

Birth of Christ: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

A selection of texts on Christ's birth in Bethlehem.

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VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

Thus was true God born in the undiminished and perfect nature of a true man, complete in what is his and complete in what is ours. By "ours" we mean what the Creator established in us from the beginning and what he took upon himself to

restore. There was in the Saviour no trace of the things which the Deceiver brought upon us, and to which deceived humanity gave admittance. His subjection to human weaknesses in common with us did not mean that he shared our sins. He took on the form of a servant without the defilement of sin, thereby enhancing the human and not diminishing the divine. For that self-emptying whereby the Invisible rendered himself visible, and the Creator and Lord of all things chose to join the ranks of mortals, spelled no failure of power: it was an act of merciful favor.

It was the devil's boast that humanity had been deceived by his trickery and so had lost the gifts God had given it; and that it had been stripped of the endowment of immortality and so was subject to the harsh sentence of death. He also boasted that, sunk as he was in evil, he

himself derived some consolation from having a partner in crime; and that God had been forced by the principle of justice to alter his verdict on humanity, which he had created in such an honourable state. All this called for the realization of a secret plan whereby the unalterable God, whose will is indistinguishable from his goodness, might bring the original realization of his kindness towards us to completion by means of a more hidden mystery, and whereby humanity, which had been led into a state of sin by the craftiness of the devil, might be prevented from perishing contrary to the purpose of God.

So without leaving his Father's glory behind, the Son of God comes down from his heavenly throne and enters the depths of our world, born in an unprecedented order by an unprecedented kind of birth. In an unprecedented order, because one

who is invisible at his own level was made visible at ours. The ungraspable willed to be grasped. Whilst remaining pre-existent, he begins to exist in time. The Lord of the universe veiled his measureless majesty and took on a servant's form. The God who knew no suffering did not despise becoming a suffering man, and, deathless as he is, to be subject to the laws of death. By an unprecedented kind of birth, because it was inviolable virginity which supplied the material flesh. What was taken from the mother of the Lord was the nature without the guilt. And the fact that the birth was miraculous does not imply that in the Lord Jesus Christ, born from the Virgin's womb, the nature is different from ours. The same one is true God and true man.

From the letter of Pope Leo the Great to Flavian, bishop of Constantinople. Read at the Council of Chalcedon (451)

VOICE OF THE SAINTS

From St. Ephraim the Syrian, "Hymns on the Nativity" (4th century):

Blessed be the Child Who today
delights Bethlehem.

Blessed be the Newborn Who today
made humanity young again.

Blessed be the Fruit Who bowed
Himself down for our hunger.

Blessed be the Gracious One Who
enriched all our poverty and
filled our need.

Blessed be He Whose mercy inclined
Him to heal our sickness.

Blessed be the Holy Child of
Bethlehem!

On this day when the Rich One was
made poor for our sake, let the

rich man also make the poor man a sharer at his table.

On this day a gift came out to us without our asking for it; let us then give alms to those who cry out and beg from us.

This is the day when the high gate opened to us for our prayers; let us also open the gates to the seekers who have strayed but sought forgiveness.

Today the Deity imprinted itself on humanity, so that humanity might also

be cut into the seal of Deity.

His swaddling clothes gave a robe of glory to human beings.

From a sermon by St. Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome (604):

Also, appropriately, he was born in Bethlehem, for Bethlehem, being interpreted, means 'house of bread' and it is he who says 'I am the living bread, which came down from heaven.' And so the place in which the Lord was born was already called 'house of bread' because it was to be there that in the future the one would appear, in substance of our flesh, who would fill the hearts of the faithful with abundance.

The Angel announces that a king is born, and the choirs of angels join their voices, and rejoicing together they cry, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those of good will.' Before our redeemer was born in the flesh there was a discord between us and the angels, from whose brightness and purity we stood afar, not only as the result of original sin but also because of our daily offenses. Because through sin we had become strangers to God, the

angels as God's subjects had cut us off from their fellowship. But because we have now acknowledged our King, the angels have received us as fellow citizens.

From St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 31:

I too now contemplate Jesus "lying in a manger," in a place fit only for animals. Lord, where is your kingship, your crown, your sword, your sceptre? They are his by right, but he does not want them. He reigns wrapped in swaddling clothes. Our king is unadorned. He comes to us as a defenceless little child. Can we help but recall the words of the Apostle: "He emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave"?

Our Lord became man to teach us the Father's will. And this he is already doing as he lies there in the manger. Jesus Christ is seeking us — with a call which is a vocation to

sanctity — so that we may carry out the redemption with him. Let us reflect on this first lesson of his. We are to co-redeem, by striving to triumph not over our neighbour, but over ourselves. Like Christ we need to empty ourselves, to consider ourselves as the servants of others, and so to bring them to God.

Where is the king? Could it be that Jesus wants to reign above all in men's hearts, in your heart? That is why he has become a child, for who can help loving a little baby? Where then is the king? Where is the Christ whom the Holy Spirit wants to fashion in our souls? He cannot be present in the pride that separates us from God, nor in the lack of charity which cuts us off from others. Christ cannot be there. In that loveless state man is left alone.

As you kneel at the feet of the child Jesus on the day of his Epiphany and

see him a king bearing none of the outward signs of royalty, you can tell him: "Lord, take away my pride; crush my self-love, my desire to affirm myself and impose myself on others. Make the foundation of my personality my identification with you."

VOICE OF THE POETS

Three Christmas poems by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

I. CHRISTMAS hath darkness

Brighter than the blazing noon,

Christmas hath a chillness

Warmer than the heat of June,

Christmas hath a beauty

Lovelier than the world can show:

For Christmas bringeth Jesus,

Brought for us so low.

Earth, strike up your music,

Birds that sing and bells that ring;

Heaven hath answering music

For all Angels soon to sing:

Earth, put on your whitest

Bridal robe of spotless snow:

For Christmas bringeth Jesus,

Brought for us so low.

II. In the bleak mid-winter

Frosty wind made moan,

Earth stood hard as iron,

Water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

Snow on snow,

In the bleak mid-winter

Long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him

Nor earth sustain;

Heaven and earth shall flee away

When He comes to reign:

In the bleak mid-winter

A stable-place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty

Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom cherubim

Worship night and day,

A breastful of milk

And a mangerful of hay;

Enough for Him, whom angels

Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,

Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air,

But only His mother
In her maiden bliss

Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,

If I were a Wise Man

I would do my part –

Yet what I can I give Him,

Give my heart.

III. Love came down at Christmas,

Love all lovely, Love Divine;

Love was born at Christmas,

Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,

Love Incarnate, Love Divine;

Worship we our Jesus:

But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,

Love be yours and love be mine,

Love to God and all men,

Love for plea and gift and sign.

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