

The Story of Christmas and the New Year

Introduction

I strongly doubt that there is any day in the course of the year in the lives of Christians of all ages that is better known, better loved and better celebrated than the 25th of December. Easter is the feast of all feasts, the highest and most important of all in our Christian liturgy, but Christmas is the most widely celebrated. All over the world, people look forward to, and prepare well in advance for Christmas. People long for this feast not just because of its spiritual significance, but also for the mundane or material promises including the gifts, parties, special meals and the renewal of relationship ties and so forth. Childhood memory of Christmas stays on well into late-late age.

Many people celebrate Christmas every year without understanding its real or true meaning. In this regards, minds are often taken up with material and secular considerations. Even good Christians can all too easily be misled by the joy and merriment that accompanies Christmas that they fail to recognize the reason for their happiness. In this reflection, I hope to explore this big event called Christmas, including the history behind it. This includes a discussion of the key events of Christmas such as the advent and Christmas day and how these have evolved over the years. I will also briefly discuss the new year and its connectedness to Christmas. This reflection aims at helping us understand why Christians are filled with joy at Christmas and to tell our own story of this gracious season.

Advent

For about one whole month before hand, the church too prepares spiritually for a worthy celebration of the most remarkable feast on earth today, Christmas. This is the time the Church calls "Advent". Advent simply means 'coming'. This is a period of preparation for the greatest coming of all, the coming of God to our sinful world and his birth among us as man (*Person nke abua n'ime ato na otu di Ngozi*).

As we probably know already, some of the customs associated with Christmas have their origin deep in the past before the good news of the Gospel was made known. Other customs of the extant past however, which may seem to have no religious meaning, are full of significance for us Christians. Guess we know, for instance, that the custom of decorating a Christmas tree was first introduced by St. Boniface into Germany more than twelve hundred years ago. At that time, the people of Germany were mainly pagan and St. Boniface was a missionary. In order to counteract the pagan custom of offering sacrifice to a sacred oak tree, he commanded that Christians decorate a fir tree in honour of the Child Jesus at Christmas time and so the custom of the Christmas tree started from Germany.

Another instance is the custom of Santa Claus. In many countries of the world, children believe in a mysterious being named Santa Claus. If they have behaved themselves well during the year, he will visit them (kids) on Christmas night and bring them a gift. How many children know that Santa Claus is actually St. Nicholas, bishop and saint who lived in Turkey several hundreds of years ago? Santa means 'saint' or 'holy' in Latin while Claus is a contraction of the name 'Ni – Claus, Nicholas'. He was well loved for his generosity in giving unexpected gifts to the poor, especially at Christmas time. Much later in Holland, he was made the patron saint of children and would reward them with a present if they were good and well behaved.

In Mexico, children bring gifts to the Church on Christmas eve to lay at the feet of the infant Jesus. One story tells of a little boy who wanted to give a gift to the child, but he was poor and had nothing to give. "But I can at least pray, he thought. And so, he knelt down outside the church window where he could see the people inside and made a fervent prayer to Jesus. When he rose to his feet, there was a beautiful red plant in the spot where he had knelt. He reverently plucked a red flower from the plant and laid it at the feet of the infant



Jesus in the Church. This they say was the origin of the beautiful *poinsettia* plant. Even today in Mexico, it is still called the “flower of the holy night”.

Christmas

On the blessed feast of Christmas every year, Christians throughout the world praise and thank God for the good news proclaimed by the angel. We have good reason to express our happiness and to rejoice in this celebration. For this child, born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem is the prince of peace. And so we rejoice as members of a great family spread throughout the world. Christmas has always been regarded as a family occasion. Every Christian wants to spend Christmas day at home with their families. People save money and resources to travel long distances just to be reunited with their loved ones at Christmas. They see the figures of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and then think of their own families.

We also know that the message of Christmas is that of peace. Our world is increasingly ravaged by war and hatred between individuals, peoples, and nations. The most senseless and destructive of wars include the first and second world wars, the Nigerian civil war, Vietnam War, Israeli - Palestinian war, Arab wars, Iraq war. The evils of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain unforgettable. The satanic menace of terrorism has dealt deadly blows on so many innocent people and dented our world with bloodshed. The list is endless.

During the first world war (1914-1918), the German army faced that of France and Britain and soldiers defended lines of opposing pits and trenches. All was quiet on the frontlines in 1914. Soldiers could not fire their shots on that blessed night. It was so quiet. Suddenly, from the German lines, the French soldiers heard the words, in German, of a Christmas carol they knew: **“Silent night, holy night. All is Calm, all is bright, round you virgin mother and child. Holy infant, so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace...”** This hymn meant so much for the German soldiers. It had been composed by a young German priest. It was then translated into French and English and indeed several languages of the world. The German soldiers dropped their guns and came forward, singing all the time, ‘silent night, holy night...’. The French soldiers too climbed out of their trenches and soon the opposing armies had really met: they met for the first time as human beings and as brother Christians, and they celebrated that Christmas night as best they could. On the day after Christmas, they were commanded to resume fighting again and the slaughter went on for another three years.

Even in the Vietnam war (1964-1975), the soldiers agreed to a truce on Christmas day. They didn’t think they should be fighting on such a sacred and blessed night. Other cease fires had been proclaimed in several other places of conflict because of Christmas.

The Early Celebration of Christmas

Christmas has not always been celebrated as we know it today. For nearly three hundred years after the death of Jesus, the Christians formed a small and persecuted community who were often killed because of their faith.

Throughout the pagan roman empire, Christians were not allowed to build churches or to celebrate publicly the memory of the birth of Christ. It was not until Constantine became Emperor of Rome that Christians received their freedom in the year 313 AD. He was also responsible for building the first Christian church and it was dedicated to St. John, the beloved disciple of Jesus. This church is still the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope). The early Christians began to observe the birth of Jesus on the 6th of January every year. It



was only later that this feast day was called CHRISTMAS. This word means exactly what it says : the mass of Christ, Christ-mass. Many Christians today are shocked to hear or learn that 25th December was not the actual date of Christ's birth. In fact, no one knows what date is Christ's exact birthday. In the Gospel of St. Luke, we heard that Christ was born when Augustus was emperor and a man named Quirinius was governor of Syria. The early Christians therefore had a good idea of the year in which Christ was born, but they did not know the actual date. They began to record dates and count years from the birth of Christ. Therefore, every new year was for them was another year of the Lord (Anno Domini). This is why we use the capital 'A.D' for years of the Christian calendar. For instance, the year 2015 means Two thousand and fifteen years after the birth of Christ.

As emphasized earlier on, the early Christians celebrated the feast of Christmas on the 6th of January. This is still the custom of most Christians of the ancient Coptic Church in Egypt and Ethiopia. It was in Rome that Christians first began to celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December. They did this to counteract the pagan festival of the sun god held on that day and quite common in Rome in those days. Gradually, other Christians from other several regions joined in and it spread throughout the known world. Even today in our Latin rite, the 6th of January is still linked to Christmas and is still called 'the little Christmas'.

Christmas Today

Bethlehem is a small town on the west bank of the river Jordan in Palestine. The inhabitants are Arabs and the majority of these are Christians. On Christmas night they are joined by thousands of pilgrims from all over the world who pray and sing together in many languages the beautiful 'adeste fideles' -**"O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem..."**. As we cannot all go to Bethlehem, we try to bring the picture of the birth of Christ into our homes, Churches, and hearts. Like Jim Reeves, we too can sing with certainty that "man shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day". Many families make small cribs with pictures of the infant Jesus and Mary and Joseph and the animals and a bright star overhead. It was St. Francis of Asisi more than seven hundred years ago that made the first crib or a representation of the birth of Jesus.

The New Year's Day

It is quite interesting to note the difference between the Christian calendar and that of the Muslims, or the African traditional religion, or even the Jewish, for instance. The early Christians counted their the years and record of events as happening before or after the birth of Christ. For us, that God took a human body like ours and became man was clearly the most important event in the history of humanity, therefore world history has to be recorded or remarked based on this great event. Christians adopted the old Roman calendar of Julius Ceaser and that is still being followed throughout the world today. The Muslims count their dates from the time that Prophet Muhamad fled from Mecca to medina and the people there accepted his preaching. This in Arabic is called Hejjira and so the years in Muslim calendar are prefixed with the initials A.H., meaning Anno Hejjira or in the year of the flight. In the same way, the years in the Christian calendar are prefixed, A.D., meaning "in the year of the Lord". The Muslim has special names for the lunar months of the year. For instance, the name 'Ramadan' is the month of fasting according to Muslim calendar. In ATR (African Traditional Religion), special events are used to count or reckon events. For instance, there are four days in the Igbo week and sixteen days in their one month. Several months make one year. Each of these months have special events and sacred meanings attached to them.



The Jews also follow a lunar calendar like the Muslims and they count the years from what they believe was the creation of the world. This took place, they believe 3761 years before Christ; and so, this present year for them is 5776. The first Christians were all converts from the Jewish religion, so they naturally followed the Jewish calendar for their religious practices. But in civic affairs, they followed the Roman calendar. This was known as the Julian calendar introduced by the emperor Julius Caesar in 46 BC. His successor Caesar Augustus slightly modified this calendar which was used for over 1,600 years. The names July and August are named after those two emperors. The other months were named after the Roman gods or festivals or were known by their numerical position. The new year began for the Romans with March so, September, October, November, December merely mean 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th month in Latin.

The Christian Calendar and the New Year's Day

Emperor Augustus corrected the calendar introduced by Julius Caesar to the Roman Empire. A much bigger correction was on the instruction of Pope Gregory XIII just over 400 years ago, in October 1582. It was discovered that the calculations made in the Julian calendar was not quite correct and that each year was about 11 minutes too long. In the following years, the calculations were widened and the calendar time and the movement of the earth around the sun had increased by ten days. Pope Gregory decreed that ten days be suppressed and that Thursday 4th October 1582 be followed immediately by Friday 15th October 1582. Because of this, for instance, St. Teresa of Avila in Spain died on 4th October 1582, but her feast day is observed the next day, 15th October. This new calendar was the most exact and definitive. This calendar which is still in use till today is the full product and responsibility of the Church and has ever been called the 'Gregorian Calendar'. Many non-catholic countries refused at first to accept the new calendar simply because it came from the Pope. For instance, it was not until the year 1782, that Great Britain agreed to adopt this Gregorian new calendar, though not without protests and resistance from some people. New Year Day, the first of January is a truly Christian feast. On this day we thank and praise God that another year of the Lord has passed and a new one has begun. We honour the blessed Virgin Mary on that day as we celebrate the feast of Mary, the Mother of God. It is also a world day of prayer for peace between peoples and nations.

Conclusion

The tendency to take Christ out of Christmas is very high today. The danger of reviving it as a pagan orgy is also very high especially in our secular and anti-god/anti-religion, post-Christian, post-modern world of today.

This little reflection has merely attempted to tell the story of Christmas. Effort has been made to explore as briefly as possible, the story of advent, the highpoints of Christmas starting from the time of the early Christians to this present day. A little reference was made on the new year and the difference and similarity between calendars of some religious groups. The aim is to show that all history and all events are related to the birth of Christ. All history is therefore salvation history. The Church proclaims in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil, "Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end. The Alpha and the Omega, all time belongs to him and all the ages. To him be glory and power, through every age and forever, amen".

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year everyone!!

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