

A CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

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“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and lineage of David: To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Lk 2:6-7).

This is how our Savior chose to come into the world. He came in a place of silence and simplicity, when Mary and Joseph were far from their home in Nazareth, where they were well known. Here in Bethlehem, no one knew them. And he is born in a stable or cave, which we know because St. Luke tells us that there was a manger in it for animals to eat from. So here too, in this stable-cave, they are far from the business and noise of many people, even far from other travelers who used the inn. They were unknown here, in the fields of Bethlehem, in a quiet and peaceful setting with an ox and an ass, according to Christian tradition. And did not Isaiah prophesy this, saying, “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib” (Is 1:3)?

Had they still been in Nazareth when Mary’s time had come to bring forth her firstborn son, all their neighbors and relatives would surely have been upon them with endless chatter and superficial distractions. And had this birth taken place in the Bethlehem inn, full, no doubt, with visitors and Roman officials concerned with the census of Caesar Augustus, they would have been surrounded with much noise, talking, perhaps even dancing, singing, and music—a lot of raucous noise, most inappropriate for this holy event.

But here in the cave, outside Bethlehem, they were *alone* in the dark of the night, on the edge of the desert—on the edge of the world—their only companions, the peaceful ox and ass.

Then came the shepherds. But these were no ordinary shepherds, only interested in sheep, coming to disturb them. They had been specially prepared from heaven beforehand for this meeting with the new-born Christ child. They knew whom they were seeing when they saw Christ lying in the manger.

St. Luke tells us, **“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger”** (Lk 2:8-12).

We see how God prepared these shepherds to be truly worthy witnesses of the birth of God upon earth. They also were far from the city and from their families. They were *alone*, keeping *awake*, keeping *vigil* at night, in the *silence* of the fields, surrounded by the most peaceful of creatures, sheep. And then, suddenly, they are surrounded by heavenly light, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. And they are afraid at first; and then they are told by an angel the news that the longed-for Savior had been born, and that he was the Messiah and Lord of all, and that he is in the city of David, since he is the longed-awaited son of David; and that he is wearing swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Who would be afraid to approach a Savior like this? Not even these simple, humble, pious, and lowly shepherds would be afraid to go and visit this kind of a humble, simple, poor Savior, even though he was Christ the Lord. But before they present themselves before Mary and Joseph as their first human visitors, they were given one further preparation—they were to see the glory of the heavens opened up before them, and their minds and hearts were to be flooded with heavenly light and peace. Only then would they be ready to enter upon so holy a scene, the luminous cave of God’s Son at his birth as a man on earth.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will” (Lk 2:13-14). All the holy spirits of heaven, the angels, had come to witness this divine birth, and they give glory to God in heaven; and on earth they wish peace to all those of good will, to all those with whom God is well pleased.

This is a birth that can accomplish that. It can bring us heavenly peace. It can make us new. For “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor 5:17). “Behold,” says Christ, “I make all things new” (Rev 21:5). Put off, therefore, the old man (*palaion anthropon*), says St. Paul, and put on the new man (*kainon anthropon*): “Put off concerning the former conversation the old man (*palaion anthropon*), which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; put on the new man (*kainon anthropon*), which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). Yes, this child has indeed come to make us new. He is the seed of a new creation, of a peaceful kingdom (Is 11, 6), of the kingdom of heaven on earth (Mk 1:15). It is for this that he was born on earth as a man, to renew the earth, to renew us, to pour out upon us a bath of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4-6).

Now prepared, the shepherds are worthy neighbors to visit Jesus at his birth. They know who he is, and are filled with wonder and awe, as they silently and reverently enter this holy cave, lit up by the Son of God. And doubtless, like the Magi, they humbly fall down in worship before him, together with Mary and Joseph. And so do we. They sit in

silent adoration, in prayer, deeply nourished in their spirit by all that they had seen and heard.

There are many deep mysteries here. Why is God born in such a way, in such simplicity, silence, solitude, and poverty? What is the meaning of all this? Why did he choose to be born in this way? What does it teach us? What are we expected to do as a result of this example and teaching?

Does it not show us that the things which the world considers important are not really important, and that we would do better without them? The pleasures, the luxuries of this world are better done without. It also shows us the value and beauty of silence and solitude. It even shows us the beauty of living on the edge of the desert—on the edge of the world.

This is the life monks have always sought—and you have come here to a monastery to spend these days of Christmastide, the Christmas Octave, with us. A monastery is always a desert. Monks intentionally seek to live on the edge of the desert—on the edge of the world—a life of voluntary, evangelical poverty and simplicity, a life of austerity, solitude, and silence with God, in order to live in his glory and splendor. Monastic life is a life of prayer and fasting, far from the pleasures of the world. You come here to pray with us, to adore God incarnate among us in silence and solitude, far from the noise, business, and superficiality of the world. You come here looking for something deeper, something that will truly nourish and fill your spirit. What you are looking for is what the shepherds found: *God incarnate*, lying in a manger, in that illuminated cave of Bethlehem. And surely they fell down, like the Magi, and worshiped before him.

“And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Lk 2:15-16). They were now prepared. When they came, they would enter that stable in a holy way, and thus would not intrude on the silence and solitude of Mary and Joseph, in the dark of the night, in the illuminated cave of Bethlehem.

They would, in fact, *enhance* the scene, and make it still more beautiful in all its simplicity and austerity. And they also came with a message from heaven for Mary and Joseph, for **“when they had seen it [the manger], they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds”** (Lk 2:18). They told of the apparition of angels, and their announcement that this child was the Savior, the Messiah, and the Lord of all.

This was the one Isaiah prophesied as Emmanuel, God-with-us on earth, God with us in our hearts to forgive us our sins and lead us back home to heaven, to *transform* us, to *fill us with his splendor and light and heavenly peace*. He was the child Isaiah prophesied would one day come upon our earth, saying, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth and for ever” (Is 9:6-7). And the angel told Mary, “And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Lk 1:33).

And of him the psalmist prophesied, “His seed also will I make *to endure for ever*, and his throne as the days of heaven... His seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before me” (Ps 88:29,36).

This is our Savior, our redeemer, the child that has made us *new*. Yes, we are still in process, still longing for the *full* coming of the peace of heaven on earth and in our hearts, but I think we all realize and admit that the peace we are looking for and longing for and aching for is brought by *this child*, who is “The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6).

In God’s plan, the splendor of divinity entered into the human race to *renew* it, to rejuvenate it, to make it *splendid*, to make it *divine*, to fill it with *splendor, divine light, and heavenly peace*. In short, by his incarnation, he came to *divinize* our *humanity*. He came to insert divinity into our humanity, into our human nature, into our flesh. It is an inoculation with the splendor of his divinity. Yes, we remain human, but we are now filled with divine life, with grace, with the indwelling Trinity. If we are baptized, believe this child to be the Son of God, and imitate his life, we will be *divinized*. We will be filled with *splendor* and *light*, through his inserting his divinity into our flesh in this child.

So the shepherds, after their *contact* with so holy a mystery, **“returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them”** (Lk 2:20). And do we not do the same? Every year this mystery of the incarnation is actualized anew for us. Every Christmas we are moved by it anew. We contemplate this mystery, and are renewed by it, are we not? Jesus saves us by his incarnation, death, and resurrection. But at Christmas we especially focus on his incarnation, on his assuming our flesh and investing it with his divinity to illumine it from within and make it splendid. Our contact with this child causes his splendor to flow into us, into our flesh, and illumine it.

This happens in a unique way through the Eucharist, which is an extension of his singularly divinized human body and blood which we ingest into our body and blood in communion. Our body is then filled with his light-bearing body, with his divinity-bearing body. In swallowing his sacramentalized, singularly divinized body, which contains his divinity, we swallow his transforming and divinizing divinity contained in this body. The Eucharistic Jesus, then, divinizes our body from within, illuminating it, making it *splendid*, filled with divine *splendor*, filled with divine light, life, and love.

And Jesus says, “remain in my love” (Jn 15:9). He wants us to remain in this *splendid* love, in this splendor, and hence live a splendid life. And the *way* he was born gives us an indication of *how* to realize this. We realize it in poverty, in simplicity, in silence, in solitude, in austerity, in mortification, in renunciation—all the things monks seek to do, and they seek to do this for the sake of prayer and union with God. This is the monastic life, a life lived in silence, prayer, and fasting, lived on the edge of the desert—on the edge of the world—far from its pleasures, to live for God *alone* as our *only* joy. As a result, they live in the splendor of the divinity of this child, because they have purified themselves from all other delights so as to have their hearts prepared to be able to experience his light, love, and splendor.

All people are called to this, in a way suitable to the responsibilities of their state in life. All indeed are called to renounce worldly desires and live upright, sober and godly

lives in this age. Those who do so, and live only for God—once purified of the world and its pleasures—will live in the light which this child was born to bring to the earth. “For the grace of God our Savior,” writes St. Paul, “has appeared to all men, teaching us that, renouncing ungodliness, and worldly desires, we should live soberly, justly, and piously in this present age; looking for that blessed hope, the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11-13).

Appendix

Thus we will be lights in the darkness, our lives—illuminated and made new by this child—will show others the way to live in his light and peace. May you, therefore, “be *blameless* and *innocent*,” as St. Paul teaches us, “children of God *without blemish*, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you *shine* as *lights* in the world” (Phil 2:15).

And how does all this come about? You are in a monastery during the beautiful Christmas Octave. What better place to be at this beautiful time? Perhaps you are wondering what monks are trying to do here. They are trying to purify themselves of the world and its pleasures, of its noise, worldliness, and superficiality by living an austere and silent life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world, so that once purified, they might come into union with God in prayer, and live in the splendor of his love, illuminated, transformed, and divinized by it, and hence radiate peace and light to all the world. All people are called to live this way, each one in his own way, as the Holy Spirit will make clear to each one.

And more specifically, this union with God comes about in apophatic prayer, and then extends to the whole of our day and of our life. What, then, is apophatic prayer? It is wordless, thoughtless prayer, focusing oneself on God in silence of mind and heart. God then, when he wills, manifests himself to us in dazzling inner light and love which unites us to him and rejoices our heart and spirit, while our senses and the faculties of our spirit are dormant or suspended in their operations. These experiences normally occur with regularity when we are purified from the world and its pleasures, although God sometimes gives people previews of this when then are still unpurified, to interest them to take the correct ascetical path to union with him.

This apophatic prayer, then, in time, if we continue to live a life *mortified* to the world and its pleasures, *crucified* to the world, and the world to us (Gal 6:14), will lead us to *a new state of light and peace as our new normal state*, out of which we periodically fall when we fall into imperfections. But in confessing them, we then return again *to our new normal state of peace and splendor in the Lord*, the splendor of Bethlehem, the heavenly peace which the angels wished to men of good will at Christ’s birth, although we will not always experience this to the same degree.

So let us, then, meditate in the silence and peace of Bethlehem, and seek to grow in the holiness and union with God that he wishes for us.

