

DOMINICANA

Vol. XXXX

DECEMBER, 1955

No. 4

WHEN TIME AND ETERNITY MET

ANDREW NEWMAN, O.P.



HE LITURGY OF THE CHURCH, wherein doctrine and devotion are wedded, presents the most profound truths with such vividness of expression, beauty of form, and precision of thought that it has touched the hearts as well as the minds of all men of all ages. During the holy season of Christmas, the dominant liturgical considerations are first of the Son of God in the ineffable splendor of the Blessed Trinity, and then of the Son of God in the unutterable humiliation of humanity, for Christmas is nothing more than *the temporal birth of the Eternal Son*.

BEFORE THE DAY-STAR I BEGOT THEE

"O Christ Redeemer of us all,
Only Son of God Most High,
Alone before the beginning,
Begotten ineffably."

—From the Hymns for Matins

The Paternity and Sonship attributed to the First and Second Persons of the Trinity are not to be understood metaphorically. In no sense is this a case of using words loosely. The words mean exactly what they imply. This Divine Father truly generates a Son, Who like all sons, is the term, the end of the generative act. But since this act of generation in God is a divine act, it must not be identified with corporeal generation. All the imperfections which accompany carnal generation must be excluded. Here is no transmission of seed, no production of a new being which once did not exist. Divine generation is a spiritual, eternal act—an act which befits an infinitely perfect God.

Such a spiritual generation is not an absurd thing. It is im-

aged in every intellectual act, in every thought, wherein the mind, conceiving a mental word or idea is likened to a parent, while the idea, the fruit of this act is its "offspring." In the God-head a similar but infinitely more perfect act occurs. God the Father contemplates from all eternity the grandeur of His own nature and conceives a Thought, a Word, which is the perfect adequation of the Father's divine perfection, imaging with complete exactness the "brightness of His glory and the figure of His substance" (Heb. 1: 3). This Word is more than a representation, for unlike the word or concept of a created intellect, this Divine Word is of the same nature as the Mind which conceived It. It is divine, a living reality, a Person co-substantial and co-eternal with the Father, a Person born of the Father's intellectual act; the Word of God is the Son of God. The Church, in the ninth lesson of Christmas Matins recalls this eternal birth of the Son in the Blessed Trinity.

"For this Word is indeed a substance in person, proceeding without suffering from the Father Himself. Now, just as the phrase 'In the beginning was the Word' signifies eternity, so also does the phrase 'The same was in the beginning with God' show us co-eternity. For the Father was never alone without the Word, but always was God with God, and indeed in His proper person."

EMMANUEL — GOD WITH US

Christmas is the birthday of a Child—the Christ-Child, Whose infant Humanity like that of all other children is stamped with inherent weakness. Upon His Mother He is dependent for all His needs: both for the bestowal of life and for its preservation. A cave for His home, a manger for His cradle, swaddling clothes about His Body—these are the mute and unmistakeable signs of His lowly estate. The contrast between the grandeur and majesty of the Trinity and the misery of this Child is immediately apparent. On the one hand is infinite perfection, omnipotence, eternity; on the other, unquestionable imperfection, impotency, finiteness. Yet it is precisely the awareness of this contrast that the divinely appointed teacher desires to awaken in men. For Christmas, embracing both the eternal and the temporal, has full significance only when both these elements are understood and accepted.

The Church's message is simple and unequivocal: the Son of Mary of Nazareth and the Son of the Father Most High are one! This Child is God. The Child resting in the manger is He Who



ADORATION OF THE MAGI

from all eternity has existed in the Bosom of God the Father. This is the Word, the Splendor of the Father, the Figure of His Substance. God has stripped Himself of His glory, and in its place has clothed Himself with human flesh. God has become man; in this Child time and eternity meet; humanity and divinity are united.

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us: and we saw His glory, the glory as it were of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

—*From the ninth Response of Matins*

WITH NO SHADOW OF IMPERFECTION

The Church, mindful of the amazement and wonderment which fills the mind at the thought of God become man, is perfectly aware of the apparent contradiction here involved. The Church has too profound a knowledge of human nature not to know that men in the face of such a difficulty will oftentimes seek an easy but false solution. Some, in an effort to preserve divine perfection intact, will deny the reality of the Child's humanity, saying that His Body is only an appearance—that it is nothing more than a device by which the invisible God might be seen by corporeal eyes. Others will go further. They will consider the Church's message a myth, something not worthy of credence by an intelligent mind. That a God of such perfection be conceived in the womb of a woman, and be born like any other man is too absurd a doctrine. Such a teaching is nothing more than a re-echoing of Greek and Roman mythology. The Infant in the manger is a mere man, the natural result of a woman's womb being made fruitful by human seed.

In the face of such responses to her message, the Church stands firm in her assertion: this Child is true God and true Man. She readily admits that this mystery of an Incarnate God transcends the full comprehension of the human intellect, but is steadfast in her declaration of its reasonableness. Involved here is not contradiction, but rather manifestation of the infinite power of God. The key to the mystery lies only in the affirmation of the integral and undiminished perfection of both the divine and human natures in Christ. To deny either is to resolve the difficulty by denying its existence. Thus in the Christmas Office, the Church, understanding that the solution of difficulties leads to a greater penetration and appreciation of truth, answers the objections proposed, first by explaining the manner in which the

human nature is united to the divine, and secondly by revealing the author of the Child's generation. The Church as it were promises that once the principles exposed by her are grasped, not only will the human mind find a truth of infinite sublimity, but the human heart an object of infinite loveableness.

The Church first turns her attention to those who deny the reality of the Child's humanity. Speaking through the mouth of the holy Pontiff, St. Leo, she gives the following explanation:

"The Word of God, the Son of God, has become man, and in such a way did He unite both natures that the glorification did not consume the inferior, nor did the assumption in any way diminish the superior. . . . Therefore, while preserving intact the distinction of both substances, both are joined in the unity of one person, humility is assumed by majesty, infirmity by power, mortality by eternity."

—*From the Fourth and Fifth Lessons of Matins*

The truth which the Church uses in answer to the second objection to her message is of equal sublimity—the miraculous conception and birth of the Child. No earthly union has made the mother of this Child fruitful, but rather a union which is divine, for the author of this Child's generation is God Himself. God Who has created all things has no need of secondary causes to accomplish His Will. Divine power which has created human seed and has endowed it with its life-giving efficacy here produces the proper effect of this seed without the accompaniment of any created causality. The Child's generation is thus the immediate, personal effect of divine omnipotence. The Holy Spirit has come upon this mother, the power of the Most High has overshadowed her, and, without the least detriment to her virginal purity, has conceived the Child in her chaste womb.

"Not from the seed of man, but by the breath of the Holy Spirit, was the Word of God made flesh and the fruit of the womb made to blossom. The Womb of the Virgin swells forth, the cloisters of her purity remain; the banners of her virtues gleam; God dwells in His Temple."

—*From the Hymn for Vespers*

But the prodigies of divine power do not cease here. The birth of the Child, no less than His conception, transcends the laws of nature, and bears no less the mark of divine omnipotence. The womb which conceived Him without violation is delivered of Him without corruption of its virginal integrity. This mother has conceived in an ecstasy of divine love, and has brought forth her Child in joy ineffable, exempt entirely from the pains of motherhood. God has bestowed on the mother kneeling before

the manger an unique privilege, a privilege only divine omnipotence can give. He has given her the fruitfulness and joy of a mother, while preserving undefiled the innocence of her virginity.

"A woman in childbirth brought forth a King, whose name is eternal.
And she a mother's joy with virginity's innocence at once possesses.
Blessed amongst women, she was seen to have no equal, neither before
nor since."
—*Second Antiphon of Lauds*

This Child, therefore, is not only human, but is also divine. Humanity and divinity are one, united in the Person of the Word. In this Child, God has manifested His power, revealing through Him His glory, His intimate life, the secrets of eternity. A God become man in the womb of a woman and born of her is not a denial of divine perfection, a blasphemy against divine purity—rather "such a birth befits God."

The Church is a wise judge of human nature. Accordingly she realizes that man's desire for knowledge will not be satisfied until he has grasped the reason why the God of Heaven has come to dwell with him. She also realizes, however, the limitations of the human mind. She knows that the reason for the Incarnation is too sublime a truth for any created intellect to grasp immediately, or even once attaining it, to comprehend it fully. The Church, therefore, in the Christmas Office adapts her explanation to the native weakness of the human intelligence, enumerating first the effects that the Incarnation had wrought among men, then using these effects as so many stepping stones by which to lead her hearers to catch a glimpse of the divine motivation for the Incarnation.

HUMAN TRAGEDY

Man in the state of original justice enjoyed perfect peace and inner tranquility. His lower faculties and passions were completely under the domination of reason, enlightened and guided by it in all things. Everything about man was at peace. With no fear from the elements of nature, with the earth as his paradise, and all creatures serving his needs, man enjoyed complete and perfect friendship with God, a union of love, which, begun in time would be consummated in eternity. For the first man the knowledge of this divine union was a source of indescribable happiness.

But by the abuse of his greatest gift, liberty, man deliberately turned against his Divine Friend, preferring his own glory before God's. The will that was created to love Supreme Good before all things chose to place its love in itself. Man, the crea-

ture, rebelled against the love of the infinite Creator and opened the world to sin and its terrible consequences. Man's union with God was destroyed; his eternal destiny was lost. Turbulent discord replaced the perfect harmony of man's nature. With his flesh warring against his spirit, he became the plaything of his passions, tossed to and fro by their vehemence like a rudderless ship on a storm-lashed sea. His intellect, formerly so enlightened, now became darkened with shadows of ignorance, and his sense of right and wrong blunted. The will, having once chosen created good in the place of God, found itself more and more turning away from Sovereign Goodness. Sin was added to sin. But the greatest tragedy of all was man's inability to repair the damage done, to regain for himself God's friendship, to win back his lost inheritance. An offense had been committed against an Infinite Being—only a being of infinite dignity could make just reparation. Man, the creature, could never meet the demands of divine justice.

DIVINE GENEROSITY

What man could not do, God has done for him. God *freely* chose to deliver man from the tragedy which he had brought upon himself. In His infinite, divine wisdom, God devised a way in which human nature could restore itself and at the same time discharge its debt. He sent into the world a Mediator Who was at once divine and human, none other than His Divine Son become man, Who as man could offer satisfaction in the name of men, and as God could clothe this satisfaction with infinite merit.

With the birth of the Divine Child in the manger, therefore, a new era of peace and joy begins for man. The enmity between heaven and earth is broken; man is restored to his inheritance. His wounded nature is the recipient of a divine remedy, which quells his rebellious passions, enlightens his intellect, and moves his will toward good. God has become man, and man has become god-like.

"Today the King of Heaven deigned to be born to us of the Virgin, that He might restore lost man to the heavenly kingdom. Today true peace has come down to us from heaven. Today has shone forth upon us the day of the new redemption, of the ancient reparation, of the eternal happiness."

—*From the First and Second Responses of Matins*

The comparison between human infidelity and divine generosity can only bring man to one conclusion: divine love is the sole reason for the Son of the Eternal Father becoming the Son

of the Virgin. "God so loved the world that He sent His Only—begotten Son into the world . . . that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3: 16-18).

"The Goodness and kindness of Our Saviour appeared then, not by reason of good works that we did ourselves, but according to His Mercy He saved us."

—*Capitulum of Sext*

CHRISTMAS' FRUIT

In the Christmas Office, the Church places before men's minds the principles of eternal truth, the mysteries of faith. From these principles she leads men to draw valid conclusions, conclusions valid not only for human happiness in this life, but also for an eternity of beatitude in the next. Thus the Church in her Christmas message urges men not merely to assent intellectually to these truths of faith, but to make them part of their everyday lives. A life of love and good works is the conclusion she wishes to be drawn from her teaching. For just as principles without conclusions are useless, so also faith, without a subsequent overflow into good works, avails nothing.

"Let us give thanks, dearly beloved, to God the Father, through His Son, in the Holy Ghost. Let us put off the old man with his acts, and having been made partakers of the generation of Christ, renounce forever the works of the flesh. Remember thy dignity, O Christian! Having now been made a partaker of the divine nature, scorn to become again the vile thing of old. Remember well of what Head and of what Body thou art now a member. Remember how thou, having been snatched from the power of darkness hast been brought to the Light and Kingdom of God."

—*From the Sixth Lesson of Matins*

HUMILITY

St. Paul's explanation of humility: (Epistle to the Philippians, ch. 2)

a manifestation of: "Let each esteem others better than themselves, each one not considering the things that are his own, but those that are other men's." v. 3-4.

the model of: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who . . . emptied himself . . . and humbled himself . . . v. 5-11.

an effect of: "Wherefore, my dearly beloved . . . with fear and trembling work out your salvation." v. 12.

the motive of: "For it is God who worketh in you, both to will and to accomplish, according to his good will." v. 13.