

HISTORICAL NOTES

ST. CHRYSOSTOM AND THE DATE OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY. The ably argued study of Fr. Paul Gaechter, S.J., on "The Chronology from Mary's Betrothal to the Birth of Christ," which appeared in THEOLOGICAL STUDIES for May and September, 1941, presents the somewhat unexpected view that Our Lord's birth took place in March-April (7 B.C.), rather than at a date more closely approximating the centuries-old liturgical observance of December 25. Actually, this traditional date has often been shown to be inaccurate. But the divergence has not usually been considered so great, nor has the approach to a more probable date ordinarily been from the angle Fr. Gaechter very acutely suggests. As he makes no reference to the basis of the December 25 tradition in his article, it may seem that this tradition is wholly unfounded, and not deserving refutation. Indeed, that is the stand of many authors on the subject. Thus, Fr. Urban Holzmeister, S.J. says that the date is a mere convention, regarding which 'haberi non posse traditionem legitimam' (Urbanus Holzmeister, S.J. *Chronologia vitae Christi*. Romae. 1933 p. 45). This, however, ill suits the emphatic assurance with which St. John Chrysostom affirms the December date. I propose to show here that the ancient account has considerable foundation, and that it may be fitted into Fr. Gaechter's theory by the use of his own principle that the Nativity occurred several months after the arrival at Bethlehem. It is only in making the two events almost simultaneous that the older view need be considered erroneous.

The basic assumption of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers in this question is that Christ was born soon after the arrival of Joseph and Mary at Bethlehem in obedience to the Imperial census decree. The taciturn compression of St. Luke's account not unnaturally led to this assumption, although, as Fr. Gaechter points out, more close scrutiny of the text throws this into doubt. On the basis of this assumption, it was easy to argue that if one could determine the date of the census, the date of the Nativity would also be thereby ascertained.

Obviously, the surest way to discover when the census occurred would be to look up the record of Cyrinus' administration, as preserved in the official archives of the Empire at Rome. It is interesting to note that these Roman archives are appealed to, in a similar problem, as early as St. Justin Martyr. In his *Apology* we find two references to them, not to determine the exact date of Christ's birth or death, but to prove their historicity. In speaking of Bethlehem, he says: "It was there that Jesus Christ was born—as you yourselves can learn from the registers made under Cyrinus, your first Governor in Judea" (*Apol.* 1.34). Later, to establish the fact that Christ did die under Pilate, he proclaims: "And that this occurred you may learn from the

Acts of Pontius Pilate's administration" (*ibid.* 1.35). This in the city of Rome itself. A generation later, Tertullian makes a similar appeal to these archives. Speaking ironically of men who are ignorant of the most obvious facts about Christ, he asks: ". . . cuius (Christi) nemo adhuc certus de tribu, de populo, de domo, de censu denique Augusti—quem testem fidelissimum dominicae nativitatis Romana archiva custodiunt?" (*Adv. Marcionem* 4.7). Further on, he recurs to the same argument: "Sed et census constat actos sub Augusto nunc in Iudaea per Sentium Saturninum, apud quos genus eius (Christi) inquirere potuissent" (*ibid.* 4.19).

St. Augustine, too, seems to have these records in mind when he states, in a usually overlooked passage: "Quia Verbum Deus non est factus, per quem omnia facta sunt tempora; sed homo factus Christus in tempore. Apparet quo consule, quo die conceptum de Spiritu Sancto virgo Maria peperit Christum" (*In Ioannem* 23.12.) Clearly, he believes in the existence of some quite definite evidence on the question, or at least of a deep-seated popular tradition, even to exact dates.

St. Chrysostom, however, is the most confident in this source of information as a guide to the date of Christ's birth. His use of the argument is not to prove the fact of the Nativity (which his congregation readily admitted) but to justify the day December 25 as the proper occasion for its liturgical commemoration. For in introducing the feast at Antioch in 386, after the example of the church at Rome, he is concerned to reassure his people that this is the right day to hold the celebration. His sermon *In Diem Natalem Christi* (Migne, P.G. 49. 351-357 for texts cited) contains several affirmations of remarkable confidence in the date. Early in the first chapter of the sermon we read: "Moreover, it is not yet ten years since this day was made clear and known to us." A little later, he repeats the statement, with the significant addition that the date has been known to the Roman church from the earliest days: "In this way, then, the day, which has been known *from the beginning* (ἀνωθεν) to those who dwell in the West, was brought over to our regions, not many years hence." But as his people still appear unconvinced, the Saint adds: "I shall produce three proofs, whereby we may know with certainty (πάντως) that this is the very season (καιρός) in which our Lord Jesus Christ, God and Word, was born." The first of these proofs is the rapid spread of the feast throughout the world, once it was formally instituted at Rome; for this argues a general assurance of its authenticity. The second proof is the most interesting from our present viewpoint: that anyone may examine the Roman archives and verify the date for himself. "Moreover, it is possible for anyone who wishes, to consult the ancient archives preserved publicly at Rome, and find out the precise date of this enrollment (ἀκριβῶς εἰδέναι). . . . Now, it is from those who live in that city and know these facts accurately (ἀκριβῶς) that we have received this day and feast. For

those who live there, after having celebrated (ἐπιτελοῦντες) this feast themselves from the beginning and by ancient tradition (ἄνωθεν καὶ ἐν παλαιᾷ παραδόσει), have now brought its knowledge to us." A third proof lies in the fact that Zachary sacrificed at the special altar in the *sancta sanctorum* (as is shown by the reference to the altar of incense in the sacred text); but the high priest only entered here in September. Consequently, when the Angel came to Mary six months later, it was March, and nine months afterwards, in December, Christ was born.

The first and third of these proofs carry little weight. The rapid spread of the feast may only indicate the general agreement that it was a beautiful celebration to adopt, not that distant churches were sure that Rome had determined upon exactly the right day for commemorating it. The Nativity, it seems, was not formally celebrated at first, but included in the January 6 celebration of the Epiphany. But in the pontificate of Julius I (341-352), the popular desire for a separate commemoration led to the inauguration of a special feast of the Nativity on December 25. This rapidly spread to the whole of Italy, and is reported in distant Cappadocia by 380, and in Alexandria during the *floruit* of Paul of Emesa (427-433), while St. Jerome complains that in 411 at Jerusalem the Nativity is still not dissociated from the Epiphany celebration (see MPG 96.1445b; MPL 61.648c; and the article "Christmas" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* by Fr. Martindale.)

The argument from the time of Zachary's ministration is plainly invalid, as Zachary was not High Priest, as Chrysostom assumed, nor was his office performed at the Holy of Holies (cp. Holzmeister, *op. cit.* p. 38).

But the appeal to the Roman archives is not to be so readily dismissed. Though it cannot be verified now, neither can it be refuted from positive evidence. It surely seems strange that Chrysostom would be so insistent on the validity of the Roman date, and speak with such assurance, in the vigorous Greek words cited above, if there were not good ground for his belief that the Roman church had actually consulted the records, and found the census in question to have occurred in late December. At least this investigation cannot be considered impossible, or rejected without adducing proof. It must be noted, however, that Chrysostom, although saying that such consultation of the archives was easy and an obvious procedure, does not explicitly state that he knows it did take place. He only affirms that his information comes from people who "know these facts accurately," as we saw above. Now, this, at the minimum, implies an old tradition at Rome that someone had once consulted the records and corroborated the date, so that it did not need new verification when the authorities decided to institute a special feast of that event, separate from the Epiphany celebration.

But why precisely December 25, when the census records at most must have only indicated that the enrollment took place in late December? It is

generally considered that this day was chosen in preference to others near it, because on it the pagan Romans celebrated the "birth" of the new sun. Moreover, the earliest record of the feast, in the Philocalian Calendar, composed in 354 (see MPL 13.675), lists December 25 in the civil calendar as "Natalis Invicti (Solis)," but in the parallel *Depositio Martyrum* has: "viii kal. ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae." The temptation to turn this celebration of the advancing sun, already held sacred by the Romans to *Sol Invictus*, into a commemoration of the rising of the true Sun of Justice would be, especially for the ancient Christians, very enticing. If there was already a tradition that the census-records indicated Christ's birth in late December, the identification of the two celebrations would be virtually irresistible. (On early connection of Christmas with the *Natalis Solis Invicti*, see St. Cyprian, *De Pasch. Comp.* 19; Tertullian, *Apol.* 16, and *Ad Nat.* 1.13; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.67; Chrysostom, *De Solst. et Aequinoct.* 2.) Fr. Gaechter's acute observation that the Nativity did not actually occur immediately after the arrival in Bethlehem for the census, clearly did not suggest itself to the Christians of the fourth century. On the other hand, their firm conviction that the census took place in December ought not to be lightly set aside or ignored.

The conclusion from the evidence here cited would seem, then, to be as follows: Joseph and Mary probably left Nazareth not long after their marriage feast in November, as Fr. Gaechter argues, in order to conceal from prying Nazarenes the fact that Mary was already some months with child. But this journey to Bethlehem ought not to be put quite so early as Fr. Gaechter proposes. The census-decree which provided an occasion for leaving Nazareth was probably not promulgated in June-August, but in November-December, so that the registration would have to be completed by the end of December. Fr. Gaechter, it will be remembered, noted that this later period in November-December was also opportune, and more likely than any other except the period about August (p. 361). His argument for the August promulgation, because of the season between harvest and winter planting, he admits is only suasive (p. 362). The ancient tradition that it actually occurred later, so that the arrival at Bethlehem might be supposed to have fallen in December, deserves consideration. It is not weakened by his other arguments. Surely the safety of our Lady's secret would not be endangered at Nazareth even in her late fifth month, because intimate relations with other women would be far less after her marriage than before. Nor would this be too late for her to make the journey without serious discomfort because of her condition.

In short, I suggest that the trip from Nazareth occurred a month later than Fr. Gaechter proposes, i.e., in December, although the Nativity would

still be placed in March-April. The testimony of St. Chrysostom and other early writers for a December census that epoch-making year seems too confident not to be taken into our consideration.

Further valuable information on the whole question of the date of Christmas may be found in the following: H. Usener, *Geschichte des Weihnachtsfestes*. Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen, I. Bonn. 1889; S. Bäumer, "Ueber den Ursprung des Weihnachtsfestes." [*Katholik* III/I (1890) 1-125]; R. Herdt, *La Fête de Noël*, Paris, 1927; A. Hollard [*Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 11 (1931) 256-275]; A. Meyer, *Das Weihnachtsfest* (Tübingen, 1911); Baumstark, "Die Zeit der Einführung des Weihnachtsfestes in Konstantinopel" [*Oriens Christianus* 2 (1902) 441-446]; Chrysostomus Baur, O.S.B. *Der Heilige Joannes Chrysostomus und Seine Zeit*. München. 1933.

RAYMOND V. SCHODER, S.J.

THE SO-CALLED "CROSS" OF HERCULANUM. In the summer of 1939 a premature press notice announced to the world that a Christian cross had been found in the course of excavations at Herculaneum. Beneath a layer of lava and solidified mud that had a thickness of approximately 18 meters there was an extensive building which had been changed from a patrician dwelling to a place for shops and stores shortly before the disaster of 79 A.D. On the second floor in an isolated part was a small chamber with but one door giving on a corridor and no window to the outside. Opposite the door a stucco panel had been affixed to the wall and in this is the impression of some cruciform object which had disappeared before the whole was buried by the volcanic eruption. The discovery had been made early in 1938, but formal announcement was made only in November 1939 by Mr. Maiuri, the director of the excavations. Subsequently Father G. de Jerphanion, S.J. very carefully inspected the find and the surroundings in order to form his own conclusions on the controverted object. These are now given in a thoroughly scientific and well balanced study that appears in the *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 7 (1941) 5-35. It is accompanied by two photographs which give a clear idea of the object.

The first part of the article gives a very detailed description of the monument. Only a few points need be mentioned here. What we have is merely the impression of an object that was fastened to the wall with nails before the stucco was applied. The panel is eccentric with regard to the wall, and the object, apparently of wood, does not occupy a symmetrical position in the panel. There is no decoration, nor any symbol or inscription to help interpret the strange object. Before it, but to one side, is a small wooden cupboard of somewhat odd form. Whether this piece of furniture has any

connection with the cruciform object or even stood in the room when that was there is uncertain. It has neither the form of an ancient Christian altar nor that of a pagan *ara*.

As to the question whether we have here a cross that was venerated by Christians at this spot, Father de Jerphanion comes to the conclusion that this must be denied. Early Christian tradition, both literary and monumental, is against the supposition that any cultus was shown to the material sign of the cross before the third century. When St. Paul and the early Fathers speak of the cross as the sign of salvation, it is the torment, not the material object, that is in their minds. In fact when the cross does appear in the figure of the "Latin" cross it does not agree with the descriptions given by such authors as St. Irenaeus and Tertullian of the cross used by the Romans, showing that the artists were no longer familiar with this instrument of execution. Hence strong proofs would be required for asserting that this is really a Christian symbol, and no proofs are at hand.

There are also other considerations that militate against this being a Christian symbol: the locality is entirely unsuited for a place of Christian assembly of those days; the workmanship of the studio is poor and gives signs of haste; there is nothing in the line of decoration.

The question still remains open whether we have to deal with a symbol of a non-Christian cult or a purely secular object.

AUGUSTIN C. WAND, S.J.

