

From the December 4, 2009 Issue

Twelve Days of Christmas

The history of Christmas is strange and convoluted. Other important festivals of the Church, including weekly Sunday worship, Easter, and Epiphany are all more ancient in their origin, so Christmas sometimes looks like a novelty or a recent innovation. (“Recent” here meaning “the 4th century” as opposed to “the 1st century.”) The whole idea of celebrating Jesus’ birth has sometimes been regarded as ridiculous or offensive. Some of the Church Fathers thought it was a bad idea (such as Origen) and in 1644, having put the King on the run, the Puritan-dominated Parliament of England then proceeded to outlaw Christmas.¹ Christmas made its comeback a few years later, but many Puritans continued to call yuletide “fooltide.”

It seems, then, that Christmas needs some defense. What are we celebrating and why? In brief, we are celebrating the moment when the Son of God was born into his creation as one of us: a Son of Man. We are celebrating humanity being born again in the birth of the Last Adam—Jesus Christ, the Son of God born of Mary.

And why do we celebrate? Because our new birth in Jesus’ birth is our adoption and our salvation. As the Son of God now shares forever in our humanity we also shares forever in his Divinity. His birth as Mary’s son is the means of our birth as the children of God the Father.

So personally, I make no apologies to Origen or the Puritans for celebrating this joyful moment in the Father’s plan of Adoption. Let the celebrations begin!

And let the celebration last for twelve days! The twelve days of Christmas are one aspect of the festivities that our ancestors did a much better of job of than we do. The earliest celebrations of Jesus’ birth were connected with the celebration of his baptism on Epiphany, January 6. Over time his birth came to be celebrated on December 25 and the twelve days between the two celebrations became the season of Christmas.

By the medieval period, Christmas was more than just a one day event, with presents in the morning and back to work the next day. Christmas lasted from Christmas Day all the way through Twelfth Night, on January 5 the night before Epiphany on January 6.

I say it’s time for us as Christians to recapture this twelve day celebration of Christmas. Think for a moment of the amazing and joyful event that we are celebrating. Doesn’t the awesome descent of the Son of God into our humanity call for more than just one day of joy and worship? When we think of Jesus’ birth we have so much to talk about and celebrate, it seems to call for an extended celebration.

The Revised Common Lectionary, which many of our churches in the United States use to connect Scripture readings to the worship days of the Christian Year, already encourages and enables an extended celebration of Christmas. It designates the Sundays between Christmas and Epiphany as the “First Sunday of Christmas” and the “Second Sunday of Christmas” and assigns Christmas-connected Scripture readings to those Sundays (You can check out the Lectionary here: <http://tinyurl.com/yfzmlon>). So if nothing else, it would be relatively easy for the Sunday worship

and preaching of our congregations to continue the celebration of Christmas throughout the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany.

We also have plenty of freedom in our family lives at home. Most of us with kids will find our children out of school during those twelve days, even if we don't get them off work. We can think of ways to connect the fun they have on Christmas break with the ongoing celebration of the Christmas season. In the evenings throughout the Christmas season, from December 25 all the way through January 5, we could have special games, treats, and family activities. We could make Twelfth Night a special celebration, as a final celebratory night at the end of Christmas.

Every year at Christmas time I hear Christians lamenting the commercialization of the festival and the lack of focus on Jesus. And yet, we have to admit that sometimes we as Christians allow ourselves to be too much carried along by what our culture is doing. Our culture says that Christmas is a one day event, on December 25, that is preceded by a month of shopping.

Why not resist the culture this year? For our churches and families, let's decide that Christmas is a twelve-day event preceded by the month long celebration of Advent. That way of doing Christmas doesn't make much sense from a commercial standpoint, but it makes a lot of sense from the standpoint of celebrating the incarnation of the Son of God and the adoption of humanity into the life of the Trinity.

~ Jonathan Stepp

¹Martindale, Cyril Charles. "Christmas." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 3. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. 1 Dec. 2009 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm>