

A COLD EYE  
ON CHRISTMAS

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## A COLD EYE ON CHRISTMAS

"Let us cast a cold and scientific eye on Christmas," Dr. B. Huston Fawcett said to his final World History class before the Christmas break.

He paused to look over the thirty-seven adolescent faces in front of him, some waiting attentively, others already sliding off into glassy boredom.

Forty-two years earlier, when he had first taught this particular lesson in his first year at St. Mary's Academy, the faces had all been white and the students all Catholic. But over two generations many of the white Catholic families had moved away, replaced mostly by black non-Catholics, and so the diocese had opened its doors to refugees from the public school system of all races and religions. Now the faces in front of Dr. Fawcett were of all shades, the children of all sorts of cultures and traditions. But the souls, Dr. Fawcett thought, the souls had not changed.

So. Dr. Fawcett took a deep breath and started rolling the boulder up the hill one more time.

"Let's look at the story of Christmas as history. For example, does anyone know the date of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up.

"Miss Doyle?"

"December 25th," Miss Doyle said confidently. She was a beautiful shade of brown with black kinky hair and sapphire blue eyes.

"How do we know that?"

She shrugged. "That's when we celebrate Christmas."

"Yes," Dr. Fawcett agreed. "But Jesus Christ was born over two thousand years ago. How do we know that it was on December 25th?"

Silence.

"Well," Dr. Fawcett went on, "what are the main sources of our knowledge of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up, fewer than before.

"Mr. Singletary."

Black, moon-faced Mr. Singletary was born again, and knew his chapter and verse.

"Matthew 2 and Luke 2."

"Very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "And do either of them supply a date for His birth?"

The class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"No," he finally said.

"That's correct," Dr. Fawcett said. "In fact, there is no source that tells us the date of Christ's birth. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Then why do we celebrate it on December 25?"

"The truth is," Dr. Fawcett said, "that for several centuries the Church didn't celebrate Christ's birth. Easter was the only holiday celebrating Christ. But December 25th was an important pagan holiday in the Roman world, celebrating the birth of the sun god, Saturnalia in the west and the Mithraic feast in the east. So to compete with these pagan holidays, the

Church began to celebrate Christmas on the same day."

"You mean it was made up?" Miss Doyle said, forgetting to raise her hand.

"Yes, it was made up," Dr. Fawcett said.

"To imitate pagan holidays?" Mr. Pfeiffer said.

"To compete with pagan holidays. But let's move on to the year. In what year was Christ born? Mr. Santiago."

"1 A.D." Mr. Santiago answered.

"How do we know that?"

"Well, it's 1 A.D. by definition, isn't it?"

"Yes, very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "Very clever. But of course no one called it 1 A.D. at the time, did they?"

"No, of course not," Mr. Santiago agreed.

"So when did we decide that it was 1 A.D.?"

Mr. Santiago shrugged. No hands went up.

"Actually, it was calculated by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus in 525 A.D., who counted – actually, miscounted – back through the reigns of Roman emperors up to that time. Though of course five centuries after the birth of Christ no one really knew when that event occurred. Miss Doyle."

"You mean it's not 2007?"

Dr. Fawcett laughed. "Yes, of course it's 2007. But the point is that the number 2007 is just as arbitrary as the date December 25th. These are traditions created by the Church for a variety of practical reasons in the absence of any real knowledge. But let's go on. There are, after all, a few things we do

know. For instance, who was king when Christ was born. Miss Reagan."

"Herod."

"And how do we know that?"

"Matthew, I think. Isn't it Matthew that tells of the three kings and the massacre of the innocents?"

"Yes, it is, Miss Reagan. Very good. You know your scripture. And when did King Herod reign?"

Silence.

"King Herod reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.," Dr. Fawcett said. "He died in 4 B.C., sometime after a lunar eclipse on March 13 and before the start of Passover. So what does that tell us about the year of Christ's birth? Miss Bayliss?"

"That He must have been born before 4 B.C."

"Yes. And at least how much before?"

"Enough time for the wise men to see Him and report back to Herod, and then for Herod to massacre the innocents."

"Mr. Singletary?"

"Enough time for the Holy Family to travel to Egypt and live there awhile, since they stayed there until they heard of Herod's death. And since Herod slaughtered all of the male children up to two years old, he must have thought that Christ could have been born up to two years earlier. So Christ had to be born around 5 or 6 B.C."

"Excellent! Excellent!" Dr. Fawcett exclaimed. "But we have another piece of the puzzle to consider. Remember that Joseph and Mary traveled to

Bethlehem just before Mary gave birth. Does anyone know why? Miss Mott."

"There was a census."

"And who ordered the census. Mr. Singletary?"

"Caesar Augustus."

"And who was governor at the time?"

Again the class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"Cyranius was governor of Syria," he finally said.

"Luke 2:2, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

Dr. Fawcett strolled back and forth in front of the class as if pondering the point.

"No mention of Herod, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

"Isn't that strange?" Dr. Fawcett wondered out loud. "Matthew talks about Herod. Does Luke so much as mention Herod?"

"No," Mr. Singletary said.

"Now we know when that census took place," Dr. Fawcett went on. "Sulpicius Quirinius (Cyranius in Greek) was appointed governor of Syria, which included Palestine, in 6 A.D., and soon after taking over he conducted the census to aid in tax collections. Miss Doyle."

"But Dr. Fawcett. How could Christ have been born during that census if He was born around 5 or 6 B.C.? It doesn't make sense."

"Quite right, Miss Doyle. It doesn't make sense."

"I mean, Luke is saying one thing and Matthew is saying another, right?"

"But the Holy Gospel is the word of the Lord!" Miss Elkins shouted out, unable to control herself. "It can't be wrong!"

"But lookit!" Mr. Santiago said. "If Herod died in 4 B.C. and the census took place in 6 A.D., something doesn't add up."

"Actually," Dr. Fawcett said, "scholars have been attempting to reconcile these dates for many years. Some suggest that Quirinius must have been governor twice and conducted two censuses. Others suggest that the King Herod mentioned in Matthew was not Herod the Great but one of his sons. But every explanation raises other problems. The fact is that we have a discrepancy between Matthew and Luke and no easy way to resolve it. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Dr. Fawcett, why are you doing this just before we go on Christmas break? What's the point of this?"

"Very good, Mr. Pfeiffer! Very good! We get right to the heart of things. Mr. Pfeiffer, if someone could prove to you absolutely that Matthew and Luke were in conflict, which we have only suggested, not proven, but if it were proven that at least one of them had to be wrong, would you want to know that? Miss Kim."

"Yes, I would."

"Why?"

"Because it was the truth."

"Mr. Pfeiffer?"



"I wouldn't want to know anything about it!"

"Why not?"

"I believe in God's word!"

"Even if it were true that Matthew and Luke disagreed on something?"

"It couldn't be true. The word comes not from them but from the Lord."

More hands. A forest of quivering hands. The bell rang. No one seemed to notice.

"Miss Doyle?"

The beautiful dark face with the sapphire eyes smiled. "What's the difference when He was born? I can believe in Him anyway, can't I?"

"Yes, Miss Doyle, of course you can," Dr. Fawcett said. "But I'm afraid we've run out of time. Think about what we've said here. It has to do with the relationship between reason and faith. Each of you will have to work out that relationship for yourself over the course of your life. Have a Merry Christmas, class! I'll see you next year."

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Fawcett!" some shouted back. But others had already begun to argue about reason and faith, too engrossed to call out Merry Christmas.

Beautiful! Dr. Fawcett thought. How lovely! And what a gift it was to be able to bring young minds to a new awareness.

Christmas Eve, after Midnight Mass, found Dr. Fawcett on his knees before the nativity scene in his local parish church, praying to the infant Jesus. He

had come to mass alone, having lived alone since his wife had died 23 years earlier, and was now enjoying a few precious moments alone with Jesus while the sacristan, a friend, closed the building around him.

What he knew, and his students didn't know, was that St. Mary's Academy was closing at the end of the school year. The number of Catholics in the diocese was shrinking, and the diocese could no longer keep all of its schools open. Naturally, they were closing those furthest from the centers of Catholic population, of which St. Mary's was one.

Having seniority in the diocese, Dr. Fawcett could have been transferred to another school of his choice. But he was loath to force a younger teacher out of a job when he was past retirement age, and so he took the retirement package that the diocese offered.

He prayed to the infant Jesus that he had made the right choice for his life after retirement. For 42 years he lived in the same one-bedroom apartment, for 19 years with his wife, Carmela, and then for 23 years alone, monk-like, giving much of his meager income to St. Mary's, to his local parish, and to mission schools overseas.

He had intended to become a priest but then fell in love with Carmela, and so he changed his vocation to that of a lay teacher, moving across the divide from faith to reason.

Nor did he ever regret that choice, even though Carmela couldn't have children and died early of a cancer in her brain. He was grateful that he had known fleshly love with such a beautiful person, for

however long. And the life of reason, of a scholar, had excited him to the point of getting his doctorate in history and writing one book and several articles about the early history of the Church in North America, works that elicited a good deal of controversy and some academic recognition.

In July he would give up his apartment and go to teach in a mission school in the mountains of Bolivia, and he prayed for health, since that was what most worried him about his choice, years enough of good health so that he might be of use there and not a burden.

He prayed for the students whose education would be disrupted by the closing of the school. Some would have to travel long distances to the few schools that remained open. Others would have to return to the public schools they had fled. Grant them a life of faith and reason, he prayed, and the chance to know with clarity and understanding wonders that he would never see.

He prayed that their faith would not make them clap their hands over their ears and shut their eyes in an attempt to close themselves off from truths of the mind and senses. And he prayed that their reason would never undermine their faith, poisoning their will with a skepticism that would refuse so extraordinary a gift.

He prayed in gratitude for his own faith, which had filled his life with love and meaning. And he prayed that in his new life he would have the

strength to do God's will and to accept gladly the fate God intended for him, whatever that might be.

Finally, as he heard his friend the sacristan noisily closing cabinets and drawers, he wished the infant Jesus, a plastic doll in the arms of a plastic Mary, faced by a kneeling plastic Joseph, a happy birthday.

"Happy Birthday, Blessed Lord!" he whispered, tears of happiness starting to his eyes. "Happy Birthday!"

He got up off his knees, turned, said goodnight to his friend the sacristan, and walked out into the cold Christmas morning.