

THE GREATEST GIFT

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MEN HAVE BEEN exchanging gifts on Christmas day for a long time now but if one were to explain the practice solely on the grounds of custom he would not be giving the whole story. For while Christmas gift-giving is indeed an age old custom it presupposes something older than man himself, namely love. Behind every gift there is love. So it is not at all mysterious to find the sanctuary of the Christian home adorned with gifts on Christmas day. What men find difficult to express in words they express in kind. Through the medium of a gift, parents and children manifest their love for one another.

True love can't be bought ; it must be given. Costly as the monetary value of the gift might be, it is merely a tangible proof for what is in fact priceless. Only the goodness of the one loved can move one man to love another. In the light of this truth we can see how the love God manifested for us on the first Christmas day was unique. It was love operating through mercy. Certainly sinful man was far from lovable, he was in fact God's enemy. Mankind after having been vested, in the person of Adam, with a raiment woven of perfections both of nature and grace, had wilfully divested himself preferring the nakedness of sin. Yet God loved mankind to the extent that He planned to unite human nature to Himself. This is mercy: giving to another the very goodness whereby he becomes an object to be loved.

In every outpouring of divine goodness on this universe of ours, it is God's mercy that is at work. His mercy is the language of His love. In no other instance is this language so cogent as when couched in these terms: "God so loved the world as to give His Only Begotten Son" (John 3:16). Man now is lovable, not as he is in himself, sinful, but as he is in Christ Who is without sin. The Babe of Bethlehem is the Incarnate proof of God's love for men. Truly can we say that giving gifts at Christmas began with the first Christmas, when the Greatest Lover gave the Greatest Gift.

From this day forward God dwelt in the presence of men not simply as their Creator and Provider, Law-Giver and Judge, but as true Man. This divine donation is the true meaning of Christmas. To us a Son has been given, the very Son of God. Our faith teaches us that there is true Sonship and Fatherhood in God and that the Son from all eternity dwells in the bosom of the Father. In His never-ending act of Self-contemplation the Father conceives a Word, an Image, so perfectly expressive of the Divine Nature that this Word is One with the Father. In no way are they different One from the Other save in the relationship of Fatherhood and Sonship. This we know on faith alone, for when faced with the Mystery of the Triune God our intellect can only assent, never understand. It is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son Whose Infinite Beauty is never absent from the loving sight of the Father, Who is given to us on Christmas day as the Incarnate proof of God's love for men. Man's joy at Christmas will be full only to the degree he realizes the import of the Greatest Gift from the Greatest Lover.

Some things, of course, have changed since the day when Christ first came to men. Angelic choirs then heralded His arrival while His first embrace was from His virgin mother. Today it is the tinkling of a bell that announces His arrival while He is embraced in the elevated hands of a priest. Yet Christ is the same yesterday and today. Thus it is that the Consecration of the Mass on Christmas day marks a turning point for the Christian soul. During the weeks of Advent it was penitential in spirit, now it is joyful at the arrival of the Expected One. When the priest utters those words of authority he brings into our midst the Flesh and Blood, Soul and Divinity of the God-Man. The Incarnation is continued. Men, prostrate before the Sacred Species, adore the Same Person Who received the loving adoration of the first Christian faithful in a grotto at Bethlehem (House of Bread) centuries ago. Today, as on that day, men of good will have reason to rejoice. "In whom also now though you see him not, you believe, and believing shall rejoice with joy unseeable and glorified" (I Peter 1:18).

The centuries which separate us from His first coming mean little to the Christian who is alive to this marvel that Christ remains with us in the Eucharist. With mind and heart impregnated by faith and love, imagination unfettered by the boundaries of place and time, this day in 1958 might readily become a day in the Ninth Month of the Christian era. Bethlehem is the term of the flight and the scene depicts a Child held in the arms of His mother. This Child had dwelt in the presence of men for months in silence, a silence broken

only when His power went out to sanctify His Precursor, St. John the Baptist, on the day of Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth. But on the day of His Nativity, a nature-endowed monopoly of a mother on the silent possession of her Child is relaxed and she gives Him to the world. To us a Child is born. The Christian centers his gaze on this Child. Faith, the supernaturally powerful lens revealing all the splendour of the Nativity scene, pierces the veil of this Child's humanity and the Christian beholds his God. True God now amongst men as true Man. The Christian 'sees' the meaning of Christmas. To men the Son of God is given. This divine donation for which Mary is the perfect handmaid is the real basis for Christmas joy. How appropriately does St. Peter write of an "unspeakable" joy, for joy's reveille is the possession of a good and here is Goodness Itself.

But "Why" this Gift, unparalleled by even the most heroic donation created love might inspire? "Why did God become Man?" What is true and indisputable is that the circumstances surrounding the Incarnation clearly reveal that the Son of God came as the Redeemer of Mankind. At the very announcement to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah the angel told her to name Him "Jesus" which means God-Salvation. And in announcing the news of His arrival angelic voices sang out: "For today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Yet because man's estrangement from God was something avoidable, sin an effect of human liberty, the question is asked: Would God have become incarnate had man remained His friend? Some theologians have answered yes. This is not the teaching of the Prince of Theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas. While he did grant some probability to this opinion he considered it more probable that had man not needed a Redeemer, God would not have become Man. His procedure is strictly theological.

Mysteries such as this one, says St. Thomas, are so beyond the ken of the created intellect that only God's revelation will acquaint us with them, and any understanding of them will likewise only come from God. He observes that the founts of Revelation, Sacred Scripture and Tradition, speak of the Incarnation always in terms of man's redemption from sin. And in recognition of God's Infinite Power, he notes that it could have been otherwise had God so willed. St. Thomas shows himself to be a realist, he faces the facts, knowledge of possibilities belongs to God. In the case of the Incarnation the facts are these: Adam's infidelity fashioned a chasm separating man from God; centuries of diligent spade work on the part of Adam's posterity led to the extension of this gulf. To bridge this gap so that man and

God might again embrace in friendship was beyond the powers of human nature. Sin is an infinite offense, man as a finite being can only do so much. If then, God's enemy were ever to regain His friendship the initiative would needs be on God's part. Certainly He was not compelled to regard man's plight. In strict justice He could have left mankind to be eternally divorced from Himself. For no punishment temporal or eternal, could ever perfectly equate the insult which is sin. But it was in the power of Christ as true God and true Man to perform an act of reparation which would proceed from a Divine Person and thereby perfectly satisfy Divine Justice. He did this in the name of fallen man whose nature He united to Himself in all its entirety save for its sinfulness. The Babe of Bethlehem is then, the divine answer to a humanly insoluble problem.

The story of this marvelous outpouring of Divine Goodness which is the Incarnation, is the only adequate Christmas story. For "men of good will" it is an unique story in that it has a beginning but is without an ending. It begins with God's merciful love for men while they were yet "dead in sins"; it is continued until the end of time as the story of Christ's love for men who are "made partakers of the Divine Nature." Even now He abides with us in the Sacrament of Love. Man's joy at Christmas is meant to last longer than twenty-four hours. The Christmas news of Christ's arrival will be renewed as many times as human hearts thrill to their union with His Sacred Heart in Holy Communion. The Christmas greeting of St. John: "God so loved the world as to give His Only Begotten Son" will rejoice men's souls with "unspeakable" joy as often as they kneel in the Presence of the Eucharistic Christ.



For though He appeared as man yet He was not in all things subject to the laws of humanity; that He was born of woman, savoured of lowliness; the virginity, however, that attended His birth shows that He transcended mankind. His carrying in the womb was joyful. His birth immaculate, His coming forth without pain, His nativity free of blemish; for since she who by her fault had brought death to our nature was condemned to bring forth in sorrow, it was fitting that the Mother of Joy should bring forth in Joy (Gregory Nyss. Cat. of G. F.).