

might say, the point of his nose as the centre. Oh, yes, he liked Catholic services—they quite fascinated him. He thought he might as well be a Catholic as anything else. I suppose he will remain on the books as 'Roman Catholic' till doomsday. He intends to spend two Christmas days in gaol, if it so please his Majesty the King!

I may add that I have in my possession the names of the parties referred to in the course of this communication, and that these names will be available whenever required.

These few experiences may prove interesting to the readers of the *New Zealand Tablet* by showing them how prison statistics of religious beliefs are made in New Zealand. The official records are, in this respect, absolutely useless, so far as we are concerned. They prove nothing. They simply show that every criminal in New Zealand has his glorious 'liberty of speech' to say what he likes, as he likes, when he likes, where he likes in regard to his religious connection—the liberty to take up the rôle of 'Roman Catholic' as he crosses the threshold of the gaol, only to throw it aside as he would an old moth-eaten garment when leaving the gaol walls. He goes into the gaol as a visitor does to a fever ward of the hospital. He puts on a 'Roman Catholic' shroud to keep microbes from his sacred person, and throws the garment away when it has served his purpose. So it has ever been.

St. Mary's, Boulcott street, Wellington,
December 17, 1908.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL

It is certain that at the end of the third century the birth of Our Lord was celebrated in both the Eastern and Western Churches. It is equally certain that at the beginning of the fifth century that feast was celebrated in the whole Christian Church (if we except the Donatists and the city of Jerusalem) on the 25th of December. But between these points there was much difference as to the day on which the birth of Our Lord was to be celebrated. The Acts of the Passion of St. Philip of Hieraclea show that the feast of Epiphany was observed in the Eastern Church at the end of the third century. Now it is sure that throughout the greater part of the fourth century the Easterns included the birth of Christ among the four reasons for that feast. Thus at that period of the Churches of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine celebrated the nativity of Christ on the 6th of January. St. Epiphanius, a writer of the latter half of the fourth century, is very positive as to the birth of Jesus on the latter date. St. Chrysostom, preaching on Christmas Day, 388, to the people of Antioch, defends the feast from the reproach of novelty, although he admits that in Syria it was then scarcely ten years old. Other Orientals of the early part of the third century, like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, seem to be ignorant of any celebration of the birth of Christ. The language of the latter almost excludes the supposition of such a feast in the capital of Egypt, while the former speaks of it in connection with some Gnostic heretics, who placed the date in April or May. The act of St. John Chrysostom was not an isolated one. In 379 St. Gregory Nazianzen, in union with the Emperor Theodosius the Great, introduced the feast into Constantinople. In 382 St. Gregory of Nyssa, brother of the great St. Basil, introduced it into Pontus and Cappadocia. Clearly it was the authority of the Roman See that, indirectly at least, compassed these notable liturgical acts. It is no small matter that, in face of local oppositions, Constantinople and Antioch should insert in the calendar a specific Roman feast.

The tradition of the 25th of December as the birthday of Our Lord is much earlier and more positive at Rome than in the Orient. St. Augustine speaks of it as an old custom in his time, and in this he is supported by St. Jerome, as well as by the Cappadocians, SS. Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. St. Chrysostom justified its introduction into Antioch by the example of Rome. wiser in this matter than the Orient. His judgment seems to have been influenced by a copy of the Augustan census of Judea, which according to him, was kept in a public place at Rome, and proved the birth of Christ at the Roman date. The

Apostolic Constitutions,

an episcopal manual compiled between A.D. 350 and 425, but containing a much earlier discipline, mention the 25th of December as the feast of the Nativity. Cave even cited Theophilus of Caesarea, a second century writer, for this date; the passage cited is from the acts of a council held at Caesarea in Palestine A.D. 190. These acts have come down to us through the writings of St. Bede, the famous historian of the English Church in the first quarter of the eighth century. Their genuineness is yet somewhat doubt-

ful, though the newest studies on St. Bede show that he was well versed in the most ancient Christian literature.

Very lately there has been discovered in a Greek monastery of the island of Chalcois a copy of the commentary of Hippolytus on Daniel, in the fourth book of which it is very clearly stated that Christ was born on the 25th of December. Possibly this is an interpolation, as some critics maintain. If it were genuine, we should have here a local tradition of the Roman Church in the early part of the third century vouched for by one of its most brilliant writers and officers. Such a tradition, so soon fixed in the public worship of the Roman Church, would bring us within hailing distance of the Apostolic memories and ordinances. Unexceptionable from every point of view is the notice in the Philocalian Calendar of A.D. 386 that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea on December 25th. Shortly after, about the middle of the fourth century (354), we find St. Liberius receiving at Rome, on Christmas Day, the vows of Marcellina, the sister of St. Ambrose. With all these evidences of ancient origin it seems strange that the little ecclesiastico-astronomical tract, *De Pascha Computus*, of the year 243, written either in Italy or Africa, is silent about the feast of the 25th of December, or rather says positively that the birth of Jesus took place on March 28th; 'the day on which God created the sun was the fittest day for the birth of the Sun of justice.'

The practice of celebrating

Three Masses

had its origin at Rome. The very old Mass-books, called the Gelasian and Gregorian Sacramentaries, contain each three Masses for the day. Anciently they were said at the time and in the order in which they are prescribed in the Missal, i.e., at midnight, before the aurora, and after sunrise. We know that in the sixth century, and probably earlier, the Pope was wont to say these three Masses at St. Mary Major's, St. Anastasia's (whose feast occurred that day), and at St. Peter's. Curiously enough, the preface of the Nativity, several collects, and many parts of the Masses remain identically what they were fourteen hundred years ago, so jealous is the Church of her liturgy and so capable of preserving it from substantial alteration. The midnight vigil of Christmas is the last relic of a very common custom in the first Christian ages of celebrating nocturnal vigils for the feasts of the saints. The attendant disorders discredited them, so that only the venerable vigil of the Nativity escaped. In the early middle ages all the people were expected to attend the midnight Mass and to communicate, under pain of three years' excommunication, as a means of compelling the performance of what we now call Easter duty. Perhaps this is the meaning of the tradition that the Emperor Justin (the first or the second) ordered Christmas to be everywhere celebrated, no doubt by confession and Communion, for it was a common feast long before the time of either Justin.

At an early date legend and fancy seized upon the feast and decked it out with

Charming Myths.

There are some few left from the Graeco-Roman time, such as the story that at the birth of Christ the Temple of Peace at Rome collapsed; that a spring of oil burst out in the Trastevere and flowed the whole day long into the Tiber; that Augustus saw in the air the Blessed Virgin with the Child in her arms and dedicated to them an altar of the First-born God. Pretty fancies! not unnatural in a people who project back upon their pagan past some small share of their new Christian consciousness. It was the Germanic peoples, however, who were destined to make the fortune of Christmas. It fell at a time when they were wont to celebrate their pagan sacrifices, and the missionaries prudently gave their traditional customs a Christian sense and direction. The rich cheer, the abundant presents, the lavish hospitality of their old pagan days were not abolished. Nor were the numerous Scandinavian ceremonies in honor of Yule, the log, the candle, the boar's head, the common feasting. The Lord of Misrule and the Abbot of Unreason continued the carnivalesque character of the northern Yuletide, while the mince pies and spice cakes recall the gross and barbarous wassailings of the primitive Goth and Saxon. Under men like Gregory, Augustine, and Theodore of Canterbury, Aldhelm and Daniel of Winchester, such habits were gradually modified, and within a short time the fierce pirates of the Northern seas gave to God saintly men like Wilfrid, Willibrod, Winfred (Boniface), and saintly women like Eadburg, Hilda, Lioba, and countless others. 'It is only by a long course of training that the fancy and imagination can be brought to run in the new groove of thought,' says Brother Azarnis in his *Development of English Thought*. To that end does the Church bring to bear all her teaching and discipline. By degrees she weeds out the tares of the old faith and plants the new. But there are also in every race and age

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