1999

Did Ambrose’s Sister Become a Virgin on December 25 or January 6? The Earliest Western Evidence for Christmas and Epiphany outside Rome

Martin F. Connell
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mconnell@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/theology_pubs
Part of the Christianity Commons, and the History of Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
Did Ambrose’s Sister Become a Virgin on December 25 or January 6?
The Earliest Western Evidence for Christmas and Epiphany outside Rome

by

Martin F. Connell*

The advent of both Christmas and Epiphany into Latin Christianity happened over a rather short period of time; except for the church of Rome, it was less than a few decades from absence to the virtual omnipresence of both feasts. Yet the evidence available for putting together the chronology of the introduction and reception of the two is rather spotty, with sporadic clues emerging in apparent isolation from one another. In studies of the evidence, clues are usually drawn from places and literary genres as diverse as a secular history of an emperor’s visit to Paris;¹ a North African sermon;² Spanish conciliar decrees; and sermons, a letter on virginity, and a heresiology, all coming from northern Italy.

The last of these places, northern Italy, thus provides a relatively large portion of the witness to the origins of these feasts straddling the turn of the year, and much of this essay will concentrate on that region. Part I, therefore, will consider the extant evidence in the writings of Ambrose of Milan, beginning with a particularly thorny passage from one of his many works on virgins and virginity. To help us understand the context for what we have found in the writings and sermons of Ambrose, Part II will place the Ambrosian contribution into the ecclesiastical milieu of late fourth- and early fifth-century northern Italy. Part III will broaden the scope by raising questions about other clues from Latin churches—from churches of North Africa and Spain in particular—that are often used by historians of the liturgical year as evidence for their hypotheses about the emergences of Christmas and Epiphany.

* Dr Martin Connell, a Roman Catholic layman, is Assistant Professor of Liturgy in the School of Theology, St John’s University, Collegeville, MN 56321-7288, USA.

¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, Rerum Gestarum Libri qui supersunt XII.2.4-5. See also Thomas Talley, The Origins of the Liturgical Year (New York: Pueblo 1986) 141-2, for the use of this text for the origins of Epiphany in the West.

I. Ambrose of Milan

1. On Virginity

Over the past century a litany of historians of liturgy and of the papacy has debated a relatively short passage from Ambrose’s *De virginitate*, a passage of merely twenty-two lines in J. P. Migne’s *Patrologia Latina* (16:219-20). In it Ambrose addresses his sister Marcellina and recalls the day on which she dedicated herself to virginity by “taking the veil” in the presence of Liberius, the then bishop of Rome:

Holy sister,

The time has now come to consider the things you used to discuss with me, the teachings of Liberius, of blessed memory. [We look to him because] the holier the man, the more is his word filled with grace.

You marked your profession of virginity by a change in clothing in the church of Saint Peter on the birthday of the Savior. (What better day could there have been for this than that on which the virgin received her child?) As many daughters of the Lord stood around competing for your company, he [bishop Liberius] said:

“You desire a good wedding, my daughter. You see how many people have come together for the birthday of your spouse, and has anyone gone away empty?”

“This is he who, when asked, changed the water into wine at the wedding feast; so too in you, earlier polluted with the vile elements of nature, has he conferred the sacrament of virginity. This is he who, in the desert with five loaves and two fishes, fed four thousand people. If more had been present, more would have been fed. He has therefore called many people to your wedding, and he now serves not bread from the storeroom, but his body from heaven.”

Ambrose wrote *On Virginity* in Milan in 378, just a few years into his long episcopate, recalling an event that had taken place in Rome almost a quarter century earlier, in 353 (or perhaps 354). Because the earliest extant evidence for Christmas on December 25, in 336 in Rome, considerably antedates not only Ambrose’s recollection and his sister’s consecration to virginity but all

---

4 See Mark 6:42, 8:8, and parallels.
5 See John 2:1-12.
6 *De virginitate* 3.1.1.
other Western evidence for the feast, great effort has gone into assigning Marcellina's profession of virginity to this date based on this passage. Such an assignment would verify that Christmas was being celebrated by at least one non-Roman Latin church in order to demonstrate that the new feast was being received and celebrated outside that eternal city. Without such confirmation, the gap between Rome's and another Latin church's reception would be much longer. Yet assigning Ambrose's recollection to December 25 is not without problems.

Most evident of the problems, perhaps, is the chronology itself: Ambrose is trying to repeat the words the Roman bishop Liberius had preached a quarter-century earlier. At the time of his sister's virginal veiling in 353, Ambrose would have been about twenty years old; he would not be baptized a Christian until twenty years later, just a short time before his episcopal consecration in December 374. Yet there is no sure evidence for the existence of Christmas in Milan in 353. In fact there is no evidence for it even in 378 when Ambrose is recording this memory for his virginal sister!

There are a few other cautions to bear in mind when considering Ambrose's recollection. First, unlike Christmas, about which we are not sure, Epiphany was being celebrated in Milan during Ambrose's episcopate; further, Epiphany had earlier included the "birthday of the Savior" in its narrative embrace in churches in the East and in at least a few churches in the West. Moreover, the non-nativity scriptural references included by Ambrose in the recollection—the wedding feast of Cana and the multiplication miracle—are elsewhere ascribed to Epiphany in Milan at the time of Ambrose's writing.

It is true that the bridal associations of the Cana narrative might be easily dismissed by those who find such wedding imagery fitting for Marcellina's veiling: Bonas, filia, nuptias desiderasti. Yet, in conjunction with the multiplication narrative, such a dismissal is hasty. The key question, then, as we consider the passage from On Virginity is this: Did Ambrose's sister Marcellina become a virgin on December 25 or January 6? The evidence, though not airtight, commends the latter.

---

9 See the section below on the Epiphany hymn Illuminans Altissimus.
10 The case for January 6 over December 25 is further strengthened by the later custom in both Rome and Milan of consecrating virgins on Epiphany, Pentecost, and on the feasts of the Apostles. See, for example, Mario Righetti, L'anno liturgico, Manuale di storia liturgica II, 3d ed. (Milan: Ancora 1969) 66.
The birth narrative could well have been celebrated on December 25 in Rome when the unbaptized Ambrose and his family lived there and on January 6 in Milan when the then metropolitan Ambrose presided over the church there. But the connection for Ambrose in writing to his sister years later is the celebration of the birth of the Savior, not necessarily the date, which might not have been the same in the two metropolitan churches. That nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have been occupied with the date of the event in Ambrose’s remembrance rather than the common birth narrative does not mean that Ambrose and his sister were themselves so occupied a millennium and half earlier.

2. Jesus, Illuminator of the Shining Stars

Let us next consider Ambrose’s Epiphany hymn, *Illuminans Altissimus*:

Jesus, most high illuminator
of the shining stars;
bring peace, life, light, truth,
to those singing to you.

And, you consecrate this day
On which, by a mystical baptism,
the flowing waters of the Jordan
turned back three times.

And, with a star shining in heaven
pointing to the virgin birth,
you led the magi to the manger
to adore you on this day.

And, you brought the taste of wine
into the jars filled with water,
for the server drawing it
knew that he had not filled them.

Seeing that the waters were colored
and flowing with inebriation,
he was surprised that when the changed elements
passed into other uses.

In the same way that he divided
the five loaves for five thousand men (*uirum*),
so did the food increase in their mouths,
between the teeth of those eating.
The bread was multiplied greatly
as was its distribution;
was anyone, seeing this, amazed
at the continual flowing of the sources?
In the hands of those breaking it,
the bread was supplied to overflowing;
and the pieces that were not broken
escaped untouched by men (uiris).\textsuperscript{11}

This hymn attributes to the feast of Epiphany, in order, commemorations
of the baptism of Jesus (stanza 2), the adoration of the magi (3), the Cana
miracle of the water turned into wine (4–5), and the multiplication of the
loaves (6–8).\textsuperscript{12} The passage from On virginity describes Jesus as the spouse
who “fed four thousand in the desert with five loaves and two fish,” while the
hymn sings about “the five loaves for five thousand.” None of the canonical
accounts of the multiplication have four thousand people and five loaves and
two fish.\textsuperscript{13} Hieronymous Frank, straining to have the passage mark the nati­
vity feast on December 25, highlights the numerical discrepancy in order to
exclude the possibility that this passage could be referring to the feast of
Epiphany. Frank suggests, thereby, that there was a recognized distinction in
Milan between a Christmas commemoration of the feeding of the four
thousand and an Epiphany commemoration twelve days later of the feeding of the five
thousand.\textsuperscript{14} Such stretches are necessary, it seems to me, only if one is trying
to make the Marcellina passage prove the existence of Christmas in Milan
in 378.

3. The Commentary on the Gospel of Luke
Further support for the absence of Christmas in Milan in the first few years
of Ambrose’s episcopate comes from the major role that the magi take up in
Ambrose’s exegetical work on the Gospel of Luke. Even though the magi are

\textsuperscript{11} The original Latin text can be found in Ambrose, Hymnes, ed. Jacques Fontaine (Paris: Cerf 1992) 335-59.

\textsuperscript{12} There is also an extant hymn from Ambrose for Christmas, Intende qui regis Israel, yet some scholars err on this when they posit that both Christmas and Epiphany were being cele­
brated in Milan when Ambrose became bishop there in 374. The hymns prove only that the
feasts were in place by the end of his episcopate, in 397.

\textsuperscript{13} The accounts with five thousand present—Mark 6:34-44, Matt. 14:13-21, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-13—have five loaves and two (or a “few”) fish, but the accounts with four thousand —Mark 8:1-10 and Matt. 15:32-9—have seven loaves and a few fish. None have what Ambrose
cites from Liberius, i.e., four thousand people and five loaves and two fish.

\textsuperscript{14} Hieronymous Frank, “Die Feier der Feste natalis Salvatoris und epifania in Mailand zur
not part of the infancy narrative in Luke's account, they are the focus of a series of sections in Ambrose's commentary on the infancy of Christ. While not by itself conclusive, this is another piece of evidence which makes one wonder: Would Ambrose have brought the Matthean magi into the commentary on the birth narrative in Luke if the magi had not been part of the liturgical content of the birthday feast which was celebrated on January 6? Might it not have been that he did so because the magi played such a central role in the liturgical imaginations of the members of the Milanese church in relation to the feast of the Lord's birth which was also marked on January 6? Might the two have been among linked epiphanies, "manifestations," marking the celebration of January 6?

Another contributing piece of evidence comes from the absence of any mention of Christmas in the entire Commentary on the Gospel of Luke. If Christmas was observed in Milan as Ambrose wrote this work,15 it is odd that there is no mention of it at all, even when he is writing about the birth itself. Yet there are pointed references to the magi and to the feast of Epiphany. In the Commentary it is the magi who are the examples for the faithful as to how they should consider and approach the vulnerable infant swaddled in the manger after his birth from the virgin. One is led to ask why, when Ambrose's commentary is not on Matthew's gospel but on Luke's, it is the Matthean magi and not the Lucan shepherds who are held out as the examples for adoring the infant Savior. Might it not have been that the birth narrative and the visit of the magi are linked in the Commentary on Luke because both were commemorated on the Epiphany feast on January 6 and would therefore have been tied together in the catechesis and in the imagination of the assembly?

II. Other North Italian Bishops

In addition to Ambrose of Milan, there are a number of early church leaders in northern Italy who contribute the oldest texts on the origins of Christmas and Epiphany.16 The first below, Filastrius of Brescia, is a contemporary of

15 Gabriel Tissot, the translator of the expositio in Sources Chrétiennes, dates the work between 377 and 389. See Ambrose of Milan, Traite sur L'Evangile de S. Luc, Sources Chrétiennes 45 (Paris: Cerf 1971) 11.

16 Below I will deal with only two of these bishops in detail, Filastrius of Brescia and Maximus of Turin; the witness of other northern Italians—Chromatius of Aquileia and Peter Chrysologus of Ravenna, in particular—will be raised in the notes only.

150
Ambrose, while the second, Maximus, presided over the church of Turin for some time in the first half of the fifth century.

1. Filastrius of Brescia

The heresiology of a contemporary of Ambrose, Filastrius of Brescia, defames those whose theologies were found heretical by his standards at the end of the fourth century. While the targets of his invectives were usually teachers and leaders, not calendrical calculators, toward the end of the work he dedicates a section to the false opinions circulating about the dating and narrative content of the feast of Epiphany:

There are certain heretics who have doubts about the day of the epiphanies of the Lord and Savior, which is celebrated on January 6, saying that they must celebrate only the birthday of the Lord on December 25, but not the day of the epiphanies. They thus ignore that under the Law and according to ** the Savior in the flesh brought all things to completion in himself and about himself, so that he was born on December 25 and revealed himself, as he revealed himself on January 6 *** in the Temple; what was real did not appear as a shadow, and he was therefore worshipped by the magi.\(^{17}\)

It is evident that there was some controversy in Filastrius's day about the feast, its theology, and about whether Epiphany should be observed by those who had just celebrated Christmas twelve days earlier.

This passage raises a number of issues related to what we found in Ambrose. First, we note that even though Filastrius will prescribe only one narrative to the feast on January 6—the adoration of the magi, Matt 2:1-12—the day itself is called not the day of epiphany, but the day of the epiphanies (*Epifaniorum*). This remnant reveals, most likely, that the day had formerly celebrated various “manifestations” of the Lord, including perhaps the birth of Jesus, but it had been or was being pared down to one as Filastrius wrote.

Secondly, Filastrius’s passage informs us that there were some who were celebrating “only the birthday of the Lord on December 25, but not the day of the epiphanies.” If, as we know, the feast of Christmas was being introduced, and this introduction led some to think that they would no longer celebrate the feast of January 6, is it not likely that their omission was

\(^{17}\) Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina [CCSL] 9:304. The asterisks mark lacunae in the manuscript.
assumed because the narrative of the birth, which had earlier been on January 6, was now being proclaimed on December 25?

2. Maximus of Turin

We find four sermons preached by Maximus of Turin on the day of Epiphany itself (13a, 64, 100 and 101) and a few more preached within a few days of the feast (13b, 13, 65, 102 and 103). Unfortunately, it is difficult to ascertain the chronological order of the sermons. A few are about the baptism of Jesus and the consecration of the waters which took place at that event. One is about the Cana miracle only, in which the water was turned into wine. A few others commemorate both the baptism of the Lord and the miracle of Cana.

In the sermons which mark only the baptism of Jesus (13a, 13b, 13 and 100), Maximus links Epiphany with Christmas as a kind of season, speaking of Christmas as the Lord's birth in the flesh and Epiphany as the rebirth in the sacraments. This seems to exhibit a more advanced stage of development, and so we assume that the Cana narrative was the first one, with the baptism narrative added later.

18 For an evaluation of the Epiphany sermons of Maximus, see Milena Mariani Puerari, “La fisionomia delle feste e dei tempi liturgici maggiori nella chiesa torinese durante l'episcopato di san Massimo (IV-V secolo),” Ephemerides Liturgicae 106 (1992) 381-406.

19 There is another northern Italian bishop, Chromatius of Aquileia, whose corpus of works contains only one sermon on Epiphany, and it deals only with the baptism of the Lord; see Sermo 34 (CCSL 9a:156-7). Although the Aquileian evidence does not qualify the present discussion, this sermon is unique in its single concentration on the narrative of the baptism because of its associations with the narrative and themes of the churches of Egypt. This is dealt with elsewhere: see, for example, Guglielmo Biasutti, “Aquileia e la chiesa de Alessandria” in Aquileia e l'oriente Mediterraneo I, Antichità Alloatriatiche 12 (Udine: Arti Grafiche friulane 1977) 215-30; and James E. Furman, “Rufinus: an Alexandrian in the West,” Coptic Church Review 13 (1992) 3-23.

20 The juggling of various narratives and theologies for the feast of the epiphanies in northern Italy is not unique to Maximus. The enormous collection of sermons from the eminent fifth-century bishop of Ravenna, Peter Chrysologus, similarly reveals an evolution concerning the manifestations marked by the feast. While is seems that the visit of the magi was the dominant narrative there, Peter also describes the triple manifestation, trino modo, of the occasion. His sermon 157 mentions the magi bearing their mystical gifts (157.1), the Cana miracle of water turned into wine (157.5), and the consecration of baptismal waters in Christ's entry into the river Jordan (157.6). In yet another sermon, 160, the three episodes are the magi, the baptism, and the multiplication miracle (160.6). In addition to these two different triple manifestations, there are two Epiphany sermons—156 and 158, probably preached consecutively—which attend only to the visit of the magi. For more on the witness of Peter Chrysologus, see Franco Sottocornola, L'anno liturgico nei sermoni di Pietro Crisologo: Ricerca storico-critica sulla liturgia di Ravenna antica (Cesena: Centro Studi e Ricerche sulla Antica Provincia Ecclesiastica Ravennata 1973) 237-50.
The hypothesis that the Cana narrative antedated the narrative of the baptism is further supported by the bishop’s explanation of the meaning of the word “epiphany” to the Torinese faithful in a sermon on the Cana miracle (101). The stage of transition from Cana to the baptism would be in the sermons in which the bishop begins by briefly mentioning the Cana sign, but then continues at length about the baptism of the Lord (64, 65). Striking in Maximus’s sermons on Epiphany is the absence of any references to the visit of the magi.

One of the main things that the testimony of Maximus brings to the present discussion is the speedy evolution in the narratives and the rites during the period of this investigation, even in the span of one episcopate. Clearly, in the late fourth and early fifth centuries narratives, theologies, and elements of rites for Christmas and Epiphany were being shuffled and juggled from one church to another—from East to West, from West to East—variously inculturated according to the liturgical and theological attractions and aversions of the time and place.

III. Evidence from Churches in North Africa and Spain

1. Augustine’s Sermon 202

The universally recognized evidence for the emergence of Christmas comes from the Chronograph of 354, a document which contains two lists of burial dates, one of bishops, the depositio episcoporum, and the other of martyrs, the depositio martyrum. It is evident from the lists that December 25 was the recognized date of the birth of Jesus: VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudea.21 The burial list of the bishops makes it clear that the list itself was made in or earlier than 336, and from this have historians generally taken this year as the terminus ante quem for the existence of Christmas in Rome.

Some who have sought to find an even earlier emergence have turned to a sermon of Augustine against the Donatists, in which the prodigious North African bishop inveighs against his theological foes by considering that they do not celebrate Epiphany:

With good reason have the heretical Donatists never wished to celebrate this day with us: they neither love unity, nor are they in communion with the Eastern Church where that star appeared. Let us, however, celebrate

the Manifestation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on which He harvested the first fruits of the Gentiles, in the unity of the Gentiles.\textsuperscript{22}

The festival being celebrated is Epiphany, for the visit of the magi is the narrative elsewhere confirmed as the reading for Epiphany in North Africa. Yet some scholars have used the evidence of Augustine’s sermon to suggest that Christmas may have been established in North Africa even earlier than the evidence we have for its appearance at Rome. This seems to be a conclusion that goes beyond what the text itself can bear.

To this end it is noted that Augustine does not mention that the Donatists do not celebrate Christmas “with us.” The difficulty, however, with this reasoning is that the sermon was preached on the feast of Epiphany. It seems quite natural that on that feast Augustine would speak about what the Donatists do or do not do on the feast of Epiphany. But why would one expect that on Epiphany Augustine would rail against the Donatists’ practice (or lack of practice) on Christmas.\textsuperscript{23} One would think that, if he were going to mention their not celebrating Christmas, he would do so on the feast of Christmas, not on the feast of Epiphany. One could logically assume that if, on Christmas, Augustine were railing against the Donatists not celebrating Epiphany “with us,” then we could safely assume that they were celebrating Christmas because that was the celebration at hand as Augustine spoke.

Some have suggested that, because the North African church shared many of the same theological notions and practices as the church of Rome, then here too one can expect that the North African church observed Christmas. Yet, even if the North African churches shared many customs of the church of Rome, one cannot methodologically presume that if Rome was doing it, so too was North Africa. As yet we have no evidence of any church outside Rome celebrating Christmas before Epiphany; it is a stretch to presume that the churches of North Africa were doing this without any positive proof as confirmation.

Scholars who have followed this line from the Epiphany sermon of Augustine have pushed from this absence of evidence back in time to claim that, even though the sermon of Augustine against the Donatists was preached in the

\textsuperscript{22} Translation from Augustine, \textit{Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany}, Ancient Christian Writers 15 (Westminster, MD: 1952) 170.

early fifth century, because the Donatist schism had happened in 311, the feast of Christmas must antedate the schism. With this claim they have sought to push the *terminus* back from 336 to 311. Adding to this speculations based on the historical exigencies of the late third century, the *terminus* for the emergence of Christmas in North African ends up in the middle of the third century, sometime before 243. If we had the proof to confirm the many conditions which have led to the speculation back to 243 as the beginning time for the emergence of the nativity feast on December 25, this would indeed be a remarkable find and one which in effect would push back the date of the first non-Roman evidence for Christmas back over a full century from the first evidence of such a celebration. Without the confirmations, however, such musings remain merely that.

2. The Council of Saragossa

Because there have been attempts to find testimony for Christmas (and Advent) in the earliest calendrical evidence from Christian Spain, let us consider this evidence in order to see if Christmas might have been the first of the two feasts there as some have supposed. Some historians of the liturgy have turned to fourth-century Iberian texts looking for an early precedent for Advent, and they have regularly highlighted the fourth canon of the Council of Saragossa (380):

> For twenty-one continuous days, from December 17 until the day of the feast of Epiphany (which is January 6), no one should be absent from church, or hide at home, withdraw to a dwelling in the country, move to the mountains, or go out walking barefooted, but everyone should come together in church.

More than a few researchers have sought to prove, for example, that “the three-week period mentioned there was not simply oriented toward Epiphany, but included Christmas.” Yet there is no evidence to support the point that this church, or indeed any church in Spain, was celebrating Christmas in 380: the canon above does not mention December 25 or the feast of Christmas. If anything, the canon positively excludes the possibility of the existence of Christmas since the pre-Epiphany preparation period would not have been twenty-one days long if a major feast occurred twelve days earlier.

---

24 See, for example, Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 85-91.
While Bernard Botte wrote, "if the canon does not establish the existence of Christmas, neither does it prove that the feast had not yet been celebrated," yet those who have cited him have usually omitted this qualification and treated his work as proving the existence of Christmas. Botte and others have pushed the evidence beyond its due, however, and, to demonstrate that Christmas must have been celebrated in Saragossa when the canon was promulgated, they turn to a letter written in 385 by the Roman bishop Siricius to the bishop of Tarragona, Himerius.

3. Siricius of Rome to Himerius of Tarragona

Himerius had earlier written to Damasus, Siricius's predecessor in Rome, who had died. So his successor is addressing Himerius's concerns, one of which was determining the proper times of the year for baptism. The response of Siricius states that in Tarragona the rite of baptism is sought by "innumerable people." (He learned this from Himerius's original letter to Damasus.) In order to respond to the crowds seeking initiation, the rite had been celebrated "randomly and without order by his fellow bishops" (*improbabilis & emendanda confusio, quae a nostris consacerdotibus*), leading to "a confusion which must not be approved of and which needs to be corrected."

Siricius continues by listing the times when baptism is being conferred to accommodate the throngs:

> passim ac libere *natalitiis* Christi seu apparitionis nec non & apostolorum seu martyrum *festivitatis* innumeræ (ut asseris) plebes baptismi mysterium consequantur.²⁹

Because *natalitiis* can function as an adjective modifying *festivitatis*, the "birth feasts" here may well be those of the apostles and martyrs, rather than or in addition to that of Christ. Moreover, *Christi* could be the genitive modifying *apparitionis*, another genitive referring in combination to the "manifestation of Christ." Also, the plural number of *natalitiis* further excludes the possibility that it was referring only to the birth of Christ. None of those

²⁹ J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio* III (Florence: Zatta 1754) 65; emphasis added.
³⁰ The separation of these two words by nine other words makes this objection unlikely from a grammatical point of view, but the sum of the grammatical difficulties, when considered together, call the earlier hypothesis into question.
who have adduced this piece of evidence have addressed the odd use of the plural form, as noun or adjective, of the word _natalitiis_.

The scholars who have brought the letter of Siricius into the discussion have done so in order to prove the existence of Christmas in Spain in 385. Yet the letter is problematic as evidence for their case. First of all, Siricius's response to the bishop of Tarragona does not address the issue of dates, but merely the content of the celebration. Even suspending the aforementioned problem of the plural form of _natalitiis_, the phrase of the letter which scholars cite to argue for the existence of Christmas, _natalitiis Christi seu apparitionis_, may be pointing to narratives for the same date (January 6) in the church of Tarragona, even though the Roman bishop, Siricius, might have had two dates in mind—December 25 for the birthday (_natalitiis_), January 6 for Epiphany (_apparitio_)—when he wrote his response. This is grammatically possible from the phrase because the conjunction _seu_ can function to indicate an appositional way of naming something.31

This letter is moot on the main point, therefore, if the church of Tarragona celebrated the birthday feast and _apparitio_ on the same day (January 6), which is likely from the canon of Saragossa quoted above. These objections, grammatical and calendrical, are not proposed here to argue conclusively that Christmas was not celebrated in Spain at the end of the fourth century, but that they make the evidence indeterminate enough to preclude their use as proof of the existence of Christmas at the end of the fourth century in Spain. Since historians have introduced the letter of Siricius to bolster the tentative proposal that Christmas was in existence in Saragossa in 380, the Saragossan conciliar evidence becomes as weak and inadmissible as the Tarra­gonan letter is inconclusive.

**IV. Conclusion**

Much of the research about the origins of Christmas and Epiphany has been aimed at finding ever-earlier dates for the emergence of these feasts. At times, however, that very aim has seemed to predispose scholars into adding more gravity and specificity to texts that, when considered in their local ecclesial context, simply cannot confirm the emergence of Christmas for a time any earlier than the last quarter of the fourth century for a church

outside Rome. Speculation about Christmas (and Advent) in Spain, in North Africa, and in northern Italy has been rich and engaging. But too often it has also been inventive. Although the evidence for this period is quite sparse in this matter, we have to be careful that we do not heap upon the earliest testimony what can be known only later.