

CHRISTMAS, 2025

Happy Christmas!

To quote St. Paul, "rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4-5)

Of all days of the year, only Easter Day is a greater day for rejoicing. For us men and our salvation, the Word has become Flesh and now dwells among us. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord. Again, I say, rejoice.

The first time I heard a know it all type announce to me that Christmas was just a "baptism" of the pagan Roman feast of the unconquered sun, I wanted to put the know it all in a headlock (it was an uncle at Christmas Dinner however, and that would have been mighty frowned upon). The next time, after I studied ancient Roman religion a little bit, I just laughed. The early Romans had no feast of the unconquered sun. This was not an ancient festival for pagan Rome. It came up rather suddenly in the late 3rd Century A.D. Now, there was an old Christian tradition, attested to by, among others, Tertullian of Carthage in the middle of the 3rd Century, that the earthly life of the Lord Jesus began and ended on the same date, March 25. He was conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (Feast of the Annunciation) on March 25, and died on the Cross for our Salvation on March 25. Count forward nine months from March 25, and you get the Lord's birthday on December 25. Since March 25 always falls in the middle of Lent, the great penitential season in preparation for Easter, the Roman Church decided very early on, most likely around the middle of the 3rd Century to have its annual celebration of the great mystery of the Word becoming Flesh, the Incarnation, on December 25, the Incarnate Word's birthday. Hmm. The feast of the so-called "unconquered sun" didn't crop up in Rome until the late 3rd Century. Hmm. It occurred to me that it was the Roman pagans who stole Christmas and tried (and failed) to make it pagan. As usual, the know it all had it perfectly wrong. Christmas began as what it still is, a great shout of joy at the truth that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, that those who believe in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life.

So, shout with joy! Rejoice in the Lord. I say it again, rejoice.

Most of the entire Catholic Church's feasts originated in local churches other than the Roman Church. This is certainly true of Epiphany, for example. The early Roman Church seems to have been much more reluctant than, for example, the Jerusalem Church was to add feasts to the year in addition to Sunday. Yet, the Roman Church did add Christmas, and added it with enthusiasm. The Roman Church began to celebrate Christmas in the 3rd Century, and celebrated Christmas with increasing enthusiasm. By the 5th Century, the Roman Church would celebrate Christmas with four Masses, each with its own set of readings and prayers, the Vigil Mass, the Midnight Mass, the Dawn Mass (probably the last one to be added), and the Mid-Morning Mass (probably the first one). To this day, we have those same four Masses, with almost exactly the same Scripture readings that were proclaimed in the 5th Century. That is something to think about. Whatever Christmas Mass you attend, you are hearing the same Scripture readings that Christians of the Roman Tradition have heard for 1600 years.

All of those readings for all of those years call out the same message: rejoice in the Lord this day! I say it again, rejoice!

By the 5th Century, the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, led a mobile wave of rejoicing through the City. He would celebrate the first Mass, a Vigil Mass at St. Mary's ("Mary Major" it is called, as the first church in Rome dedicated to Our Lady), and then take a nap. The serious celebration would begin with the Midnight Mass at St. Mary's, followed by a feast. There would then be a procession to St. Anastasia's for the Dawn Mass, followed by a snack. The Bishop of Rome would then lead a procession to St. Peter's for the Mid-Morning Mass. Since St. Peter's was built on Vatican Hill to the west of Rome with its Altar facing east, the people exiting the Basilica after Mass faced west, and could see the City below them, bathed in light. This recalled the verse from what the Church then and today sings every morning, Zechariah's Canticle in chapter 1 of St. Luke's Gospel, "The Dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the ways of peace."

A quick glance at each day's headlines or news feed reminds us that, then as now, the world sometimes seems to dwell in darkness and shadow of death. Christmas reminds us that the darkness is temporary and the shadow of death transient. The Dawn from on High came into the world to conquer sin by His saving Death and to then to conquer death by His glorious Resurrection. It is the Conqueror of death Whose coming we celebrate at Christmas. He is the Light which shines in every darkness, and which no darkness can overcome.

No early Pope celebrated Christmas with more enthusiasm than Pope Leo I (the Great, 440-461). Well, if his time and place had headlines or news feed, they would have been pretty gloomy. Italy invaded! (Twice, actually, by Atilla the Hun and Gaiseric the Vandal) Gaul invaded! (By Atilla, before he invaded Italy, and subsequently perished during a hangover) Emperor Personally Kills General in Chief! General in Chief's Ex-Bodyguards Kill Emperor! No Recognized Emperor in Italy! Rome Sacked! Bishop of New Rome/Constantinople Dies of Beating from Bishop of Alexandria's Henchmen! Pope and Council Depose Bishop of Alexandria! Enough, already. You get the idea. Despite all of this, Pope Leo I celebrated Christmas with enthusiasm, and worked hard to lay foundations for the Church's future (including approving the mission to distant Ireland of a certain bishop named Patrick). Wasn't he weighed down by all the bad news? Not at all. He knew that the Dawn from on High has dawned, and now shines on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death with a light that no darkness can overcome.

So, celebrate Christmas vigorously. Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice because, well, there really is an Unconquered Sun/Son! It doesn't work in Latin, but it is a nice, holy pun in English. As an early member of "Generation X", I remember the original "Star Trek" in syndication on weekday t.v. in the late 70s and early 80s. One episode, that may have annoyed the franchise's atheist founder, played with the idea of a planet where the Roman Empire never ended, and where the coming of the Christ, the Sun/Son came later. Silly? Perhaps - but I liked it, and I will go with that holy pun. The Unconquered Sun and the Unconquered Son are one and the same, conceived on March 25, born on December 25, dying on Friday, March 25, and rising ever-victorious and life-giving on the Third Day. Risen in glory, present now in word and Sacrament, He will come in glory at the end of ages, when every tear shall be wiped away.

Therefore, rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again, rejoice.

Happy Christmas!

