

## *REFLECTIONS*

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### CHRISTMAS, A CELEBRATION OF FAMILY

Christmas is a nostalgic time that evokes feelings of joy, serenity, love, and a desire for family gatherings. Songs like “I’ll be Home for Christmas” and “It’s a Wonderful Time of the Year” arouse memories of holidays past celebrated in the warmth and love of family life. Now more than half a century since their release, these emotive songs are still seasonal standards.

The true beauty of Christmas, however, is more than sentimental reminiscences. Its essence is religious, centered on the celebration and meaning of God becoming man. Churches will be beautifully decorated, prominently displaying a crèche with statues representing the infant Jesus and those who were with him at his birth in Bethlehem. People will attend Mass and join in hymns praising God. In spite of the secular influences that shape our daily lives, Christmas helps us experience the wonder and comfort of God’s presence.

We are very familiar with the story of Our Lord’s birth, especially as related in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: the angel’s announcement to Mary, her fiat, the angel’s visit to Joseph, the census, the couple’s trip to Bethlehem, the rejection at the inn, finding room in the stable, the angelic hosts, the guiding star, the shepherds and wise men, and most of all the babe lying in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. Yet, the images, as beautiful as they are, are almost too well-known so that we do not fully appreciate the thoughts and meanings they present.

That Holy Night was the beginning of the redemption of man. Without his birth, there would be no Resurrection and the gates of heaven would still be closed to us. On that first Christmas, the “*Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.*” God had come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. He assumed a human nature, with all of the joys and agonies, trials and tribulations, thoughts and emotions, sufferings and death that are innate to man.

People saw Jesus, heard him, spoke with him, ate with him, and touched him. He had parents and relatives, mingled with neighbors, practiced a religion, learned a trade, worked, and finally assumed his public mission to teach, gather followers, suffer and die on a Cross. These are human experiences to which we can relate. Because of this birth, God was no longer an unseen, unknown divinity that was beyond our comprehension. Now he was a personal God.

The narrative about Christmas is not only about Our Lord, as central as he is, but about family. Mary accepted motherhood with her fiat to the angel’s announcement. Joseph took her as his wife. They traveled to Bethlehem as a couple, as a family. He negotiated a place to stay and was present as Mary gave birth. Joseph likely arranged the straw in the manger, and Mary wrapped the child in swaddling clothes. She fed, dressed and nurtured him. On the eighth day, they had him circumcised and on the fortieth presented him in the temple in obedience to Jewish law.

Mary may have held her Son when she and Joseph welcomed the Magi. Soon after that visit, the family fled to Egypt to protect the child from Herod’s persecution. Upon the tyrant’s death, they returned to Nazareth, where in the love of his earthly family, “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” (Lk 2:40)

In those years, Mary reared Jesus, while Joseph taught the boy a trade and worked to support them. They experienced the same delights and griefs of typical families. After one of their annual trips to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover, the boy was missing. Mary and Joseph searched for three days before locating him in the temple. Mary said, “Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.” Would not any loving parent have had the same worries, and had the same relief upon finding him? Jesus then returned with them “to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother kept all of these things in her heart.” (Lk 2:48-51)

From a theological perspective, Christmas brings forth an even deeper tenet of family, for God himself has a familial nature. As Pope John Paul II expressed it: “God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since he has in himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of family, which is love.”

Thus, the human family, being centered in love, is a reflection of the nature of God. It is love for one another that binds a family together. It is God’s love for us that allows us repeatedly to receive his forgiveness for our sins and his grace for our salvation. It is through love that parents sacrifice their pleasure and wellbeing for their children. It is for love that Jesus died on the Cross for our sins.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his Angelus Address on December 27, 2009, expressed this relationship between God and family as:

“God had chosen to reveal himself by being born into a human family and the human family thus became an icon of God! God is the Trinity, he is a communion of love; so is the family despite all of the differences that exist between the Mystery of God and his human creature, an expression that reflects the unfathomable Mystery of God as Love...The human family, in a certain sense, is an icon of the Trinity because of its interpersonal love and the fruitfulness of this love.”

Do not limit your reflection on this consequential birth which linked heaven and earth to December 25. Live everyday as a preparation for Christ’s coming. Spend time each week in Eucharistic Adoration, go to Confession, attend Mass more frequently, meditate on the liturgical readings, and make the Rosary a frequent family prayer. If you cannot pray with your family, pray for them. As Fr. Patrick Payton stressed, “The family that prays together stays together.”

Each time you say the Hail Mary, think of the Archangel Gabriel’s salutation to Mary, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” and the invitation to her to become the mother of God. Meditate upon this event and on the birth that followed. Be thankful for the great gift we received through the birth of Jesus.

May you and your family have a very *Blessed and Merry Christmas!*

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