

Christmas message is lost among the holiday clutter

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I was aghast the other evening as I watched someone in Jay Leno's audience struggle with identifying who Mary's husband was in the Nativity story.

Christmas has obviously gotten too cluttered and its meaning has gotten lost.

But the history of Christmas itself is complicated. It took centuries for it to become as important as it is today, almost superseding Easter, the principal Christian holy day that commemorates Christ's saving death and resurrection.

The earliest mention of Christians celebrating the birth of Jesus appears in the second century, but it was observed in the springtime because of gospel reference to shepherds tending their flocks — a springtime activity.

But early on, also, the Eastern Church commemorated the birth of Christ along with a then-prominent holy day, the Epiphany, the feast of the Three Kings. This observance of the presentation of the Savior to the world took place in January.

Church leaders in the West, however, opted to separate the Nativity from the Epiphany celebration and move Christmas to December in order to supplant the Roman pagan bacchanalian observance of Saturnalia.

Dec. 25 was selected for Christmas and not Dec. 22, the day of the winter solstice — not because of any important religious tradition, the celebration of the Annunciation.

That holy day commemorated the angel Gabriel relating to Mary that she would bring forth a son, conceived in obedience to God's will. This dawning of salvation was, like Christmas, remembered in the spring, the season of new life, and the day for the Annunciation was fixed on March 25, the vernal, or springtime, equinox.

When Christmas was separated from the Epiphany, Dec. 25 was chosen because it was nine months, to the day, from March 25.

Other European peoples also observed the winter holiday. In England, the Anglo-Saxons celebrated the yuletide and there, too, Christian missionaries replaced pagan traditions with Christmas.

The social need to mark the year's turn of the sun could not be suppressed, and partying at Christmas time has continued. But the bacchanalia was postponed to Jan. 1.

The term "Christmas" is of Latin origin and stands for "Christ's Mass (Eucharist)." In Spanish, "Navidad," alludes to the "birth" of Christ. In French, "Noel" comes from "good news" (as in glad tidings) that proclaim salvation.

The tradition of giving presents at Christmas seems to have originated from the feast of the Magi, who brought gifts to the Christ child. In many countries, presents are still distributed on Jan. 6.

Some sources suggest that the gift-giving custom also comes from European lords and kings increasing the rations to peasants at this time of year, the death of winter, when food sources were scarce. This occasioned among the commoners special, festive family dinners, which imitated the banquets of the lords and kings.

With time, the celebrations related with an event as momentous as the birth of the Savior have gotten so elaborate that they sometimes crowd out the basic Christmas story — as with the man on the Leno show who couldn't remember Joseph.

This cluttering of Christmas has periodically led religious reformers to advocate doing away with Christmas celebrations altogether, especially Christians in the early New Testament decades at that time observed Christmas as a holy day.

But that view implies a separation between the secular and the sacred when, in fact, faith sanctifies human traditions. Changing the dates for Christmas and adding to the celebration are our attempts to make holy our remembrance of God's spirit among us, thereby making it relevant today.

The solution to a cluttered Christmas is simplicity and, most importantly, to sanctify the celebration. Christmas is, after all, about the salvation we all yearn for.

Have a simple, blessed Christmas!