

Christmas Traditions

*Why We Do
What We Do*

Christopher M. Bellitto, PhD



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Why We Do What We Do

Christopher M. Bellitto, PhD

Why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25? Why do we bring a tree into our house and decorate it? Did three wise men really travel from the east?

Each December we automatically do things that say “Christmas,” but we don’t always know *why*. Not every Christmas tradition is directly related to a religious holiday—indeed, some even have pagan roots—but looking at our Church’s history to uncover how Christmas developed is a window to our faith.

Many of the pictures that first come

to mind when we think of Christmas are, in fact, quite recent. Some of the most common are tied in with images of Victorian carolers, a leftover from the powerful influence the British Empire had on the world only 150 years ago, especially in its American markets. Clement Moore's poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* was published in 1823; Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* appeared in 1843, not long before the American Civil War. Currier and Ives prints that show snowy, typically nonreligious scenes on Christmas cards and calendars also didn't appear until the nineteenth century.

We should note that the first Christmas didn't take place in a snowy place, but a desert—a reminder that half of the world's Christians live south of the Equator, where on December 25 it's summer.

Gospel Sources

To really understand Christmas, we must go right to the sources—the Gospels—but that can be a problem.

The first message Christ's disciples told about Jesus concerned his passion, death, and resurrection—that is, Easter—not his birth. Only later, once people heard about and believed in Jesus' divinity and resurrection, did they want to know more about his childhood. One could almost say, then, that the Gospels were preached (and later written) from end to beginning.

Right away, though, we're reminded that the Gospels weren't written as newspapers or historical records in any modern sense. We have, for instance, no independent historical corroboration for the Roman census that sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. And even if it

existed, in the ancient Roman world it was not always required to go home to be counted. Herod's slaughter of male children under the age of two years, fueled by his fear of a rival king, likewise has no strong historical basis.

Does this mean the Gospels are fantasy or useless? Hardly. Catholic Scripture scholars urge us to take the Gospels—and all of Scripture—seriously, but not always literally.

Of the four Gospels, just Matthew and Luke have extensive infancy narratives. Only Luke's includes shepherds in the scene of Jesus' birth, probably as a metaphor that Christ, the Good Shepherd, came to outcasts, the marginalized, and those who had left the flock.

In fact, one of the earliest artistic representations of Jesus, from about the second century, is on a fresco in Rome's Saint Callixtus Catacomb. It depicts

Jesus as a young, clean-shaven shepherd with a sheep draped around his shoulders. Shepherds were often present at the birth of Greco-Roman gods or heroes, so Luke may have placed shepherds in the nativity scene because they would have been familiar to a pagan audience.

Luke's Gospel deliberately emphasizes links between what came to be called the Old and New Testaments: He emphasized Bethlehem because it was known as the city of David.

It's surprising that John's Gospel doesn't name Jesus' mother, and Mark's doesn't mention Joseph.