

Article: Christmas and its season

For early Christians, the Saviour's birth was second in importance only to His resurrection on Easter Sunday. Therefore, from earliest times, Christians paused to reflect on God's great and gracious gift of Himself. The date of Christmas, however, fluctuated among March 25, January 6, and December 25. December 25 was selected as the date perhaps because it coincided with a pagan winter solstice festival known as the birth of the invincible sun (*natalis solis invicti*). Christians quickly adapted this festival to the birth of the truly invincible Son of God, whom "the darkness has not overcome" (John 1:5).

However, some suggest another ancient reason to calculate December 25 as the date of Christ's birth, a reason that dates from the early fourth century. Citing the ancient belief that calculating the date of conception is more significant, some like to emphasise that an older tradition places the date of the annunciation on March 25, and December 25 is nine months after this date. The choice of March 25 as the date of the annunciation was calculated from the biblical narrative of Mary's visit to Elizabeth, which occurred after John the Baptist's conception. In addition, by following a somewhat mystical ancient logic in which famous persons were said to have lived in complete years, a person's death date was often considered to be his day of conception. Because the early Church calculated that the first Good Friday occurred on March 25, this way of thinking meant Christ was conceived on the same date. The earliest mention of Christmas as an official feast of the Christian community is from AD 354 in a list of commemorations primarily of martyrs from AD 336. The compiler of this list uses December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth.

Despite what occurs in our commercial markets, the season of Christmas continues after December 25, a period known traditionally as the "Twelve Days of Christmas." This nearly two-week season includes a number of minor festivals: The Festival of St. Stephen, the first martyr, occurs on December 26. St. John, apostle and evangelist, is remembered on December 27. The death of the babies in Bethlehem is observed on December 28, which is the Festival of the Holy Innocents. The circumcision and naming of Jesus on the eighth day after His birth (Luke 2:21) is celebrated on January 1. The Christmas season culminates on January 6 with the most ancient nativity celebration, the Epiphany of our Lord.