



December 2007

The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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THE WAY WE WERE... *Advent and Christmas*

As I write this, it is the first week of November. Halloween was over not quite a week ago. Thanksgiving is several weeks off in the future. The radio stations, some of them, are already playing Christmas carols and music, not all the time, but often enough. The stores have begun to decorate for Christmas, and even though in the coming weeks they will have much more to what they have out now, there is already a lot of Christmas stuff on display. Many of the TV commercials are already suffused with holiday themes about holiday shopping. My cousin was in from Fort Wayne a few days ago, and he wanted to see the "new" Macy's on State St. – what we saw, was Macy's with its program of holiday decorations already well advanced.

I am old enough to remember when the "holiday season" was still acknowledged to be Christmas, and when it did not begin to be in evidence until Thanksgiving. Now, Thanksgiving, which once upon a time marked the start of the Christmas shopping season, is a day-long pause at about the midpoint of that season. For a brief while, just a few years it seems, Halloween was the new starting gun for the race to Christmas, but this year you could find lots of Christmas trees in lots of stores side-by-side with the Halloween costumes and candy.

I am not one of those who fiercely objects to the word *Christmas* being chased out of the public square during these months and being replaced with *holiday*. I do not at all buy the disingenuous protest that this is done for reasons of inclusivity and out of a spirit of sensitivity – the spirit of this is so obviously hostile to Christianity and resentful of that religion's prominence in

American life that it is pointless to either deny or argue about it – but neither am I all that upset that it has happened. If the culture I move in wants to go on a two-month binge of consumer spending and justify it by an appeal to some holiday, and if the mandarins of political correctness want to decree that this has nothing at all, not really, to do with the day that annually celebrates the birth of Christ, that's fine by me. It impoverishes the popular culture and falsifies the historical record, but on the whole it seems that serious Christians are the better off for it. It reminds us that our true citizenship is in heaven. It also forces us to put forth a greater and more genuine effort to keep Christmas, to make room for the Christmas feast, in those spaces that we can yet call our own. If what is happening in the stores, schools, parks, civic centers, and other public places has nothing to do with us and our celebration of the Savior's birth, then we know that our true center at this time will have to be located in our homes and in our parish churches.

This is not, on the whole, a bad deal for us, but it does demand a lot, and this at just the time when the craziness of the broader culture is making additional, huge demands on our time and attention. If we are going to do this, and do it well, it may help to see a bit of where the feast got its start and how it has come down to us over the centuries.

In the beginning, or close enough to the beginning, there was the feast of Epiphany. *Epiphaneia* is a Greek word which means *manifestation* or *showing*, and originally referred to a state visit that a king or emperor might make to

some city of his realm, during which he would show himself to the crowds. The word is used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus, who manifested his glory to his disciples, and who was himself the manifestation of the love and glory of the Father. The feast of Christ's epiphany began in Egypt during the third century. January 6 became the day for this observance, probably because it was already the date for an Egyptian pagan festival in honor of the sun god. The church authorities thus opposed this pagan celebration by establishing a counter-festival in honor of the true manifestation of the true Son of God in his birth at Bethlehem. The Gnostic heretics in Egypt, mimicking the Church, made of the same date, January 6, a feast of the baptism of the Lord. The Gnostics taught that Jesus was but a man until the moment of his baptism, at which instant the divine nature was fused with the human; so they would not celebrate his birth, but would instead celebrate his baptism. As the century wore on, the Church began to use this feast not only against the pagans but also against the Gnostics, and so it came to be the simultaneous celebration of the manifestation of the eternal Son of God in his birth as a child and in his baptism in the Jordan. A bit later the day also was seen as a day for remembering the adoration of the Magi, the first manifestation of the Christ to the nations. From Egypt, this feast of Epiphany grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire.

As it spread through these years, the emphasis of the feast fell more solidly on the baptism of Jesus, the beginning of his ministry and of his public revelation. The element of birth receded, and so in Rome, about the year 330, December 25 was established as the date for the celebration of the birth of Christ. As in Egypt over a century earlier, the selection of the date was influenced by an already existing pagan feast of the sun. For more than fifty years, pagan Romans had been keeping the feast of *Sol Invictus*, the unconquered sun, on December 25, the day of the winter solstice. In a repetition of what had happened a century earlier in Egypt, the Roman church consciously opposed a pagan feast with a Christian one – instead of *Sol Invictus*, the

Church would celebrate *Sol Justitiae*, the Sun of Justice, Jesus Christ, who had been given that title long before his birth by the prophet Malachi (4:2). The pagan feast of the “birthday of the sun,” was thus co-opted and became the feast of the birth of the Son of God in our flesh. For a number of years, many Eastern Churches observed the birth of Christ on other dates, but by the end of the fourth century the Roman practice had become universal.

Once the feast of Christmas had been firmly established, it quickly became one of the main feasts of the Church year. In some of the provinces of the Western Roman Empire, especially in Gaul (mostly modern France), Spain, and later Germany, it began to be treated just like Easter in that it was preceded and prepared for by a long season of fasting. In 490, Bishop Perpetuus of Tours decreed that a fast should be observed on three days of every week from the feast of St. Martin on November 11 to the feast of Christ's birth on December 25. The name of *Advent* was not yet used for this; it was called *Quadragesima Sancti Martini*, or St. Martin's Lent. In Rome, however, there was no such penitential fast before Christmas, nor any special season of preparation until the sixth century. At that time Rome began to keep a shorter pre-Christmas season of only four or five Sundays, and it kept it without a fast. The Roman season was rather a joyous and festive time.

The scene was now set for a clash of customs and this began in earnest in the eighth century, when the dioceses of the Frankish kingdom began to use the Roman calendar and liturgy. How do you combine a short, joyful pre-Christmas season with a much longer, penitential one? Not very well, as it turned out. After several hundred years of swinging back and forth, the final structure of the season emerged: the Roman shorter season won out over the longer Gallic one, the fast was kept but made much less severe, and the season as a whole took on a mood that was at once penitential and joyful, odd as that may sound. This version of Advent, in place throughout Europe by the early thirteenth century, is the one that has endured down to the present day.

The most prominent ornament of the Advent season is of course the Advent wreath. This is, as these things go, a very recent invention, having its beginning in Lutheran eastern Germany only a few centuries ago. The flat circle of evergreens with four long, upright candles was not used much in the churches, but became very popular in the homes of the faithful. Its use spread quickly throughout Germany, in both Protestant and Catholic regions, and from there came to America in the late nineteenth century. Each Sunday a new candle is lit, and each night the family gathers around the wreath for the lighting of the candles and a brief prayer. Perhaps one of the most user friendly customs in this or any liturgical season, and one that actually works and looks better in the home than it does in the parish church, it is not surprising that it has caught on as well as it has.

The “twelve days of Christmas” of the English carol are the days *after* Christmas, not before, in spite of what we hear in local news puff pieces common at this season. The twelve days of Christmas are those between Christmas and the Epiphany, within which fall a number of important saints’ and feast days, each with its own interest: St. Stephen, St. John, Holy Innocents, the solemnity of Mary Mother of God, the Holy Family. Over the past several decades we have seen a general wrecking of the calendar, both civil (as holidays are promiscuously transferred to Mondays to insure that the three-day weekend will be common and boring) and ecclesiastical (as major feasts are moved to Sundays the better to become invisible), and the Epiphany is one of those so affected. This year, however, January 6 falls on the needful Sunday, and so we will have a rare Christmas season with Epiphany actually coming on the “twelfth night,” and so a season to be especially enjoyed.

But then enjoyment is exactly what this season and its feasts are all about – a child is born to us who has made us all beloved children of the Father of lights. The American holiday season is full of activity and bustle, but it affords little in the way of true joy. If we can keep Advent and Christmastide as it should be kept, within doors, inside our homes and churches,

like the precious flame of a candle cupped in our hands against the windy blast that sounds noisily all around us, then we may find that we have been graced with a light whose warmth and splendor will stay with us throughout the year. It’s worth the effort.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.

A CLOSING WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

For many people, their IRA is one of their largest assets and a great potential resource for giving to their parishes and other charities. From a tax standpoint, however, charitable giving from the IRA while the person is alive had never been an ideal way to donate. That has changed. A new law makes it possible for a person 70.5 years old or older to transfer up to \$100,000 from the IRA to qualified charities without incurring income tax on the withdrawal. But this provision is effective only for the rest of 2007, so people have to act on this by December 31 to take advantage of it.

Although the donor does not get a tax deduction for these IRA gifts, there are several benefits. The amount transferred to the parish from an IRA does not increase the donor’s adjusted gross income on their tax return. Those who do not itemize their deductions on their income tax return (and therefore can’t claim charitable deductions) still receive the benefit of not triggering a taxable IRA distribution. These IRA contributions will count toward a donor’s mandatory annual distribution, i.e. instead of taking an unneeded mandatory IRA distribution, the donor can instruct his IRA trustee to send those funds to the charity. And the ceilings on the percentage of the adjusted gross income that can be claimed as a charitable deduction will not apply to these transfers.

If you would like to make a donation to St. Peter’s under this provision before it expires at the end of this month, you can get more information from your IRA’s trustee or by calling Rich Goode at the Archdiocese of Chicago’s Planned Giving Office at 312-655-7848.



*Merry Christmas and
A Happy New Year!*
All of us here at St. Peter's,
both the Friars and the Staff,
wish you and yours
a most blessed Christmas
and a prosperous New Year.
We thank you for your
generous support in 2007,
and look forward to serving you in 2008.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.

APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*