

December 25
or
January 6



When Shall
we Celebrate?

Armenian Church Youth Ministries
A Department of the Western Diocese
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December 25 or January 6 When shall we celebrate Christmas?

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Armenians celebrate Christmas on January 6. This causes some confusion for most, especially since December 25 so widely recognized. Why two dates? How can there be two dates marking the same event?

In fact, up until the 4th century *all* Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus on January 6. That date commemorated all the events leading to the beginning of Christ's ministry. On January 6, the early Church celebrated:

- Jesus' Birth (Nativity)
- The Visit of the Magi
- Jesus' Baptism at the River Jordan

The Church was not so much concerned with the actual birthday of Jesus, as much as the birth of His ministry, which the Bible tells us, began after His baptism by John the Baptist.

Today the Visit of the Magi is celebrated on January 6 in many countries including Mexico and Latin America. And most Christian churches celebrate the Baptism of Christ on January 6 as Epiphany.

There are different accounts of why the Birth or Nativity was changed to December 25. The most common involves the pagan feast celebrating the birth of the Sun. Right around December 22 the Winter Solstice takes place – the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. Immediately following the solstice, the days start getting longer: the sun shines longer during the day (until the Summer Solstice). Pagans would celebrate this astronomical event, which brought warmth, light and life to their lives.

In the 4th Century, following the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, an effort was made to rid the Roman Empire of pagan feasts and holidays. The feast of the Nativity of Jesus was moved to December 25 to shift the focus of celebration from the *birth of the Sun* to the *birth of the Son*, Jesus Christ!

Meanwhile, in Armenia the acceptance of Christianity had already taken place in the year 301. Different from the Roman Empire where Christianity was an *accepted* religion, in Armenia, Christianity was *the* official religion of the state. In fact, Armenia was the first nation to accept Christianity as a state religion. Hence, there was no reason to change the Christmas feast to December 25. It has remained on January 6 until the present day. Today, the Armenian Church celebrates the Birth and Baptism of Jesus on the same day as the ancient Christian Church—on January 6.

When should we celebrate?

The big question remains: when shall we celebrate? The answer is simple: The Christian is called to bear witness to Christmas *everyday!* Christ is born every day in the hearts of believers, in the help they give their neighbors and in the love they share with the world. December 25 and January 6 are convenient reminders for us. They are opportunities for us to focus on our faith in our savior Jesus Christ. They remind us of the greatest gift given to us by God - His Son! Christ was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, but he continues to be born when we pray, when we reach out, when we love. It is at those times that Christ is Born! It is at those times that we can celebrate the Birth of Love, the Birth of Light, the Birth of Life, and the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ!



Did you know?

- “12 days of Christmas” are measured from December 25 to January 6.
- Pilgrims who would visit the site of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem needed 12 days to travel to the River Jordan where they would make their pilgrimage at the site of Jesus’ Baptism on January 6.
- The Armenians refer to January 6 as the feast of *Theophany*, which means “The Revelation of God.”
- At the Birth of Jesus, God was revealed = Theophany!
- At the Baptism of Christ the **Son** of God is baptized, the **Spirit** of God descends in a dovelike form and the voice of God the **Father** is heard. (See the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3) At this point, the Holy Trinity is revealed = Theophany!