

THE LIGHT OF MEN

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S we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity, we commemorate the beginning of Christianity, for the cave at Bethlehem is the corner-stone of the Christian religion. The origin, nature and end of Christ's Church are a testimony of His birth in the cave. In the Office of the Feast of the Nativity are these significant words of St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan: "Behold the beginning of the Church. Christ is born, and the shepherds watch; shepherds gather together the scattered sheep of the Gentiles, and lead them into the fold of Christ, that they may no longer be a prey to the ravages of spiritual wolves in the night of this world's darkness."

"Behold the beginning of the Church." The Church derived from the Babe of Bethlehem every pulsation of her life and every attribute of her perfection as He was born in a hillside cave which was used as a stable for animals. Between Christ and the Church, at the very moment of His Incarnation, there was an "ineffable intimacy of union." The breadth and depth and richness and variety and splendor and at the same time the unity which was to distinguish Christ's Church was concentrated in the events which transpired at the birth of the Saviour.

Amid profoundly humble and essentially peaceful surroundings Christ is born. Though wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, His infant form shines with heavenly splendor. Born of the Immaculate Virgin Mary in the presence of His pure and virtuous foster father, Joseph, His birth heralded by the Angels from above, and a star in the heavens spreading the good news among all the people, "in him was life, and the life was the light of men." Christ's sanctity lives in the Church today; "the light of men" radiates rays of perfect holiness. Our Saviour resides in the tabernacle upon the altar; it is our Bethlehem. As many as receive Christ, he shall give them power "to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in his name."

Centuries before the Nativity, Isaias the Prophet foretold the coming of a light which would illumine the darkness of man: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen." The "light" which shines upon the altar is the same great light which made

all things bright at Bethlehem. It transformed the wretched abode of the Saviour into a spiritual palace. Our Lord came to enlighten those who were in darkness. Today the "light" of Christianity is the "light of Christ" which permeated the cave. The Divine presence within the sanctuary of the Church spreads its rays of perfect sanctity in all holiness and truth to enlighten the darkness of man and enable him to attain eternal joy in heaven.

The "light" which was made manifest on Christmas night emanated from one Person; those whom it enlightened were one in spirit. Thus the real internal unity of the Church had its origin upon the hills of Bethlehem. The shepherds were the first to receive "the light of men." "The shepherds watch." Having heard the "good tidings of great joy" from above while watching their flocks, the shepherds decided to go over to Bethlehem and witness what had come to pass. Coming with haste they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger. As they knelt before the Saviour in fervent gaze and adoration, they "understood of the word which had been spoken to them concerning the Child."

But the shepherds were not alone in receiving the "light" of Christ's manifestation. Into the one fold were to come three Wise men from the East who were "among the scattered sheep of the Gentiles." Seeking the whereabouts of the Messiah, they saw His star in the Heavens and wanted to adore Him. As there are enemies of the Church today who would "abandon the law of truth which Christ proclaimed and the law of love which is the life-breath of His Kingdom," so it was at the birth of Christ. There was Herod. Herod had his place in the events at Bethlehem as he was the menace to the Church Militant. He had evil designs upon this person of whom it was foretold that He would rule the people of Israel. Calling the three Kings to him, he commanded them to report to him just where this Messiah was born. The Magi left the palace of Herod and once again they followed the star which beckoned from above. Finding the place of the Saviour's birth, they entered the stable and found the Child with Mary His mother. Falling down they adored Him; and they offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The shepherds and the Magi were the first Christians who received "the light and became sons of God." The former were Israelites; the latter were Gentiles. Both came to Christ together "as to the corner-stone." Here we visualize the real formation of the Church. No condition of men was to be excluded from Christ's redemption. The shepherds were simple and lowly; the Magi were wise and powerful. The adoration of the three Kings matched the fervent gaze

of the shepherds. The wise men brought rich gifts; the shepherds brought their "gifts" also, namely, the understanding and appreciation "of those things which were told them by the angel." The first Christians represented the unity of Christianity: there was one fold and one Shepherd. As the members of Christianity today worship one Person in the Blessed Sacrament, they worshiped one Person in the manger.

The light which the shepherds and the Magi received contained rays of celestial and divine truth from Heaven. Christ's coming, determined by the wisdom of His Eternal Father, was to enlighten the world and dispel darkness. At His coming man was a "prey to the ravages of spiritual wolves in the night of this world's darkness." The light of pagan philosophy—even in the highest human knowledge from Plato and Aristotle—was unable to penetrate the thick veil that overshadowed the intellect and the genius of man, and to illumine that intelligence with one ray of celestial or divine truth. The light of genius had beamed upon it. But the greatest achievements could not elevate the mind of the pagan to one pure thought of God who made him. Every human light had tried in vain to dispel this thick cloud of darkness. The light of God alone could do it; and that came with Jesus Christ. "In Him," says the Evangelist, "was the Life and the Life was the light of men."

But the purpose of the coming of the Messiah was not only to dispel the darkness of the age in which He came, but of all ages; not only to give man partial relief from the veil which overshadowed him, but to enable him to obtain eternal light. This is Christianity. It was the mission of Christ. The foundation of Christianity rests upon the belief that the Babe of Bethlehem is "the light of men." The birth of Christ is tidings of great joy to all; not only to the Jews, but to all peoples; not only for the first Christmas, but for all time. The apostolate of the Church is universal.

It is over nineteen hundred years since the glorious beginning of the Church. Built upon the "pillar and ground of truth," it is a splendid edifice. As the Mansion of Inner Light it has not only radiated the rays of its own perfect sanctity, but for those who have been brought into contact with it, like the shepherds and Magi of the first Christmas, it has been the means of pointing out to them "the way, the life, and the truth."

As we celebrate the glorious feast of the Nativity, we can visualize the Christmas scene of many centuries ago. We can picture Bethlehem, the corner-stone of our Faith. There is the beginning of Christianity. Christ, Our Saviour, is born while the shepherds watch

their flocks. Receiving a divine invitation, they come and adore the Messiah. The Magi, led by a star from Above, appear before the manger. By the light which shines, their darkness is illuminated. At this very moment we too can worship and adore the Saviour. For His light is with us today. Christ, the light of the world, is hidden within the golden gates of the Tabernacle. With the simple Faith of the shepherds and the deep humility of the Magi, we too can receive the light. There will be some who will not receive Him because "their darkness does not comprehend the light." As we kneel before Him we can recall to our minds the first glow of the "light of men." And like the people of Bethlehem our joy also may be full in our fellowship with Christ as we meditate upon the humble beginning of Christianity.