



FACT OF  
FAITH

# The Date of Christmas

BY FR. LARRY RICE

If you ask nearly anyone in the Western world the date of Christmas, chances are you'll be told its December 25. And if you ask them what Christmas celebrates, chances are you'll be told it's the commemoration of Christ's birth. But the question remains, was Jesus born on December 25? Well, the most diplomatic answer would be, "experts differ."

Given the popularity of Christmas in today's world, it's hard to imagine that Christmas wasn't always seen as particularly important. The earliest records we have of the Church observing the feast of Christ's birth date from the fourth century. By the time St. John Chrysostom was bishop of Constantinople in 398, most of the Christian world observed Christmas on December 25. The Church in Armenia was at that time marking Christmas on January 6; today much of the Orthodox Church follows this tradition.

But why was December 25 chosen? Many believe that the date was chosen to counter the Roman feast of Saturnalia. Certainly, in the history of the Church, and the history of Christmas in particular, there are plenty of examples of Christians shifting local pagan observances to Christian ones, effectively "baptizing" their culture and customs. This doesn't mean that Christmas is



A Nativity scene is displayed on Christmas on the grounds of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Haskell, N.J. (CNS photo/Octavio Duran)

some kind of disguised pagan festival, it simply reflects the very understandable human need to integrate our faith and culture and to allow our faith to transform every part of our lives.

Regarding the actual year of Christ's birth, we don't find much more clarity. Since the calendar is traditionally divided into epochs "before" and "after" Christ, one might presume that Jesus was born in the year one, or perhaps the year zero. Well, there was no year zero. And tradition has it that a sixth century monk names Dionysius Exiguus fixed the date at the year 1, but errors in his calculations have led scholars to believe that the actual year may be between 4 and 6 BC. Historical evidence, based on references from Luke's Gospel, might

lead us to concur. Astronomical research by Dr. William Bidelman at Case Western University makes a strong case for April or March of the year 2 BC.

Ultimately, for Christian believers, the precise date and year isn't of primary importance. For us, most important is the underlying fact, which we celebrate at Christmas: that God loved us enough to become human, to share our human experience, and achieve our redemption. Whenever we celebrate Christmas, we remember that Christ's Incarnation has changed our world—and our lives—forever.

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