

## REASON AT BETHLEHEM

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F no revelation had been made to the shepherds and they had chanced upon the cave where the Infant Christ lay, attended by His Mother and Saint Joseph, on the first Christmas night, they would have found a scene suited to evoke pity rather than admiration. Despite the contrary artistic convention, we read of no strange, enthralling radiance about those figures to declare their heavenly vocation. Perhaps it would have been hard even to discern them in the scant glow of moon and stars reflected into the recess by the dull earth. It is likely that strangers did pass by and, if they saw the Holy Family at all, that at best they sympathized with them for having to seek shelter there. Or they may only have observed that, indeed, the city must be very crowded, when the visitors are forced to abide in a cave. But never would they have dreamt that One of those visitors had come not only from Nazareth but from the bosom of the Father—that the Babe, hardly visible in the gloom beneath the rock, had fashioned that rock, and the earth beneath, and the moon and stars above. And if great sages instead of peasants had gone by, neither would they have had an inkling of the presence of the Son of God, Incarnate. Reason without the light of faith cannot know the Incarnation.

Yet reason can and must go to Bethlehem. Faith is not something unnatural, it is supernatural. It neither destroys nor replaces nature, or the natural power of knowing, but rather adds to and perfects reason itself. The shepherds learned of the Incarnation from an angel, a messenger of God, but they could not reasonably have accepted his testimony if there had been no indication that he was divinely authorized to deliver it. In matters of merely human faith the same requisite appears. When a person is told of some fact of which he has no previous knowledge, he believes only on condition that his informant is trustworthy, and the more closely the fact pertains to his well-being, the more exacting he is in his scrutiny of the reasons for believing. No less can be expected of divine faith, since it is a question of life and death—of eternal life or

eternal death. The Incarnation means that the Son of God has become man, and the principal reason for his assumption of human nature is the salvation of men. But for the fruition of salvation, the first and indispensable condition is faith in Jesus Christ. "For there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved."<sup>1</sup> In His last discourse to His disciples Christ solemnized the precept of faith: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be condemned."<sup>2</sup> Nothing can possibly concern man more than his final end, and since he is daily challenged by a truth that professes so definitely to determine that end, his rational investigation of the credibility of that truth is not only permitted but, in the name of common sense, most stringently demanded. Blind faith, or unreasoned assent, is absurd and morally defective. It is a rejection of the duties no less than of the rights of reason, for it belongs to reason to command and to forbid deliberate, human actions, and deliberation or freedom is essential to faith. So there must be reasons for believing that God is Incarnate. The infidel must diligently examine them that he may reach the haven of faith, and the believer should often reflect on them that his faith may be enlivened.

Adequate reason for believing the angelic message to be of divine origin was given to the shepherds in "the brightness of God," "shone round about them" when the angel appeared. Then, after the good tidings were announced, "there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God." The dazzling light, the angelic apparitions, and the song of divine praise were impelling evidences that God Himself had made the angel an instrument of His revelation. The shepherds realized this, for they referred to the revelation as "the word which the *Lord* hath shewed us."<sup>3</sup> So also must reason look for "the brightness of God," to become convinced that He has declared the mystery of the Incarnation, Who, as its Author, could alone have known it from the beginning. The doctrine of the Incarnation does carry with it this "brightness of God," the evidence of divine revelation. Reason is capable of perceiving it, and that perception does not demand great subtlety of argumentation or excess of study. Certainty in this all-important matter is not reserved to those unusually blessed with mental dexterity. It is available to all, as are the gifts of faith and salvation, to

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<sup>1</sup> Acts, iv, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Mark, xvi, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Luke, ii, 8-20.

ignorant shepherds as well as to Wise Men. Since both are invited to Bethlehem's cave, both may find the light of God which must direct them thither. There can be and are various reasons to show that the Incarnation is credible, and not all who observe them may be equally proficient in grasping and expressing them. Still all can acquire sufficient knowledge of these reasons to dispose their minds for rational, prudent cooperation with divine grace in the act of faith.

Foremost among the proofs of the rational credibility of the Incarnation is, of course, the testimony of Christ Himself. The argument derives from the New Testament, and especially from the Gospels, considered, however, not as inspired writings (for the acceptance of biblical inspiration presupposes faith), but precisely as historical records of proved reliability. Briefly it is this: Christ, true man, claimed to be God, and His claim is worthy of faith. The existence of that claim must be as clear to anyone who reads the Gospels with an open mind, as the existence of the Gospels themselves. To cite but a few instances: He said that He was "Lord of the Sabbath"<sup>4</sup>; of His own authority He forgave sins<sup>5</sup>; He declared that He was King of the Kingdom of Heaven, Judge of all men<sup>6</sup>; that He existed before Abraham<sup>7</sup>; that He was one with the Father<sup>8</sup>; He commended St. Peter's confession of faith in His divinity<sup>9</sup>; and, finally, before the High Priest, He admitted the only truthful charge which had been brought against Him, by affirming that He was the Son of God.<sup>10</sup> What is more, His claim was clearly understood as a claim to divinity in the proper sense by the people, who sought to kill Him, "because He did not only break the sabbath, but also said God was His Father, making Himself equal to God"<sup>11</sup>; by His disciples, who confessed His divinity, and left all things to labor and die for that same faith; and by the High Priest, who judged Him worthy of death because of blasphemy. Had we but the record of this one event we could say as did Caiphas, "what further need have we of witnesses?" holding, as he did, (without his perfidious inference) that this Man, Jesus Christ, manifestly claimed to be God. But the texts here indicated are a mere fraction of the many to be found throughout the New Testament, which bear out the existence of Christ's claim. In other words, reason, investigating the Scriptures as historical documents, is able to arrive at this conclusion: Jesus Christ said that He was God. Faced with this fact, reason

<sup>4</sup> Matthew, xii, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew, ix, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew, xxv, 31-46.

<sup>7</sup> John, viii, 58.

<sup>8</sup> John, x, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew, xvi, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew, xxvi, 64.

<sup>11</sup> John, v, 18.

cannot rest until it has found a valid explanation. There is only one—the claim of Christ must be believed. To those who would deny it, He Himself has presented the infallible testimony of miracles: “If I do not the works of My Father, believe Me not. But if I do, though you will not believe Me, believe My works: that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”<sup>12</sup> Miracles, which require the direct intervention of God, cannot be performed in support of falsehood. And miracles did witness to the teaching of Christ. No less than forty are explicitly mentioned by the Evangelists. Moreover, if Christ’s claim to divinity be rejected as false, it follows that He must have been either a fool or an impostor. If He knew it was false He lied in making it, and if He thought it was true when in reality it was not, He was the victim of the wildest hallucination. Neither of these alternatives, however, is thinkable, and no sane person will seriously defend either. Even the adversaries of the doctrine of the Incarnation vie with one another in praising the sublime virtue of Christ, and willingly concede that He was a very great and very saintly Man, and that His moral teachings, both of word and of deed, stand alone throughout all time in the perfection of their exalted purity. But base deception is incompatible with sublime virtue, and imbecility, with perfect teaching. The only reasonable conclusion regarding Christ’s claim to be God is that it is worthy of faith.

Or reason may arrive at Bethlehem by another route. In the argument sketched above, Christ in His human nature is the angel, or the divine messenger, Who announces His Incarnation to men, and “the brightness of God” that bears proof of His divine commission is found in His miracles and the intellectual and moral excellence of His Person. There is still another messenger proclaiming the Incarnation, in whom reason can discover true signs of divine approbation. It is the spouse of Christ, the Catholic Church. As reason is compelled to face the fact of the Christ of history and to answer the vital question, “what think ye of Christ?” so also is it confronted with the omnipresence of the fact of Catholicity and with a question no less urgent, “What think ye of the Catholic Church?” Her age and universality, the numbers of her children, the limitless variety of their origins and environments, the completeness, coherence and splendor of her teaching, and the conviction with which she propounds it, the praise and sanctity which she has never ceased to offer to God, the good she has accomplished for men and the evils averted

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<sup>12</sup> John, x, 37-38.

or alleviated, her prominence as the only important force that stands defiant to sin and error in an unbelieving world—these and a thousand other qualities of the Church, which everyone so often witnesses, unite to constitute overwhelming evidence that the Catholic Church cannot be a house built with human hands upon the foundation of fraud. The Church is a fact which none can escape, and—to those who honestly study her nature and claims—a divine fact. If after twenty centuries of the most devastating opposition known to human and diabolical malice she still teaches, like her Master, “as one having power,” it is only because her power to teach is from God, and, since the basic truth of all her divine doctrine is the Incarnation of the Son of God, reason can find out from its unprejudiced study of the Church that the Incarnation is divinely revealed and therefore credible.

While, then, the Incarnation is a mystery which cannot be known except through revelation, and which reason can in no way demonstrate, it falls within the natural power of the intellect to know that it has been revealed. Reason can go to Bethlehem—and more—reason *must* go to Bethlehem. The principal work of reason is to govern the life of man to the end that he may be happy. Bethlehem is the beginning of the only road that leads to Heaven—and Heaven is the only place where the treasure of true happiness is possessed. Once conscious of the claim, made by Christ Himself and by the Church, that Jesus Christ is Man and God, no one can refrain from investigating that claim without opposing the dictates of reason itself. And then, when faith is bestowed and the Incarnation is seen not merely as credible, but as a truth taught by God Himself, reason is by no means obliged to suspend its operation. On the contrary, the realization of this ineffable truth naturally arouses the mind to further action. Given faith in the Incarnation, reason can see how very fitting it was that God should become man. Finally, adhering securely to the principles divinely revealed and solemnly defined by the infallible authority of the Church, reason can study those principles, solve difficulties which may appear contrary to them, and draw from them truths which they implicitly contain. In a word, after faith has come, reason can admire and, in a measure, understand the Incarnation.

The whole universe was made for one purpose—to show forth the perfection of God. Our little minds cannot fathom God’s hidden counsels yet we can see without difficulty the truth of these words of

Holy Writ: "The Lord hath made all things for Himself."<sup>13</sup> Creatures are motivated in their actions by the acquisition of goods, because of their imperfection, but God, Who is infinite goodness, to Whom nothing is wanting, can act for no reason other than Himself. All the works of God are but manifestations of His perfection. Consequently, when the mind contemplates at work, which more than any other, shows forth the invisible perfection of God, reason naturally admires that work in its fitness, or congruent accord with divine wisdom. Such is the Incarnation. The goodness of God is resplendent at Bethlehem in the condescension of the Infinite in being clothed with the infirmities of human flesh; the satisfaction made for sin on Calvary proclaims the justice of God; His wisdom is glorified in the plan of man's redemption by the conciliation of justice and mercy; and so wonderful is the Incarnation in its magnitude that it shows the power of God with greater effulgence than all his other works.

Another reason of the fitness of the Incarnation is the property of goodness to communicate itself. It is altogether becoming that Infinite Goodness should give Itself forth in a way greater than which none can be conceived. God has communicated His perfection by creation, in the natural being and life of creatures, and by grace in their supernatural life, but in the Incarnation He has given Himself to a created nature in a substantial, personal union. Other reasons for the fitness of the Incarnation may be seen on the part of the human race, freed as it is from the captivity of sin by the Redemption, instructed in truth and virtue by the Word of God, and given strength and light to follow the way of salvation.

Lest this brief outline of the powers of reason in respect of the doctrine of the Incarnation seem to imply that, after all, there is not so much mystery in that doctrine as might at first have been supposed, it is well to repeat that the union of the divine and human natures in the one Person of the Son of God is and always will be a mystery to mortal man. To comprehend it, one should have to comprehend the Word of God Who became incarnate. But to see clearly the essence of the Word is nothing less than the Beatific Vision—the joy of Heaven. It must be confessed that the undertaking of this mystery which the intellect can attain after revelation has been made is but a very obscure reflection of infinite truth itself. And history bears out the proneness of the mind of man to error in his present condition. The Incarnation is a union of two natures in one Person. And throughout the Christian era there have been heretics to defend as the

<sup>13</sup> Proverbs, xvi, 4.

true explanation of that union every conceivable manner in which two things may be joined in one. Reason may indeed study the meaning of this mystery but if for a moment it should forget its own weakness and desert the guidance of infallible authority it would soon become entangled in the meshes of error.

The truth has been revealed to us through the media of Scripture and tradition, and its content and meaning have been clearly defined in the councils of the Church. We must believe that the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, took to Himself a perfect, individual human nature, that neither the human nature was destroyed, nor the divine diminished, by the union, but that both remained perfect and intact without any mixture or confusion, that the actions and perfections of both natures, while distinct from each other, must be attributed to the one Person of the Son of God—in a word, that Jesus Christ is God and Man.

To describe the theological explanation of the manner in which the Incarnation took place would exceed the limits of this article both in space and in intention. However it may be observed that in the course of that explanation false interpretations of this mystery can be rationally excluded. There are two errors which stand out most prominently and serve best to manifest the true doctrine—those of Nestorius and Eutyches. The first taught that in Christ there are two persons, one, the man who was born of the Blessed Virgin, suffered and died, and the other, the Word Who intimately associated Himself with that man by a union of affection, grace, operation and dignity. Eutyches, in his zeal against Nestorianism, went to the opposite extreme and said that, although before the union there were two natures, the union resulted in one. Both of these explanations oppose the reality of the Incarnation and contradict the only valid meaning of the Scriptures. If, as Nestorius maintained, there are two persons in Christ, then God did not become man, and the Gospels falsely attributed to the one Person, Jesus Christ, humanity and divinity. Nestorianism is not an explanation but a manifest denial of the Incarnation. The rational refutation of the heresy of Eutyches is simply that two perfect natures cannot become one nature. In the supposition that they could, the resulting nature either would be God or man, or would be composed of both natures. The first alternatives would involve the destruction of one of the natures and the logical negation of either humanity or divinity in Christ. And the second alternative supposes the impossible—that God is mutable.

Midway between these two extremes stands the truth. Nature and person are distinct in man. The human nature of Christ was created without its proper human nature. And since in God the divine Persons are one in nature or essence, the two natures are united in the Incarnation through being terminated by one and the same person, the divine Person of the Son of God.

At Bethlehem a truth was made known which man, left to himself, could never have discovered. But God has so disposed the intimation of that truth, that man aided by divine illumination, might be able to receive it according to his nature, that is, in a rational way. Reason saw evidence not of the mystery but of the fact that God has spoken it. Faith and reason are both gifts of God. Far from being opposed in matters supernatural, neither can operate without the other. Faith works to perfect reason, and reason has no access to the supernatural but through faith.

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## MOTHER OF MERCY

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*EDWARD M. VAHEY, O.P.*

The silken wings of angels waft above,  
 The incense of our Ave to the throne  
 Of Mary, Mother of all grace and love,  
 Whose tender heart has never spurned our moan.

Unhappy children of an erring Eve,—  
 In sorrow banished from our rightful home—  
 Our fate to mercy's Queen in hope we leave,  
 And dream in wistful silence as we roam.

Our Advocate before the Trinity,  
 For strength of victory does daily plead,  
 That face to face forever we may see,  
 The fruit of her chaste womb—a matchless meed.

Hail, clement Lily, e'er thy praise we sing,  
 Sweet master-key to heart of Christ the King!