

CHRISTMAS WITH THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

(It is always a problem just a few days before Christmas to get oneself into the proper Christmas "spirit." One knows one ought to feel, happy about it, but it is difficult working oneself into the proper mood, because one does not quite know why or how to be happy at Christmas.

The Fathers of the Church are expert at being happy at Christmas. They know that Christmas is the birth of Christ, and this unspeakable gift is an inexhaustible source of happiness to them. Therefore we are here stealing some of their thoughts with the same end in view.

The thoughts of Pope St. Leo are those proposed by the Church on Christmas Day to those who recite the Divine Office. The majority of the thoughts are taken from the *Catena Aurea* (Golden Chain) of St. Thomas Aquinas, forged by him of the thoughts of all the Fathers of the Church on the four Gospels. Some of the thoughts are taken from St. Thomas' own Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew. Others are taken from St. John Chrysostom's Homilies on St. Matthew, the possession of which St. Thomas is said to have desired more than that of the city of Paris.)

Our Savior, dearly beloved, is born this day: let us rejoice. It is not right that there be sorrow on the birthday of life. No one is cut off from participation in this gladness. Let the saint exult because he is nigh to victory; let the sinner rejoice because he is invited to pardon. (Pope St. Leo).¹

*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem: because he was of the house and family of David. To be enrolled with Mary his espoused wife, who was with child.*²

Bethlehem is interpreted *house of bread*. The place in which the Lord was born was called before "the house of bread" because one day would appear there in the flesh He Who would nourish the minds of the elect with interior fullness. As He Himself said: I am the living bread which came down from heaven. (St. Gregory the Great).³

¹ *Serm. 1 de Nativ. Domini.* In *Brev. S.O.P.*, I, p. 350.

² St. Luke, 2:4,5.

³ *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, (Editio Vives, Paris, 1876). Vol. 17, *Catena Aurea in Lucae Evangelium*, p. 34.

*And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger. . . .*⁴

He Who clothes the whole world in varied beauty is wrapped in poor rags, that we may receive the first robe. (St. Bede the Venerable).⁵

Doubtless if He had wished, He could have come moving the heavens, shaking the earth, and sending forth thunderbolts. However, He did not appear in this way: for He did not wish to condemn but to save, and to crush human pride from the outset. Therefore He not only became a man, but He became a poor man. And He chose a poor mother who has not where to lay her new-born infant. (St. John Chrysostom).⁶

He Who is the bread of Angels is laid in a manger in order to refresh us, as it were holy animals, with the food of His flesh. (St. Bede the Venerable).⁷

*. . . . because there was no place for them in the inn.*⁸

He Who sits at the right hand of the Father lacks the shelter of an inn that He may prepare many mansions for us in the house of His Father. (St. Bede the Venerable).⁹

He was born, not in the house of His parents, but in an inn and along the wayside, because through the mystery of the Incarnation He was made the way which should lead us to the homeland where we should enjoy truth and life. (St. Bede the Venerable).¹⁰

*And there were in the same country shepherds watching, and keeping the night-watches over their flock.*¹¹

Each one, too, who lives a private life, fills the office of shepherd if, gathering together his good acts and clean thoughts, he strives to govern them with a just moderation, to nourish them with the food of the Scriptures, and to preserve them against the artifices of the devils. (St. Bede the Venerable).¹²

*And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them, and they feared with a great fear.*¹³

Nowhere in the whole sequence of the Old Testament do we find

⁴ St. Luke, 2:7.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ St. Luke, 2:7.

⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹¹ St. Luke, 2:8.

¹² *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹³ St. Luke, 2:9.

Angels, who so repeatedly appeared to the Patriarchs, to have appeared with light. This privilege was rightly reserved for this time, when there arose in the darkness a Light for the righteous of heart. (St. Bede the Venerable).¹⁴

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will.*¹⁵

Formerly Angels were sent to punish, for example to the Israelites, to David, to the Sodomites, to a valley of tears. Now on the contrary they sing on earth, giving thanks to God because He revealed to them His descent among men. (St. John Chrysostom).¹⁶

And they praise together, devoting the words of their exultation to our redemption, because, since they see that we are taken back, they rejoice that their number is filled. (St. Gregory the Great).¹⁷

Those whom the Angels had formerly looked upon as weak and degraded, with the birth of the Lord in the flesh, they now venerate as companions. (St. Bede the Venerable).¹⁸

How glad should this unspeakable work of love make the lowliness of man, when it causes the sublimity of the Angels to rejoice so greatly. (Pope St. Leo).¹⁹

*And it came to pass, after the angels departed from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another: Let us go over to Bethlehem, and let us see this word that is come to pass, which the Lord has shown to us.*²⁰

Having put aside base carnal concupiscences, let us pass over with the whole desire of our mind to the heavenly Bethlehem, that is, the house of living bread, so that we may merit to see reigning on the throne of the Father, Him Whom they saw crying in the crib. (St. Bede the Venerable).²¹

Let us also arise; and though all should be aroused, let us run to the abode of the Child, even though kings, peoples, tyrants, try to obstruct our way lest we fulfil our desire. (St. John Chrysostom).²²

*And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger.*²³

¹⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁵ St. Luke, 2:13.

¹⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁷ *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁹ *op. cit.* In *Brev. S.O.P.*, I, p. 351.

²⁰ St. Luke, 2:15.

²¹ *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²² *Homilia XC in Matthaicum.* P. L., Tom. 77, col. 78.

²³ St. Luke, 2:16.

And they came with haste, for no one seeks Christ with slothfulness. (St. Ambrose).²⁴

A happiness so great is not to be sought with slothfulness and torpor. We should follow the footsteps of Christ with eagerness. (St. Bede the Venerable).²⁵

*And seeing, they understood of the word that had been spoken to them concerning the child.*²⁶

Let us hasten to embrace with complete love the things that have been said of our Savior, so that, in the future vision of perfect knowledge, we may be worthy to understand them. (St. Bede the Venerable).²⁷

*But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart.*²⁸

Do not think the words of the shepherds are to be contemned as paltry. From the shepherds Mary increased her faith. (St. Ambrose).²⁹

*Behold there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem. Saying: Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and are come to adore him.*³⁰

This star was not among those created in the beginning of time, as is evident from four things. First, from its motion. No star moves from north to south. Yet the kingdom of the Persians, whence the Magi came, is situated to the north. Secondly, other stars never cease to move; this one did not move at all times. Thirdly, from its time. No star shines in the daytime; yet this one gave light to the Magi during the day. Fourthly, from its position, because it was not in the firmament. This is evident from the fact that by it they definitely distinguished the abode of Christ. (Hence the Gospel relates: *We have seen his star*, that is, the star made for His service. Therefore it should be said that it was specially created for the service of Christ.) (St. Thomas Aquinas).³¹

This star was fitting for those to whom it was shown, namely to the Gentiles, whose calling was promised to Abraham in the similitude of stars: *Look up to heaven and number the stars if thou canst*, etc. (Gen. 15:5). Wherefore both at the Nativity and at the Passion there was brought to pass a sign in the heavens which made Christ

²⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 37

²⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁶ St. Luke, 2:17.

²⁷ *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁸ St. Luke, 2:19.

²⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³⁰ St. Matt., 2:1,2.

³¹ *op. cit.* Vol. 19, *Comm. super Matthaëum*, p. 257.

known to all peoples. It was made suitable to all because He is the Savior of all. (St. Thomas Aquinas).³²

Why therefore did the star appear? Because He who was coming to abrogate the old dispensation and lead the world to one and the same worship and be adored everywhere on land and sea, opened from the very beginning the door to all peoples, that by the example of strangers He might teach his own also. (St. John Chrysostom).³³

*And King Herold, hearing this, was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*³⁴

Note that men, as Chrysostom says, set up in high places, are disturbed by a slight word proffered contrary to them. But the humble never fear. (St. Thomas Aquinas).³⁵

What shall be the tribunal of the Judge, when the cradle of the Infant terrified proud kings? Let kings fear Him Who sits at the right hand of the Father, Whom a wicked king feared at His mother's breast. (St. Augustine).³⁶

*But they said to him: in Bethlehem of Juda. For so it is written by the prophet.*³⁷

Christ wished to be born in Bethlehem to avoid glory. On account of this He chose two places: one in which He wished to be born, namely, Bethlehem; the other in which He suffered, namely Jerusalem. And this is against those who thirst for glory, who wish to be born in high places, and are unwilling to suffer in the place of honor. (St. Thomas Aquinas).³⁸

*And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother.*³⁹

They did not find Mary crowned with a diadem or reclining upon a golden bed, but with barely one garment, not for the ornamentation of the body but for the covering of nudity, such as the wife of a carpenter would have on a journey. If they had come seeking an earthly king they would have been more abashed than joyous, having undertaken the labor of so great a journey for nought. But because they sought a heavenly king, though they saw nothing regal, content with Him by the testimony of the star alone, their eyes rejoiced to see an insignificant child, because the spirit in their heart showed Him

³² *op. cit.*, p. 258.

³³ *op. cit.* P. L. Tom. 77, col 65.

³⁴ St. Matt. 2:3.

³⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 259.

³⁶ *op. cit.* Vol. 16, *Catena Aurea in Matthaei Evangelium*, p. 40.

³⁷ St. Matt., 2:5.

³⁸ *op. cit.* Vol 19, p. 259.

³⁹ St. Matt., 2:11.

to be terrible. They see a man and acknowledge a God. (St. John Chrysostom).⁴⁰

*And falling down they adored him: and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*⁴¹

It may be considered in a mystical sense that they did not open up their treasures along the way, but for the first time when they came to Christ. Similarly we ought not to show our good things on our way (to heaven). (St. Thomas Aquinas).⁴²

*And having received an answer in sleep that they should not return to Herod, they went back another way into their country.*⁴³

In this is shown that through obedience we arrive at our country—Paradise—from which through sin we have been expelled. (St. Thomas Aquinas).⁴⁴

The Magi listened to Herod to seek the Lord, but not to return to him. They signified good listeners, who do the good which they hear from evil preachers, but do not imitate their works. (St. Remigius).⁴⁵

Jesus was therefore shown neither to the learned nor the just: for ignorance prevails in the rusticity of the shepherds, and irreverence in the sacrileges of the Magi (who belonged to the Chaldean magicians). That corner stone took them both to Himself, Who came to choose the unlearned and confound the wise, and not to call the just but sinners, so that no great man might become proud, and no weak man might despair. (St. Augustine).⁴⁶

If these barbarians offered gifts at that time in order to do honor, what shall you be if you do not give to the needy? If they undertook so great a journey to see the new-born Child, what excuse have you, who do not hasten even to another quarter of the town to visit the sick and the imprisoned? We compassionate with the sick and the imprisoned, even with enemies. Will you not even compassionate with your generous Lord? They offered gold; will you barely give bread? They saw the star and rejoiced; will you see Christ a stranger and naked and not be moved? (St. John Chrysostom).⁴⁷

Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity, and having been made a sharer in the divine nature, do not return to your old vileness by a base life. Remember of whose head and body you are a member. Your price is the blood of Christ. (Pope St. Leo).⁴⁸

(Translated by Nicholas Halligan, O.P.)

⁴⁰ *op. cit.* Vol. 16, p. 43.

⁴¹ St. Matt., 2:11.

⁴² *op. cit.* Vol. 19, p. 262.

⁴³ St. Matt., 2:12.

⁴⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 263.

⁴⁵ *op. cit.* Vol. 16, p. 42.

⁴⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ *op. cit.* P. L., Tom. 77., col. 78.

⁴⁸ *op. cit.* In *Brev. S.O.P.*, I, p. 351.