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**THE FIRST EARLY CHRISTIAN TESTIMONIES
OF CHRISTMAS**

The inception of the holy day of Jesus' birthday is one of the greatest puzzles of early Christianity and history of liturgy. It is so because there is no a single ancient text which describes its origins. Moreover, when it comes to the early stage of the development of this holy day, the sources do not give similar accounts. The inadequacy of these sources has created a situation where the origin of Christmas has been described in various and contradictory ways.

Most of the debates centre around reasons and circumstances of the inception of Christmas, which means the answer to the question of why the day of 25 December was chosen as a day of celebration (Gospels do not give the exact day of the year in which Jesus was born). Another problem, and this paper deals with it, is when this holy day appeared and what are the first traces of its celebration.

The research carried out so far is not congruent. The hypothesis—created by Louis Duchesne¹ and supported by Bernard Botte in his basic monograph on this issue²—that Christmas has existed in Rome at least since 336 A.D., carries a lot of authority. However, this is not the opinion which is commonly accepted. Some researchers keep returning to the old hypothesis of Herman Usener, who argued that 25 December was celebrated in Rome only in 354-360 A.D., while

¹ L. Duchesne, *Origines du culte chretien*, Paris 1920, 128.

² B. Botte, *Les origines de la Noel et de l'Epiphanie. Etudes historique*, Louvain 1932, 33-37.

earlier it had been celebrated on 6 January.³ Hans Forster, a historian from Vienna, apart from many shorter articles, has recently published two full monographs on the origins of both holy days.⁴

There also exists a group of researchers who place the origins of Christmas much earlier, around 300 A.D., which was still during the period of the persecution of Christianity. This hypothesis was supported by the great historians of the ancient Church: Hans Lietzmann and Franz Joseph Dolger.⁵ Hugo Rahner suggested that Christmas had begun at the end of the third century, during “the great peace” which existed before the last persecution of Christianity.⁶ Similarly, an American historian of liturgy, Thomas Talley, places the origins of Christmas in the second half of the third century.⁷ Older studies included even earlier dates. On the basis of improper or not critical analyses of sources it was accepted that the holy day of Christ’s birth was known to Hippolytus of Rome at the turn of the second/third century and to the author of *De Pascha computatus*

³ H. Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest (Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen 1)*, Bonn 1911, s 281.

⁴ H. Forster, *Die Feier der Geburt Christi in der Alten Kirche. Beiträge zur Erforschung der Anfänge der Epiphanie- und Weihnachtsfest*, Tübingen 2000, 95-107 and 195-196. Forster rejected the authenticity of records in the *Chronography* 354, and the first testimony of Christmas for him is the sermon by Optatus of Milevi. He supports this hypothesis less strongly in his second monograph *Die Anfänge von Weihnachten und Epiphaniastage: eine Anfrage an die Entstehungshypothesen*, Tübingen 2007. This hypothesis is also supported by C. Gianotto, *L’origine de la fête de Noël au IV^e siècle*, in: *La Nativité et le temps de Noël. Antiquité et Moyen Âge, études réunies par J.-P Boyer et G. Dorival*, Publications de l’Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence 2003, 68-69.

⁵ H. Lietzmann, *Geschichte der alten Kirche*, 3. Aufl., vol. 3, Berlin 1961, 324; F.J. Dolger, *Das Sonnengleichnis in einer Weihnachtspredigt des Zeno von Verona. Christus als wahre und ewige Sonne*, „*Antike und Christentum*” 6 (1940), 1-56, 23-24.

⁶ H. Rahner, *Das christliche Mysterium von Sonne und Mond*, in *Idem, Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung*, 3. Aufl., Zürich 1957, 135.

⁷ Th. Talley, *Les origines de l’année liturgique*, Paris 1990, 106.

from 243 A.D.⁸ or even to the pope Telesfor (c.a. 125-136).⁹ And finally, sometimes the origins of Christmas were placed in Apostolic times.

What are, then, the earliest traces of Christian celebrations on 25 December?

1. The borderline date of the beginnings of the holy day

We should begin by referring to the testimonies which are supposed to prove that Christmas was already celebrated in the period of the persecution of the Church (before 313 A.D.) and before the Council in Nicaea (325 A.D.). Such sources were quoted while researching Christmas's origins, although they are not convincing or well documented. Two of them should be introduced in order to show why interpretations included in them were erroneous.

Did Hippolytus of Rome know Christmas?

The first trace of the holy day of Jesus's birth was found in the *Commentary on the Prophet Daniel* edited in 202-204 A.D. Hippolytus of Rome presented there chronological calculations which were to prove that the end of the world was not so imminent. In the context of history he also defined the time of Christ's life, mostly His death and birth. The date of birth, however, is not unequivocal. The first critical edition of the *Commentary* from 1897 includes

⁸ Antoni Żurek claims that *Commentary on the Prophet Daniel* "maybe" includes "the oldest testimony of the celebrations of Christmas". (A. Żurek, *Wprowadzenie do Ojców Kościoła*, Tarnów 1998, 102). The opinion that the author of *De Pascha Computus* "most probably" knew Christmas was held by W. Hartke (c.f., W. Hartke, *Über Jahrespunkte und Feste insbesondere das Weihnachtsfest*, Berlin 1956, 75.).

⁹ Such views were summarized by Wincenty Granat, who wrote about Christmas: "There is no single certain historical testimony about the establishment of the holy day, while tradition, the traces of which can be found in *Liber Pontificalis*, insists that it existed in Rome as early as the first half of the second century (W. Granat, *Dogmatyka katolicka, Chrystus Bóg-Człowiek*, Lublin 1959, 310.)

the following version of the text: “Christ was born on 25 December, on the fourth day of the week.”¹⁰

So in the text, the date of 25 December appears. If it really had existed in the text from the beginnings of the third century, it would really have been exceptional in this period. However, the researchers from the end of the nineteenth century treated it suspiciously. As Adolf Hilgenfeld, a Protestant theologian and an expert of Hippolytus’s works, said, information about 25 December was impossible in this period, and that it must have been added later.¹¹ Louis Duchesne, a great French historian of liturgy, claimed that the authenticity of this date is “extremely dubious”.¹² However, there were some researchers who accepted that Hippolytus really had known the date of 25 December and even Christmas itself.

The suspicions about the authenticity of this date were partly confirmed when other manuscripts of *Commentary on the Prophet Daniel* were found. It was the manuscript from a monastery in Mt. Athos (A) which included the most extensive text and it proved to be decisive. It was accepted as the best and oldest of the manuscripts of this text. Unfortunately, the fragment about Jesus’s birth had a hole and was unclear because it gave the following version: “The first coming of our Lord in the body, which happened in Bethlehem, took place [...] on April 25 December”. So, paradoxically, two dates were given alongside” “[...] April 25 December”. The first one was

¹⁰ *Komentarz do Księgi Daniela IV*, Bonwetsch, GCS, Berlin 1897. This edition, based on a Greek manuscript and old Slavonic translations, became the source of the translations in this book. It was also republished in the series, and the quoted French text also states that Jesus “was born on 25 December”.

¹¹ This opinion of the 1897 edition of Hippolytus’s *Commentary* is quoted by *Komentarza Hipolita Henri Leclercq*, see the entry “Nativite de Jesus”, in *Dictionnaire d’archeologie chretienne et de liturgie*, vol. 12, Paris 1935, 910. C.f., the earlier works of Adolfa Hilgenfeld (1823-1907) on the chronology of Jesus’s life in the writings of Hippolytus Hyppolitus: *Die Zeiten der Geburt, des Lebens und des Leidens Jesu nach Hippolytus*, „Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie” 35 (1892), 257-281; *Die Lebenszeiten Jesu bei Hippolytus*, op. cit., 36 (1893), s. 106-117.

¹² L. Duchesne, op. cit., 272.

damaged or partly erased. Its original format can be deduced from Hippolytus's paschal table, according to which Jesus was born on 2 April. It may be assumed that the date in this manuscript was identical. Therefore, the sentence was complemented with the term *nona*. This is the version given in the second "completely changed" edition of *Commentary on the Prophet Daniel* from 2000, in which the date "25 December" is put in square brackets as added to the text, and the whole fragment reads like this:

The first coming of our Lord, which happened in the body, which happened when he was born in Bethlehem, took place <2> April [25 December]¹³ on the fourth day of the week, in the forty-second year of Augustus's reign, counting from Adam in the year 5500. He suffered on the cross in the thirty-third year of his life, on 25 March, on the day of Preparation (Friday), in the eighteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Rufus and Rubellion were consuls.¹⁴

There could not have existed two dates of Jesus's birth: 2 April (probably) and 25 December. It seems that the first one, the April one, is authentic. Because it sits well with the dates given by other authors

¹³ Literally "on the fourth day before <the Nonas> of April [on the eight day before the Kalends of January]". The word missing in the manuscript should have been filled with one of these terms: *the Kalends, the Ides, the Nonas*. Therefore, a following date could have been placed here: the Kalends of April (29 March) the Nonas of April (2 April) or the Ides of April (10 April). The version with the Nonas was selected because that is the date of Christ's birth in the *Paschal Table* by Hippolytus. Herman Usener was the first to claim that in Hippolytus's *Commentary* that was certainly the date he gave, for that was the date given in his paschal table. (*Das Weihnachtsfest*, 373-375).

¹⁴ *Komentarz do Księgi Daniela IV*, 23, in *Hippolyt Werke*. 1,1. *Kommentar zu Daniel*, hrsg. G.N. Bonwetsch, zweite, vollständig erarbeitete Auflage von M. Richard, GCS Neue Folge 7, Berlin 2000, 244-246. In the edition of Hippolytus's commentary prepared by Marcel Richard on the basis of the manuscript *cod. A (Vatopedi 290, formerly 260)* the date "on the eighth day before the Kalends of January" is given in square brackets and as interpolation to the original text. However, this change was not marked in the German translation placed next to the Greek text, which is a translation more than one century old.

in this period: Clement of Alexandria (Jesus was born in April or May) and the author of *Paschal Reckoning* from 234 A.D. (also the date in the spring—28 March). What is most important, however, is that it is agreement with the date of 2 April which Hippolytus placed in his *Paschal Table*. So the phrase “25 December” was added later. It must be stated that it exists in the majority of manuscript testimonies of *Commentary on the Prophet Daniel*. However, this date would have been exceptional in the third century and contradictory with Hippolytus’s *Paschal Table*. Maybe, at first it was just a postscript in the margin made in the period when Christmas was already celebrated in December. A copyist added it into the text, and at the same time he left the first date, in April, which is preserved in the oldest manuscript and remains a witness to the original version.

This is obvious, and so the date 2 April disappeared from the majority of manuscripts. It was incomprehensible to later copyists, and that is why they avoided it while they were rewriting this text. As Marcel Richard stated, it was preserved “almost miraculously” only in the old manuscript from the monastery of Vatopedi in Athos.¹⁵ It remained the witness that according to the author from the beginning of the third century, Jesus was born during the holy day of Pasha (14 nissan), which in the Roman calendar was 2 April. It should be added that even if the date 25 December had been authentic, it would not have been the oldest testimony of celebrations of Christmas, because Hippolytus wrote nothing about the celebrations; he only gave chronological calculations. Christmas started to be celebrated more than a hundred years later.

Did it exist before the arguments with the Donatists?

In the research on the origins of the holy day of 25 December the hypothesis that it existed at the beginning of the fourth century, when the Donatists started their activities in Northern Africa, is still quite popular. This hypothesis is based on Augustine’s fourth sermon

¹⁵ M. Richard, *Comput et chronographie chez saint Hippolyte*, „Melanges de Sciences Religieuses” 8 (1951), 9 and 20-21.

for the The Epiphany (homily 202 in the collection of his speeches) which was presented at the beginning of the fifth century.

It was connected with the holy day celebrated on 6 January. Augustine talked about the tribute of the magi, the star leading to Jesus, etc. He also dealt with topical issues, but first of all about the unity of the Church. He referred to the painful issue of the Donatists, which was dividing the Church in Northern Africa. Anyway, he spoke on many occasions on this schism, popular particularly in Numidia, where he himself had come from. He stressed that the magi, as the representatives of pagans, came to Jesus from the East in order to create in this way the unity of the Church. Augustine gave the issue of celebrations of the The Epiphany as an example of the lack of unity. He accused the Donatists of never celebrating this holy day together. As he pointed out, they behaved in this way because "they do not love unity and have no community with the Eastern Church".¹⁶ The bishop of Hippo did not mention Christmas, as if there were no problems with celebrations of this holy day. This led to the following opinion: the Donatists did not accept the The Epiphany, which started to be celebrated when the schism already existed, while they celebrated Christmas from the beginning, which means that it had to be known before the Donatists broke with the Church.

It is known that the Donatist schism originated during great persecutions, which happened in 303 and 304 in Northern Africa and forced Christians to undertake dramatic alternatives. Donatus wanted to create the Church of "the pure" and accused those who during these persecutions had lost their faith. His movement could have already existed in 305 A.D., although it was clearly noticed slightly later, c.a. 311-312 A.D. And from then till the period of Augustine it tore apart

¹⁶ Augustine, *Homilia 202, 2 (In Epiphania Domini)*: "While we, in union with all the churches coming from pagans, celebrate this day, on which our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was born and on which he, as if, accepted the primordial features of pagans." (*Merito istum diem numquam nobiscum haeretici donatistae celebrare voluerunt: qui nec unitatem amant, nec Orientali Ecclesiae ubi stella apparuit communicant. Nos autem manifestationem Domini...celebramus*); see *Opere di Sant'Agostino*, vol. 32, 1, 120; PL 38,1033.

the Church in this region. So Christmas must have been established before Diocletian's persecutions. This is the conclusion which Gottfried Brunner drew from Augustine's homily: "On this ground I believe that the Donatists celebrated Christmas on 25 December. They took it from the ancient Church. In the period of the schism it was widespread enough, including in Africa. And it is very probable that it had been celebrated in Africa before the outbreak of Diocletian's persecution."¹⁷

These arguments were taken up by Hans Lietzmann in the well-known history of the ancient Church.¹⁸ Also, Hieronymus Engberding claimed that Christmas was established in Northern Africa before 312 A.D.¹⁹ Even Hugo Rahner supposed that Christmas must have been celebrated before Diocletian's persecutions, at the end of the third century, because in Africa it had been transferred from Rome before the Donatist schism in the years 305-312.²⁰ And finally, Thomas Talley also defended this hypothesis; in his important works about the development of the liturgical year, he argued that the holy day of 25 December was introduced before the Donatist schism; that is before 311 A.D. He summed up his arguments: "If we assume that the Donatists celebrated it, we should place its beginning in the period between 243 and 311 A.D."²¹, that is before the writing by Pseudo-Cyprian of the treatise *De Pascha computus*, and Donatus's schism.

¹⁷ G. Brunner, *Arnobius ein Zeuge gegen das Weihnachtsfest?*, „Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft“ 13 (1935), S178.

¹⁸ H. Lietzmann *Geschichte der alten Kirche*, vol. 3, 324: "In Africa Donatists rejected the holy day of the Epiphany, which was greeted by Augustine with complaint. Because he does not mention Christmas, it might be assumed that they had known this holy day as older and had approved of it, before they left the Catholic Church in 311 A.D."

¹⁹ H. Engberding, *Der 25. Dezember als Tag der Feier der Geburt des Herrn*, „Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft“ 2 (1952), 25-43.

²⁰ H. Rahner, *Das christliche Mysterium von Sonne und Mond, 190-191*. C.f., H. Frank, *Fruhgeschichte und Ursprung des römischen Weihnachtsfestes im Lichte neuerer Forschung*, „Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft“ 2 (1952), 15.

²¹ Th. Halley, *Les origines de l'année liturgique*, 101-102 and 106.

This hypothesis, however, does not have solid and convincing grounds. Augustine's sermon was preached because of the The Epiphany and it deals only with this holy day. Therefore, it does not have to mention Christmas. Besides, in the sentence: "Donatists have never wanted to celebrate this holy day with us" the word "never" (*numquam*) does not have to mean that they did not celebrate it from the beginning of the schism, that is from the moment of the establishment of the Donatist movement. This statement means only that Donatists did not want to celebrate the The Epiphany together, since this holy day had been established (surely these celebrations moved to the West after the schism with the Donatists).

The followers of Donatus did not accept this holy day probably because it had come from the East. They used the pretext that it had been introduced in Africa relatively late, during the dispute between both sides. Generally, they were more conservative than the whole Church, and it included the realm of liturgical innovations. So they did not accept new holy days, although they introduced numerous celebrations to worship the martyrs from their movement. Maybe the reluctance to accept the new celebration was also the result of the fact that the Donatist exegetes, in the context of their defiance of astrology, treated magi-sages with reserve,²² and they did not accept the holy day, the leading motif of which in the African Church—as Augustine's sermons show—was the tribute to pagan visitors from the East paid in Bethlehem to Jesus.

In fact, Augustine accused the Donatists only of not celebrating the The Epiphany together with the whole Church. And he did not mention Christmas. He did not accuse them of rejecting this holy day as well. Also, in other texts in which he was arguing with

²² C.f., F. Dolbeau, *Le sermon 374 de saint Augustin sur l'Épiphanie. Edition du texte original*, in Augustin d'Hippone, *Vingt-six sermons au peuple d'Afrique*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Paris 1996, 585 (the hypothesis of F. Dolbeau that the Donatists celebrated the Epiphany, but on a different day than the Catholics has no textual grounding.); F. Scorza Barcellona, *I donatisti, l'Epifania ei Magi secondo Ps. Agostino, sermone Caillau-Saint-Yves II38*, „Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni” 50 (1984), 5-18.

the Donatists, he did not ascribe such an opinion to them. Augustine's texts also do not allow the claim that they celebrated Christmas as early as 305 A.D. or 311 A.D. Or that this holy day existed in this period in northern Africa or in another region.

Moreover, there do not exist convincing testimonies which would indicate that Christmas was already celebrated in the period of the Church's persecution, or in the first years after they ceased in 313 A.D. (the so called "Edict of Milan") or even 325 A.D. (the Council of Nicaea), the lower borderline date *terminus post quem* of introducing Christmas.

2. The first testimony—the Roman calendar of Philocalus

The celebration of Christ's birthday on 25 December for the first time is testified in the Roman calendar which historians call the *Calendar 354* or the *Chronography 354*. This source is crucial in the explanation of the beginnings of these celebrations, and it includes "the oldest and the most certain data about Christmas".²³

The editor of the calendar was Furius Dionysius Philocalus, a famous calligrapher and a friend of the pope Damasus.²⁴ He collected several documents on history, and civil and religious life in Rome. The subsequent

²³ So states Th. Mommsen, the publisher of the *Chronography 354*, see *Chronographus anni CCCLIII*, MGH AA 9, *Chronica minora 1*, Berolini 1892, 101. On the *Chronography 354* see P. Janiszewski, *Historiografia późnego antyku*, in *Vademecum historyka starożytnej Grecji i Rzymu. Źródłoznawstwo czasów późnego antyku*, v. 3, ed. by E. Wipszycka, Warszawa 1999, 184-186.

²⁴ Philocalus is only mentioned on the title page of the codex. *Furius Dionysius Filocalus titulavit*. Certainly he was the author of the illustrations to the title page or the title pages (*tituli*) of the subsequent parts of the calendar. It can also be assumed that he was responsible for the arrangement of the whole of the collection, which is the opinion of M.R. Salzmänn, see the entry „Kalender II (Chronograph von 354)”, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 19, Stuttgart 2001, 1189. Philocalus is also known as a calligrapher from other sources. He rendered in stone the epigrams of pope Damasus devoted to the martyrs. On one of them is presented as “a supporter and close friend of pope Damasus.: (*Damasi papae cultor atque amator Furius Dionysius Filocalus scripsit*), see M. Schmidt, *Epigrammata Damasiana. Propaganda z rzymskich podziemi*, series: *Xenia Posnaniensia*, lecture 30, Poznań 2007, 16.

documents included a list of dates of emperors' birthdays, a list of consuls and prefects, biographical notes of Rome's bishops, the Easter table, and a list of Christian and pagan holy days, as well as the chronicle of the city and of the world. At least three of these texts testify to the existence of the Church holy day of Christmas on 25 December.²⁵

The list of holy days in 354 A.D.

The main testimonies are two documents from Philocalus's collection, which may be called liturgical calendars of the Church of Rome: remembrance of the martyrs (*Depositio martyrum*) and the bishops (*Depositio episcoporum*).

The first list generally includes the martyrs of Rome and its vicinity; it indicates when and where their memory should be worshipped (the place of the cult is also important, and that is why the document is called *deposition*—"putting in a grave". The list, however, starts with, (which is important) information about Christ's birthday, and only later are the memoirs of the saints given:

25 December – Christ born in Bethlehem in Judea.²⁶

20 January – Fabiana in the cemetery of Callistus, and Sebastian in the Catacombs.

21 January – Agnes at Via Nomentana.

22 February – St. Peter's Cathedral.

7 March – Perpetua and Felicitas in Africa, etc.²⁷

²⁵ New edition of the *Chronography 354* prepared for the Viennese series CSEL, will allow us to understand better this important historical source, particularly because the manuscript tradition is quite fickle. The *Chronography 354* has survived only in three copies from the 16-18th centuries, see W. Wischmeyer, *Die christlichen Texte im sogenannten Filocalus-Kalender, w: Textsorten und Textkritik. Tagungsbeiträge*, hrsg. A. Primmer, K. Smolak, D. Weber, Wien 2002, 45-57; J. Drvjak, *Der ogegnante Kalender des Filocalus*, in *ibid.*, 19-38.

²⁶ The text runs as follows: *VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudae*—"on the eighth day before the Kalends of January Christ was born in Bethlehem in Judea.

²⁷ *Depositio martyrum*, in *Chronographus*, MGH AA 9, 71. In Th. Mommsen's edition this document is entitled *Feriale Ecclesiae Romanae*, but this title has no support in the text and was invented by the editor.

So, among the liturgical celebrations in Rome the holy day of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem was given the first place. This is the oldest testimony about this holy day in patristic sources.

This document should be considered together with the second liturgical text *Remembrance of the Bishops* (*Depositio episcoporum*), where Christmas is not mentioned, but its existence might be assumed. The arrangement of this second list is meaningful. The days of putting in a grave (*depositio*), that is the liturgical anniversaries of the bishops of Rome, are given, starting with the last days of December. The list opens with Dionysius buried at the cemetery of St. Callistus on 27 December, and then lists Felix and Silvester, who died on 30 and 31 of December, respectively. It is only later that the January remembrances follow, and then the remembrances for the following months. The sequence of these remembrances assumes that the calendar begins from 25 December, that is from Christmas, which opens the liturgical year. It is the only possible explanation for such an arrangement of this list.

So in 354 A.D. when Philocalus's calendar was created, 25 December was already a holy day.

The testimony from 336 A.D.

Louis Duchesne came up with the hypothesis that the first, original edition of (*Depositio episcoporum*) must have been written before 354 A.D. Philocalus only supplemented it, adding the popes Marc and Julius. The order of the remembrances points to this.²⁸

²⁸ See *Depositio Episcoporum, w: Chronographus*, MGH AA 9, 70. The list is given after: B. Botte, op. cit., 33.

| Day of death | Pope's name papieża | Year of death | Two stages of the document's history |
|--------------|------------------------|---------------|--|
| 27 XII | Dionysius | 269 | 1) the original list was made in 336 A.D. It lists the popes in the calendar, shown on the left. |
| 30 XII | Felix | 274 | |
| 31 XII | Sylvester | 335 | |
| 10 I | Miltiades | 314 | |
| 15 II | Marcellus | 304 | |
| 5 III | Lucius | 255 | |
| 21 IV | Caius | 296 | |
| 2 VIII | Stephen | 256 | |
| 26 IX | Eusebius | 311 | |
| 8 XII | Eustachian | 283 | |
| 7 X | Mark | 336 | |
| 12 IX | Julius | 352 | |

Duchesne²⁹ noted that originally the list included remembrances of the first ten bishops, who are listed according to the order of liturgical celebrations within the year. It included the popes from the beginning of the third century until 335 A.D. The last of them was Sylvester, who died on 31 December 335 A.D. This list must have been made after the death of this pope, during the pontificate of Mark (which lasted for several months till 7 October 336 A.D.) Therefore, the form of *Depositio episcoporum*, used by *Chronograph* comes from the first months of 336 A.D. The list is the testimony of liturgical concepts from this year.

So at least in the year 336 A.D. the list of the liturgical remembrances started with Christmas, celebrated on 25 December. The holy day must have existed at that time.

²⁹ L. Duchesne presented this concept in his review of H. Usener's book about Christmas: *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen von H. Usener. Esrter Theil: Das Weihnachtsfest, kap. I, bis. III.*, in «Bulletin critique» 11 (Paris 1890), 41-47.

The problem of authenticity

Some researchers question the historical validity of the note included in *Depositio martyrum* “25 December Christ born in Bethlehem in Judea”. Two main issues are put forward.

The first one states that this sentence has the character of purely historical information. It only gives Jesus’s date of birth, but does not concern the holy day or celebrations. Therefore, it does not confirm that Christmas existed at that time.³⁰

The allegation is off the mark. The following expression could not have been used: *Natale* or *Dies natalis Christi* (Christ’s birth)³¹ because it would have been difficult to understand. The document lists the remembrances of the martyrs, that is the dates of their deaths and burials, which in the language of this period were called *depositio*, but, more often: *dies natalis*, the day of birth for heaven.³² That was the way in which martyrdom was treated—as the moment of “birth” to eternity. In this context the term “the birth of Christ” would be confusing. Therefore, a more appropriate phrase was used: “Christ born in Bethlehem in Judea”. However, it is not only purely historical information. Because it was put in the list of liturgical remembrances and it signifies a religious holy day.

The second, more serious issue, is the one of the homogeneity of *Depositio martyrum*. This document contains two bits of information which were not directly connected with the martyrological cult: one of the birth of Christ on 25 December, the other of celebrations of *St.*

³⁰ This is the position of Hans Forster, *op. cit.* 95-103,

³¹ Ambrose of Milan recalled the ceremony which took place in 352 A.D. on Christmas day. *Salvatoris natali* (*De virginibus* 3,1,1). He described the holy day itself as *Salvatoris [dies] natalis* or *Salvatoris natale*. Pope Siricius in a letter from 385 A.D. to bishop Himerius from Tarragoun lists Christmas as *natalitiae Christi*, and the Epiphany *Apparitio* (*Ep.* 1, 2, PL 13, 1134. In the letter this term is used: *Natalitiis Christi*.

³² The term *natale* appears in the context of the holy day *Natale Petri de cathedra* given with the date 22 February (in this context the term *natale* could be used, as it is supplemented by the phrase *de cathedra* indicating that this remembrance is of the first bishop of Rome as a teacher and guarantor of knowledge,

Peter's Cathedral on 22 February. Because of the presence of these two holy days, it looks as if the list of the martyrs is not homogeneous and does not strictly reflect the title. There have appeared opinions that these two bits of information are not original: they have been added later and they could not be treated as the oldest testimony of the existence of these celebrations.³³

We should agree that *Depositio martyrum* gives the list of the putting of the bodies of Christian martyrs (*depositio*); these were the days of their deaths and, at the same time, of their liturgical remembrances. This list was to go back to the times when the celebrations took place usually at a martyr's grave. However, on this list, which includes 52 names, not all remembrances are connected with real places of burial. We have here the martyrs who were buried in Africa: Cyprian, Perpetua and Felicity. Their remembrances in Rome were performed in places totally different from the places of their burial.³⁴

So, the term *depositio* means the day of putting in a grave, but in a wider context: liturgical remembrance or anniversary. Therefore, *Depositio martyrum* could also define celebrations which did not have anything in common with a grave or with martyrdom, such as the birth of Christ in Bethlehem or the remembrance of St. Peter's cathedral. Even more so because these remembrances had been introduced only recently. However, there was no need to include well known celebrations, such as Easter or Whitsun, which were additionally movable feasts in the Roman calendar, and one particular day of their celebration could not have been given.

The information about two new holy days, even if it destroyed the homogeneity of the list, could be accepted. It is supported by the fact

³³ Hans Forster treats these mentions as later interpolations in his works on the beginnings of Christmas: *Die Feier der Geburt Christi*, 95-103; *Die beiden angeblich 'ältesten Zeugen' des Weihnachtsfestes*, „Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft” 42 (2000), 29-40. Claudio Gianotto accepted Forster's opinion, *L'origine de la fête de Noël au IV siècle*, 68-69.

³⁴ C.f., J. Ruysschaert, *Les deux fêtes de Pierre dans la Depositio Martyrum de 354*, in *Rendiconti*, vol. 38 (*Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, serie 3*), Roma 1967, 173-184.

that some other early liturgical documents listed Christmas in their lists of martyrs' remembrances. It is enough to list the *Calendar from Caragena* from 505 A.D., which was built on the basis of the Latin list of the martyrs: it includes exclusively remembrances of the martyrs, but it makes two exceptions: we have Christmas on 25 December and the Epiphany on 6 January.³⁵ *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* is another example. Its original version comes from the fifth-sixth century. Apart from remembrances of the martyrs, it includes, under appropriate dates: Christmas, the Epiphany and St. Peter's Cathedral.³⁶ So, two new holy days could also have been added to *Depositio martyrum*.

These two holy days could also have existed during the time when *The Chronography of 354* was compiled. On the basis of other sources (which will be presented later in the text) it may be assumed with great certainty that Christmas was celebrated in Rome in 353 A.D. during the pontificate of Liberius, c.a. 363 A.D. in northern Africa in the times of Optatus of Milevis. The testimonies which are only slightly later indicate unequivocally that around 380 A.D. the holy day was developing all over the West: in northern Italy, but also in Spain and Africa, it was also accepted in Constantinople, Cappadocia and western Syria. John Chrysostom, in a sermon in Antioch on 25 December 386, stressed that in his city this holy day had been known for fewer than ten years, but that it had been celebrated for much longer in Rome. This development of the holy day proves that the date of its beginning cannot be put further back than in *The Chronography of 354*. It must have been placed in this collection, and the best place for it was *Depositio martyrum*.

In the middle of the fourth century the holy day of *Natale Petri de cathedra* could have existed, even though, unlike Christmas, there is no confirmation for it in the sources of this period. It was less important, and therefore it was mentioned less often. However, it is

³⁵ *Kalendarium Carthaginense*, PL 13, 1227-1228.

³⁶ *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, PL 30, 437.

mentioned by *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*³⁷ and also by the Gallic synod in Tours in 561 A.D.³⁸ *The Chronography* confirms that there existed circumstances which could have induced the beginnings of remembering of St. Peter's Cathedral. It so happened that Philocalus included in his collection a list of short biographical notes of the popes, known as *Catalogus Liberianus*. These are short notes about the bishops of Rome, from St. Peter the Apostle to Liberius, which try to specify how long and in which years the subsequent pontificates lasted. These are the crucial data in these notes. They were collected and recorded in such great detail for the first time. In this context it is less strange that the liturgy for the anniversary of the inauguration of the pontificate of St. Peter also started to be celebrated. In Rome the remembrance of the first bishop of Rome and the holy day of his bishopric could have been initiated.³⁹ Also, other sees of bishops tried to celebrate their beginnings. In Jerusalem the tradition of reverence to the very throne of the bishop (cathedral)

³⁷ *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* gives the following information for 18 January: *Dedicatio cathedrae Sancti Petri apostoli, qua primo Romae sedit*, while on 22 February: *Natalis cathedrae S. Petri apostoli, qua sedit apud Antiochiam* (*Martyrologium vetustissimum s. Hieronymi*, PL 30, 440 and 444).

³⁸ The Council's canon 23(22) criticizes those who on the holy day of the cathedral of St. Peter (on *festivitate cathedrae domini Petri*) give offerings to the dead and upon the return from church to home return to the old pagan errors. (*Les canons des conciles merovingiens*, Sch 354, 384).

³⁹ It has been widely accepted that these celebrations might have started in the context of the pagan holy day of *Cara Cognatio*, during which a feast took place which ended the yearly six-day-long remembrance of the dead. (*Parentalia*). In this case *cathedra* meant an empty space for a dead person during a funeral. In fact the holy day of *Natale Petri de Cathedra* was not a funeral remembrance connected with the martyrdom of Peter and his cult in the Catacombs and in the Vatican, but St. Peter was then remembered as the guarantor of concord and unity and the symbol of Apostolic and educational dignity. I wrote about this in: *Geneza święta Natale Petri de Cathedra*, „*Vox Patrum*” 24 (2004), vol. 46-41, 255-264.

on which the first bishop of the city had sat had been celebrated much earlier.⁴⁰

Besides, the secular texts in *Chronography* should also be remembered, which give special meaning to different imperial anniversaries. A separate document lists the days of the emperors' births (*Natales caesarum*), while in the list of Roman holy days (*Fasti Philocali*) the anniversaries of their beginnings of rules (called *natales*) are marked. All these dates comprise the majority of state ceremonies. A common background conducive for such celebrations could be perceived there. The acceptance of such ceremonies for the Christians, particularly after the conversion of Constantine, became easier. It was then that the time came to introduce the celebrations of the birth of Christ (Christmas) and the cathedral of St. Peter.⁴¹

So the fact of mentioning these two holy days does not seem to be strange in the list of remembrance of the martyrs (*Depositio martyrum*), but logical, if we take into account the whole document and the whole collection of Philocalus. The presence of these two holy days nicely dovetailed with all the celebrations shown in different documents of *Chronography*. However, it is the concord of these two documents which is most crucial, *Depositio martyrum* and *Depositio episcoporum*, because they both take it for granted that the list of liturgical remembrances starts with Christmas. They were both created within the same community, and they are mutually consistent and complementary, which undoubtedly supports their authenticity,

⁴⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia kościelna* 7, 19: "Also Jacob's throne, which as the first from the Saviour and the Apostles received the see of the Jerusalem church, and who is called by the Divine Books Christ's brother, has been preserved to our times. While the brothers there have held him in great esteem from generation to generation and in this way they have clearly shown the great reverence with which holy men have been treated and are still treated." (POK 3, 328). According to Egeria "the throne of Jacob is in the church of the holy Sion." (SCh 296, 68).

⁴¹ *Natale Petri* as the holy day introduced in the image and under the influence of imperial *natales*, which celebrated the coming to power of Augusta and the Caesars see H. Stern, *Le Calendrier de 354. Etude sur son texte et ses illustrations*, Paris 1953, 74.

The date of Jesus's birth in the list of the consuls

The date of Christ's birth is also marked in *The List of Consuls (Fasti consulares)*, included in *The Chronography of 354*.

According to this document, Jesus was born "on 25 December on Friday on the fifteenth day of the moon".⁴² It is the only description of Christ's day of birth which, apart from the day of the month, provides additional explanations: that it happened on Friday, on the fifteenth day of the moon. These data become understandable if we take into consideration the fact that according to the same list of the consuls, Jesus's death also happened "on Friday on the fifteenth day of the moon".⁴³

The day of Christ's birth is—in certain ways—similar to the day of His Passion. Jesus was born on the same day of the lunar month (fifteenth) and on the same day of the week (Friday) on which He later suffered and died. This confluence was of great symbolic meaning: Jesus was born as the second Adam, on Friday, that is on the sixth day of the week, which was reminiscent of the moment of the creation of the first man on "the sixth day" (Gen 1, 26-31). These analogies had already been developed by some authors in the second and third centuries, particularly by Irenaeus of Lyons.

It is also clear why the list of the consuls also gives the date of Christ's birth. It is connected with the Easter account and is its

⁴² *The names of these two consuls: Gaius Caesar and Emilius Paul (Caesare et Paulo). The following information is provided in: Hoc cons[ulibus] Dominus Iesus Christus natus est VIII Kal[endas] Ian[uaris] d[ie] Ven[eris] luna XV, see Fasti consulares, in Chronographus, MGH AA 9, 56.*

⁴³ Next to two names of Geminów (*Gemino et Gemino*) we have the following information: *His consulibus dominus Iesus Christus passus est die Ven. luna XIII, see Fasti consulares, w: Chronographus, MGH AA 9, 57.* According to the New Testament, the Passion happened on Friday, on the day of Pascha, that is 15 nisa, that is on the fifteenth day of the lunar month (*XV lunae*). The list of the Roman bishops included in *Chronographus* informs that Jesus "suffered during the reign of Tyberius when two Geminis were the consuls, 25 March (*Episcopi Romani*, in *Chronographus*, MGH AA 9, 73).

part.⁴⁴ In the patristic tradition, on many occasions the days of Christ's birth and death were given in the context of Easter dates. Hippolytus of Rome did it in his *Paschal Table*, and also the anonymous author of *De Pascha computus* from 243 A.D. It is therefore logical that they also appeared in Philocalus's list of the consuls. There is no ground on which the authenticity of the dates of Christ's birth and death in (*Fasti consulares*) should be doubted.⁴⁵ Their inclusion is the result of the old Christian tradition to have such data placed in the context of the paschal table.

The Roman holy day

Holistic analysis of *The Calendar of 354* shows that it includes certain and authentic traces of the existence of the holy day of Christ's birth celebrated on 25 December. The opinion that "this is the basic and the oldest document about the beginnings of Christmas"⁴⁶ is correct. Its close reading allowed the statement that this holy day existed not only in 354, but at least since 336, when the first version of *Depositio episcoporum* had been created. The importance of *The Calendar* is also connected with the fact that apart from the Christian documents it includes lists of pagan celebrations, and it shows the celebrations of different anniversaries (*natales*), imperial celebrations (it includes the dates of the rulers' birthdays, "birthdays of towns" or horse races). And in this way it allows for a better description of the relations existing between different traditions. On the basis of this calendar the following thesis could be postulated: in the fourth century there existed a common cultural climate which led to the development of the mentioned civil celebrations, but also to the creation of Christian celebrations of birthdays or anniversaries of the beginnings

⁴⁴ This list of the consuls also shows the day of the week and the day of the month (*epakts*), on 1 January of the given year. For example, next to the names of Gaius Caesar and Emilius Paulus (*Caesare et Paulo*), with which the date of Christ's birth is given, there is this information: *Sat. XIII* (which means that in this year 1 January was on the day of Saturn, that is on Saturday, in the thirteenth day of the moon

⁴⁵ This is rejected by H. Forster, op. cit., 101.

⁴⁶ B. Nadolski, *Liturgika*, vol. 2, *Liturgia i czas*, Poznań 1991, . 92.

of offices (Christmas, remembrance of St. Peter's cathedral). And finally, *The Calendar of 354*, as the oldest testimony of the existence of Christmas, allows us to state that this holy day was created in Rome, and from there it spread to other regions. The opinion that it was introduced first in Northern Africa has no solid ground.⁴⁷

The development of this holy day in different regions of the West shows that the only source could have been Italy and Rome. At times both Latin and Greek authors suggested it very clearly. John Chrysostomus, in his homily for Christmas, stated that in Antioch, where he was preaching in 387 A.D., this holy day had been known only for ten years, but that citizens of Rome had celebrated it for a longer period. He suggested that in Italy it had been celebrated for a long time and according to the ancient tradition. Under the influence of the Church of Rome, and following its example, it was introduced in Antioch and in other regions.⁴⁸ Hieronymus, in a similar manner, in his homily in Bethlehem from around 400 A.D., claimed that the West had preserved the original tradition of celebrating Christmas on 25 December.⁴⁹

The earliest authors writing about Christmas were aware that this holy day comes from Italy and from Rome itself. These opinions converge with what might be deduced about the origins of this holy day from *The Chronography of 354*.

2. Natale in Rome in 353 A.D. during the pontificate of Liberius

Apart from *The Chronography of 354*, another important testimony is information about celebration of Jesus's birth during the pontificate of Liberius (352-366).

⁴⁷ This opinion was supported by: G. Brunner, op. cit., 172-181; H. Lietzmann, op. cit., vol. 3, 324; H. Engberding, op. cit., 25-43; Th. Talley, op. cit., 102.

⁴⁸ Jan Chryzostom, *Kazanie na Boże Narodzenie 2*, transl. by W. Kania, in Jan Chryzostom, *Homilie i kazania wybrane*, PSP 8, Warszawa 1971, 90.

⁴⁹ Hieronim, *Homilia de Nativitate Domini*, ww. 112-160: *Alii putant quod in Epiphaniis nascitur; non damnamus aliorum opinionem, nostram sequimur doctrinam* (CCL 78, 527528).

These celebrations are mentioned by Ambrose from Milan, when he was describing the taking of the monastic veil by his sister, Marcelina. The ceremony, as he states, took place “on [the holy day] of the Saviour’s birthday” (*Salvato-ris [die] natali*) and took place “at Peter, the Apostle”, that is in the Vatican’s basilica.⁵⁰ In this text Ambrose used expressions which leave no doubt that he meant the celebration of the birthday (*natale, dies natalis*). The name of the celebration is repeated in the speech of Liberius, which was quoted by the bishop of Milan. The pope thus addressed Marcelina when he was handing a veil to her: “Do you see how many people have gathered for the Birth (*natalem*) of Your Bridegroom”.⁵¹ These expressions unequivocally indicate that it was the holy day celebrating the coming of Christ into the world.

The ceremony was treated as an appropriate moment for including into it the accepting of a veil (*velatio virginum*), which is a ritual of monastic consecration. “Which day would be more appropriate for this than the day on which the Virgin gave birth to the Child”—said the pope in his homily. Augustine, in his sermons for Christmas, also stressed that this was the day of virgins consecrated to God.⁵² The Ceremony in the Vatican’s basilica took place, as it was calculated, in 353 A.D., before the exile of pope Liberius (355-358).⁵³ So, it was

⁵⁰ Ambroży z Mediolanu, *O dziewicach* 3, 1, 1, transl. by K. Obrycki, in św. Ambroży, *Wybór pism*, part 2, PSP 35, 1986, 215.

⁵¹ Ibidem. Ambrose also used the term *naturalis* to mark the date of death. He added to *virginibus* the sermon delivered on the day of the liturgical remembrance of St. Agnes, in which he said: “Today we celebrate the birth of the virgin [...], the birth of the martyr [...] the birth of the St. Agnes (*quoniam hodie Natalis est virginis... Natalis est virginis, integritatem se quamur. Natalis test martyris, hostias immolemus. Natalis est stanctae Agnes*). Ibid., 1, 2, 5, PSP 35, 180; SAEMO 14,1, 104-106)

⁵² He spoke about it in detail in the homily 191, 4 (*AU the day of the Lord’s birth*), delivered in Hippo in 412 A.D., the last part of which was addressed to virgins (PSP 13, s 45). This motif returns in other speeches of Augustine: 184, 2; 188, 4; 192, 2; PSP 13, 23; 36; 46.

⁵³ On the dotation see F. Gori, in the commentary to *De virginibus* 3, 1, 1, in *Tutte le Opere di Sant’Ambrogio*, edizione latino - italiana, vol. 14, 1, Milano - Roma 1989,

as early as that time that the Birth of the Saviour, *Natale Salvatoris*, was celebrated in Rome. However, Ambrose did not say on which day the celebration took place. Was it on 25 December? Not all researchers think so. Doubts are put forward mostly because in the speech presented during the ceremony (quoted by Ambrose) pope Liberius developed the theme of Christ's birthday, but he also mentioned the wedding in Cana in Galilee and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves.⁵⁴ This means that in the liturgy of this day he also mentioned mysteries which were usually celebrated during the holy day of the Epiphany.

Herman Usener was the first scholar to state that the ceremony described by Ambrose took place on 6 January. He also believed that in Rome, similarly to the East, Christ's birthday was celebrated at first during the holy day of the Epiphany. This was to last till 353 A.D. In the next year the pope separated these two holy days, establishing Christmas on 25 December, which was already listed in *The Chronography of 354*.⁵⁵ This hypothesis is still supported by some researchers today, who stress that apart from *The Chronography of 354* there are no clear testimonies of Christmas being celebrated in Rome in the fourth century.⁵⁶ Therefore, they suggest that the celebrations were introduced in Rome in the later period, after 354, while the information about the holy day in *The Chronography of 354* was interpolated.⁵⁷

205, footnote1.

⁵⁴ Ambroży z Mediolanu, *O dziewicach* 3, 1, 1-3, 3, 14, PSP 35, 215-220.

⁵⁵ H. Usenet, op. cit., 281: "In 353 A.D. a Roman bishop still celebrated the birth of the Saviour on the day of the Epiphany. This was for the last time. In 354 A.D. the birth of Christ was marked in the diptych of the bishop of Rome as 25 December. The new holy day was celebrated for the first time in 354 A.D."

⁵⁶ So argues M. R. Connell, *Did Ambrose's Sister Become a Virgin on December 25 or January 6? The Earliest Western Evidence for Christmas and The Epiphany outside Rome*, "Studia Liturgica" 29 (1999), 145-158. Outside Rome, as Connell shows, there is no confirmation of the existence of Christmas earlier than in the last quarter of the fourth century, that is in the years 375-400.

⁵⁷ H. Forster suggested that the celebration of Christmas was introduced in Rome after 354 A.D., c.a. 360 A.D., see op. cit., 131.

Michels suggested that ‘epiphanic’ motifs in the speech of Liberius might have been the result of the fact that Ambrose did not relate this homily faithfully. There is no doubt that he listened to it and took part in the ceremony of the veil’s acceptance on the birthday of the Saviour. After all, he lived in Rome for about 25 years (from his birth till c.a. 365 A.D.). He wrote this treatise as the bishop of Milan in 377 A.D., twenty years after the ceremony. He did not have an edited version of the speech and he created a free paraphrase of it. However, he was influenced by the picture of Milan celebrations of the holy day of 6 January, during which the birth of Christ and the miracle in Cana were celebrated.⁵⁸ However, this hypothesis does not solve the problem, because it is based on the presumption that in the times of Ambrose in Milan only the Epiphany was celebrated, not Christmas. However, in fact the bishop knew both separate holy days: 25 December and 6 January.⁵⁹

The most likely explanation is that in his speech Liberius was inspired by the ceremony of accepting veils by virgins.⁶⁰ The pope preached because of Christmas, but in the first part he spoke mostly about the consecration of virgins. He referred to the ritual of the putting on of a veil as “marriage” (*nuptiae*), and in this context he mentioned the wedding in Cana and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, to show that the clemency of the chosen Bridegroom (*sponsus*) exceeds all expectations. It was only after this encouragement directed at virgins that the preacher moved on to the topic of the holy day and said: “Today (*hodie*) out of the Virgin a man of human nature was born.”⁶¹ So it could be assumed that the information about the wedding in Cana and the multiplication of the loaves was less connected with the celebrated holy day and more with the ceremony

⁵⁸ Th. Michels, *Noch einmal die Ansprache des Papstes Liberius bei Ambrosius De virgini-* bus III 1,1 ff, „Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft” 3 (1923), 105-108.

⁵⁹ H. Frank, *Zur Geschichte von Weihnachten und Epiphanie*, „Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft” 12 (1933), 145-155 and 13 (1935), 1-10.

⁶⁰ C.f., B. Botte, *op. cit.*, 36.

⁶¹ Ambroży z Mediolanu, *O dziewicach* 3, 1, 2, PSP 35, 215.

of "marriage" with Christ. This explanation is supported by the fact that if the homily had been presented on 6 January, Liberius would not have mentioned that it was happening on the day of "the Bridegroom's birthday" (*ad natalem sponsi tui*) and Ambrose would not have stated that the ceremony took place on the day of the birth of the Saviour (*Natale Salvatoris*). Both authors would not have refrained from saying that it was the Epiphany, while the text clearly shows that it is about the celebration of Christ's birth (*Natale*), which can only mean the holy day of 25 December. Another explanation is also possible, which might be formulated as the supposition: pope Liberius in the homily delivered on 25 December, the day of Christ's birth, also dealt with motifs connected with the Epiphany, because this holy day did not exist in Rome at that time, because the first traces of its existence come from the fifth century.

It should be assumed that the speech of pope Liberius, quoted by Ambrose, was delivered on 25 December: it was then that the holy day of Christ's birth was celebrated, and during it Marcelina accepted a virgin's veil. This supports the data from *The Chronology of 354* that in the middle of the fifth century the holy day of the incarnation was already being celebrated.

4. The oldest preserved sermons for Christmas

The speech of Liberius from 353 A.D. discussed above can be translated as the first Christmas sermon. It is known only in the paraphrase by Ambrose. However, there are some homilies by Latin preachers which are only a little later and are preserved in their entirety.

Optatus's sermon

The first sermon to be mentioned is the one ascribed to Optatus of Milevis. As Andre Wilmart stated: "this is the oldest speech for Christmas that came to us from Christian antiquity."⁶² He dated this homily to 362 or 363 A.D., and thought that it was written in the times

⁶² A. Wilmart, *Un Sermon de saint Optat pour la fete de Noel*, „Revue des Sciences Religieuses” 2 (1922), 271-302, 280.

of Julian the Apostate. He argued that in the first part devoted to Herod the preacher was making an allusion to the persecutions of Christians during the reign of Julian the Apostate.⁶³ The sermon was delivered on 25 December. Its first sentence shows it: “Here has come the day on which we are to celebrate the mystery of Christ’s birth”⁶⁴

In his speech, and this is quite natural, Optatus commented on the description of Christ’s birth in the Scriptures. But most of his attention was devoted to the homage paid by the magi from the East and the slaughter of the innocents from Bethlehem. The last motif was so dominant that in the manuscript tradition it was entitled *On the Day of the Death of Innocent Children (In natali sanctorum Innocentium)*. Therefore, the content of this speech is somewhat surprising. Optatus was dealing with the issues which—at least in the later period—were typical for the Epiphany. The homage of the magi and their gifts, as well as Herod’s slaughter, were dealt with in homilies on 6 January, as the homilies of Augustine of Hippo and Leon the Great testify.⁶⁵ Therefore, if Optatus was dealing with these issues in a sermon on 25 December, it means that he could have not known the Epiphany.⁶⁶ It is also supported by the fact that he referred to the Christmas as to the holy day “of the Epiphany of the Lord in the body” (*apparitio domini in carne*). Maybe in this time the holy day of the Epiphany was not celebrated yet, and therefore the first sermons preached in

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ The speech: *In natali sanctorum Innocentium*, PL Supplementum 1, 288-294.

⁶⁵ C.f., R Scorza Barcellona, *L’interpretazione dei doni dei Magi nel sermone natalizio Ps.) Ottato di Milevi*, „Studi storico-religiosi” 2 (1978), 129-149; Idem, *I donati sti, l’Epifania dei Magi secondo Ps. Agostino, sermone Caillau-Saint-Yves I 38*, in: *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 50 (1984), 5-18.

⁶⁶ Almost at the same time Philastrius, the bishop of Brescia, spoke against those who did not want to celebrate the Epiphany, because they believed that this ceremony – understood as the celebration of the homage of the magi – unnecessarily ‘doubled’ Christmas (*De heresibus* 140, 1-3, CCL 9, 304). Therefore, the ceremony of 6 January might have created an impression that it concerned a motif which was already mentioned on the holy day of 25 December.

this area on 6 January come from Augustine at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries.

There is still the issue of the authorship of this homily to consider. In the manuscript there is the name of Optatus. Andre Wilmart assumed that this name refers to the bishop of the African town of Milevi, known from his debates with the Donatists. However, not all researchers accept this identification, and they suggest that this sermon was given by a Donatist in the fourth century: Tyconius or Optatus of Thamugadi.⁶⁷ Despite the uncertainty about authorship, this homily is considered to be the oldest speech for Christmas and the earliest testimony of the celebrations of this holy day in Northern Africa.⁶⁸ We should definitely see in it the oldest stage of the development of the holy day, when it was still connected with the themes which later started to be connected with the Epiphany. The character of this homily suggests that it should be placed in the earliest period, many years before Augustine's activities, maybe c.a. 362 A.D.

The sermons of Zeno of Verona and other preachers

Three speeches for Christmas by Zeno, the bishop of Verona in Northern Italy (c.a. 360-380 A.D.), are only a bit later than the sermon of Optatus of Milevi.

They are of a different character to Optatus's speech. Firstly, they are generally centred around the mystery of Christ's birth, while the homage of the magi and slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem are not mentioned. Besides, they are not only exegetic commentaries to a fragment of the Gospels, but also theological considerations. They deal with the two natures of Christ, and

⁶⁷ See E. Romero Pose, *Ticonioy el sermón In natali sanctorum Innocentium (Exegesis de Mt 2)*, „Gregorianum” 60 (1979), 513-544. E. Dekkers places this speech together with the authentic works of Optatus of Milevi, see *Clavis Patrum Latinorum* 245.

⁶⁸ C.f., H. Forster, *Die beiden angeblich, ältesten Zeugen' des Weihnachtsfestes*, „Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft” 42 (2000), 29-40; Idem, *Die Feier der Geburt Christi*, 105-117.

of Mary the Virgin giving birth to Him. They point to the two births of the Son of God: one perennial from the Father, the other carnal from the Virgin, which was also miraculous because it was performed not in pain, but in joy.⁶⁹ They compare Christ to the sun, which brings light to the earth.⁷⁰ Surely, Zeno's homilies refer to the content of the holy day, but also to topical events: the background for them were disputes with the Arians on Christ's divine nature, which were also important in Italy (at least before the Council of Aquileia in 381 A.D. when Arian bishops were condemned). Zeno's speeches are therefore of a theological nature (similarly to the speech of Basil the Great for Christmas). Together with the homilies of Liberius and Optatus, they belong to the oldest sermons delivered on 25 December in the West.

Ambrose's Christmas sermons have not been preserved, although he must have known these celebrations. It is believed that he himself introduced them. He saw the celebrations of 25 December while in Rome, and he took them to his own diocese, probably in the times of Damasus (366-384).⁷¹ However, two other homilies of other bishops from northern Italy from the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries exist: by Chromatius of Aquileia and Maxim of Turin. However, it was only with Augustine of Hippo (396-430) and Leon the Great (440-461) that we have the first two series of Latin sermons for this holy day.

Almost at the same time there appeared the Greek homilies in the East. The first of them was the homily by Basil the Great for Christmas, preached c.a. 370 when he was still a priest in Caesarea

⁶⁹ Tractatus I, 54 (*De nativitate Christi*) II, 8 (*De nativitate Christi*), CCL 22, 128-129 and 176-178. Zenon z Weroni, *Kazanie na Boże Narodzenie 1 i 2*, transl. by. W. Kania, in *Teksty o Matce Bożej*, vol. 2, *Ojcowie Kościoła łacińscy*, Niepokalanów 1981, . 36-40.

⁷⁰ Tractatus II, 12 (*De nativitate Domini et maiestate 4*), CCL 22, 185-186, transl. by W. Kania, s42. See F.J. Dolger, *Das Sonnengleichnis in einer Weihnachtspredigt des Zeno von Verona. Christus als wahre und ewige Sonne*, „*Antike und Christentum*” 6 (1940), 1-4.

⁷¹ See P. Borella, *Appunti sul Natale el Epifania a Milano al tempo di S. Ambrogio*, in *Melanges liturgiques offerts au B. Botte*, Louvain 1972, 49-69, 56 and 59.

in Cappadocia (363-370), or bishop in this city (370-378). The great homily of Gregory of Nazianzus comes from 380 A.D.—at that time Christmas seemed to have been celebrated in some regions of the East. In the 380s there also appeared the sermons of Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom. In the West it is only Philocalus's testimony from 354 A.D., the homily of pope Liberius (353) and (Pseudo) Optatus from c.a. 363 A.D. which are older than the first Greek homilies. However, the chronological distance is small.

The first hymns for Christmas

Hymns for the celebration of Jesus's birth are an important testimony of celebrations of this holy day. In the West the oldest of these hymns is the one by Ambrose, the great bishop of Milan (374-397). This text praises Christ's incarnation and His miraculous birth from the Virgin. It mentions a manger which lights a dark night. Referring to Psalm 19, it also presents a picture of the Mighty One: who has a double nature, divine and human, and comes from his "marriage chamber" (*procedat e thalamo suo*) to cover the road to the Abyss.⁷² We also have Ambrose's hymn from the Epiphany entitled *Illuminans altissimus*, in which different motifs of this holy day are listed: baptism in Jordan, the journey of the magi led by the star, the wedding in Cana, and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. All in all, it lists as many as four motifs of this celebration, showing the subsequent aspects of Christ's revelation.

There were other Latin poets who followed Ambrose in writing hymns for this ceremony. Such as Prudentius, a great poet from Iberia (c.a. 400 A.D. In the volume of poetry *Cathemerinon* (literally 'songs for every day'), which includes songs for different times of the day and some moments in the year, he included one hymn for Christmas

⁷² Ambroży z Mediolanu, *Hymn 5, Intende qui regis Israel (In Natale Domini)*, in *Santi Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera*, Milano 22, 1994, 46-51. See . *Hymnes, texte établi, traduit et annoté sous la direction de J. Fontaine*, Paris 1992, 273-275. C.f., Ps 19, 6 (NIV) "It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth".

and a different one for the Epiphany.⁷³ In the first one he deals with the nativity scene from Bethlehem and the mystery of the incarnation; in the second—the homage of the magi—the slaughter of innocents and Jesus's baptism.

It should be added that the first collection of hymns (altogether 28 of them) for Christmas was written by the greatest early Christian poet from Syria—St. Ephrem (306-373). They are about the holy day of 6 January, yet they are entitled: *For Christmas*,⁷⁴ Because at first in Syria, and in Palestine, the Epiphany was basically the celebration of the mystery of the incarnation (but not of the baptism). That is why these hymns by Ephrem deal mostly with the Son of God's coming to the world, his birth in Bethlehem, the appearance of the unusual star on the sky, and the coming and homage of the magi. Their main theme is the mystery of the incarnation, the appearing of God, and the 'sprouting' of true light.

So the oldest testimonies of Christmas come from the second half of the fourth century. Chronologically, the first trace of its existence is *The Chronography of 354*. The Roman calendar allows us also to state that the ceremony of 25 December had been celebrated earlier, at least since 336 A.D.

This holy day had not existed as a separate celebration of Christ's birth for the first three centuries of Christianity. So it took a relatively long time to have it introduced. Undoubtedly, it was the result of the development of the liturgy, the theology of the incarnation and

⁷³ *Hymny (Cathemerinon)*: 11. *Hymn na Boże Narodzenie*. 12. *Hymn na Trzech Króli*, w: Prudencjusz, *Poezje*, transl. by M. Brożek, PSP 43, Warszawa 1987, 76-78 and 78-83. 4 separate liturgical hymns for the Epiphany were made out of properly selected stanzas of Prudencius's long hymn (see A. Bober, *Antologia patrystyczna*, Kraków 1967, s. 561). In a similar manner part 12 of this hymn *To Young Men* is used in the liturgy..

⁷⁴ See *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen De Nativitate (Epiphania)*, CSCO 186187, *Scriptores Syri* 82-83 (the Syrian text and the German translation), ed. and transl. by E. Beck, Louvain

the cult of the place of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem. It was also the result of external changes, particularly of Constantine's breakthrough. After 313 A.D., when, after a period of more and less intensive persecutions Christianity achieved the status of a legal religion and the freedom of actions, it started to develop and organize its cult. It was then that new celebrations were introduced to the liturgical year. It was also in this context that Christmas appeared: in Rome in the second quarter of the fourth century: after the Council of Nicaea (325) and before 350.

The Chronography of 354 is the only certain testimony of the existence of the Christian celebration of 25 December coming from before the middle of the fourth century. While in the second half of this century numerous hymns and homilies were created connected with this holy day: Latin, Greek and Syrian. Because Christmas, once it was established, quickly gained popularity and theological importance.

List of abbreviations

- CSCO – *Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium*.
GCS – *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten (drei) Jahrhunderte, Leipzig (Berlin) 1897*.
MGH AA – *Monumenta Germaniae historica, auctores antiquissimi*, vol. 1-15, Berlin 1887-1919 (przedruk Munchen 1961-1985).
PL – *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, Parisiis 1844-1855*.
POK – *Pisma Ojców Kościoła*, 1-28, ed. by J. Sajdak, Poznań 1924-.
PSP – *Pisma Starochrześcijańskich Pisarzy, Warszawa: ATK (UKSW) 1969-*.
Sch – *Sources Chretiennes, Paris 1941*.