

Homily: Christmas 2022

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Our Catholic Faith is filled with mysteries, supernatural mysteries: truths about the infinite God which our small, finite minds are unable to fully grasp. We can't wrap our minds around them; we never will (b/c we're not God!).

Consider the Trinity, the central mystery of our Faith: One God, but three distinct persons in the one God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Each divine Person is God. All three are co-eternal, with no beginning; each of the three divine Persons is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving.

As God told St. Catherine of Siena: "There is not a leaf of a tree that falls to the ground without My providence" (i.e., My knowing it and willing it).

What makes each divine Person distinct from the other? Their *relations*:

As we profess in the Creed: God the Father, by knowing Himself perfectly, eternally *begets* the Son – the Word, who is "begotten, not made"; that is, He is not created; the Word is, like the Father, eternal.

The Word is the Father's self-knowledge personified: God the Father knows Himself so perfectly that His act of knowing Himself generates another person – a divine Person of the same substance as the Father; thus the Son, the Eternal Word, is the perfect image and reflection of the Father.

So, God the Father begets; God the Son is eternally *begotten*; and God the Holy Spirit eternally *proceeds* from the mutual love of the Father & the Son.

From all eternity, in the divine counsels of God, only one of those divine Persons would become man - while remaining God: the Eternal Word would become flesh in the immaculate womb of the Virgin Mary – most fitting, b/c the God-man, the Eternal Word, would preach the word of God to us.

The Word becoming flesh in Mary is another supernatural mystery, which we call the *Incarnation* – the next greatest mystery after the Trinity.

Can we understand how the Son of God, while remaining God, could become man in one divine Person? No. We believe this mystery on faith.

The Incarnation was foretold by the Old Testament prophets who spoke under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. For example, more than 700 years

before Christ, Isaiah prophesied: “*The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel*” (that is, “*God is with us*”).

This prophecy was fulfilled on Annunciation Day, when the Virgin Mary uttered her “*Fiat*” – “*Let it be done to me according to your word*” - in response to the Archangel Gabriel’s message.

It was at that moment – the “*fullness of time*” as St. Paul calls it – that the Word became flesh, the Son of God became man, in Mary’s womb. And for what purpose? To save us, to redeem us from our sins by dying on the Cross.

But consider - another aspect to the mystery of the Incarnation, the Eternal Word becoming flesh: He whom the entire universe cannot contain, dwelt enclosed in Mary’s womb for nine months before His Birth.

Jesus, as an unborn child in Mary’s womb, was totally dependent on her. We can ponder, in awe and wonder, that the Creator of all things depended totally on His Mother whom He created, for nine full months – and even after His birth, as an infant who needed to be nourished, clothed, cared for.

Here our Savior gives us an example to imitate: to depend upon Mary, our spiritual Mother, for all our needs.

The 6th century poet, St. Fortunatus, beautifully summarizes all this :

- 1 The God whom earth and sea and sky / adore and laud and magnify, / whose might they own, whose praise they tell, / in Mary's body deigned to dwell.
- 2 O Mother blest, the chosen shrine / wherein the Architect divine, / whose hand contains the earth and sky, / vouchsafed in hidden guise to lie:
- 3 Blest in the message Gabriel brought; / blest in the work the Spirit wrought; most blest, to bring to human birth / the long-desired of all the earth.
- 4 O Lord, the Virgin-born, to thee / eternal praise and glory be, / whom with the Father we adore / and Holy Ghost for evermore. Amen.

And today we celebrate the glorious Birth of the Savior, and we sing with the angels, “*Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will.*”

Still another aspect of this mystery: Mary remains a virgin in giving birth to Jesus; her virginity is left intact, there is no pain or rupture of her body. It is a miraculous birth – fitting for the Mother of the God-man. She is “ever-Virgin,” as we say in the *Confiteor*.

After His birth He is wrapped in swaddling clothes – strips of cloth wrapped around His tiny body which bind Him, restrain His movement – a sign, a foreshadowing of that dark day when His body, bruised and beaten, will be fixed firmly to the Cross by three nails, to pay the price for our sins.

Mary looked upon her newborn Babe in swaddling clothes with great joy and wonder; beneath the Cross she will behold Him with unspeakable pain and sorrow in her Mother’s Heart, pierced by that sword foretold by Simeon.

On the night of His Birth the newborn Jesus is laid in a manger - a feeding trough with hay, for cattle to feed upon; again, a sign that He is the “*living bread that comes down from heaven*,” who nourishes us with His own Body and Blood, to enable us to live, and act, and love, like Him; and to take up our daily crosses and follow Him.

This is why, just as without Christ, there is no Christmas; likewise, there is no Christmas without *the Mass*: the re-presentation of Christ’s Sacrifice on Calvary. Christmas literally means “*Christ’s Mass*.”

And without the Cross, the Incarnation and Birth of the Savior is emptied of its true meaning. As St. Augustine says,

“You would have suffered eternal death, had he not been born in time. Never would you have been freed from sinful flesh, had he not taken on himself the likeness of sinful flesh. You would never have returned to life, had he not shared your death.”

The great saints and missionaries throughout the ages preached Christ’s Birth and Death for our salvation: “*God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*”

Among the greatest of those missionary-saints were the North American Martyrs, the French Jesuits, who in the 17th century proclaimed the Kingdom of Christ to the Native Americans in New York and Canada.

Some, like the Iroquois and the Mohawks, mostly rejected the Gospel message; in fact, they put to death SS. Jean de Brebeuf, Isaac Jogues and their companions after horrible tortures; but others, like the Huron tribes, received the Good News of the Gospel with open hearts.

To help instruct the Hurons about Jesus and His Birth of the Virgin Mary, the Jesuits composed Christmas carols, adapting the biblical story of Christ's Birth to their Native American culture, using terms which they could understand.

I'll end by quoting from one of these carols, called the *Huron Carol*, written in the Huron language by the Jesuit martyr, St. Jean de Brebeuf. The actual title is *Jesous Ahatonhia* ("Jesus, he is born"). The text is very tender and moving. Imagine you're a Huron on Christmas singing this hymn:

1. 'Twas in the moon of winter-time / When all the birds had fled, / That mighty Gitchi Manitou / Sent angel choirs instead; / Before their light the stars grew dim, / And wandering hunters heard the hymn:

(Refrain): "Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born, *In excelsis gloria.*"

2. Within a lodge of broken bark / The tender Babe was found, / A ragged robe of rabbit skin / Enwrapp'd His beauty round; / But as the hunter braves drew nigh, / The angel song rang loud and high. **Refrain**

3. O children of the forest free, / O sons of Manitou, / The Holy Child of earth and heaven / Is born today for you. / Come kneel before the radiant Boy / Who brings you beauty, peace and joy. **Refrain**