

Some sort of a paragraph or excursus on the matter of dates in church history...and other places, of course.

Unified time systems such as we now use were not understood or identified in past ages. The Romans used time schemes such as "in the year of the Emperor...." or "in the year of the proconsul..." or "in theyear of the...." But the culture of Rome dated from the supposed founding of the city and the designation is AUC --ab urbe condita. By most of the modern reckonings this occurred about 754 BC.

Varro, an early Christian chronographer, fixed the date at 753 BC and many dates in church history were "off" about one year following this slight miscalculation. Some chronological synchronisms came from Greek culture where a system was used on the basis of counting olympic games. The first of these was 777 BC (our reckoning) and every fourth year was an olympiad, counted successively. This continued until the 4th century AD when these games were stopped.

Some time help came from the Hebrew reckonings in which a continuous calendar was suggested from the first of Tishri, 3761 BC.

Our present scheme comes from the monk Dionysius, about 525 AD who worked with the Julian calendar. He devised the idea of identifying things ab incarnatione Domine (AD) for all events since the birth of Christ and a term ab origino mundi for all things before the birth of Christ. The latter never caught on, so to speak, and dates for that time are usually given as BC (Before Christ...or Christianity) or on the Jewish calendar as BCE (Before common era).

The Julian calendar was "off" eleven minutes a year and this amounted to a pile of minutes in time and kept pushing the festivals of the year into the wrong spots. Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) implemented the needed reform and the "gregorian" calendar which is in use today was the result. It took the Protestant world some time to accept his work but it is uniform in the west today although not totally accepted in the east.

Unless you are writing a book on the subject there are very few dates in church history that must be known precisely. For most things a quarter century range is adequate.

Students interested in calendrical studies will find helpful information in volume 113 of the TWENTIETH CENTURY ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CATHOLICISM.