

VANISHING STAR

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WHEN the star rose over Bethlehem and heralded the the birth of Christ, its purpose was fulfilled; when it had announced the place where the Saviour was, it disappeared. Its usefulness had been exhausted. The same course is followed by very many articles about Christmas, for they also vanish, at least in their effects, once the Christmas season is ended. There is a valid excuse for the star because our Lord was born in the flesh only once. There is no excuse for the vanishing star of doctrine since Christ should be continually reborn in our hearts. You have seen examples in many articles of the tendency to localize Christmas in the sense that the article arouses our fervor at Christmas time but is forgotten for the rest of the year. It failed to take into account the larger sense of the Incarnation. In its effort to describe the Christ-child, the star, the stable or the manger, it sometimes neglected the fact that the Incarnation is timeless, that the birth of Christ is the inception of our spiritual life, that the benefits of His coming foster that life within us. This article will attempt to set forth those benefits in such a manner that they not only arouse our love for Christ at Christmas but will continue to draw our souls to Him throughout the year.

Gratitude and love are never drawn from the human heart more strongly than by the realization that someone has been kind to us. In the Incarnation Christ shows two types of kindness. He presents us with gifts and He helps our helplessness. When such kindness so exceeds human expectation that we cannot adequately conceive the love which prompted it, then our heart melts within us for it outstrips the feeble yet necessary striving of our minds and pierces the veil of faith to the very heart of God Himself.

When the sin of Adam wounded our nature, man lost everything worth while except life itself and natural gifts. The gifts of super-nature which he had received from the hand of God when he was created were taken from him. Though he had no real right to them, their loss made that life which he still retained practically worthless. As he was, he could never see the face of God. He had turned from Him and was helpless to return. Out of the depth of divine love, God sent His Only-begotten Son to assume flesh and repair the infinite damage sin had caused. By the Incarnation Christ once again turned

the face of man towards God. Through His coming we were made adopted sons of the Father, restored in some ways more bountifully than before to the gifts which become a son of God. Christ healed our nature through redemption and lifted man from his helpless condition. As if that were not enough, He showered upon him innumerable advantages which would help him one day to attain to the vision of God.

Those advantages and aids which Christ brings to us by His Incarnation will be explained in this order. Christ redeemed man and by His redemption both aids man to do good and restrains him from evil. He aids him to do good by increasing his faith, hope and charity, by offering His own example, and by giving him a share of His divine life. He restrains man from evil by breaking the grip of the devil, by making man realize his dignity, by teaching him to rely on His grace, by deflating his pride, and by bestowing upon him freedom from the dominion of Satan. An explanation of each of these points will form the rest of the article.

Though man's nature was repaired, some of the ravages of sin had not left him. Like a person who has had an operation he still bore the mark of the wound in his soul. For instance, he has to be pushed in order to do good. Christ provides the necessary impetus by His Incarnation. By the very fact of assuming our mortal flesh, He makes our faith more certain. When we see the Son of God becoming man, we are more disposed to believe when God speaks. We still do not see the things of faith but our assent to them is mightily strengthened on account of Christ. That invincible trust and confidence in God which characterizes faith, through the coming of Christ, is made the unshaken rock from which all our actions take their strength.

Hope is absolutely essential to the living of human life. Our confidence in Christ and hope for the eternal reward He promises us is an invaluable aid to living. Even in the face of disaster the virtue of hope carries us through and strengthens our determination to reach the goal. The reason why hope has this power is because it is based on a sure foundation. When, through the Incarnation, we see how much God loves us, our hope takes a firmer stand and while we do not yet possess the things hoped for we hope more certainly that they will be ours. It was to lift man up and strengthen his hope as well that Christ lowered Himself to the level of man. Because of this man more surely inclines toward the eternal vision that lies beyond the horizon of time.

What could more greatly excite our love for God than that the

Son of God should take to Himself our ailing flesh? Is it possible to think of any greater proof of God's love for us than the Incarnation? That the Son of God should walk the earth for no other reason than His love for us seems incredible unless we recall that God's ways are not our ways. Our puny efforts in the direction of love bog down pitifully before the face of Him Who taught us how to love. Love consists in being interested in another as if that other were one's self. It is a complete giving with no thought of a return. When we see the Son of God offering Himself completely and entirely for us, can we do anything less than give ourselves entirely to Him? The way in which He inspires our love for Him has no parallel for the simple reason that God has no parallel.

Man being prone to evil needs an example if he is to do good. With a model before his eyes he finds it much easier to do good than he would without such a model. The Incarnate Son is that Model. We have but to follow in His footsteps if we would reach His goal. The life of Christ is meant to be our example and model and incentive, because everything He said and did was for our instruction. It would be exceedingly difficult to follow the path He has mapped out if He had not gone before us, keeping us on the road and urging us on by His sympathetic entreaties when the way becomes steep. His strong hand bears us up lest we fall and His presence gives us courage, for He has already traversed the way and knows it well. The end of the road is not in sight but we trust completely in His guidance, for to help us is His sole reason for being at our side. We may lean upon His arm with perfect confidence that He will not fail us. We cannot fall by the wayside as long as He supports us. Nor will we move towards our eternal goal unless He aids our progress.

Christ's taking of our human nature had a peculiarly divine effect upon us. When the Incarnate Son shared our nature through the Incarnation, He made us members of His Mystical Body. "You will readily understand from all this, Venerable Brethren, why Paul the Apostle so often writes that Christ is in us and we in Christ. In proof of which there is this other more subtle reason. Christ is in us through His Spirit whom he gives to us, and through whom He acts within us in such a way that all divine activity of the Holy Spirit within our souls must also be attributed to Christ. . . . This communication of the Spirit of Christ is the channel through which flow into all the members of the Church those gifts, powers and extraordinary graces found superabundantly in the Head as in their source, and they are perfected day by day in these members according to the

office they may hold in the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ."¹ Christ by His Incarnation secured for us this presage of our future complete possession of God for all eternity.

Due to the fall of our first parents man not only needs an inducement to do good; he needs, also, something to restrain him from doing evil. When a sick person is cured of a vicious habit which has undermined his health, he should not have those things which were responsible for his sickness. By His Incarnation Christ not only restored spiritual health to the soul of men, He also provides against man falling prey to the same sickness again. He establishes this preventive force in several ways.

When man submitted himself to the domination of Satan through the first sin, the grip of the devil was too strong for man to break. Remember that the devil had been an angel and though cast into hell, he still retained the brilliant power of the angelic intellect. Man's weak mind is no match for it. Our human understanding needs to be helped by God Himself if we are to escape the wiles of the devil. Christ by His Incarnation instructed us that we may not succumb to the temptations of the devil. By assuming our flesh He mortally humiliated Satan, for one thing the devil cannot withstand or understand is love, and love is the reason for the Incarnation. The Incarnate God keeps us from giving in to temptation because the purpose of His coming was to rescue us from the bondage of sin.

Respect for himself is an absolute prerequisite if man is to proceed on his way to God. If he has no self-respect his life will be aimless, his actions pointless, his efforts fruitless. When difficulties arise he has no reason to oppose them. He has no starting point from which to jump off. All the "fight" is gone out of him. Such is the picture of a man whom sin has robbed of his self-respect. When Christ assumed our flesh, a basis for self-respect was returned to man. He then saw clearly the dignity of his nature and perceived that it was worth something because of the very fact that Christ became man. Now he realized he had something to fight for. The backbone of his nature was stiffened and he could walk with his head erect, proclaiming to the world the calm yet humble assurance of his new found dignity.

That man might not become vain in his new found dignity, the Incarnation serves him as a constant reminder that it is the God-Man Who pours His grace upon him. We are very prone to take things for granted. That urge within us to forget our humble begin-

¹ Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, Pope Pius XII, NCWC edition, pg. 48.

ning is checked by our realization of the fact that God become man is the source of all our blessings. Because we are always seeking to become independent, a noble quest in the natural order but suicidal when there is question of grace, the manhood of Christ recalls constantly to us that God has lifted us up and not we ourselves.

One of the greatest obstacles to our smooth progression along the road to eternal happiness is our pride. It is a sickness like every other sin, but there is this insidious element about pride, that it not only causes our ill-health but also prevents our taking any remedy. This is the blinding force of pride. The soul sick with pride is in the same condition as a man who is physically sick but thinks he is well. He is the most difficult patient to treat for he will not take his medicine. Christ's taking of our human nature is the sovereign cure for pride. We cannot refuse to quaff the medicine of humility when we see Christ drinking it to the dregs. The softly-lit humility of God lowering Himself to become man tones down the flashing blindness of our pride and enables us to see ourselves in our true light, for humility and truth are inseparable.

By far the most noble possession of man and the one for which he is fighting today is his freedom. It must be a most precious thing when men are ready and willing to go to the expense even of life itself to preserve it. That freedom which is held up before our eyes as an ideal to be striven after even to blood is not, however, as necessary as freedom from the servitude of sin. The one has supreme value in the temporal order but the other bears the stamp of eternity and is the only ticket that will be recognized for a passage to heaven. Christ's coming freed us from the domination of Satan. He broke the chains in which the devil had bound us. If we are as willing to fight to preserve that freedom from Satan which He won for us as we are to preserve our country's freedom, then we need have no fear for the outcome. But on the other hand there are those who while fighting for their country's freedom lay down their arms as cowards when it comes to the battle for their own freedom from sin. Why is this? It is because they refuse to accept the freedom Christ fought for with His Blood. It is because men blind themselves to the coming of Christ.

The most useful way that suggests itself to conclude so that the points of the article will be remembered and pondered is to wrap them up in a neat package for handy fetching home. A summary will serve that purpose very well. Recalling that the reason for the Incarnation is the redemption of man, it is easy to see that the means God used to accomplish that purpose are most apt. Christ could have used no

more fitting method than He did use to redeem man. He wanted to urge man to do good and restrain him from evil. He leads him down the road to perfection which consists in doing good by increasing his faith, hope and charity, by giving him the solid footing of the path He has tread and by feeding the life of his soul with a share of His divinity. He restrains him from evil by placing him on a pinnacle having lifted him up out of his sorry condition. He does this by breaking the death grip of the devil, by restoring true dignity to his fallen nature, by protecting him from presumption through reliance on His grace, by crushing his pride through His own humility and by the crowning gift of freedom from Satan's power. All this He accomplished through His Incarnation. If we keep these things in mind, the star which announced His coming will never fade in our hearts. On the contrary, it will shine brighter than ever, lighting up for us the path to Heaven.

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