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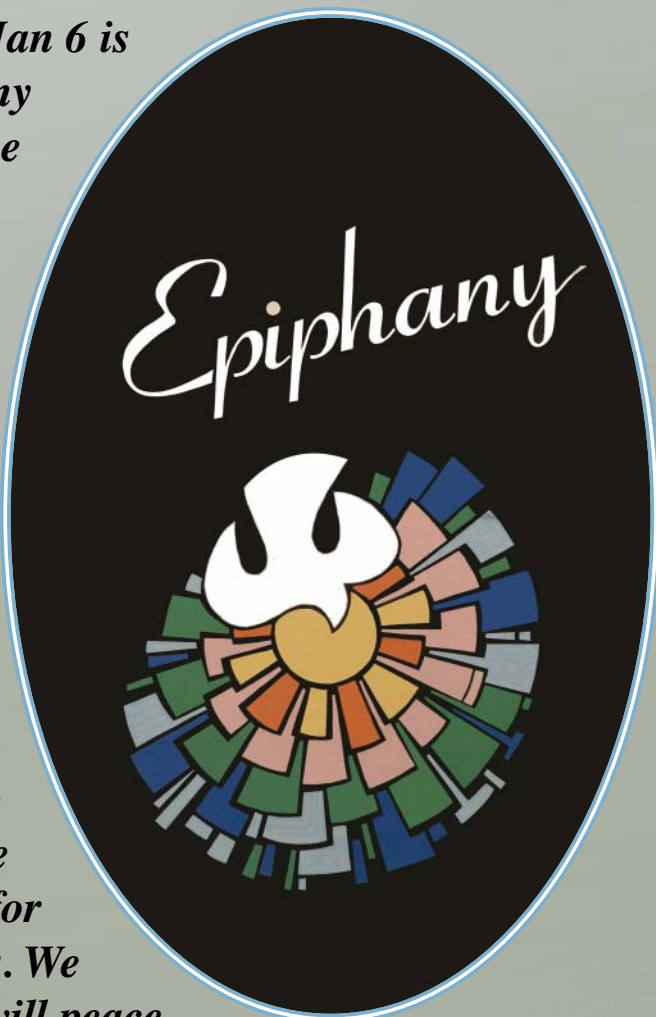
The Octave of Christmas

By Fr. Russell Becker, OFM

January, 2008

Dear friend of the missions,

Hard to believe that it is another New Year! I hope that the Christmas season still keeps you filled with wonder and joy. This month January I celebrate everything you will read about below. Jan 3 is the Feast of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, the patronal title of our Franciscan province. Please keep us all in your prayers. Jan 6 is the Solemnity of the Epiphany and Jan 13 is the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. Martin Luther King Day is Jan 21 and Jan 22 is a day of penance and prayer for life. The 100th Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is January 18-25. Please join in some of the gatherings during the week to pray for Church Unity. There are only a few weeks to the beginning of Lent (Feb 6) so be ready because it will come up very quickly. Thank you for you support for our missions. We all hope that this New Year will peaceful and healthy.



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o many different themes come together around January 1 that you practically need a program to remember them all. It is the Octave of Christmas, New Year's Day, the World Day of Peace and the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God.

January First is the Octave of Christmas. An *octave* is the eight day celebration of a feast which enables the Church to reflect on many aspects of the feast associated with the octave. Thus the community has the opportunity to intensify its experience of the mystery being celebrated. There are only two feasts in the current liturgical calendar that have official octave celebrations: Christmas and Easter. The celebration of the eighth day of Christmas has an interesting history and is the focus of diverse themes. All of these themes have merit and are important to the life of the community, BUT, first and foremost it is the eighth day of Christmas. All the other themes that are associated with the day can find meaning in the Mystery of the Incarnation.

New Year's Day. Christmas seems to have been celebrated around the winter solstice to take advantage (to baptize, in a way) of a pagan feast of light. The Invincible Sun celebration becomes the celebration of the Invincible Son, *the Light that darkness cannot overcome* (Jn 1). The Church was also faced with the fact that the beginning of the civil year in Rome was also a day of celebration and associated it with the celebration of the Word, *who was with God in the beginning* (Jn 1).

Just as there are many new beginnings associated with New Year, the ultimate new beginning was given to humanity, in fact to all of creation, in the Incarnation of Christ. There needs to be some mention of the New Year, it is very much in the minds of the

members of the community. The focus, though, is still Christmas. Other Churches in northern Europe took a less festive approach declaring this day and those which followed it to be days of penance, in order to discourage celebration. The Roman approach adapted to the situation in a way that only served to spread the celebration of the Incarnation.



World Day of Peace. This is a fairly new association with January first. Pope Paul VI designated this day as a Day of Prayer for World Peace. Frustrated by the amount of warring that was going on he felt that this would focus people's attention to the need for peace. As we pray for peace we are still celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace, which was announced by the angels singing of *peace on earth and good will to all.*

So just as the ultimate new beginning comes to us in the incarnation of Christ, so does the ultimate source of peace come to us in the Incarnation of Christ. Christmas is truly the focus and it is in this context and no other that we should pray for peace. The carol, *It came upon a Midnight Clear*, has this often omitted verse which clearly associates Christmas with peace: *Yet with the woes of sin and strife/ The world has suffered long; Beneath the heav'nly strain have rolled/ Two thousand years of wrong; And man, at war with man, hears not/ The tidings which they bring; O hush the noise ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing!*

The Historical Jesus. In the sixth century the Churches outside of Rome began to celebrate the circumcision of Jesus and the giving of the name which the angel told Mary to name the infant. The biblical source for this was Luke 2,21. Jewish Tradition was that the circumcision and official naming of the male infant took place eight days after the birth. This gospel is still proclaimed on the day. The name Jesus was the biblical way to express the vocation of the infant: he would be the Savior. The remembering the circumcision also inserts Jesus into the Covenant with Abraham, who trusted in God's faithfulness. This faithfulness is sealed in the birth of Jesus Christ.

The feast and the devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus eventually spread to the entire Roman Church by the fourteenth century. Even in the observance of the Holy Name of Jesus, Christmas is still the focus. The Christmas Pasch reveals to us an infant who bears the name Jesus. He is our Savior. This vocation is fulfilled in the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. He is true to his name, and we know for sure that God is our salvation.

Mary, the Mother of God. This is the oldest title of Mary and the feast that the Roman Church first associated with New Year's Day to give religious value to the day. In the revision of the Roman Calendar of 1969, this feast was restored: *January 1, the day of the octave of Christmas, is the solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God. It also recalls the conferral of the name of Jesus.* Again the focus for this celebration of Mary's maternity is Christmas.



It is in celebrating the mystery of the Lord's incarnation that we discover Mary's unique role in salvation history.

This title of Mary is the most traditional of all her titles. The Greek is THEOTOKOS--God-bearer. Very early in the Church's proclamation of the gospel, the idea of mother as image of discipleship began to appear. Both Mark and Luke recall stories where Jesus states clearly that those *who hear the Word of God and keep it are brother and sister and mother to him*. So we are challenged by Mary's openness to God's Word, her obedience to God's Word and her bearing of God's Word to become God-bearers in our world. St. Ambrose reflected later that while Jesus had one mother according to the flesh, he will have many, many mothers according to the spirit, if we are willing to follow the example of Mary.

Truly the whole Christmas celebration in all of its aspects, those very ancient, and those which are not quite so old, is about Jesus being born. When he is born in *our time, because we have been open to the Word of God, and willing to make the sacrifices and changes necessary for us to be God-bearers, then we will have new beginnings, the possibility of world peace, the knowledge that we have a savior and a world where Christ will reign.*

Reflection Questions:

- 1. Have you had trouble keeping the Christmas Mystery alive in your life?*
- 2. How can we follow Mary and bear the Lord Jesus into the world we touch?*
- 3. Make a New Year's resolution to grow closer to the Lord in prayer and Scripture reading.*
- 4. What do you think you can do to bring about more peace in our world and the lives of those you love?*

Please pray for our missionaries who celebrate their birthdays this month:

- January 21: Bishop Capistran Heim, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- January 24: Fr. Pius Liu, O.F.M. (Taiwan)**
- January 26: Fr. David Babcock, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- January 30: Br. Henry Fulmer, O.F.M. (Home Missions.)**
- January 31: Fr. Paul Osborne, O.F.M. (Brazil)**

May God bless them with health and energy and peace!

Please remember our present and former missionaries who are ill:

- Fr. Aloysius Siracuse, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- Fr. Joseph Ganssle, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- Fr. Charles Finnegan, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- Bishop Benedict Coscia, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- Fr. Ignatius McGeedy, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Home Missions)**
- Fr. Arthur Murray, O.F.M. (Home Missions)**
- Fr. Clement Healy, O.F.M. (Jamaica)**
- Fr. Stanislaus Widomski, O.F.M. (Japan)**
- Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)**
- Br. Rosario Vieira, O.F.M. (Brazil)**
- Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)**

**May God grant them health,
peace and happiness!**