

The Christmas Mystery

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One of the most startling truths of New Testament Christianity often reverberates for me. It is from St. Paul and though I've not previously observed its emphasis in my homilies or writings, I do so in this column because of the insight it offers all of us as we attempt to understand the meaning of Christmas. (I will save this startling New Testament truth until the last paragraphs.)

But first, a lengthy digression.

For all but the most avowed of agnostics and atheists, I suspect, the Christmas mystery holds a unique fascination. And for this, our Western culture is indebted to the great St. Francis of Assisi. It was his intent in 1223, "to make a memorial of that Child who was born in Bethlehem and in some sort behold with bodily eyes the hardships of his infant state, lying on hay in a manger with the ox and the ass standing by."

And so he created the tableau which we know as the "crèche," a word derived from the name of the town of Greccio where Francis found himself at the time. Other crèches there may have been at Francis' time and earlier, but it was undoubtedly Francis who popularized what has since become an institution. In spite of the lonely and cold first Christmas night, the crèche presents a warm, inviting scene on which generations since have meditated for great reward. Gratefully, even today's most aggressive secularist elements fail to erase that indelibly evocative Christian visual setting which has inspired countless hymns and carols, stagings in grammar schools' auditoriums and Radio City Music Hall and artistic renderings in museums the world over.

While St. Nicholas with his episcopal identity, has been morphed into a fat and jolly "Ho! Ho! Ho!-ing" figure, the Babe in the manger has stood the test of secularized time and continues to win over our culture's nostalgia.

But is that enough? There is an adage that claims that church pews fill up on

Christmas Eve with virtual unbelievers, unappreciative and unconcerned about probing the mysteries inherent in our faith's simple but infinitely rich formula found in our ancient Creed, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." It's the thought of the apologist of the last century, Frank Sheed, possibly exaggerated, that there is not the great difference we would expect between the unbeliever who denies Christ's revelation and the believer who never gives his mind to it.

So let's ponder just a few of the many references to this infant in swaddling clothes offered us in the New Testament:

- This is "the Son whom God made heir to all kings, and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word." (Heb. 1:2-3)
- At his name "every knee must bend, in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: Jesus Christ is Lord." (Phil. 2:10)
- "He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creatures. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible...all were created through him and for him. He is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being." (Col. 1:15-17)

These thoughts are no hyperbole. They live in that manger and have been staple food for believers in every age who seek to break through the nostalgia. They and many more such insights into the reality of the manger are available for our enrichment not by human wisdom however scholarly, but by grace alone. Which brings me to St. Paul's words referred to in my opening paragraph.

Paul asks how anyone can understand the inscrutable truths of the God made man, how can we know the very wisdom of God? Paul responds: In human dealings, who knows our innermost self except the innermost spirit within each of us? How, then, can we even dare to pretend to know the innermost workings of God, he asks. Then, in speaking of our Baptism, Paul writes: "The Spirit we have received is not the world's spirit, but God's Spirit, helping us to recognize the gifts he has given us." (1 Cor. 2:12)

And so we encounter the inscrutable, unfathomable claim guaranteeing the Church's insights into this mystery of Christmas and every other profound mystery of our Faith: "But we have the mind of Christ." (1 Cor. 2:16)/p>

Rightly, we can call upon the Spirit of Christ to assist us in understanding the reason for Christmas joy as only the Church has understood it for two millennia. And do enjoy a blessed Christmas: "For we have the mind of Christ."