

Birthdays marked the death of a Christian

The Bible says nothing to suggest we should celebrate birthdays. Birthday celebrations were associated with political rulers, like King Herod in the Gospel, who thought he deserved special attention every year. A pagan emperor or king would use his birthday to spread the message that he was blessed with special power because he was the son of one of the gods.

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The early bishops of the Church took the pagan custom of celebrating the king's birthday and modified it in order to make it useful for divine worship. Their reasoning was simple. People were not wrong to celebrate the birthday of someone who was truly a "son of God". If any man was truly equal to God, it made perfect sense to celebrate his coming into the world. The pagans were not wrong to celebrate such a birthday. They were wrong to think that the emperor was divine.

But Jesus was divine. Though being a man like us in all things but sin, he was truly Son of God. As St Paul wrote in his Letter to the Colossians: "He is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in

heaven and on earth: everything visible and everything invisible, thrones, dominions, sovereignties, powers—all things were created through him and for him. He exists before all things and in him all things hold together.” Celebrating Christ’s birthday was one way of helping pagan converts understand Christ. Thus began the custom, in the early Church of celebrating Christmas.

What does this tell us about celebrating birthdays for our Lord’s disciples? Initially, the custom in the Church was not to celebrate someone’s birthday. The custom was to celebrate the “dies natalis”. It’s a Latin phrase meaning the “day of birth” but understood as the day when a Christian died—assuming the Christian lived a holy life. The “dies natalis” was the day when he or she began “eternal life”. It was the day of “being born again” into that new world called God’s kingdom. It was

the day when a saint would stand before Jesus and hear him say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have shown you are trustworthy in small things; I will trust you with greater. Come and enter into the joy of your Master.”

When Christians celebrate birthdays, it should be a preparation for that more important day—the *dies natalis*—when each one will join the saints in heaven. A birthday is a reminder that all of our Lord’s disciples can call themselves children of God.

This article by Fr. Joe Babendreier first appeared in the Sunday Nation on 31st July 2016.
