



Christmas Day 25 December 2022 – Reflection Mgr Daniel McHugh

*“In Jesus, The Most High made Himself tiny, so that we might love Him.”*

Recently I recalled a tradition I experienced in Rome as a student in the 1960s: the Shepherds coming down from the Abruzzi Mountains at Christmas playing the Zampognari bagpipes. The story is told in Naples (where this tradition continues) that when the Shepherds went to Bethlehem they “found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the Manger” (Christmas Day Dawn Mass) and upon seeing the baby Jesus they began playing music on their pipes.

When St Francis of Assisi went to the Holy land in the 1200s he saw the exact place of Our Lord’s Birth. “In 1221 St Francis had a novel idea” writes Philip Keloski: to celebrate the Birth of Jesus. Francis wanted to recreate the experience of the first Christmas. He did this not with statues inside a Church, but with animals in a humble hilltop grove”.

Franciscan Friar Thomas of Celano narrates the rest of the story:

“About 5 days after the Nativity of the Lord, [Francis] said to [a friend in Greccio] For I would make a memorial of that Child who is born in Bethlehem, and in some sort behold with bodily eyes His infant hardships; how he lay in a manger on the hay, with the ox and the ass standing by”. “There simplicity was honoured, Poverty exalted, Humility commended; and of Greccio there was made as it were a new Bethlehem. The night was lit up as the day and was delightful to men and beasts..... [Francis] stood before the manger, full of sighs, overcome with tenderness and filled with wondrous joy. The solemnities of Mass were celebrated at the manger, and the priest enjoyed a new consolation”.

According to St Bonaventure, a miracle also occurred on that night, and someone noticed St Francis holding the Christ Child. “A certain valiant and veracious soldier..... affirmed that he, beheld an Infant marvelously beautiful, sleeping in the manger; whom the blessed Father Francis embraced with both his arms, as if he would awake Him from sleep”. The scene was powerful for all present and emphasized the poverty into which Christ was born.

The idea caught on quickly, and in 1291 the first Franciscan Pope (Nicholas IV) commissioned statues to create the first permanent Nativity scene in the Roman Basilica of St Mary Major. Ever since, Nativity scenes in all shapes and sizes have been created throughout the world and they are one of the most popular Christmas traditions. In our Parishes at Christmas, Priests will take the “baby Jesus” to the Crib which will have been set up this week; a prayer of blessing will be said and hymns sung: the scene never fails to move us.

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A few years ago the Christmas Night Liturgy in St Peter's Basilica began with the chanting of the Kalenda [the Proclamation of the historic events leading up to Jesus' birth]. Immediately afterwards, Pope Francis unveiled the image of the Christ child at the front of the Altar. In his Homily during the Mass he focused on the theme of God's grace: "bringing salvation to all" and shining "on our world this night". The Pope described this grace as "divine love, the love that changes lives, renews history, liberates from evil, fills hearts with peace and joy". This love is revealed to us in Jesus, he explained: "In Jesus, the Most High, made Himself tiny, so that we might love Him".

In a world where "everything seems to be about giving in order to get", God comes down freely. "Christmas reminds us that God continues to love us all, even the worst of us". "Today is the right day to draw near to the Tabernacle, the crèche, the Manger; and to say thank-you. Let us receive the gift that is Jesus, in order to become a gift like Jesus". The Pope related the legend of how, "at the birth of Jesus, the Shepherds hurried to the stable with different gifts", but there was one that was very poor and had nothing to give. Seeing that Shepherd, embarrassed with empty hands, Mary put the baby Jesus in his arms, continued the Pope. I am grateful to Yen Vu the Vietnamese Chaplain for posting this on Facebook; it is an encouraging point for reflection as we go to the Crib this Christmas.

More challenging, if you are ready for it is the post by Fr Terence Harrington, a quotation from the great Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Theologian and anti-Nazi pastor: "Who will celebrate Christmas correctly? Whoever finally lays down all power, all honour, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the Manger".

I have heard it said, "God was first heard in a baby's cry". Let us proclaim anew with the Angels this Christmas "Glory to God in the Highest Heaven".

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