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Why do we celebrate Christmas?

Was Jesus really born on December 25th? Were the Three Kings historical figures? What do we know about what really happened on the first Christmas?

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"If we want to celebrate Christmas authentically, we need to contemplate this sign: the frail simplicity of a tiny newborn child, the meekness with which he is placed in a manger, the tender

affection with which he is wrapped in his swaddling clothes. That is where God is" (Pope Francis, December 24, 2016)

Summary

1. What is Christmas?
2. Was Jesus born on December 25?
3. What happened in the Nativity?
4. What is the Epiphany? Did the Wise Men really come to visit the Child Jesus?

1. What is Christmas?

Christmas is the holiday that commemorates the birth of Christ, when Christians celebrate that Jesus Christ, the Son of God "came down from heaven for us men and for our salvation, and by the power of the

Holy Spirit became incarnate from Mary the Virgin and was made man," as we confess in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

“Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith.” In his first letter, St. John writes: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 463).

“The coming of God's Son to earth is an event of such immensity that God willed to prepare for it over centuries. St. John the Baptist is the Lord's immediate precursor, sent to prepare the way for him.

“Every year the Church prepares for Christmas with the liturgical season of Advent, which lasts for four weeks” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 522-524).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Christmas time. You write:
“Together with the holy expectation of Mary and Joseph, I also impatiently await the Child. How happy I shall feel at Bethlehem! I have a feeling that I won’t be able to contain this joy without bounds. Yes! but, with Him, I also want to be born anew.” —I hope you really mean what you say! (*Furrow*, 62)
- Every time Christmas comes around, I love to look at representations of the child Jesus. Statues and pictures which show a God who lowered himself remind me that God is calling us. The Almighty wants us to know that he is defenceless, that he needs men's help. From the cradle at Bethlehem, Christ tells you and me that he needs us. He urges

us to live a Christian life to the full — a life of self-sacrifice, work and joy. (*Christ is Passing By*, 18)

- When I think of Christian homes, I like to imagine them as being full of the light and joy that were in the home of the holy family. The message of Christmas is heard in all its forcefulness: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will." "And may the peace of Christ triumph in your hearts," writes the Apostle. It is a peace that comes from knowing that our Father God loves us, and that we are made one with Christ. It results from being under the protection of the Virgin, our Lady, and assisted by St Joseph. This is the great light that illuminates our lives. In the midst of difficulties and of our own personal failings, it encourages us to

keep up our effort. Every Christian home should be a place of peace and serenity. In spite of the small frustrations of daily life, an atmosphere of profound and sincere affection should reign there together with a deep-rooted calm, which is the result of authentic faith that is put into practice (*Christ is Passing By*, 22).

2. Was Jesus born on December 25?

The Gospels do not tell us Jesus' date of birth, and the earliest documents from the Fathers of the Church and ecclesiastical writers list different dates. The first indirect testimony that the celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25 is from Sextus Julius Africanus, in the year 221, and the first direct reference is the Philo-Calician liturgical calendar of the year 354, which says, "On December 25 Christ was born in Bethlehem of

Judea” (*VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae*). From the fourth century onwards, most Western sources refer to December 25 as the day of celebration of Christ's birth.

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Make your way to Bethlehem, go up to the Child, take him in your arms and dance, say warm and tender things to him, press him close to your heart... —I am not talking childish nonsense: I am speaking of love! And love is shown with deeds. In the intimacy of your soul, you can indeed hug him tight! (*The Forge*, 345)
- Whenever I preach beside the crib, I try to see Christ our Lord as a child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying on straw in a manger. Even though he is only a child, unable to speak, I see him as a master and a teacher. I

need to look at him in this way, because I must learn from him. And to learn from him, you must try to know his life — reading the Gospel and meditating on the scenes of the new testament — in order to understand the divine meaning of his life on earth. In our own life we must reproduce Christ's life. We need to come to know him by reading and meditating on Scripture, and by praying, as we are doing now in front of the crib. We must learn the lessons which Jesus teaches us, even when he is just a newly born child, from the very moment he opens his eyes on this blessed land of men. (*Christ is Passing By*, 14)

3. What happened in the Nativity?

The Gospels tell us that Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth and went

to Bethlehem, the city of Joseph, for the census, in obedience to an edict of Caesar Augustus.

Both Matthew and Luke narrate Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and Luke goes on to say that Mary laid her newborn son in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn: Jesus was born in the place where the cattle were kept.

From the very beginning, the Church has insisted on the supernatural character of Jesus' birth: "Christ's birth did not diminish His mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it. And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos*, the ever-virgin (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 499).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- A decree of Caesar Augustus has been proclaimed, ordering the whole world to be enrolled. For

this purpose, every person must go to the city of his ancestors. — Since Joseph is of the house and family of David, he goes with the Virgin Mary from Nazareth to the city called Bethlehem, in Judea. And in Bethlehem is born our God: Jesus Christ! — There is no room at the inn: He is born in a stable. — And His Mother wraps Him in swaddling clothes and lays Him in a manger. Cold. — Poverty... — I am Joseph's little servant. — How good Joseph is! — He treats me like a father. — He even forgives me if I take the Child in my arms and spend hour after hour saying sweet and loving things to Him!... (Third Joyful Mystery, Holy Rosary)

- Jesus was born in a cave in Bethlehem because, Sacred Scripture tells us, “there was no room for them in the inn.” — I am not departing from

theological truth when I say that Jesus is still looking for shelter in your heart (*The Forge*, 274).

4. What is the Epiphany? Did the Wise Men really come to visit the Child Jesus?

“The Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Saviour of the world. The feast of the Epiphany, celebrated on January 6, commemorates the worship of Jesus by some "wise men" from the East. In the magi, representatives of the neighbouring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation, the Good News of salvation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 528).

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Look how gently the Lord invites us. His words have human warmth; they are the words of a person in love: "I have called you by your name. You are mine." God, who is beauty and greatness and wisdom, declares that we are his, that we have been chosen as the object of his infinite love. We need a strong life of faith to appreciate the wonder his providence has entrusted to us. A faith like that of the Magi, a conviction that neither the desert, nor the storms, nor the quiet of the oases will keep us from reaching our destination in the eternal Bethlehem: our definitive life with God (*Christ is Passing By*, 32).
- Jesus, may everyone in your Holy Church persevere in their way, following their Christian

vocation, like the Wise Men who followed the star, spurning Herod's advice — which will not be lacking (*The Forge*, 366).

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