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Christmas Time: The Light of Bethlehem

A new article about the Liturgical year. "Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is born to illuminate our path on earth. He shows us the Father's loveable face and gives us the Holy Spirit."

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O Christ, Redeemer of the world,
only-begotten Son of the Father, born
before all ages in a way that cannot
be put into words: *Christe, redemptor
omnium, / ex Patre, Patris Unice, /*

solus ante principium / natus ineffabiliter.[1] These are the first words the Church pronounces each year at the beginning of Christmas time. The silence of this night leads us towards the eternity of God. In the mystery celebrated during these days, in praying before the crib, in our more intense family life, we want to contemplate the Word who has become a Child. We want to welcome him with “the humble attitude of the Christian soul. Let us not try to reduce the greatness of God to our own poor ideas ... Let us try to understand that this mystery, for all its darkness, is a light to guide men’s lives.”[2]

A light that leads us to the Father

God is light;[3] in him there is no darkness. When he intervenes in human history, the clouds disperse. So on Christmas Day we sing: *lux fulgebit hodie super nos, quia natus*

est nobis Dominus;[4] today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us.

Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is born to illuminate our path on earth. He shows us the Father's loveable face and gives us the Holy Spirit. He reveals the mystery of God's intimate life, for God is not a solitary being: he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In eternity the Father engenders the Son in a most perfect act of Love that makes the Word the Beloved Son: from the *Father of lights*[5] proceeds the One who is "Light from Light, true God from true God."[6] Although this Light is indescribable, and our eyes are unable to perceive it here on earth, God has not left us in darkness: he enters into people's lives in a new way, beginning with that of Mary.

"Mary's virginity manifests God's absolute initiative in the Incarnation.

Jesus has only God as Father.”[7] The only Son of Mary is the only-begotten Son of the Father: born of the Father before all ages, he is also born on earth of a Virgin Mother. Thus the Church sings: *talis partus decet Deum*,[8] such an admirable birth was in accord with God’s dignity. This mystery reveals the splendor of God’s glory to those who are humble. [9] If we draw near to the Child with the simplicity of the shepherds who went with haste to the stable,[10] or the Magi who *fell down and worshipped him*,[11] we will be able to recognize the Father’s mercy, and we will learn to converse with him as his children.

The beginning of the path towards Easter

While they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes,

and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

[12] It is easy to imagine the joy Mary experienced from the moment of the Annunciation. It was a happiness that would continue to grow day by day as the Son of God was being formed in her womb. Nevertheless, our Lady and St. Joseph were not exempt from grief. The holy night of the Redeemer's birth is marked by the hardness and coldness of men's hearts: *He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.* [13]

Thus, while his birth anticipated the glory of the Kingdom, it also anticipated the "hour" in which Jesus would give his life out of love for men: "His arms, as we admire him again in the manger, are those of a child; but they are the same arms that will be extended on the Cross drawing all men to himself." [14]

In the liturgy for the Christmas season, the Church invites us to

remember the beginning of God's passionate love for mankind that culminates in the annual celebration of the Paschal mystery. In fact, in contrast to the yearly commemoration of Passiontide and Easter, the feast of the Nativity of the Lord did not begin to be celebrated until well into the fourth century, as the calendar came to reflect more clearly the unity of the whole mystery of Christ. Hence, on celebrating Jesus' birth and letting ourselves be touched by the tenderness of the Child, we also understand more clearly the meaning of his coming into the world, as expressed in the Christmas carol that evoked so many memories for St. Josemaría: "*Yo bajé a la tierra para padecer*," I came down to earth to suffer. Christmas and Easter are united, not only by light, but also by the power of the glorious Cross.

For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne . . . a stern warrior.[15]

These words from the Book of Wisdom referred directly to the old Passover, to the Exodus that set the Israelites free. During Christmas time, the liturgy frequently uses these words to show us, by means of contrasts, the Word who comes down to earth. He whom nothing can contain is enclosed within time; the Master of the world finds no place in his world; the Prince of Peace descends as a *stern warrior* from his royal throne. We can thereby understand that Jesus' birth is the end of the tyranny of sin and the beginning of the liberation of the children of God. Jesus has freed us from sin, thanks to his Paschal Mystery. It is the "hour" that runs through and guides the whole of human history.

Jesus takes on a nature like ours, with all its weaknesses, to free us from sin through his death. This can only be understood from the viewpoint of love, for love seeks union: it seeks to share the same lot as the beloved: “the only way to measure what he does is to say that it cannot be measured; it comes from a madness of love which leads to him to take on our flesh and bear the weight of our sins.”[16]

Our Lord chose to have a heart of flesh like ours so as to “translate” into human language the madness of God’s love for each one of us. And so the Church rejoices on exclaiming: *Puer natus est nobis*, [17] a Child has been born to us. He is the long-awaited Messiah of the people of Israel, but his mission reaches out to all mankind. Jesus is born for everyone; he “has in a certain way united himself with each man.”[18] He is not ashamed to call us his

“brothers and sisters,” and wants to join us in praising the Father’s goodness. It is only natural that during the days of Christmas we should live Christian fraternity in a special manner, loving all men and women without useless distinctions based on race, background, or abilities. We need to welcome Jesus’ liberating love that draws us out of the slavery of our bad inclinations, and breaks down the walls dividing us from others, so as to make us “sons in the Son.”[19]

A mystery that illuminates the family

“The cycle of feasts surrounding the mystery of the incarnation (Annunciation, Christmas, Epiphany) ... commemorate the beginning of our salvation and communicate to us the first fruits of the Paschal Mystery.”[20] These fruits always stem from contact with Jesus, from

the relationships created around the Child. And, as with every child who comes into the world, these relationships are, in the first place, family ones. The light from the Child extends, then, in the first place to Mary and Joseph, and from them to all families.

Within Christmas time, the feast of the Holy Family reminds us that Christian families are called to reflect the light of the Home at Nazareth. They are a gift from the heavenly Father, who wishes there to be oases in the world where love has been freed from the slavery of selfishness. The readings for this feast offer us some advice on how to make family life holy: *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

[21] We are shown specific ways to make a reality of this great Gospel paradox: only self-renunciation and sacrifice leads to true love.

The Octave of Christmas closes with the Solemnity of Holy Mary, Mother of God. This feast began to be celebrated in Rome, possibly in relation to the dedication of the Church of Holy Mary *ad martyres*, located in the Pantheon. This celebration reminds us that the Son of God is also the Son of the Woman who believed in God's promises,[22] and that he became flesh to redeem us. Thus a few days later we celebrate the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, the name that brings us consolation in our prayer, since it reminds us that the Child whom we adore is named Jesus because he saves us from our sins.[23]

Salvation for all mankind

The final days of the Christmas cycle commemorate the expansive power of God's Light, intent on reuniting all men and women in the great family of God. On the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the Roman rite originally commemorated also the

“manifestation” to the Magi from the East, the first-fruits of the gentiles, and the wedding feast at Cana—the first manifestation of Jesus' glory to his disciples. Although the Roman liturgy now celebrates these

“epiphanies” on different days, there still remain some echoes of this tradition, which is conserved in the Eastern liturgies. One of these is an antiphon for the 6th of January:

“Today the Bridegroom claims his bride, the Church, since Christ has washed her sins away in Jordan's waters; the Magi hasten with their gifts to the royal wedding; and the wedding guests rejoice, for Christ has changed water into wine, alleluia.”[24]

On the solemnity of Epiphany, the Church invites us to follow the example of the Magi, who persevered in seeking the Truth, did not fear to ask for help when they lost sight of the star, and found their own true grandeur in adoring the newborn Child. Like them, we too want to give him all that is best. For we know that those who are in love need to give gifts, and that the Lord “does not want riches, or the fruits or the beasts of the earth, or of the sea or the air, because they all belong to him. He wants something intimate, which we have to give him freely: ‘My son, give me your heart’ (Prov 23:26).”[25]

Celebrating our Baptism

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord closes the Christmas season. It invites us to contemplate Jesus as he lowers himself to sanctify the waters, so that in the Sacrament of Baptism we can

unite ourselves to his Paschal Mystery: “We, by Baptism, are immersed in that inexhaustible source of life which is the death of Jesus, the greatest act of love in all of history.”[26] So it is only natural, as Pope Francis says, that we should remember with joy the date we received this Sacrament: “To know the date of our Baptism is to know a blessed day. The danger of not knowing it is that we can lose the awareness of what the Lord has done in us, the memory of the gift we have received.”[27] Saint Josemaria always remembered the day of his baptism; each 13th January he recalled with gratitude his godparents and the priest who had baptized him.[28] On one of his last birthdays here on earth, on leaving the oratory of Our Lady of Peace after celebrating Holy Mass, he paused for a moment before the baptismal font, kissed it, and

remarked: "It makes me very happy to kiss it. Here I became a Christian."

Every three years on the first Sunday after the Baptism of the Lord, the gospel of the wedding feast at Cana is proclaimed. At the beginning of Ordinary Time, we are reminded that the light that shone out in Bethlehem and by the Jordan is not a mere endearing parenthesis, but a transforming force that seeks to reach the whole of society, starting from its nucleus—family relationships. The transformation of water into wine suggests to us that human realities, including our daily work done well, can be transformed into something divine. Our role is to be docile to the action of grace, to identify ourselves with the will of Jesus. He will ask us to fill the vessels *usque ad summum*,^[29] right to the brim with our efforts, so that our life might acquire supernatural value. In our struggle to sanctify our daily

work, we find our Lady anew. Mary, who showed us the Child in Bethlehem, now directs us towards the Master with her sure advice: *Do whatever he tells you!*[30]

[1] Hymn *Christe, Redemptor omnium*, I Vespers of Christmas.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 13.

[3] *1 Jn* 1:5.

[4] Roman Missal, Nativity of the Lord, *Ad Missam in aurora*, Entrance Antiphon (cf. *Is* 9:2, 6).

[5] *Jas* 1:17.

[6] Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

[7] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 503.

[8] Hymn *Veni, Redemptor gentium*.

[9] Cf. *Heb* 1:3.

[10] Cf. *Lk* 2:16.

[11] *Mt* 2:11.

[12] *Lk* 2:6-7.

[13] *Jn* 1:11.

[14] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 38.

[15] *Wis* 18:14-15.

[16] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 144.

[17] Roman Missal, Nativity of the Lord, *Ad Missam in die*, Entrance Antiphon (cf. *Is* 9:6).

[18] Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1171.

[21] *Col* 3:12-13 (2nd reading for the feast of the Holy Family).

[22] Cf. *Lk* 1:45.

[23] *Mt* 1:21.

[24] *Antiphona ad Benedictus*,
Morning Prayer for 6 January.

[25] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 35.

[26] Pope Francis, General audience,
8 January 2014.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada,
The Founder of Opus Dei, vol. 1, p. 10.

[29] *Jn* 2:7

[30] *Jn* 2:5

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