

JANUARY 1, 2026

Today's Gospel, Luke 2:16-21, reminds us that the Lord Jesus' earthly parents faithfully obeyed the Law of Moses and made Him a Son of the Old Covenant, circumcising Him on the Octave Day of His birth, and giving Him His Name. His Name, chosen by God and not by Mary and Joseph, means "God Saves," and sums up Who the Lord Jesus is and what His mission is. He is God in our Human Nature, acting to save humanity as a member of humanity. His mission is to save humanity from sin immediately, and from death ultimately. Just saying the holy Name of Jesus is a prayer. As the great 12th Century monk and preacher St. Bernard of Clairvaux said, "To speak this Name gives light, to think of it is the food of the soul, and to call on it calms and soothes the heart."

As I noted at Christmas, there was an ancient Christian tradition, attested to in the early 3rd Century as already an ancient tradition, that the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ began and ended on the same date, March 25. On March 25 He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On Friday, March 25, He died on the Cross for the salvation of the world, to rise triumphantly from death on the third day. By the end of the 3rd Century, the Roman Church was already celebrating His birthday, nine months from March 25, on December 25. From the Roman Church the Feast of Christmas radiated out, until all of the regional churches except the Armenian Church adopted it.

The Feast of Christmas on December 25 was a very ancient, perhaps aboriginal, feast of the Roman Church. The Feast celebrated on January 1 was not. For a long time, Christians in the Latin speaking part of the Roman Empire totally ignored January 1, because it was a major pagan holiday, the Roman New Year's Day. Though Roman law did not endorse it, Roman custom considered New Year's Eve and Day to be a time when the ordinary rules of life did not fully apply, and people could go wild. The wildness of the Roman New Year's celebration made it entirely unfitting for Christians, especially since that wildness included the cruel entertainment of gladiatorial fights, customarily offered to the public by the imperial government for the start of the new year. Christians, a small minority in the Latin speaking part of the Roman Empire, simply ignored New Year's Day and all of its degraded and degrading festivities.

The Roman Empire went through a transformative crisis during the 3rd Century, which set the stage for further dramatic change during the 4th Century, with organized pagan worship collapsing with stunning speed and completeness, and almost everyone becoming Christian. This victory was so rapid and comprehensive, that most people became Christian without changing their behavior very much. While the Emperors pulled public funding away from gladiatorial games, for example, causing them to shrink dramatically, private funding ensured that they did not disappear. People still misbehaved on New Year's Eve and Day, including attending gladiatorial events, and now most of these people were supposedly Christian. Clearly, Church leaders had a problem on their hands.

How to deal with the problem of New Year's Eve and Day? The various regional Latin speaking churches took different approaches. The North African Church continued simply to ignore New Year's as much as possible, and to urge Christians to avoid New Year's festivities (we have a sermon from St. Augustine on this subject). Most Church leaders, however, recognized that mostly ignoring the problem wasn't going to make it go away. Something had to be done.

The Churches of Sicily, Milan, Hispania, and Gaul did something very interesting. They already celebrated the Lord Jesus' Birth on December 25. That suggested to them an observance of the Lord's Circumcision and naming on the Octave Day of His Birth. He saved humanity from sin by shedding His precious Blood, and the first time He shed His blood was at His Circumcision. Accordingly, those Churches made January 1 a day of fasting and abstinence, doing penance for sin. They also urged Christians to make March 25 the first day of the New Year, which many places did throughout the Middle Ages. January 1 became a day for recalling sins, doing penance, and giving thanks to the Savior for the pouring out of His saving Blood.

The Roman Church took a different approach to the problem of New Year's Eve and Day. The Roman Church thought that January 1 could be redeemed. Instead of telling people not to celebrate on December 31 and January 1, the Roman Church told them to celebrate with moderation and for the right reason. Their celebration was not to involve anything pagan, and it was to be in honor of Holy Mary, the Mother of the Divine Person Who is the Eternal Word assuming Human Nature, our Lord Jesus Christ. On Christmas Day, the focus had to be on her Divine Son. On January 1, the focus would be on her, the Woman whom God chose for the most awesome title a mere human being could possibly have, "Mother of God." Hence, the Roman Church kept pushing until gladiatorial fights were finally outlawed (after fans lynched St. Telemachus on 1 January, 400, for attempting to stop a gladiatorial combat, the Emperor Honorius was angry enough finally to outlaw the horrid events altogether), and also encouraged people to flock to the church in Rome dedicated to our Lord through His Mother, St. Mary Major, and there implore her intercession for a holy and happy New Year. Christians of Rome were to pray with celebration, and celebrate with thanksgiving to God.

Today, the Roman Catholic celebration of January 1 has elements of all three of those early approaches to the problem of New Year's Eve and Day. We urge people to avoid the foolish excesses that are still too common on December 31 and January 1. We solemnly recall the sacred Name of Jesus, given to the Baby Boy on His octave day, and promising Salvation to all who upon it in Faith. As we solemnly recall His sacred Name, we also solemnly recall the first shedding of that precious Blood that would be poured out to wipe away all of the sins of the struggling but never hopeless human race, from Adam and Eve until the fulfillment of all things. Finally, we recall with deep gratitude the chosen Woman, holy Mary, the sacred gate through Whom the Savior, Emmanuel, God-With-Us, came to His faithful people.