***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**January 2025**

**A DATE FOR THE BIRTH OF JESUS**

The idea that the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth[[1]](#footnote-1) would be celebrated on the 25th of December comes from the first Christian Emperor of Rome – Constantine.[[2]](#footnote-2) No one, not even today, knows the exact date when Jesus was born – it was most probably *not* the 25th of December and certainly *not* in the year 1 AD.

During the first 300 years of Christianity, the focus was on **Jesus Christ’s death**, the extraordinary truth of his **Resurrection** from the dead, and **the promise of eternal life**. To us who celebrate our birthdays every year, it is somewhat surprising that such an important historical person has no authentic birthday date.

When the Roman Emperor Constantine won his victory under the sign of the Chi Rho (a symbol for Christ) marked on the shields of his army, he guaranteed tolerance of all religions in the Roman Empire but declared Christianity to be the state religion. He told of how he saw the sign of the Chi Rho in the sun and of a dream in which Jesus appeared to him and said, *“In this Sign, you will conquer!”* It is important to remember that Constantine, although he was not yet baptised, was predisposed towards Christianity because his mother, Saint Helena,[[3]](#footnote-3) was a devout Greek-speaking Christian.

In searching for a birthday date for Jesus and finding that no one knew exactly when he was born, Constantine and the Church [[4]](#footnote-4) decided that the best date for an “Official Birthday” was the Winter Solstice that occurs around the 21st to the 25th of December. The advantage of this date was that it almost coincided with the Roman seven-day feast of Saturnalia from the 17th of December until the 23rd of December and aligned with the Roman feast of *“Sol Invictus”* (The Invincible Sun). Today, we tend to see this as a process of inculturation.

CHRIST THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD:

From prehistoric times, the greatest concern of agrarian [[5]](#footnote-5) people was when to plant their crops. This became very important if snow, fog, clouds, and rain continued to dominate the winter season. Calculating the Winter Solstice, when the days began to grow longer, was extremely valuable for people who relied on farming for survival. Hence, the latest theories are that the megalithic structure on Salisbury Plain in England, Stonehenge,[[6]](#footnote-6) was a giant seasonal clock that was aligned towards sunrise on the Summer Solstice and sunset on the Winter Solstice and not just a religious gathering place, a grand monument or burial place of chieftains or kings. Deposits there containing human bones date back to 3000 BC, and their DNA indicates that those rural people originally came from the area of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Winter Solstice then was an excellent choice for Christ's official birthday because he declared, “*I am the Light of the World; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark but will have the light of life.*” [[7]](#footnote-7)

TWO FEASTS LINKED TOGETHER:

Having decided on the “Official Birthday” of Christ, it seemed necessary to calculate back nine months for the Feast of the Annunciation on the 25th of March, solely based on his birth being the 25th of December. Unfortunately, every now and then[[8]](#footnote-8) this liturgical feast of the Annunciation falls during Holy Week, which causes a liturgical conundrum because it would have Jesus being conceived just before he died, causing devotional confusion and perhaps some mirth. When that occurs, the feast of the Annunciation is moved. This difficulty occurs because the date for Easter moves around, following a Full Moon in a Lunar cycle.

WHY THIS TOPIC:

Since all this is so confusing, you might be wondering why this topic has been chosen for our January 2025 Secular Franciscan Spiritual Message. There are three points to make here. First, some anti-Catholic Christian sects argue that the “Roman Catholic” Church has been lying to everyone about the date of Christ’s birth for centuries! Should you hear this, you now have an answer against this unfortunate statement. Second, since the feast of Christmas has just passed, this subject has been a “hot topic” on YouTube where young people can read about it and become utterly confused and perhaps refuse to celebrate Christmas. [[9]](#footnote-9) Third, it is important to point out that our devotion to Christ is based on faith, hope and charity, not on the exact date of his birth.

THE INCARNATION:

The real point of these two liturgical and devotional feasts, Christmas and the Annunciation, is the incredible reality of the **Incarnation** of Jesus Christ - the Messiah - our Saviour - the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity! When the Virgin Mary replied to the Archangel Gabriel: *“Let it happen to me as you have said.” [[10]](#footnote-10)* The Incarnation took place – the Word became flesh. Saint John, in his gospel, wrote: *“The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth*.”[[11]](#footnote-11) What we need to grasp is that, in so many ways, the Incarnation is not only about who Jesus is but also about the dignity of the human person.

St Luke tells us that almost immediately after the visit of the Archangel Gabriel, Mary set out to assist her cousin Elizabeth,[[12]](#footnote-12) who already, according to the Archangel, was six months pregnant. When Mary greeted her cousin, Elizabeth *“was filled with the Holy Spirit,”* and the baby John the Baptist, at six months, jumped for joy in his mother’s womb. Elizabeth immediately cried out, *“Blessed is the fruit of your womb!”*

THE SANCTITY OF ALL LIFE:

Perhaps this dramatic moment that we call the **Visitation** should make us stop and wonder if a six-month-old human embryo and a two-week-old embryo are more human than we think. They are babies that have yet to grow to maturity and be born. What happened in secret at the Annunciation was revealed in truth at the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. [[13]](#footnote-13)

ETERNAL LIFE:

To save us, Jesus did not take the form of an Angel. He took human form to show us a way of life that leads through death to everlasting life. [[14]](#footnote-14) Hence, more important than exact dates is the message [[15]](#footnote-15) and the message is the man – Jesus Christ!

Wishing you good health and many blessings in this New Year 2025 AD.

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1. Dare we suggest that Jesus was not really Jesus of Nazareth but Jesus of Bethlehem, where he was born, as was his foster father, St Joseph, and his legal ancestor, King David. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Constantine I (born 272 – died 337) was Emperor from 306 – 337 AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Helena is typically a Greek name. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pope St Sylvester (Pope from 314 to 335). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. People who relied on farming and grain crops for a living. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stonehenge was built between 2600 BC and 2400 BC, which gave them 200 years to drag those 25-ton stones from 26 km away and set them into place. This was a very serious effort for farming people. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Gospel according to John 8:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example, it had to be moved in 2016 and 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. No Christmas presents for them! [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gospel according to Luke Chapter 1:38. *“You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gospel according to John Chapter 1:14 and the First Letter of John Chapter 1:1-3 *“Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have* ***heard****, which we have* ***seen*** *with our own eyes, which we have* ***watched*** *and* ***touched*** *with our own hands, the Word of life -- this is our theme.* *That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony, declaring to you the eternal life, which was present to the Father and has been revealed to us.* *We are declaring to you what we have* ***seen*** *and* ***heard****, so that you too may share our life. Our life is shared with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The journey from Nazareth to Ein Karem is about 144 Km. Walking 8 hours a day, the trip would be about 5 to 7 days. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, the unborn child has no rights as a human being until it is born. This was not a deliberate omission, but rather a naïve understanding that the human embryo was naturally sacrosanct in its mother’s womb. This omission, presumed in 1948 when abortion was not legalised, has come in our day to be an opportunity for an extraordinary number of excuses for the removal of an unwanted child. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hebrews 2:16-18 *“For the suffering he himself passed through while being put to the test enables him to help others when they too are being put to the test.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “**The medium is the message**” is a phrase coined by the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan and the name of the first chapter in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964. McLuhan proposes that a communication medium itself, not the messages it carries, should be the primary focus of study. I am, I believe, applying this concept correctly to the gospel message. The date of his birth is not important, nor is the message greater than the man. We are called into an intimate relationship with the man Jesus so that we may hear him and listen to him. Understand, now why his last miracle was to heal the servant’s ear. Ask him to heal your h**ear**t. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)