

Origins and Spiritual Imports of Christmas at a Time like This

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“This is how Jesus came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they came to live together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being an upright man and wanting to spare her disgrace, decided to divorce her informally. ... When suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit.’ She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.” – Matthew 1:18-22.

Let me begin by wishing every one of us, ‘Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, 2020.’ May this Christmas and New Year increase in each of us the blessings and joys of the Infant Jesus, born at Bethlehem of Judea on a Christmas Day! My prayer for you this Christmas is that the Infant Jesus accompanies you, your family, and loved ones throughout the coming New Year, with his peace, grace, mercy and love.

At a turbulent time like ours today, what is the spiritual imports of Christmas for us? In a world characterized by myriads of manmade violence, persecutions, wars, as well as insecurity of life and property, occasioned primarily by fear, greed and bad leadership, what is the significance of Christmas for Christians and non-Christians alike? In a word, in our world of today, where human life appears to have lost its value and meaning, what is the message of the Infant Jesus, born in the manger at Bethlehem for us all?

More significantly, in the midst of the ongoing persecutions and killings of Christians (and non-Christians alike) in different parts of the world today by terrorists, bad leaders and deceit of the devil, what message does the Infant Jesus offer us at this Christmas?

Obviously, as always, Christmas, the annual Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ in human flesh in Bethlehem, offers us the message of hope, steadfastness and obedience of faith in the Incarnate Son of God. It challenges us not to lose faith and hope in God, in spite of the difficulties and seemingly hopelessness of our present situation. Christmas teaches us that God is always present and does not abandon his people in moments of trials and difficulties. Our faith in the Infant Jesus assures us that, no matter what happens, “God-is-with-us” – “*Chukwu-nonso*” (a popular name among the Igbo). His name is ‘Immanuel’, the Holy Scripture tells us. (Cf. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).

Therefore, my prayers and good wishes for you and all my friends and acquaintances this Christmas and throughout the New Year 2020, is that God showers you with the blessings of the Infant Jesus born at Bethlehem on a ‘Christmas Day.’ May he never allow you to lose trust, faith and obedience in His saving power, mercy and love! May the Infant Jesus strengthen you this Christmas and throughout the New Year!

Finally, as we reflect on the meaning and spiritual imports of Christmas, may the Infant Jesus help you to appreciate his blessings, especially, all the aspects of his saving mystery: Incarnation (Christmas), Passion, Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection (Easter)! May he bless you with strong faith throughout the New Year and all through your life! Amen.

The Theme of Our Reflection

Our Christmas reflection this year centers on the origins, significance and spiritual imports of Christmas at a time like ours today. In the midst of conflicting ideologies in a world controlled by secularized media, market-economy, lust for power, neo-geopolitical hegemony, racism, cultural and religious intolerance and bigotry, nepotism and tyranny of all sorts, it is not uncommon nowadays, to hear people give wild interpretations concerning the origins and significance of Christmas. Some of these individuals have even gone to the extent of ascribing “paganism and secular” meaning to the origins and significance of the Christian annual celebration of the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ at Christmas.

This is why it is necessary that we dedicate our Christmas reflection this year, in providing some basic background to the origins, meaning, and spiritual significance of the feast of Christmas in the Christian annual liturgical calendar.

The Early Church, at the beginning, that is, immediately after the Resurrection-Event and the Pentecost, started with regular celebration of the Paschal Mystery (Easter), the Eucharist, during most of their community meals and prayers (cf. Acts 2:42-47). Gradually, it developed into what we have today, the regular celebration of the Eucharist or rather commemoration of the Paschal Mystery on Sundays and, especially, the annual celebration of Easter as well as the daily community Eucharistic celebration.

The Paschal Mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ is the fount and summit of every celebration, feast, ministry, and teaching of the Church from the earliest times. It has remained so till today, and will continue to be until the end of time, the second coming of Jesus Christ in glory. The Easter-Event is what gives meaning to every action and life of the Church and Christians from the earliest times. It will continue to be so, until the end of times!

The feast of Christmas, like most of Church’s traditional feasts and celebrations, was instituted by the Early Church. In particular, it started at a time the Church was wisely preoccupied of how to protect Christians from the negative influences of some of the pagan practices and feasts of the Old Roman Empire; for instance, the worship of “Sun goddess”, “Jupiter”, etc. The annual celebration of the Birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas was instituted at the time, the Early Church was consolidating itself within the hostile environment of the Old Roman Empire.

In other words, it came about at the time some people were attempting to confuse the Christ-Event with some of the pagan practices of the Old Roman Empire. The Church, however, mindful of the uniqueness of Christ-Event, instituted the feast of Christmas to protect its faithful from the negative influences of such pagan practices and beliefs of the Old Roman Empire. In

this way, the Church began to commemorate the birthday of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem on Christmas Day, on a date the Church itself, guided by the Holy Spirit, chose for the annual celebration of the feast. This is how the annual celebration of Christmas developed from those earliest times to our day.

Christmas, therefore, has nothing to do with paganism or Roman goddess or whatever. It is rather the feast of Christians, commemorating the birth of the savior, Jesus Christ at Bethlehem about 2000 years ago. Christmas derives its meaning and significance from the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ.

This is why it is wrong for anybody to associate Christmas or call it a ‘pagan’ feast. Christmas has nothing to do with paganism of any sort. Its origin is of different order. Although, it started within the hostile environment of Old Empire, Christmas has nothing to do with the ‘pagan’ practices and beliefs of Rome or the Emperor. It is rather a Christian feast and celebration founded and centered on the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.

What is Christmas?

In the first place, Christmas is a feast central to the Christian liturgical year. It is an annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ, observed primarily on December 25 as a religious and cultural celebration among billions of people around the world. In the liturgical calendar of the Church, Christmas is preceded by the season of Advent or the “Nativity Fast” and initiates the season of Christmastide, which historically in the Latin Rite, lasts twelve days and culminates on the Twelfth Night. In some traditions, Christmastide includes an octave.

Christmas day is a public holiday in many countries of the world. It is celebrated religiously by a majority of Christians, as well as culturally by many non-Christians, and forms an integral part of holidays and end-of-year festivities around it. The traditional Christmas narrative, the Nativity of Jesus, delineated in the New Testament gives an account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, in accordance with messianic prophecies. (Cf. Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-20; Galatians 4:4-7).

In particular, according to gospel account, Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, thus sometimes before 4 BCE. The birth narrative in Luke is one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. Leaving their hometown Nazareth, Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem to pay taxes. Arriving late, they find no vacancy at the inn. They are, however, offered a stable, most likely a second room attached to a family dwelling where animals were sheltered – a room that would offer some privacy from the main family room for cooking, eating, and sleeping. “The “city of David” is the *little town of Bethlehem* of Christmas-carol fame, a starlit silhouette indelibly etched on Christmas cards. No sooner was the baby born than angels announced the news to shepherds who spread the word.”

Furthermore, although the month and date of Jesus’ birth are unknown, the Church in the early fourth century fixed the date as December 25. This corresponds to the date of the winter solstice on the Roman calendar. Most Christians celebrate 25 in the Gregorian calendar, which has been

adopted almost universally in the civil calendars used in countries throughout the world. However, some Eastern Christian Churches celebrate Christmas on December 25 of the older Julian calendar, which currently corresponds to a January date in the Gregorian calendar. For Christians, believing that God came into the world in the form of man to atone for the sins of humanity, rather than knowing Jesus' exact birth date, is considered to be the primary purpose in celebrating Christmas.

In fact, for Christians, Christmas is not really about the celebration of a birth date at all. It is about the celebration of a birth. The fact of the date and the fact of the birth are two different things. The calendrical verification of the feast itself is not really that important. What is important to the understanding of a life-changing moment is that it happened, not necessarily where or when it happened.

The message is clear: Christmas is not about marking the actual birth date of Jesus. It is about the Incarnation of the One who became like us in all things but sin (**Hebrews 4:15**), and who humbled Himself "to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). As Thomas Nelson reminds us: "Christmas is a pinnacle feast, yes, but it is not the beginning of the liturgical year. It is a 'memorial, a remembrance', of the birth of Jesus, not really a celebration of the day itself. We remember that because the Jesus of history was born, the Resurrection of the Christ of faith could happen." (See Thomas Nelson, *The Liturgical Year*, 2009).

All these confirm the fact that the origins of the celebrations of Christmas (and Epiphany), as well as dates on which they are observed are rooted deeply in the history of the early Church.

There has been much scholarly debate concerning the exact time of the year when Jesus was born, and even in what year he was born. Actually, we do not know either. The best estimate, however, is that Jesus was probably born in the springtime, somewhere between the years of 6 and 4 BC, as December is in the middle of the cold rainy season in Bethlehem, when the sheep are kept inside and not on pasture as told in the Bible.

The lack of a consistent system of timekeeping in the first century, mistakes in later calendars and calculations, and lack of historical details to cross-reference events have led to this imprecision in fixing Jesus' birth. "This suggests that Christmas celebration is not an observance of a historical date, but a commemoration of the event in terms of worship."

Moreover, there was a time when the churches were not united regarding the date of the joyous event, celebration of the birthday of Jesus. Many Christians kept their Christmas in April, others in May, and still others at the close of September, till finally December 25 was agreed upon as the most appropriate date. The choice of that day was, of course, wholly arbitrary, for neither the exact date nor the period of the year at which the birth of Jesus occurred is known. "For purposes of commemoration, however, it is unimportant whether the celebration shall fall or not fall at the precise anniversary of the joyous event."

This explains why Christmas is also known as the feast of "Nativity" of Jesus Christ. The nativity sequence included in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke prompted early Christian writers to suggest various dates for the anniversary. The gospels of Luke and Matthew describe Jesus as

being born in Bethlehem to the Virgin Mary. In Luke, Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census, and Jesus is born there and laid in a manger. Angels proclaimed him a savior for all people, and shepherds came to adore him.

In fact, in the 3rd century, the date of the nativity was the subject of great interest and debate among scholars until the early Church settled for December 25 in the fourth century. Various factors contributed to the selection of December 25 as a date of celebration: it was the date of the winter solstice on the Roman calendar and it was about nine months after March 25, the date of the vernal equinox and a date linked to the conception of Jesus (now Feast of Annunciation).

In the East, the birth of Jesus was celebrated in connection with Epiphany on January 6. This holiday was not primarily about nativity, but rather the baptism of Jesus. Christmas was promoted in the East as part of the revival of Orthodox Christianity that followed the death of pro-Arian Emperor Valens at the Battle of Adrianople in 378. The feast was introduced in Constantinople in 379, in Antioch by John Chrysostom towards the end of the fourth century, probably in 388, and in Alexandria (Egypt) in the following century.

Origin of the name “Christmas”

“Christmas” is a shortened form of “Christ’s mass.” The word is recorded, as “*Crīstesmæsse*” in 1038 and “*Criste-messe*” in 1131 AD. *Crīst* (genitive *Crīstes*) is from Greek *Khrīstos* (*Χριστός*), a translation of Hebrew *Māšīah*, “Messiah”, meaning “anointed”, and “*mæsse*” is from Latin “*missa*”, the celebration of the Eucharist.

The form “*Christenmas*” was also historically used, but is now considered archaic and dialectal. The term was derived from the Middle English “*Cristenmasse*”, meaning “Christian mass.” “Xmas” is an abbreviation found particularly in print, based on the initial letter *chi* (X) in Greek *Khrīstos*, “Christ”, though numerous style guides discourage its use.

In addition to “Christmas”, the holiday has been known by various other names throughout its history. The Anglo-Saxons referred to the feast as “midwinter”, or, more rarely, as *Nātūited* (from Latin *nātīvitās*). “Nativity”, meaning “birth”, is from Latin *nātīvitās*. In Old English, *Gēola* (*Yule*) referred to the period corresponding to December and January, which is eventually equated with Christian Christmas. “Noel” (or “Nowel”) entered English in the late 14th century and is from the Old French *noël* or *naël*, itself ultimately from the Latin *nātālis* (*dies*) meaning “birth (day).”

Spiritual Imports of Christmas at a Time Like Ours Today

The simile of the ‘Holy Child Jesus’, born in the manger at Bethlehem on a Christmas Day, is a sign that God is ever-present and our companion in the valleys of life in this mortal world. God will always be there to deliver his people through the saving power and mercy of his only

begotten Son, Jesus Christ, whose birth at Bethlehem, 2000 years ago, we commemorate every year at Christmas!

This is the meaning and significance of Christmas. God never abandons his own. He is ever-present. He is always there with us, in all our circumstances or situations of life. This means that no matter how hopeless and difficult our present situation may seem, let us continue to trust, hope, and have strong faith in the saving power of our God revealed in the Infant Jesus at Christmas. His ever-living presence amongst us will never depart from us! He will always be there, to protect, save and liberate us from any danger and difficult situations in our lives!

This is because God's presence and love is everlasting. No matter the circumstance, he will always be there to deliver his people! His mercy and love lasts forever! God never created us for damnation but for eternal glory with him through the power of the redemptive acts of Jesus. He will never abandon his people. He is always there to deliver us from the hands of the wicked. Again, His name is 'Immanuel' – "God-is-with-us" – "**Chukwu-nonso**."

"Look, the virgin is with child and will give birth to a son whom they will call Immanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us.'" (Matthew 1:23).

As alluded earlier in the opening paragraph of this article, in our African context, the name Immanuel, 'God-is-with-us', has an equivalent in the Igbo name, "**Chukwu-nonso**" – which literally means, 'God is ever-present', or 'God is near always (very close with us; and never abandons his people). In fact, 'God-is-with-us.' In other words, ever before the advent of Christianity in Africa, the name "**Chukwu-nonso**", is one of the few common names, the Igbo usually, give to their newly born male child. Even as we write, the name, "**Chukwu-nonso**" is still as popular today as ever, among the Igbo.

The birth of Jesus at Bethlehem on a Christmas Day, our annual celebration of that mystery of our redemption, indeed, assures us that 'God-is-with-us' – "**Chukwu-nonso**." In, and through Jesus Christ, God is always present in our lives and in whatever difficulties of life we may be experiencing today, individually or as a society. God will never abandon us. He is always there, ready to deliver us from all evil, and dangers we encounter daily in our earthly journey and life!

The model of Joseph, foster father of Jesus

At a time like this – in moments of trials and difficulties, we face the challenge of faith and obedience to the command of God. In such a situation, however, our prayer is to ask God to increase our faith and grace of obedience, in the model of Joseph, foster father of Jesus. Joseph, challenged with the choice of either divorcing or accepting into his house, Mary, whom he found to have conceived in her womb a child by the power of the Holy Spirit, choose to obey God's command, and not his own selfish human desires. Joseph, a man of strong faith and hope, chose obedience to the command of God, not despair. He restrained himself from denouncing and disgracing Mary in any form at all.

In obedience to the command of God, communicated to him through the angel, Joseph remained steadfastness in his faith and hope in the living God. With that, he assisted Blessed Virgin Mary to nurture into maturity, the Infant Jesus. Joseph is today honored as the Patron of the Universal Church, and especially, as the Foster father of Jesus, and Husband of Mary, Mother of Jesus. In the Scriptures, his name is gloriously, remembered and celebrated by the Sacred Writers. This is as result of his unwavering faith, hope, and obedience to God's command, and especially, in the mercy and love of the Infant Jesus, whose birth at Bethlehem we celebrate at Christmas.

In other words, as Christians, our faith is not measured by those 'good things' we often count as success, or even blessings in our lives. No. Rather, our faith is measured by one's obedience and steadfastness to the command of God in moments of trials and difficulties. When things are moving fine, one does not have much difficulties praising and thanking God. But how often do we do that when things seem to go the opposite direction? How often do we worship and praise God with clean hearts and thanksgiving when things become tough in our lives?

This is the challenge of the story of Joseph (and of the Blessed Virgin Mary) in the synoptic gospels' narratives of the Nativity of Jesus Christ. It is an important dimension of the spiritual imports of Christmas. As a feast, Christmas challenges our faith, hope and obedience to the command of God in the Infant Jesus, at moments of trials and difficulties of life. It reminds us of the ever-presence of God in our lives and in every situation, we may find ourselves today.

No matter how scary and difficult our situation may appear, Christmas reminds us the importance of steadfastness, faith, hope and obedience to God's command, not to tremble or give way to despair. Because, no matter the magnitude of the turbulence or storms of the present moment, Jesus is in the boat, he will never allow us to perish or disappointed. He came into the world in human flesh, to be with us, walk with us in our journey, and to saves us from sin, and the evil one. His only request from us is strong faith, and obedience to his command of love of God Himself, and neighbor, as well as the created reality.

Conclusion and Best Wishes!

Christmas celebration is rooted in the mystery of Jesus Christ, recounted in the Bible by the Holy Writers. It came out of the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit on the Early Church. It is a Christian feast, founded and rooted in the mystery of the 'Incarnation, Passion, Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection' of Jesus Christ. It is the feast of the commemoration of the earthly birth of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ!

Thus, at this Christmas and New Year, may the Infant Jesus, Immanuel – 'God-is-with-us' ("*Chukwu-nonso*"), surround you and your loved ones, with peace of mind, love, authentic human freedom and dignity. May he clothe you with his security of life and property in your vicinity and surroundings!

May you never be deprived the fundamental human rights to live a dignified life, worship God in truth and spirit, as well as in freedom, whether in your homeland or in Diasporas! May you never

lose faith in God, and in yourself, or the world! May God clothe you with his justice, equity, sincere reconciliation, interior peace, mercy and love! May God always help you to appreciate him through those around you and the created reality!

Finally, may God bless you with strong faith in the power of his divine and redemptive mercy, revealed in Jesus Christ, his only Begotten Son! May he strengthen your faith in his saving love and grace, and help you to stand firm always in obedience to His commands, love of his people, and the entire humanity. Amen!

Merry Christmas and Prosperous New Year to all!

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