

NEW BORN AND NEWLY DEAR

DOMINIC DOVER, O.P.



YOU MAY TEST a man, a people, a society, by the way they sing of Christmas. For of all the feasts that have come with Christ and Christianity none has such deep roots in human things. This is not surprising because it is God's own humanism that is made manifest in Christmas, the true exaltation of man in the Incarnation. If religion and the faith have penetrated your way of life, Christmas will reveal it. If Christmas is gone because Christ is gone, you will be found out when you try to speak of the mock Christmas that is left.

Sing out in terms of a mighty and simple faith, as does the unknown author in the ancient Carol:

*He came all so still
Where His mother was
As dew in April
That falleth on the grass.*

No one will mistake your meaning. The faith is presupposed. It is as intimate and as clear as the air you breathe. The old carols all have this matchless quality of saying something which everyone believed and yet not being ashamed to say it again; then, what is more, saying it well, with no trace of cant or tediousness, but with gayety and simplicity, and just a touch of pity.

*When 'twas bitter winter
Harmless and forlorn
In a star-lit stable
Christ the Babe was born.*

This is a far cry from the sophisticated dirge of one of the poet laureates of our own time:

*God rest you, merry Innocents,
While innocence endures.
A sweeter Christmas than we to ours
May you bequeath to yours.*

Thus does a worldly generation accuse itself before its children. This is not the final or exclusive tribute of our age but it is representative. One wonders what has happened in the great interval between the ancient carols and this modern lament.

Is it a process something like this: from Faith strong to Faith weak, to no Faith with yet a good measure of sentiment, to a last residue of sentiment, to sentiment played upon by professional commerce, to a candid cynicism, to what? Let the songs of Christmas tell the tale, or at least suggest what might have happened.

It is discouraging to begin with another one of our contemporaries, but it may be nonetheless helpful. Franklin P. Adams, with wry humor but great truth, has described the impact of Christmas on our workaday world.

"Christmas is over and Business is Business." To which we might add: Business is Business especially during the Christmas season; thus commemorating that elaborate commercial festival which closes out the calendar year. Logically, as we have seen, the next step is cynicism and pure negation, but this stage is seldom reached in fact because even the merchantile demiurge of Gross Sales reflects genuine and widespread sentiments of goodness and generosity.

But again we ask: what goes before this? What leads to this last act of rejection, or the next-to-last act of exploitation? In answer we can say this much. The unregenerate humanist has had his part. In any age his Erasmian calm is a kind of popular exemplar of right conduct; so it is not surprising that he is found to be playing a very special rôle in the evolution of that Christmas of the latter times which is looked upon as the perfect festival of humanism. Sometimes he speaks carefully and even tenderly of what he loves most in this delightful season.

"I have often thought, says Sir Roger," in Addison's *Spectator*, "it happens very well that Christmas should fall out in the middle of winter." Dickens, who is the most charming spokesman for the bourgeois Christmas, would describe such a man by saying: "It was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well." And, in the words of his Doctor Marigold, he would fill out all the elements of the portrait. "Many merry Christmasses, friendships, great accumulation of cheerful recollections, affection on earth, and Heaven at last for all of us."

With this much evidence we can at least suggest a line of development, or of deflection. Draw a line from the cold of the stable to the warmth of the Good News, and then draw another from the

refreshing cold of winter to the warmth of a good fire. Is the same ground transversed, even by analogy? And yet this latter is the path we know best, for it runs through the very center of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. It bespeaks a solid and orderly humanism to which Christmas comes as a feast of completion. Once every year a sifting is made in society and the magnanimous man, in one of those rare moments when justice reigns on earth, achieves his rightful eminence, amid occasional cries of "Humbug." Describe this Christmas in the Romantic ballad of a Sir Walter Scott and you have the perfect formula.

*England was merry England when
Old Christmas brought his sports again,
'Twas Christmas broached the mightiest ale,
'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale;
A Christmas gambol oft could cheer
The poor man's heart through half the year.*

Yet this implies a strange admixture. We feast for the worthiest cause, and yet forget the joy of the cause in the great joy of the feast. More subtle lyricists like Leigh Hunt have remained entirely true to the later tradition in treating of this point. Thus does he praise Christmas:

*Glorious time of great Too-Much,
Right thy most unthrifty glee,
And pious thy mince-piety.*

Perhaps the poet is only mocking the unseemly marriage between Epicurus and the Christian feast. But he expresses an authentic sociological device of the genteel tradition. "Right" it must be, and "pious" too, for it is a holy season. But its true glories are the glories of the table; its glee a bare echo of the glad tidings so unthriftily bought by a God who emptied Himself and took the form of a slave. However gently you choose to interpret the satire on "mince-piety," it does connote what the bourgeois Christmas has become. So much so that in our own times Arthur Guiterman could write "A True Bill Agaynst Christmasse" on these very grounds.

*"Ye Tables groan before ye Feaste,
Ye Feasters groan thereafter."*

This is, of course, one step removed from the Christmas of Dickens, with its "friendship . . . cheerful recollections, affection on

earth," and by comparison Dickens is an angel of Light and a true guardian of the tradition. And yet the two stand in the same line of deflection. For you cannot ask mere sentiment to sustain the weight of such joy as has accumulated round this feast without inviting a sort of material critique of Christmas, in which its deepest meaning is reduced to, and ultimately explained by, that which is least in it, but most easily understood, namely, the feast. In this inversion not only does the symbol become the thing symbolized, but the symbol itself is emptied of all spiritual content.

And yet even sentiment, or the joyous roots of feasting, tend to give way today to the enormous commercial ritual which has grown round Christmas like the mature elaboration of a materialist Liturgy. Christmas is central to the mercantile spirit because it adds to the mere fulfilling of human needs, which is the true *raison d'être* of organized commerce, the prospect of a yearly campaign of super-buying founded not on needs but on outright gratuitous spending. This is the Emyrean heaven of Commerce, the great unforeseen windfall, a yearly act of supererogation which is the one truce in the daily war between buyer and seller. But is it unforeseen? Or is it not so clearly anticipated as to admit of a decisive campaign of stimulation based on fear, in which everyone must meet a deadline that cannot be put off without disgrace? There is a great foundation of human joy and human generosity that underlies and supports this vast structure and everywhere its saving grace is that it signifies a love for children. But it has grown to such proportions that the sentiment which is asked to support it must be forgiven its frequent recourse to cynicism; and, sad to say, it must be forgiven its grievous oblivion of what Christmas really means.

Yet it is possible to remember. It is possible to feast and rejoice and still remember. There is even proof that the merry bourgeois at the warm fire has not always forgotten why he is feasting. He is described in Spenser's "Faerie Queen."

*And after him came next the chill December:
Yet he, through merry feastings which he made
And great bonfires, did not the cold remember;
His Saviour's birth his mind so much made glad.*

This strikes a harmonious note in the Christian soul that knows when to feast and when to be glad, and why. But this harmony is a fine and tenuous thing, and who can achieve it? For it may be that this portrait expresses the true crisis of humanism. Can it be that man

will sit content, warming himself with the good things of this earth, and still remember Christ? Or must he be driven out of the inns like Joseph and Mary before Christ will be born in him? If one thinks that Chesterton and not Dickens is the great spokesman for Christmas, he may find an answer in "The House of Christmas."

*There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam.
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.*

Is the home we surely seek only built out of our homelessness?

If this is so, then we can understand why we find in the old carols, and perhaps in them alone, the authentic tradition of Christmas song. There is an unspoken austerity in them, a clearing away of non-essentials. They possess a keenness that turns into warmth; and this is the sign of true austerity.

*He came all so still
Where His mother was
As dew in April
That falleth on the grass.*

*Mother and maiden
Was never none but she;
Well may such a lady
Goddess mother be.*

What a great consolation it is to realize that in every age this song has been sung! And wherever it is sung we hear the echo of the ancient carols. For it seems that all those who write of the true Christmas have such a deep sense of tradition, or are so affected by the unutterable, humbling mystery of the feast, that they dare not speak save in the simplest accents, and in the cleanest, purest, meter. Every poem is a carol.

*Born in a stable
Cradled in a manger,
In the world His hands had made
Born a stranger.*

Such a tradition, handed on by a Christian Rosetti, seems never to have been touched by time, for in our own day Alice Meynell could write:

*New every year
 New born and newly dear,
 He came with tidings and a song,
 The ages long, the ages long.*

Is there not a key here to the question of continuity? Christmas *is*, not was. For if it means Christ it does not pass into the dullness of a memory which forgets carnivals and gift-giving. There is only one Gift; and this has been given to us "the ages long." That one Gift, always newly born, newly dear, is "That Holy Thing" which George Macdonald sang of in a carol which is more polemic than its 15th century models yet which retains all their charm and quiet gravity.

*They were all looking for a king
 To slay their foes and lift them high;
 Thou cam'st a little Baby thing,
 That made a woman cry.*

Whatever time and social evolution have done to Christmas in other quarters, they have not touched the Christmas of the carols. These tender verses are the stones that cry out in the market-place, calling men to recognize Christ. In their own unassuming way they preach the Good News, as do the great simple Christmas hymns of the Liturgy, their true source and exemplar. For in the mirror of the Liturgy the real nature of the carols is seen. An aesthetic delight, they are something much more. They speak to the heart. They are direct, devotional, evangelical. Their spirit is the gentle but impassioned spirit of the *Laetabundus*—that magnificent Sequence in the third Mass of Christmas.

*Infelix propera
 Crede vel vetera
 Cur damnaberis,
 Gens misera?
 Quem docet littera,
 Natum considera;
 Ipsum genuit puerpera.
 Alleluia.*

*No longer then delay;
 Doubt not what legends say;
 Why be cast away,
 A race forlorn?
 Turn and this Child behold—
 That very Son of old
 In God's writ foretold,
 A Maid hath borne.*