

PREACH UNTO ALL THE VALE

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From the outside, there is nothing remarkable about the Incarnation. This is because there is nothing remarkable about Nazareth. In a quiet valley, a virgin whispered, a man pondered a dream, and life went on. For the surveyor of contingencies, all signs on the outside point to the ordinary. That valleys should be quiet, virgins meek, and men interested in their dreams, does not bespeak the extraordinary. But for the Creator of all three—the valley, the virgin, and the dreamer—*ordinary* was the desired place to put out a doormat.

However, on the inside—for there is always an inside which, right about at the middle, reveals its fruit—there could be nothing more fitting. What could be a greater hope of new life than that a young woman should be with child, an infant should breathe oxygen, and, along the ordinary course, that infant grow *in wisdom and stature* (Lk 2:52)? What could be a greater guarantee of new life than that a young man, virile and brave, should take *his wife into his home* (Mt 1:24), be appointed as guardian of the mother and child, and at last *rise and take the child and his mother* (Mt 2:14, 21) to safer parts? The good man has a sharp instinct, a sense of duty, and a holy fear. What could be a greater sign of new life than that the valley, once quiet, should *cheer and sing for joy* (Ps 65:14)? Too far? The advent of Jesus Christ in the flesh, born of the Virgin Mary, indeed goes all too far, as was necessary, *for creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God* (Rom 8:19). Ordinary and extraordinary, necessary and fitting, the Creator of all is born the Son of the Nazarene girl. And the universe is saved.

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In New York in the month of December, a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art offers a glimpse *at the inside*. Greater Christmas trees may be found elsewhere in Manhattan, but the mammoth pine in the Medieval Sculpture Hall is something to behold, for it features, below its boughs, one of the greatest pieces of art this side of the Atlantic: a Neapolitan Baroque Crèche, a nativity set to rival all nativity sets, sprawls out from the tree. A sumptuous example of eighteenth century holiday decoration, the crèche depicts a village-worth of figurines in pastoral setting while in the middle, amid the gaieties of early-modern Italy, the Holy Family rests under a dilapidated, moss-covered temple. *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity!* (Eccl 1:2). But *the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (Jn 1:5). The ancient world gives way to a new creation. In the fading light of the world's glories, *a child is born to us, a son is given to us* (Is 9:5): in short *the true light, which enlightens everyone* (Jn 1:9).

Venture down the Upper East Side twenty blocks—granted, a veritable hike for a bleak mid-winter day—and step into the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer to hear the friars at Vespers. *Conditor alme siderum*, the proper hymn for Advent which the fathers are chanting, sings of the decay sin introduced into the world; but also of the reversal ushered in by the Incarnation:

In sorrow that the ancient curse
should doom to death a universe,
you came to save a ruined race
with healing gifts of heav'nly grace.

The birth of Christ, celebrated each Christmas, stands at the bend in the road of Providence. Time had proved creation a downward spiral, “doomed to death.” But *when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption* (Gal 4:4-5). As woman was the harbinger of the man of death (cf. Rom 5:12), so woman fittingly becomes the portal for the Man of

Life; a girl like unto the finest Temple of the living God; a virgin becomes the new Eve. And *the virgin's name was Mary* (Lk 1:27).

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The model ruins of a Neapolitan nativity set have the power to transport one to the land of their origin, that ancient city on the bay. Napoli! (*Napule*, as the locals say) Here those figurines adorning the American museum were crafted. But there is no time to dawdle here. Leave the city of culture and learning behind, and venture far. The grand buildings, the villas, and piazzas fade away. Fairly quickly, the landscape grows bleak. One becomes surrounded by hills, and the horizon slopes up to an imposing mountain, whose shadow casts a constant pall over the vale. The mountain is Vesuvius, that name so reminiscent of death and destruction. The valley is practically a graveyard, still proud of its ruins of a once-great city. All that was once extraordinary about this place was wiped out forever, its bones now preserved in a cold, dead case of ash. All lost.

There is nothing remarkable about the Pompeii valley, ever since the tragic events of A.D. 79. Some eighteen hundred years later, in A.D. 1872, in a quiet valley, a virgin whispered, a man pondered a dream, and life went on. That valleys should be quiet, virgins meek, and men interested in their dreams, does not bespeak the extraordinary.

*If you seek to be saved, promulgate the Rosary.
This is dear Mary's own promise.*

The story of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii is unlike that of any other of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Properly, it is not an apparition. The events that unfolded to give the Church this devotion are a patchwork of piety and tragedy, romance and miracles, simplicity and poetry. Until 1872, the title of Our Lady of the Rosary evoked images of epic, even seismic action. And, to be

sure, for the ordinary Neapolitan peasant to know that the beads in his or her fingers had the power to destroy a Saracen army, to banish heresy, to save Europe over and over again was inspiring. It was reassuring. But Pompeii, as has been remarked, was *not* remarkable.

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A young man named Bartolo Longo found himself in the Valley of Pompeii more and more in 1872. A wealthy noblewoman, the Countess De Fusco, had hired the recent convert to manage her lands in the valley. The superstition and darkness found by Longo among the ordinary folk of Pompeii, shrouded in the legacy of that terrible name, made him reel. The truths of the Faith were misunderstood, religious sense severely lacking; séances, conjurers, and fortune tellers visited frequently. It was as if the



OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY OF POMPEII

religion of pagan Pompeii was the only thing that survived that catastrophic day of ancient years. But this man had a past to which this superstition constantly recalled his mind.

The people of Pompeii might not have been all that different from the average Italians of their day, but they certainly pushed the envelope with what they held as true. The evil eye—that glance which had power to curse—was held as a fact of life, the ultimate bad luck to be avoided. If a child was born on Christmas night, it was believed that it would inevitably become a witch. And doctors were made redundant in the valley, for there was always a medicine-woman around who had exactly the right spell for every occasion. What could faith do that demonic superstition could not?

Yet, very different from those folk beliefs, the irreproachable surety of science was what led Bartolo Longo down the road to Satanism. Coming of age on the tide of the overtly anti-Catholic movement for Italian unification, Longo made it his life's purpose to discredit the Church in every aspect of his conduct. This zeal climaxed in his consecration as a Satanic priest. So, when he was finally brought back to the faith after much effort, to be reminded daily of the devastating power of erroneous beliefs was torture. Pompeii was a rebuke for his former ways. Then, one day, in utter desolation and intense regret about the life he had put behind him, Bartolo heard a whisper: "If you seek to be saved, promulgate the Rosary. This is dear Mary's own promise."

Was it the Blessed Virgin's voice? Longo never claimed as much. Regardless, the whisper effected in him complete peace and courage. He vowed at that moment,

If it is true that you promised to Saint Dominic that whoever should promulgate your Rosary should be saved, then I will be saved, for I shall not leave this valley without having propagated your Rosary.

He then relates, upon hearing the Angelus bell at that moment, "I sank on my knees and voiced the prayer that a world

of faithful addresses to Mary at that hour.” His faith may have been buttressed, but what of his vow? The rest of Longo’s life was dedicated to increasing devotion to the rosary in Pompeii and beyond. He compiled all those tales of blood, sweat, and tears into a few little books of remembrances. They each describe, in utter humility, his Herculean efforts to preach the rosary.

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The image of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii is emblematic of Bartolo Longo’s trust in the Incarnation’s power to change the world. Now, Longo was a Dominican tertiary, so he had within him the instinct of the preacher. If devotion was going to be successful, he knew he needed a concrete image of our Lady and her rosary around which the Pompeiians could rally. A good preacher needs a good visual. But, with only a few francs in his pocket one day in Naples, and up against a deadline, he had to settle for what he judged a rather unflattering picture from a market. In it, Our Lady and the Infant are shown handing rosaries to Saint Dominic and Saint Rose of Lima, whom Longo reclassified as Saint Catherine of Siena. The image is hardly a masterpiece. It was unremarkable.

The Incarnation is central here, in this story, in the Christian life, even in the image so unflatteringly painted, because Jesus is central. He’s right there—yes, there! In the center of the painting, right about at the middle, he sits on Mary’s lap, just as his name anchors the prayer addressed to Mary, right about at the middle: “...and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, *Jesus*.” Like in the Renaissance Christmas crèches, made so popular in Longo’s Naples, the Christian Mystery himself comes to birth amid a world which is ever decaying, ever in retrograde—a ruined Roman temple, eroded by time, terror, and even volcanoes. Even in a lackluster image, the Child of the Virgin is the greatest hope of new life. Even in a life of regret and failure, a recently converted, ne’er-do-well land agent, prone to hear voices, becomes the chosen guarantee of new life. Even in a backward, run-down town, the very *valley of the*

shadow of death (Ps 23:4) comes alive at the preaching of a chaplet and becomes a great sign of new life. In short, it was remarkable.

Today, the image of Our Lady of Pompeii is jewel-encrusted and gold-encased, securely placed under the roof of one of the grandest basilicas in the world. That the Shoot of Jesse should spring from the womb of a virgin, that the Alpha and Omega be nursed at her breast, that the Lion of Judah should balance on her lap, these things are all veiled in utter humility for *our* sakes. The Incarnation, that most humble of all deeds since the foundation of the world, solemnized in the Joyful Mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin of Pompeii, is what gives hope to a fallen world, to all in this vale of tears. It will last unto ages of ages, when valleys and dreams have passed away, and the Virgin gathers her children to herself. What was done remains, and its effects alter the course of the universe. And it shall be preached unto all the vale.

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