mummeries and excesses which ushered in the New Year than as a preparation for the Epiphany. So long as the Epiphany continued to be considered a greater festival than Christmas, the fast of Advent which preceded it was kept from the 17th of December until the 6th of January; and when Christmas was first fixed for celebration on the 25th of December, the faithful were directed not to fast on that day.

For a considerable time after the Christmas festival was universally kept, the Epiphany was still held, both in the East and the West, to be the more important festival of the two. The ancient Roman *Ordo* speaks of it as undeniably greater. Gerbert, writing in the thirteenth century, in a German Mass-book calls it *der obriste Tag*—the higher or greater day. But as time went on, the first manifestation, the birthday of the Word made Flesh, gained ground, and took precedence over the second manifestation, the proclamation of the Saviour's birth to the Gentile world. Moreover, as the years passed on, the Baptism of Christ ceased, by some unaccountable change, to be regarded as the principal mystery commemorated on the 6th of January, and gave place to the Adoration of the Magi, whence the day was called the Feast of the Three Kings. This alteration was seemingly a very gradual one; not until the beginning of the ninth century did the Epiphany receive this latter signification.

There is no doubt that from the time that it was constituted a distinct festival, the Nativity of the Saviour was celebrated by the Church with peculiar solemnity and devotion. In ancient times the principal festivals were preceded by vigils, which the faithful kept in the church, passing the night in fasting and prayer. This custom was afterward abolished for Christians in general, on account of the abuses to which it gave rise, and restricted to the religious orders. It was, however, retained for Christmas, the people being invited to assemble in the churches to assist at the Divine Office and hear the Midnight Mass. The German name for Christmas, *Weihnacht*, has reference to this