



The Divine Infant

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THE THREE MASSES OF CHRISTMAS DAY

In the stillness of a winter's night, more than nineteen hundred years ago, over the cold, bleak plains of Bethlehem there floated the voices of an angelic choir singing of the birth of a new-born King in the city of David. That little Babe of whom the angels sang is none other than the Eternal God.—God begotten of the Father from all eternity, born of the Virgin Mary on this first Christmas night, and born again in the hearts of the humble shepherds as they adored the Infant in the manger. On that day of days the boundaries of earth and heaven touched and intermingled. Heaven was brought down to earth and earth lifted up to Heaven, and the world received new life and new vigor from the commingling. The little Saviour came into the world to establish a reign of peace, happiness, and love. And each year as we celebrate the feast of His coming the heart of the Christian world throbs with gladness. Cares, troubles, and occupations of every kind give way to an impulsive wave of happiness and good-will. A lull seems to sweep into the midst of the hustle and bustle of busy life, and all men seem to pause in adoration to their thrice-born King.

He whose nativity we commemorate on Christmas Day is manifested by a triple birth: He is born of the Virgin Mary according to the flesh: He is born by His grace in the hearts of the faithful: He is also born eternally in the bosom of the Father, according to His divine nature. This threefold birth is commemorated on Christmas Day with a triple Mass. The first Mass is celebrated in memory of the temporal birth of Christ of the Virgin Mary, according to His human nature: the second is offered to honor the spiritual birth of Christ in our souls by His grace: the third commemorates His divine birth from the Father according to His divine nature.

This custom dates back to the fourth century. At first the Sovereign Pontiff alone said three Masses on Christmas Day—one at midnight in the Church of St. Mary Major, where accord-

ing to tradition the manger of Bethlehem is preserved: the second at the tomb of St. Anastasia whose martyrdom is commemorated on the 25th of December: and the last in the Vatican as the principal Mass of the day. This privilege was extended to the bishops of France, in the time of Charelemagne the Great, and later was permitted to priests; thence it was gradually extended throughout the world.

First Mass

At the mere mention of the birth of Christ according to His human nature, our thoughts instinctively wander to the hill-side cave of far-off Bethlehem, and lovingly linger with Joseph and Mary in adoration of the wonderous Infant, who, wrapt in rough swaddling clothes and lying on a manger of straw, pleadingly stretches forth His little arms as if asking for a warmer and more comfortable lodging within our bosom. The picture is indeed fascinating, and the parts of the Mass are calculated to impress it more and more deeply upon the mind, and at the same time to explain its significance.

The Introit begins with the words, "The Lord said to me, Thou art My Son: today I have begotten Thee," which serves as a prelude to the hymn of the angelic choir, "Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis." The prayer proper to this Mass reads: "O, God Who has illumined this sacred night with the splendor of Him Who is the True Light, grant we beseech Thee, that, having known this mysterious Light here below, we may hereafter enjoy in Heaven all the blessings of which He is the source." Then follows the Epistle with the significant words of St. Paul: "The grace of God our Saviour hath 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 coming of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all iniquity."

In the Gospel attention is directed to the birth of the Infant Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem amid the songs of Angels. At the Offertory is voiced the glad cry: "Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad before the presence of the Lord: for He is come." In the Secret the celebrant asks God that the offering which is presented to Him may be agreeable, and that we may become like the Infant Jesus in whom the human sub-

stance is united to the divinity. In the Preface the priest thanks the "Almighty Father, Eternal God, because by the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word a new ray of His splendor has been sent to shine on souls." God makes Himself known to all in a visible manner, in order that by this sight of Him we may conceive a rapturous love for His invisible beauties. At the Communion are the words: "In the splendors of the saints I have begotten Thee, before the morning dawn." It is customary in certain places to sing this Mass at midnight which signifies that Christ was born at that hour.

Second Mass

This Mass is sometimes called the "Mass of the Shepherds," and is celebrated about daybreak thereby indicating that the shepherds came about dawn to Bethlehem to adore the newborn Saviour. Here again there is presented to us another picture not less beautiful and upon which likewise we love to dwell. It is that of the Judean hill-slopes, where the shepherds were keeping the night watches over their flocks. "And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them: and the brightness of God shone round them: and they feared with a great fear. And the angel said to them: "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be to all the people: For, this day is born to you a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign to you. You shall find the Infant wrapt in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest: and on earth peace to men of good will." How familiar the picture? These same humble shepherds were the first fruits of Christianity. The Saviour Who was that memorable night born according to the flesh in the city of David, was again born in their hearts filling them with holy sentiments of adoration, joy, peace, and love: and it is this spiritual birth that the Church commemorates in the second Mass of Christmas, the Introit of which begins: "Light will shine upon us today, for the Lord is born to us: and He shall be called Wonderful, God, Prince of Peace, Father of ages to come: and His reign shall have no end."

In the two Collects of this Mass the priest begs Almighty God, Who has made the new light of the Word Incarnate to shine upon us, to grant that the faith in this mystery which enlightens

our souls may also shine forth in our actions, through the intercession of the Blessed Anastasia of whom we celebrate the solemn memory. The Epistle teaches us that the Sun which is risen upon us is God the Saviour, in all His goodness and in all His mercy. The Gospel brings before us the shepherds at Bethlehem, "glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard." At the Offertory the Church glorifies the power of Emmanuel: "God hath confirmed the earth: it shall no longer be shaken. Thy throne, O God! is established from eternity: thou art before all time." At the Communion is heard again the note of joy and gladness: "Rejoice, O daughter of Sion! Sing songs, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold thy King cometh unto thee, the Saviour of the world."

Third Mass

The birth of the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, according to His divine nature, is essentially one of love. The Person of the helpless Babe which we behold in the manger is none other than the Eternal Son of God, born, according to His divine nature, of the unbegotten Father's infinite love before all ages. Throughout the third Mass our attention is repeatedly directed to Him, emphasizing His divinity, His power, His goodness and His love.

The Word is the Child, which is born to us, according to the prophecy of Isaiah: the Introit proclaims Him in the words of the prophecy: "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: He bares on His shoulders the sign of His sovereignty." In the Collect the priest asks of Almighty God that the new birth by which the eternal Son, has condescended to be born, may restore us to liberty, and deliver us from the yoke of sin. In the Epistle our thoughts are especially directed to the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, Who is the true Son of God, by Whom He created the worlds, and Whom He has made heir of all things. It is of Him that the words are spoken: "Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail." This Eternal Son also is mentioned in the Response which follows the Epistle: "All the earth has seen the Saviour that Our God has sent: praise God with joy and gladness, all ye inhabitants of the earth." The Gospel likewise is concerned about the Word, that is the Eternal Son of God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. In Him was

life and the Life was the light of men. That was the true Light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world."

Again, the Word, infinitely powerful King, is spoken of in the Offertory: "Heaven and Earth are Thine. Thou hast made the world and all that is therein: justice and equality are the foundations of Thy throne." In the Communion experssion is given to the happiness of the world, which today has seen its Saviour, the Word made flesh, without suffering any diminution of His glory.

In the Dominican missal the Epistle of each Mass is prefaced with prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the promised Messiah Who was to redeem mankind from the captivity of sin.

Thus does Holy Mother Church, with heart gladdened by the "good tidings of great joy" commemorate in her liturgy, on this thrice happy day, the threefold birth of the Saviour, by a triple sacrifice.

—Bro. Andrew Pope, O. P.

