

THE DATE OF CHRISTMAS

Opponents of Christianity (and there are many these days) enjoy telling us that the actual birthday of Jesus Christ is unknown. They say that December 25th was picked as the date to celebrate Christmas not because Christ was born on that day, but rather to provide a Christian alternative to the pagan celebrations and festivals centered around the winter solstice. If true, then the failure to pay attention to historical facts undermines the Church's credibility. "You know [modern critics say smugly], Jesus wasn't really born on Christmas." If true, it also strengthens arguments that Christian celebrations are really more or less just outgrowths of pagan feasts and rituals. So when was Jesus Christ born? Is there really something to December 25th or was that date just pulled out of thin air? Here are the facts: The Roman feast of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun (in Latin, "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti") was established by the Emperor Aurelian in 274 A.D. and celebrated at the winter solstice – the shortest day of the year (usually December 21st in the Northern Hemisphere). However, the 3rd Century martyr, Saint Hippolytus (170 – 235) wrote in his commentary on Daniel that Christ was born "eight days before the Calends of January" which would have been December 24th or 25th. Saint Hippolytus wrote his commentary on Daniel sometime between 204 and 211 A.D., at least 60 years before the Romans established their feast of the Unconquered Sun. There is also a very ancient tradition that Jesus was crucified on the same date that He became incarnate. Tertullian (155 – 240), another ancient Christian writer, wrote in *Adversus Judaeos* that Christ suffered "in the month of March, at the time of the Passover, on the eighth day before the Calends of April." That day would have been March 25th. If that was also the day of the Incarnation, it explains why the early Church set the date for Christmas nine months later on December 25th. Other ancient writers, some of whom predate the feast of the Unconquered Sun also state that Jesus was conceived on March 25th. They include Sextus Julius Africanus (c. 160 – c. 240) who gave March 25th as the day of creation and of the conception of Jesus and the author of the tract *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis Domini nostri Iesu Christi et Iohannis Baptistae* who also states that Jesus was conceived and crucified on the same day of the year and who calculated this date as March 25th. So, the date of Christmas was set not to counteract the pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun. Rather, the date of Christmas was set on December 25th because, according to the most ancient Church traditions, that was the day on which Christ was born.