



THE MISSAL'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

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CHRISTMAS IS WELL NAMED. If we wish to unlock the treasures of meaning contained in this beautiful feast, its very name provides us with the key. The word "Christmas" means "the Mass of Christ" and it is through the Mass, or rather the Masses of Christmas, that Holy Mother Church teaches her children the true significance of the Savior's birth. A glance at the Missal shows that not one but three Masses are celebrated on the feast of the Nativity. It would almost seem as if the Mysteries of Christmas are so profound that they could not be taught all at once. Holy Mother Church, being a wise and prudent teacher, explains these Mysteries to her children little by little so that they may ponder and savor what they have learned. In the First Mass we are told of the Eternal "birth" of the Divine Son Who in the fullness of time came to earth as its Savior. In the Second Mass we are reminded of Christ's daily birth in our hearts through Grace. In the Third Mass we celebrate Christ's physical birth, yet acknowledge the fact that this newborn Child is God. Christmas is the feast of Christ's threefold birth and so the Church in her liturgy offers three times a perfect Sacrifice of Praise, Adoration, and Thanksgiving.

In each of the Masses we are taught by inspired words. The Prophets tell of the centuries of longing which preceded the coming of the promised Messiah, and of the joy which will accompany His birth. St. Paul explains the message which the Savior's birth brought to the world and the effects that this message should have in the lives of men. St. Luke invites us to look in on the stable of Bethlehem as he paints for us a picture of the first Christmas night. St. John helps us to see something of the very intimate life of God as he reveals to us the Eternal generation of the Divine Son. The Sacred writers also proclaim Christ's coming to the soul through Grace.

If we wish to comprehend more fully the Mysteries of the Feast of the Nativity, we need look no further than the Missal. Herein we find a perfect commentary on the simple splendor of Christmas.

THE FIRST MASS

If we use the Introit of the Mass as the keynote to the Mystery that is about to be celebrated, we see that the first of the Christmas

Masses unfolds for us the Mystery of Christ's eternal Birth as the Son of God and the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

"The Lord hath said unto me; Thou art my Son; This day have I begotten thee."

It is extremely difficult for us to understand something of the meaning of this eternal generation of God the Son. The first difficulty is the meaning of the word "eternal." Eternity is in itself something positive, yet we are forced to describe it in a negative way. We say that it is without beginning and without end. Even the examples of it must be somewhat negative. Thus in telling us when the generation of the Divine Son occurred, Holy Scripture uses the expression, "before the morning star." The stars appear to be among the most permanent things in the universe. Yet, before the stars began to be, God the Son existed. There was never a time when He was not.

But Holy Mother Church celebrates more than one Mystery in this first Mass. In telling of Christ's Divinity, she wishes also to tell of His humanity. She realizes the difficulty in learning of the Divine generation and so for the moment, she postpones her explanation of it. She will continue her commentary on Christ's eternal birth in the third of the Christmas Masses. Now she turns her attention to a Mystery which follows upon the eternal generation, a Mystery with which her children are far more familiar. She tells them of the temporal birth of Christ.

It is very fitting that the temporal birth of the Savior should be made manifest in the first of the Christmas Masses. The Midnight Mass is celebrated at an hour when the world has forgotten the warmth and light of the sun and is steeped in a chilling darkness. The time is symbolic.

In the years which preceded the advent of the Savior, man had reached one of the darkest hours of his days upon earth. This was true of both the Jews and the Gentiles. To the chosen people had been given two great treasures, the worship of the True God and the hope of a Messias. Both had been allowed to tarnish. For many of the Jews, the worship of Yahweh was no longer a worship of the mind and heart. Rather, it had become a chain of empty ceremonies to be carried out in a vain and ostentatious manner. The Messianic hope was also distorted. The notion of the Messias as described by the Prophets was forgotten and the people sought only an earthly king.

The pagan world, on the other hand, scorned the worship of the True God altogether. Men had become so accustomed to vice that at times they had difficulty in distinguishing it from virtue. At the time

of the birth of Christ, the Roman Empire had become infected with the contagion of pride, and corruption, and injustice; a disease which was to cause it a painful and lingering death. Once man had forgotten God, he could think only of himself, and too often he thought of himself as merely an animal.

It was into this world, overshadowed with the darkness of sin, that the Savior was born. The Introit of the First Mass also tells something of the reception that the Redeemer would receive.

"Why have the nations raged and the peoples devised vain things."

Christ, begotten from all eternity as the Son of God the Father, has now become man and is born into a world which hesitates to receive Him. The pagan nations will rage against Him and even the chosen people will ridicule and condemn Him. Nevertheless, Christ the Redeemer is to be victorious over all and is to save men from their sins.

Yet how was Our Divine Lord to restore men to God's friendship, and why did He come to earth to do it? To appreciate man's resurrection through Christ, we must first understand something of his fall through Adam. When Adam sinned he acted as the representative of the whole human race. Now to measure the gravity of this or any other crime, we must consider not only *what* was done, but also *against whom* it was done. Adam had offended an infinitely good God and so his sin had infinite malice. In order that the wound of this crime be healed, Divine Justice demanded infinite restitution. Therefore, Infinite Wisdom decreed that the one who was to pay this infinite debt would be both God and man. He would be man since man had committed the offense. He had to be God, since only God is infinite and so only God could render infinite restitution. For man to become God was impossible; so God in His goodness became Man. God could have come to men as a triumphant king. He could have come upon a cloud of glory escorted by legions of angels. But in order to prove beyond any doubt that He was truly man and thus could act in man's name, the Son of the Most High was clothed with flesh in the immaculate tabernacle of Mary's womb and was born into the world. The Savior chose to come as a helpless new-born Babe.

Thus in the Gospel for the First Mass we find the beautiful account of the birth of the Divine Redeemer.

"And it came to pass that when they were there, her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born Son and wrapt Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger."

This Infant, cared for so lovingly by His Blessed Mother, was truly human; yet He had a majesty which no other human being could ever have. He was God. Just as the Gospel bears witness to the humanity of Christ by telling us of His birth, so also does it point out His divinity by narrating the manifestation of the angels.

"And behold, an angel of the Lord stood by them and the brightness of God shone round about them. . . . And the Angel said: behold I bring you good tidings of great joy . . . this day is born to you a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

The new-born Child was Lord of Heaven and earth, and Heaven and earth were to give testimony to Him.

But a veil of centuries separates us from that first Christmas night when Christ, having become man, dwelt amongst us. We might ask with reason what meaning this event has in our lives today. St. Paul in the Epistle of the Midnight Mass provides us with the answer:

"The Grace of the Savior having appeared to all men, instructing us, that denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live soberly, and justly, and godly in this world; looking for the blessed hope and the coming of the glory of the Great God and Our Savior Jesus Christ."

Christ's entire life was to be an instruction for men. The first lesson was to be taught from the crib. As on the First Christmas Night, so down to the present day, there are many who can find no room for Christ in their homes or in their hearts. Many have forgotten the Divine Law to love God above all else and one's neighbor as one's self. Many too have been dazzled by the wonders of the world and have forgotten the promised brilliance of Heaven. Christ, by being born into the world at Bethlehem taught men of all ages a mighty lesson. By the humble surroundings of the stable, they are taught to live soberly and not to allow themselves to be inebriated with the wine of pride and greed. Christ's mercy in coming to men as their Savior teaches them that they should show justice and mercy to each other. The greatest lesson of the Nativity, however, was to make men aware of their newly-acquired dignity. Christ became the "Son of Man" that men might become the children of God. So it is that we are admonished in the Epistle of the Mass which tells us of Christ's Nativity, to live "godly," that is, as sons of God and heirs to an inheritance of future Glory.

THE SECOND MASS

Christ was born that He might die and by His death earn for man a supernatural life. We do not have to wait until we get to heaven in order to begin to live in a supernatural manner. In fact, we cannot afford to wait that long. Supernatural life is, as it were, a passport required of those who are to be admitted to eternal happiness. Christ on Calvary merited supernatural life for men. He bestows it upon them by being born into their souls through Divine Grace. It is this spiritual birth of Christ through Grace that is celebrated in the Second Christmas Mass.

Grace is a special gift which is given to us by God. By means of it, we share, in so far as we are capable, in the very Divine Life of God Himself. We become, as St. Peter tells us, "partakers of the Divine Nature" (II Peter 1, 4). Fortified with this participation of Divinity, we can live and act in a manner which is infinitely superior to our ability as mere human beings. We live and act in a manner above our nature. We live a supernatural life and are capable of performing actions meritorious of a supernatural reward. Sanctifying Grace establishes us in the supernatural order. Actual Grace provides us with the help we need to live and act supernaturally. The degree of Grace which individuals receive differs vastly. Some receive more; some less; all receive that which is necessary. Grace is God's gift and He bestows it as He wills.

Holy Mother Church begins her Christmas commentary on the doctrine of Grace in the Introit of the Second Mass:

"A light shall shine upon us this day; because the Lord is born to us."

These words are a fitting expression of Christ's birth in the souls of men. Just as Christ, the Light of the world, is born in the darkness of Bethlehem, so Christ, the Author of Grace, is born as the Light and Life of the soul. To speak of Grace in terms of "light" is an apt figure. We think of light as the conqueror of darkness. Very significantly, therefore, Grace is referred to as a spiritual light since by means of this gift, the twofold spiritual darkness of sin and error is overcome. Christ, by His birth in the soul through Sanctifying Grace, removes from it the darkness of spiritual death caused by original or actual sin and increases in it the brilliance of Divine Life. Through Actual Grace, Christ enlightens man's mind and moves his will to accept Divine Truth and to act in accordance with this knowledge.

No one other than St. Paul could better explain to us the beau-

tiful doctrine of Grace, and so his words are presented to us in the Epistle of the Mass.

"The Goodness and Kindness of the Savior appeared, not by the works of Justice which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the laver of regeneration and renovation of the Holy Ghost whom He hath poured forth abundantly on us through Jesus Christ Our Savior, that being justified by His Grace, we may be heirs according to the hope of life everlasting."

The Apostle first tells us the cause of our salvation. We are saved not by our own merits, but through the goodness and mercy of God. St. Paul next points out to us the means by which our salvation is accomplished. Christ, the Author of Grace, confers upon the soul this wondrous gift and by it regenerates man from the death of sin and grants him a share in Divine Life itself. St. Paul indicates, finally, the ultimate effect of Christ's coming through Grace. We become heirs to an eternal kingdom and are provided with the means to attain our heritage.

The lesson taught so concisely in the Epistle is further exemplified in the Gospel narrative. Here we see pictured, as it were, the various degrees of Sanctifying Grace; the manner in which we are to cooperate with Actual Grace; and the reward for such cooperation. In the Gospel St. Luke tells us.

"And they came with haste, and they found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in a manger. And seeing they understood of the word that had been spoken to them concerning this Child. . . . And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen."

Those who were present at the Nativity differ greatly in their relation to God. First we see Mary, who being closer to Christ than anyone else, received from Him a greater spiritual treasure. Mary, as we know from the words of the Angel Gabriel, had received the fullness of Grace. But Mary is not the only one kneeling at the manger. St. Joseph is also present. The Holy Scriptures describe him to us as a "just man." As foster father of the Divine Son, he too is very high in the order of Grace. Yet his position in this order is far less exalted than that of the Blessed Mother since his relation to the Font of Divine Life was far less intimate.

Finally we come to the shepherds. The Grace given to them is compared with the Grace of Mary and Joseph as candle light is compared with sunshine. Yet we may still learn a great deal from these poor and simple men. They teach us in eloquent fashion how to co-

operate with Actual Grace, and they indicate our reward. When they were told by God's messenger to go to Bethlehem and pay homage to the Infant Savior, they obeyed immediately. We are told that they went "with haste." They cooperated without delay or question with the Grace which God had given them. As a reward they were permitted to gaze in wonder upon the Divine Infant and they praised and glorified God. Hence they teach us that by cooperating faithfully with the motions of Divine Grace, we too can come at last to the very vision of God that we may glorify Him and praise Him forever.

THE THIRD MASS

When we look within the manger, the power of Faith permits us to see far more than a new-born Infant. With our eyes we see humanity. With our Faith we see Divinity. In the third of the Christmas Masses the temporal birth of Christ is recalled, yet the Divine Nature of the Infant Savior is also vividly placed before our minds. Here, as in the Midnight Mass, Holy Mother Church teaches us two mysteries. In the earlier Mass she told us of the God Who became man. Here she tells us of the man Who was Divine.

The instruction commences with a manifestation of Christ's nativity on earth. Since we have already learned something of this mystery in the Gospel and Epistle of the First Mass, it may now be used as a stepping-stone to a knowledge of an even more sublime doctrine. Having taught us of Christ's temporal birth, Holy Mother Church now continues her commentary on His eternal generation.

The Introit of the Mass is a majestic herald announcing to us that the Savior has come into the world, but reminding us that this new-born Child is God.

"A child is born to us and a Son is given to us; whose government is upon His shoulders; and His name shall be called the Angel of the great counsel."

Christ is the Divine Son in Whom the Father is well pleased, for He perfectly fulfills the will of the Eternal Father. It was part of God's plan for the redemption of mankind that His own Son should act as Mediator between heaven and earth. Hence the Eternal Son now comes into the world that He may fulfill, by His life and death, the decree of Divine Providence.

Yet how do we know that God's Son is eternal? We can know this only by Faith since reason alone could never discover it. To know of the eternal generation of God the Son is to know something of the intimate nature of God Himself. To understand the nature of God is,

however, too much for the human intelligence. The splendor of the Almighty is too dazzling for our gaze. Reason must be satisfied with seeing the shadows of God as they are cast upon the things that He has made. Seeing these shadows, it can conclude that God really exists and that He is unique and all perfect, but it can never conclude that God from all eternity had a Divine Son equal to Himself. The origin of our knowledge of the eternal generation can be expressed in three words. God told us. We can know this mystery only by Faith.

It was Christ Who was to reveal to us the nature of God and thus tell us of the Divine generation. Our Blessed Lord was the first to reveal to us that in God there are three Divine Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It is true that there were hints of this in the Old Testament, but they were only hints, only clouded words whose meaning was not to be clarified until the Word of God became Incarnate. Thus we read in the Epistle of the Third Mass:

"God Who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all in these days has spoken to us by His Son, whom He hath appointed heir to all things, by whom also He made the world; Who being the brightness of His glory and the figure of His substance. . . . Sitteth on the right hand of the majesty on high. . . ."

Who better than Christ could tell us of the nature of God. He was God Himself. At the same time He was man. He, therefore, could communicate with men in a very human way and appreciate their difficulty in understanding. Our Lord told us in very simple words that He was the Divine Son of the Most High, equal to the Father in all things. "I and the Father are One," and again. "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father."

As difficult as the Divine generation may be to understand, there are certain things which we can know about it. God the Father is truly a Father, for from all eternity He generates a Son. This does not happen in a human mode. Although God the Father is sometimes pictured as an old man, He is in actuality a pure spirit. He does not have a body. Therefore, the eternal generation of the Divine Son has to be in a spiritual manner. "Spiritual generation" might sound rather strange, but it is a process which is very commonplace and with which we are all quite familiar. Every time we think, a spiritual generation takes place. We conceive a thought. The thinker is the "parent." The idea is the "child." We might cast some light on the Divine generation of the Son by likening it to the process of thought. God the Father, not in a moment of time but from all

eternity, conceives a Thought and that Thought is the Word of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

St. John expresses this idea very briefly in the Gospel of the third Mass:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was made nothing that was made."

There is an adage, "like father, like son," and never was this more forcefully demonstrated than in the Trinity. A good father wishes to give to his children all that he can. God the Father, Who is Goodness itself, can do no less. He bestows upon His Son the totality of all His own perfection. Hence the Father and the Son differ from each other only with regard to the source of their perfection. The Father is all perfect, but receives His perfection from no one; the Son is all perfect, but receives this perfection from the Father. The degree of perfection is exactly the same. The Father loses nothing by His generosity and the Son is no less exalted because of it.

The Divine generation of God the Son is a mystery and so we should not be discouraged if, in this life, we cannot fully understand it. It is a fact that we accept on Faith. It is a fact that we accept on the authority of an infinitely wise God Who is incapable of error.

Holy Mother Church realizes the difficulty we have in penetrating the profundity of the eternal birth of Christ. She comforts us by telling us once again of the physical manifestation of this Divine Son. Thus we read at the conclusion of the Gospel:

"And the Word was made Flesh and dwelt among us; and we saw his glory, as it were the glory of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

The eternal Son of the Most High is exalted far above the human race; yet, because of His love for men, He willed to become one of them.

Christ is again manifested to us in the Last Gospel of the Third Mass. Here, Holy Mother Church, following the example of the wise men, kneels in adoration before the Divine Infant Who is both God and man.

THE MISSAL AND THE MEANING

The three Masses of Christmas are like three parts of a beautiful symphony. Each of the Masses has its own distinctness, its own rich-

ness, its own splendor ; yet all three blend together in perfect harmony and form a glorious canticle of praise to the new-born Savior. In the Introit, Epistle and Gospel of the three Masses Holy Mother Church teaches us the triple Mystery of Christ's threefold birth. She repeats this message in the other parts of the Masses. In the prayers of the Christmas Masses, she adores the Eternal Son of the Most High, renders thanks to the new-born Babe Who came to save the world, and asks that the effects of His coming may be made manifest through Grace in the lives of men. In each of the Christmas Masses there is re-echoed the angelic hymn of praise and glory to God. In the Credo of each Mass a solemn profession of Faith is made in the mysteries which are being celebrated. In each of the Christmas Masses Christ is again brought into the world.

Yet if we were to look for the one place where Holy Mother Church summarizes her Christmas prayer for her children, we will find it in the Preface for the feast of the Nativity. We might paraphrase it thus :

"O Eternal Father, By the Mystery of the Word made Flesh, the light of Thy glory hath shone anew upon the eyes of our mind. Therefore, while we acknowledge Him to be God seen by men, may we be drawn by Him to the love of things unseen."

Here Holy Mother Church gives us the epitome of her Christmas message and prays that her children may know and profit by the mysteries which she makes present to them.

Christmas is best learned from the Mass of Christ. If we wish to know the significance of this great feast we need but to open the Missal. Herein we are taught the message and the meaning of the Savior's threefold birth and are exhorted to love and to live what we have learned.

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Our Fellow in the manger lying,
Our Food within the banquet room,
Our Ransom in the hour of dying,
Our Prize in His own kingly home.

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