

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD, 2023

An old friend of mine recently grumbled about having to go to a New Year's party. He told me "Not in regard to Christmas, but in regard to New Year's, I say 'Bah, Humbug'". I told him that he was in remarkably good company about calling New Year's a humbug. The Roman African Church had no special observances for New Year's Day, just an ordinary morning Mass and Sermon. On one New Year's Day St. Augustine, the great genius of the Roman African Church, preached a Sermon about how Christians should avoid joining the pagans in their drunken and licentious observance of New Year's Day. St. Augustine didn't say "Bah, humbug", but you can tell that's how he felt about the day.

The Feast of Christmas belongs to the earliest stratum of the Roman Church's feasts. As soon as Rome's Christians wrote down a calendar for annual worship, Christmas was one of their feasts (Sundays, of course, and Easter Sunday in particular, being the primordial and universal feasts for all Christians). Rome's Christians certainly celebrated Christmas long before they wrote about it. In the early 200s Tertullian, the first of many great writers of the Roman African Church, testified to a Christian tradition that the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly life began and ended on the same date. He was conceived on March 25th, and died on March 25th. From the date of March 25th for His conception, the Roman Church celebrated His birth on December 25th. I suspect that the Roman Church was doing this in the third Century, possibly as early as Tertullian's time. The pagan feast of "Sol Invictus - the Unconquered Sun" was not actually an ancient Roman festival. It emerged in the third Century. I strongly suspect that Roman pagans, struggling with the steady rise of Roman Christianity, as well as the general awfulness of the Third Century, when everything seemed to be going wrong that could go wrong, invented "Sol Invictus" as a morale building celebration to compete with the Roman Church's celebration of Christmas. If so, the competition failed completely. Christmas reigns, and, for all the noise of secularism, still does.

So then, Christmas Day is one of the earliest feasts celebrated by the Roman Church. New Year's Day is not. January 1 was simply the start of the Roman official calendar, and a day when the Romans, normally so careful about proper behavior in public, allowed themselves to go wild. It had no immediate meaning at all for Christians, except the challenge not to join in the pagan revelries around them.

Those pagan revelries were dangerously attractive, and bound up with bits of idolatry. They were loud, and hard to avoid. Indeed, many imperfectly converted Christians joined in those revelries. The wild and vestigially pagan revels of the New Year remained popular in Roman lands even after the Empire became officially Christian. What were the churches going to do about New Year's Day?

The Roman-African Church simply did its best to ignore New Year's Day.

The Gallo-Roman, Hispano-Roman, and Germano-Roman Churches decided to tackle it head on. Those Churches celebrated all the days from December 25 through January 6 (Epiphany)

as feast days, except for January 1, which would be a day of penance for all the sins committed on New Year's Day, with a Mass in honor of the Lord's Circumcision. According to the Law of Moses, a Jewish boy was to be circumcised on the Octave Day of his birth. Since January 1 is the Octave Day of Christmas, it was the obvious day for commemorating His circumcision. Since the Lord Jesus' circumcision was the first time He shed His Blood, the Blood that would be poured out on Calvary's Cross as an expiation for the sins of the whole world, a Mass commemorating His circumcision could easily be offered in a spirit of penance for sin. Given the wildness that many people seem to think suitable for New Year's parties, I wonder sometimes if we should still be doing that. In any case, the Gallo-Roman, Hispano-Roman, and Germano-Roman Churches did not observe New Year's Day itself. They commemorated the Lord's circumcision on the Octave Day of His birth, and did so in a spirit of penance.

The Church of Rome itself did something quite different. Unlike the Romano-African Church, it did not think that simply ignoring January 1 would work. Unlike the Churches of the Roman West and North, it did not opt to make January 1 a day of penance, commemorating the Infant Lord's circumcision. The Roman Church decided to make the Octave Day of Christmas a day to honor Mary, the Mother of God. That is an awesome title, but if the Lord Jesus is true God and true Man, and is yet one Person, then His human Mother must be called Mother of God. She is Mother of that one Person, Who is the Eternal Wisdom-Word-Son of God, joined to human nature. Not a day of penance for the Roman Church, January 1 was a day of celebration, celebrating not something as mundane as the start of a New Year, but the wonderful mystery of God truly becoming Man, even to the point of having a human mother, in whom He was conceived and grew, from whom He was born, and from whom He received care and nurturing. The Roman Church did not observe New Year's Day itself. The Roman Church commemorated Mary's divine maternity on the Octave Day of the Lord's Birth, and did so in a spirit of rejoicing.

In the 13th Century, the Roman Church finally accepted the practice of the Spanish, French, English, and German Churches, and celebrated January 1, the Octave Day of Christmas, as the Feast of the Lord's Circumcision. In the 16th Century, when Pope Pius V made the Roman Missal, the Roman Church's book of Mass prayers, mandatory for use in all Roman Catholic churches, the Feast of the Lord's Circumcision became the universal Roman Catholic observance for January 1. This remained the case until 1974. In that year, Pope Paul VI, in the encyclical "Marialis Cultus - Marian Devotion", directed that the Feast of Mary, Mother of God, is "assigned to January 1 in conformity with the ancient Liturgy of the City of Rome", in order to "commemorate the part played by Mary in the mystery of Salvation". Thus, we do not really observe New Year's Day itself. On the Octave Day of Christmas, we solemnly remember the part played by Mary in the divinely directed story of human Salvation.

You may have noticed, actually, that the First Reading for Mass, the priestly blessing from the Book of Numbers, hints at New Year's Day, invoking the Lord's blessing at the start of a new secular year (the year of worship began on the First Sunday of Advent). You certainly noticed that the Gospel reading from St. Luke does briefly describe the Infant Lord's circumcision and naming. It is not inappropriate to recall the first shedding of His precious and saving Blood, on the day when He received the holy Name "Jesus", the Name that means "God Saves". Overall,

however, the prayers and readings of this Feast Day direct us to think about Mary. The Epistle from chapter 4 of Galatians reminds us that God's Eternal Son was truly born of a woman. To that woman all Christians are called to give due honor. The Gospel from chapter 2 of St. Luke reminds us that Mary "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart". That is a good summary for all Christians of what Christian prayer is essentially about. Christian prayer is essentially about remembering what God has done, and then reflecting gratefully on His love and mercy. Mary stands for us as a model of doing that.

Today, the Octave Day of Christmas, we conclude the Church's eight day Christmas Feast. The whole Feast is about how God chose to renew human nature by assuming human nature, joining it to divinity. The Eternal Wisdom-Word-Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, remained God, as He is from all eternity. Yet there was a change. He became Man. In Him, human nature and the Divine Nature are not mixed. They are united. They are, however, united in one Person. In that one Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, human nature and Divine Nature will be forever united. Through that union, a new human race begins. The first member of that new human race is Jesus Christ. The second is holy Mary, who kept within her all the mysteries of Salvation, and cherished them. Cherishing them, she was changed by them into the glorious model of what every Christian will be. We too, who are joined to Jesus Christ by Faith and Good Works, by holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, will be changed, if we keep within us the mysteries of Salvation, and cherish them. Cherishing our Salvation, we will be changed into something glorious, after the pattern of our risen Lord Jesus Christ the first fruits of the Resurrection.

I will not correct my friend for saying "Bah, humbug!" to New Year's Day, though I do not go so far myself. But no Catholic dares say anything like that to the Feast of the Mother of God. Mary's Son is none other than the Father's Eternal Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. From that fact flows our Salvation. In celebration of that Salvation, I do not say "Bah, humbug!" today, but, yet again, "God bless us, Everyone!"