

January 2, 2011

The Sunday Before Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The octave day of Christmas, for most of Christian history, celebrated the memory of Jesus' circumcision. That historical event was the occasion on which the Savior of the world was given the name "Jesus."

In recent decades, however, many Christians have stopped referring to this day as the feast of our Lord's circumcision. These folks---and they appear to be a majority---prefer to call it "the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus."

I am not confident anyone knows, for sure, what impulses prompted that development. Obviously, professional liturgists contrived the business, a fact that might---without further ado---make sane men suspicious of its merits.

Since the intent of the change, as far as I know, was never announced, it is surely legitimate to speculate on the matter. Assuming this freedom, then, let me speculate:

First, the change from "Circumcision" to "Holy Name" continued a growing disposition to "de-historicize" liturgical theology---to prefer defined "doctrines" over historical "events" in the designation of feast days.

I suppose the most egregious example of this preference may be Dom Prosper Gueranger's 15-volume *The Liturgical Year*, published back in the mid-19th century. For Dom Gueranger, the crowning feast of the Christian calendar was not Easter but the feast of Corpus Christi. In other words, the historical event of the Resurrection was less significant than the dogma of Transubstantiation.

The profusion of such non-historical feast days among Christians in recent centuries illustrates what I think is a deeper problem: the separation of theology from history. Thus, Christians nowadays, appropriately glad to celebrate the lovely Feast of the Holy Rosary on October 7, are rarely reminded that this feast day commemorates the Battle of Lepanto. If one may speak candidly to the point, Lepanto is not a good memory to lose.

Second, the change from "Circumcision" to "Holy Name" was inspired by what has come to be called "politically correct language." That is to say, since only boys can be (in our usual sense of the word) circumcised, our informed, up-to-date liturgist felt that little girls would "feel left out" by a feast day that only little boys could "identify with." Getting rid of "Circumcision" reflects the same mentality that objects to the word "men" in the Creed and goes to great lengths

to make sure that at least one of the acolytes in the service is female. In short, our liturgists seized hold on penis envy about the same time our psychiatrists let go of it.

Third, circumcision was becoming much less common in modern medical practice, so a "Feast of the Circumcision" was no longer relevant. In this respect, our liturgists may have been, in fact, ahead of the game. Not until 1999 did the American Medical Association announce its disillusion with "routine neonatal circumcision" and go on to "support the provision of accurate and unbiased information to parents to inform their choice." We Christians could hardly have our liturgical calendar implicitly weighing-in on this delicate clinical question, could we, not until the scientific community had made up its mind? We surely didn't want to observe feast days that failed to convey "unbiased information to parents to inform their choice."

Fourth, the Feast of the Lord's Circumcision was felt to be . . . well, just too darned Jewish. And not just Jewish, you see, but Jewish in a really physical way. I mean, really "grossed out" Jewish. All that attention directed at the male sexual organ was felt to be inappropriate to our more enlightened age. What were modern Christians to make of an outdated Middle Eastern covenant signified in an unspeakable series of patriarchal foreskins? Whew, talk about icky combined with out of date!

This "Jewish" character of circumcision was, of course, the whole point of what Christians thought it was appropriate to recall on January 1. If the purpose of December 25 was to announce that God's Son was "born of a woman," the intent of January 1 was to proclaim that that Son was also "born under the Law." And this, moreover, "to redeem those who were under the Law"---which is to say, to confer complete validation on that ancient patriarchal line through which "we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4: 4-5).

To celebrate the Lord's circumcision---for those of us who still do---is to affirm that the Church is made up of those engrafted onto the ancient stock of Israel, the children of the covenant.

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