XMAS - COLUMN 1

WHEN THEY CHANGED THE DATE OF CHRISTMAS

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Looking back on all the great pomp and the many dire prognostications attendant upon the dawn of the new millenium, January 1, 2000, I must report that all that fervent and sometimes frantic excitement was as nothing to me compared to the first worldwide celebration of Christmas on its new date, January 6, 2000.

The movement to change the date of Christmas from December 25th received its first real impetus right here in Connecticut, as I recall. A renegade priest in West Hartford, who had just recently been reassigned from mission work in the impoverished regions of northeastern Brazil, baracaded himself behind locked church doors on December 24, 1988. This effectively canceled all the Christmas masses in that parish that year.

The signs which that priest nailed on his parish doors were pointed indeed. "Westfarms Mall -- Only Two Miles Away," one of them read. Another was still more telling: "Christ Was Born In A Barrio -- Why Are You Here?"

The West Hartford priest was subsequently institutionalized. But his striking actions did touch off a lively nationwide debate in the secular media, sparked by one of the network talk show hosts who was famous in those days, but whose name I can no longer remember. The debate persisted in the religious press and even found its way into the councils of the bishops.

The traditionalists argued at that time that even a little light is better than none. So, they said, keep Christmas on December 25th, even though, many of them granted, its original biblical meanings had been largely dissipated in a glut of twinkling lights and jingling cocktails.

Over against the traditionalists, the reformers -- although carefully disassociating themselves from the actions of that renegade priest -- argued that the celebrations of December 25th had long before become a spiritual mockery. "St. Francis," one of the reformers wrote in 1990, "created the nativity scene in the 13th century as a witness to a new world where the monastic virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience would be characteristic of all Christians. But today the Bethlehem tableau is celebrated in the U.S. by people who aspire for little more than accumulating wealth, seeking polymorphous sexual gratification, and asserting the untouchable sway of the ego."

When what we called in those days "Third World Churches" then joined in the discussion enthusiastically during the 1990's,

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an irresistable ecumenical momentum began to develop. The churches of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, which then were affirming their majority status in international Christian bodies, argued simply that Christmas as it had come to be known in the affluent West, and in their own capitol ghettos of westernized wealth, was indeed the cultic center of the spirit of captialism, not the Spirit of the Christ Child. Better, then, let the Malls around the world have December 25th, said Third World Christian leaders.

January 6th was chosen as the new date for Christmas, for various reasons. That date was rooted in the earliest traditions of the Church as the date of the manifestation of Christ to the whole world, known as the festival of the Epiphany or "Three Kings Day." But more important, advocates argued, January 6th was stationed at the beginning of the new calendar year, suggesting the ancient biblical promise of a new beginning for the whole world: the hope of that day of peace and justice for all creatures, when the lamb would lie down with the lion and the poor all over the earth would be exalted, as the biblical prophets dreamed.

In my extended family, I must confess, we did exchange gifts last December 25th, along with millions of others, on what was undisguisedly the concluding secular holiday of two months licentious consuming. It was pleasant to gather once again around the tree with my family, and not to have to interrupt our domestic tranquility by going out into the cold for the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service.

But those warm domestic moments on December 25th were nothing, as far as I was concerned, compared to the charged freedom and the ecstatic joy I experienced on that new Christmas Day, January 6th. Thank God! There was no hoopla in the world around us. It was as if the world did not really care that Christ was born, just the way it was on that first Christmas Day over two thousand years ago. All there was to experience for the few of us who cared to worship that night was the bare spiritual interior. All there was to see was the simplicity of the altar, with the commonplace gifts of bread and wine, surrounded by that rough-hewn nativity tableau.

But it was electric. It was reminiscent of the spirit of St. Francis. I was moved to tears. Would that we could have changed the date of Christmas many years earlier.

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