



THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST

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By: Reverend Alban Butler

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The world had subsisted about four thousand years and all things were accomplished that, according to the ancient prophets, were to precede the coming of the Messiah, when Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, having taken human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and being made man, was born of her for the redemption of mankind.

The all-wise and all-merciful providence of God had, from the fall of our first parents, gradually disposed all things to fulfill his promises, and accomplish the greatest of all his mysteries--the incarnation of his divine Son.

If man had been restored to grace as soon as he forfeited it, he would not have been sufficiently aware of the spiritual blindness, weakness, and wretchedness in which he lay buried under the weight of his guilt. Neither would the infinite mercy, power, and goodness of God, in saving him, have appeared in such a great luster. Therefore, man was left groveling in his miseries for many thousand years, enjoying only a glimpse of his future redemption in the promise and expectation of that redemption. This glimpse though was enough to raise those to redemption if they did not shut their eyes to this light. God always raised several faithful servants and (even when most nations followed the bent of their passions, fell into the most deplorable spiritual blindness, and abandoned His knowledge and true worship to transfer His honor to the basest of creatures and the most criminal objects) reserved to Himself specific people among whom He was known and served, therefore many were saved through faith and hope in the promised Redeemer, who was still to come.

All this time the saints never ceased to beg with sighs and tears that this “Desired of all Nations”[1] might speedily make His appearance. By these inflamed desires they prepared themselves to receive the fruit of His redemption and moved God to hasten and most abundantly pour forth His mercy.

God, who with infinite wisdom brings things to maturity and perfection in their proper season, disclosed this to men by degrees.

- He gave Adam a promise and some knowledge of it.[2]
- He renewed the same to Abraham, limiting it to his seed.[3]
- He confirmed it to Isaac and Jacob.[4] In the prophecy of this latter, it was fixed in the tribe of Judah.[5]
- It was afterwards clearly determined to belong to the posterity of David and Solomon; which was repeated in all the succeeding prophets.

All of these express the particular circumstances of Christ’s birth, life, death, and spiritual kingdom in His church.

The whole written law delivered to Moses consisted of the same expressions referring to Him and the nearer the time approached, the revelation of Him became fuller. The prophecy of turning “swords into ploughshares and lances into pruning-hooks”[6] expressed that the world should be in a profound peace, a peace that would be an emblem of the appearance of the “Prince of Peace.”

According to the prophecy of Jacob,[7] the scepter was to be removed from the tribe of Judah to show establishment of the new spiritual kingdom of the Messiah, which is to endure to the end of the world.

According to Aggaeus,[8] and Malachi,[9] the Messiah was to appear while the second temple stood, which was that of Solomon, restored after the captivity.

Daniel foretold the four great empires that succeeded one another, the first of which were to be destroyed by the latter, viz.: of the Medes, Persians, Macedonians, and Romans, each marked by very distinguishing characters.[10] The seventy weeks of years predicted by Daniel[11] determine the time of the coming of the Messiah and of his death. For, from the order of King Artaxerxes Longimanus for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, seven weeks were to pass in the execution of that work in difficult times. Sixty-two more weeks added to these seven equaled sixty-nine weeks to the manifestation of Christ, who was to be slain in the middle of the seventieth week, and his death was to be followed by the destruction of the city and temple. It was to expiate iniquity, to establish the reign of eternal justice, and to accomplish the visions and prophecies.

The Gentiles had also received some glimmerings of this great event from the prediction of Balaam foretelling a star to arise from Jacob[12]. All over the East, at the time of our Savior’s birth, a great deliverer of mankind was firmly expected, as the pagan historians expressly affirm.

Suetonius[13] writes as follows: “There had prevailed all over the East an ancient and constant notion that the fates had decreed that about that time there should come out of Judea those who should obtain the empire of the world.”

And Tacitus says,[14] “A firm persuasion had prevailed among a great many that it was contained in the ancient sacerdotal books that, about this time, it should come to pass that the East should prevail, and those who should come out of Judea should obtain the empire of the world.”

Josephus, the Jewish historian, took occasion from hence to flatter Vespasian, as if he had been the Messiah foretold by the prophets.[15] Josephus stated, “and the great number of impostors who pretended to this character among the Jews in that and the following century is clear proof of this belief amongst them about the time.”[16]

When Jesus Christ was born, the seventy weeks of Daniel were near being accomplished, and the scepter was departed from the house of Judah, whether we restrain this to that particular tribe or understand it of the whole Jewish nation, so as to give a main share only to that tribe. For Herod, though a Jew by religion, was by birth an Idumean, as Josephus, whose testimony is unexceptionable, informs us, relating how his father, Antipas, who chose rather to be called by the Greek name Antipater, was made, by King Alexander Jannaeus, governor of his own country, Idumea. Herod was raised to the throne by the Romans, excluding the princes of the Asmonean or Jewish royal family, whom Herod entirely cut off; as he did also the principal members of the Sanhedrim, or great council, by which that nation governed itself by its own laws under its kings. This tyrant, moreover, stripped those people of all their other civil rights. Soon after, they were made a Roman province. It was not long afterward that their temple was destroyed and their whole nation dispersed.

So, the Jews themselves are obliged to confess that the time foretold by the prophets for the coming of the Messiah is long since elapsed. Christ was born at the time when the Roman or fourth empire, marked by Daniel, was exalted to its zenith by Augustus, who reigned fifty-seven years from his first command of the army at nineteen years of age: and forty-four from the defeat of Antony, his partner in the empire, in the battle of Actium.

God had preordained the greatness of the Roman empire for the more easy propagation of the gospel over so many nations that formed one monarchy. Augustus had then settled it in peace. A decree was issued by Augustus, and published all over the Roman empire, ordaining that all persons, with their estates and conditions, should be registered at certain places, according to their respective provinces, cities, and families. It was the custom at Rome to make a census or registration of all the citizens every five years, which term was called a lustrum. This general register of all the subjects of the empire, with the value of their estates, was probably ordered so the strength and riches of each province might be known. A general register was made in Syria and Palestine by Cyrinus. Quintilius Varus was at that time proconsul of Syria, on whom the procurator or governor of Judea in some measure depended after it was made a Roman province. Cyrinus succeeded Varus in the government of Syria about ten years after Herod's death, when his son Archelaus was banished and Judea made a province of the empire. Cyrinus then made a second register. But he made the first in the time of Varus, in which he might act as extraordinary deputy, at least for Palestine, then governed by Herod, or this registration is all attributed to him because it was finished by him afterwards. This decree was given by the emperor for political views of state, but it proceeded from an overruling order of providence that, by this most authentic public act, it might be manifest to the whole world that Christ was descended of the house of David and tribe of Judah.

Members of this family were ordered to be registered at Bethlehem, a small town in the tribe of Judah, seven miles from Jerusalem to the south-west. This was called David's-town. David's-town was appointed the place where those who belonged to his family were to be enrolled.[17] Joseph and Mary were perhaps natives of this place, though they then lived at Nazareth, ninety miles almost north of Jerusalem.

Micheas had foretold[18] that Bethlehem (called Ephrata by the Jebusites who first built it) would be ennobled by the birth of Christ. Mary, therefore, though with child, by the special direction of providence, undertook this tedious journey with her husband in obedience to the emperor's order for their enrolment in that city. Origen,[19] Saint Justin,[20] Tertullian,[21] and Saint Chrysostom[22] make no doubt it was believed that Saint Joseph, Mary, and her infant, Jesus, were enrolled. All other characters or marks of the Messiah, mentioned by the prophets, agree it was Jesus Christ.[23]

To show the divine Jesus' descent from David and Judah, the evangelists, Saint Matthew and Saint Luke, give his pedigree, but designedly different, whereby the noted character of the Messiah might be demonstrated by his double genealogy. The reason for the difference was, at that time, public and known to everyone, so it was not thought to be mentioned. It seems most probable that Saint Luke gives the natural and Saint Matthew the legal line of Joseph, who had been adopted into the latter by the frequent case specified in the law of Moses.

Saint Chrysostom helps us take notice of the astonishing mercy and humility of our divine Redeemer in that he did not disdain, in order to save sinners, to choose a pedigree in which several notorious sinners are named. He humbled Himself so much to satisfy and cure our vanity and pride. The same father, upon reading the exordium of Saint Matthew's gospel and of this pedigree, breaks out into this vehement pathos[24] "What cost thou say, O evangelist? Thou hast promised to speak of the only begotten Son of God, and cost thou name David? Admire that the natural Son of God, who is without a beginning, would suffer Himself to be called the son of David so He might make you the Son of God." The circumstances of the great mystery and the wonderful manner in which it was performed should attract our undivided attention and should and be the object of our pious meditations and devotions, particularly on this holy festival.

The Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, after a painful journey of at least four days in a mountainous country, arrived at Bethlehem. There they found the public inns (or caravansaries, as is customary in the East) already full. Further, they were not able to procure any lodgings in the town as everyone despised and rejected their poverty.

Do we spiritually invite Jesus into our hearts and prepare a lodging for his reception in our affections? This is the lodging He is infinitely desirous of and that which

He came from heaven to seek. A Christian soul refuses Him admittance by spiritual nakedness, coldness, sloth, or sin. He will justly complain of such treatment much more than the treatment he received from the people of Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary, in this distress, retired into a cave made in the side of a rock, which is called a stable because it served as a place for animals, perhaps for the animals of lodgers who stayed at the caravansary. It is commonly mentioned that an ox and an ass were in it at that time. This circumstance is not mentioned in holy scripture, but it is supported by the authority of Saint Jerome, Saint Gregory Nazianzen, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, and Prudentius produced by Baronius. If the blessed travelers did not come on foot, they must have had their own ass with them.

In this place, when her time came, the Holy Mother brought forth her divine Son without the pain of other mothers. She remained, both in and after his conception and birth, a pure virgin. With what joy and holy respect did she behold and adore the newborn infant, the Creator of all things made man for us! She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, such as her poverty had allowed her to prepare, and with holy awe laid Him in the manger. “With what solicitude did she watch Him!” says Saint Bonaventure.[25] “With what reverence did she touch Him whom she knew to be her Lord! In like manner are we to admire, with Saint Bernard, “How the holy man Joseph would often take Him upon his knees, smiling at Him.”

We ought also to contemplate how the choirs of angels, descending from above in raptures of astonishment, adore their God in this new wonderful state to which mercy and love have reduced Him and salute Him with hymns of praise. We are invited to join them in the persons of the holy shepherds.

God was pleased that his Son, though born on earth with so much secrecy and in a state of the most astonishing humiliation, should be acknowledged by men and receive the first fruits of their homage and devotion upon his first appearance among them.

Who are they that are favored with the honor of this heavenly call? The great ones of the world are passed over on this occasion. These favored ones are chosen as their character, by their very station, is simplicity and humility. Their obscurity, poverty, and solitude distanced them from the basic dangers of worldly pride. These favored ones were closest to the love and spirit of seclusion, penance, and humility that Christ came to recommend. They certainly also adorned their state with the true spirit of this simplicity and devotion. These happy persons were shepherds who, being strangers to the sensuality and pride of the world, were at that time keeping night watches over their flock.

While the sensual and the proud were asleep in soft beds or employed in pursuits of voluptuousness, vanity, or ambition, an angel appeared to these humble, poor men and they found themselves encompassed with a great brightness. They suddenly

experienced exceedingly great fear but the heavenly messenger said to them, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of exceeding great joy, that shall be to all the people. For this day is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign to you. You shall find the child wrapped in swaddling-clothes and laid in a manger.” Suddenly then appeared with the angel a multitude of heavenly spirits praising God and saying, “Glory be to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good-will.”

After the angels departed, the wondering shepherds said one to another, “Let us go to Bethlehem and let us see this word that has come to pass and that the Lord has showed to us.” They immediately hastened to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph and the infant lying in the manger. Here they adored and worshiped the Messiah as the spiritual king of men. Then, they returned to their flocks and glorified and praised God.[26] Mary was very reserved amidst these occurrences and continued to be silent in her manner, but observed all these things, while pondering them in her heart.

The angel calls this wonderful mystery a subject of great joy to all the people. Indeed, our hearts must be insensible to all spiritual things if they do not overflow with holy joy at considering such a glorious mercy where so much divine goodness is displayed to us, so many inestimable benefits are given to us, and so high an honor is bestowed upon us.

The very thought of and foreknowledge of this mystery comforted Adam in his banishment from Paradise. The promise of it sweetened the laborious pilgrimage of Abraham. The same thoughts encouraged Jacob to dread no adversity and encouraged Moses to take on all dangers and to conquer all difficulties in delivering the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. All the prophets saw it in spirit with Abraham and they rejoiced. If the expectation of His birth gave the patriarchs such joy, how much should the actual fulfillment of His birth create in us! Joy is defined as the delight of a rational creature arising from the possession of a desired object. It must then be proportioned to the nature of the possession. Consequently, our joy should be so much greater--as the reality of a good surpasses the promise of that good, actual possession surpasses the hope, or fruit surpasses the blossom.

Saint Peter Chrysologus illustrates this with regard to this difference between the Old and New Law. He says, “The letter of a friend,” says he, “is comfortable, but his presence is much more welcome. A bond is useful, but the payment more so. Blossoms are pleasing, but only till the fruit appears. The ancient fathers received God’s letters, but we enjoy his presence; they had the promise, we the accomplishment; they the bond, we the payment.”

Christians who rejoice with a worldly, vain, or carnal mirth are strangers to the Spirit

of God and his holy joy. Some exterior marks of this joy are allowed, but those marks of joy must not be sought for themselves. They must suit a penitential state and Christian gravity by their nature. They must be held in extreme moderation and motives of virtue must sanctify them. They must spring from and express an interior spiritual joy that is altogether holy. If sensuality has any part in our festivals, they are heathenish Bacchanals rather than Christian solemnities and on those heathenish Bacchanals we feed and strengthen those passions that Christ was born specifically to teach us to subdue. To sanctify this feast we should consecrate it to devotion and to the exercises of adoration, praise, and love. This is the tribute we must offer to our newborn Savior when we visit Him in spirit with the good shepherds. With them we must enter the stable and contemplate this mystery with a lively faith, by which, under the veils of this infant body, we discover the infinite majesty of our God.

To contemplate immensity shut up in a little body, omnipotence clothed with weakness, the eternal God born in time, the joy of angels bathed in tears, is something far more wonderful than to consider God creating a world out of nothing, moving the heavens, and weighing the universe with a finger. This is a mystery altogether unutterable; to be adored in silence and in raptures of admiration not to be declared by words. “How can anyone speak of the wonder which is here wrought amongst us?” says Saint Fulgentius[27] “A man of God, a creature of his Creator, one who is finite, and was born in time, of Him who is immense and eternal.” Another eminent servant of God cries out upon this mystery,[28] “O Lord our God, how admirable is thy name over all the earth! Truly thou art a God working wonders. I am not now astonished at the creation of the world, at the heavens, at the earth, at the succession of days and seasons; but I wonder to see God enclosed in the womb of a virgin, the Omnipotent lain in a manger, the eternal Word clothed with flesh.”

When the eternal Father brought his Son into the world, he laid his commands on the angels, saying, “Let all the angels of God adore Him.”[29] Though they neither wanted invitation or needed command as their own devotion was their prompter. What they must have felt and experienced when they saw a stable converted into heaven by the wonderful presence of its king and when they beheld that Divine Infant, knowing His weak hands to be those that framed the universe, bordered the heavens with light, and that provided the power and subsistence for all the heavens and earth? Were they not more astonished to contemplate Him in this humble hidden state than when seated on the throne of His glory?

Shouldn't we, for whom this whole mystery is wrought and for whom so much is favored and so highly privileged and ennobled, burn with a holy ardor to perform our part in this duty? Shouldn't we desire to give Him our best return of gratitude, adoration, and praise? We should consecrate a considerable part of our devotions to doing so. Especially on this festival, we should repeat with fervor the psalms that

chiefly consist of acts of divine praises, the hymn of thanksgiving used by the church, commonly ascribed to Saint Ambrose and Saint Austin, and the angelical hymn, "Glory and praise be given by all creatures to God alone in the highest heavens and peace (or pardon, reconciliation, grace, and all spiritual happiness) to men of goodwill." In our devotions, acts of love should also address the Incarnation of the Son of God as the mystery of love; or, properly, a kind of ecstasy of love in which God strips Himself, as it were, of the rays of his glory to visit us, to become our brother, and to make Himself in all things like to us.

Love is the tribute that God wants from us in a particular manner in this mystery. This is the return He requires of us for all He has done and suffered for us. He says to us, "Son, give me thy heart." To love Him is our sovereign happiness and the highest dignity and honor to which a creature (man) can aspire. We are bound to it upon the title of the strictest justice. God, being infinite in all perfections, is infinitely worthy of our love and we should love Him with an infinite love if we were capable of it. We are also bound to love Him in gratitude, especially for the benefit of his Incarnation, whereby He gave us Himself to rescue us from extreme miseries and to bestow upon us the most incomprehensible graces and favors.

Man had sinned and had become an associate of the devil. When Christ was born, almost all the nations of the earth had, by blindly following their passions, fallen into total forgetfulness of God who made them. Almost all nations of the earth had deified first inanimate stars and planets and then they deified dead men, the most impious and profligate of the human race. They also deified the works of their own hands--often beasts, monsters, and their own basest passions. They authorized the most infamous crimes by sanctioning pretended religious rites. From every corner of the earth vice cried to heaven for vengeance.

The Jews, who had been favored by God above all other nations and declared his peculiar people, nevertheless gave in to envy, jealousy, pride, and other vices. So, even among them, the number of privileged souls who remained faithful to God appeared to be very small.

Such was the face of the earth when the Son of God honored it with his divine presence and conversation. Who would not have imagined when he heard that God was coming to visit the earth that it must have been to destroy it by fire from heaven, as He had done Sodom, and to bury its rebellious inhabitants in hell? But no, while the world was reeking with blood and oppressions and overrun with impiety, He came to save it.

How does the ingratitude and baseness of man set off his lover? At the sight of our miseries his compassion was stirred up the more tenderly and his bowels yearned toward us. He came to save us when we deserved nothing at his hands but eternal

torments. The way He came to visit us shows yet in a more astonishing manner the excess of his goodness and charity for us. To engage our hearts more strongly, He has made Himself like us by taking upon Himself our nature. “God was seen upon earth, and has conversed with men.[30] The word was made flesh.”[31] A God is born an infinite babe, the Eternal is become a young child, the Omnipotent is made weak, He who is essentially infinite and independent is voluntarily reduced to a state of subjection and humbled beneath his own creatures. It is love, the love of us sinful men, that did all this!

Saint Francis of Assisi appeared unable to contain himself through excessive tenderness of love when he spoke of this mystery and named the Little Babe of Bethlehem. Saint Bernard says, “God, on the throne of His majesty and greatness, commands our fear and our homage but in His littleness especially, our love.” This father invites all created beings to join Him in love and adoration and to listen in awful silence to the proclamation of the festival in honor of this mystery made in the Roman Martyrology: “Hear ye, heavens,” says he, “and lend your ears, oh earth. Stand in raptures of astonishment and praise, oh you whole creation, but you chiefly, oh man. ‘Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, was born in Bethlehem of Judah.’ Oh short word of the Eternal Word abridged for us, but filled with heavenly sweetness! The affection of this melting sweetness struggles within, earnestly laboring widely to diffuse its teeming abundance, but finds not words. For such is the grace and energy of this speech that it relishes less if one iota in it be changed.” In another sermon, having repeated the same words, he adds, “At these words my soul melts and my spirit boils within me, hastening with burning desire to publish to you this exultation and joy.[32] If this love was kindled in our breast, nothing would be sweeter to us than to abide in spirit at the feet of Jesus, pondering the motive, that is, the excess of divine love, that brought Him from heaven, and contemplating the other circumstances of this mystery.

How should we salute and adore those sacred hands that are weakened, wrapped in clouts, or stretched on the manger for love of us, but which move the heavens and uphold and govern the universe? How should we salute and adore those divine feet that will undergo so many fatigues and will be bored on the cross for us? How should we salute and adore the blood that purples His little veins and dyes His blessed cheeks, but which is the price of our redemption and will be one day poured out upon the cross? How is this sweet countenance, the joy of angels, now concealed! But it will one day be buffeted, bruised, and covered with filthy phlegm. How ought we respectfully to honor it? His holy flesh, more pure than angels, even now begins to suffer from the cold and other hardships! Do we not desire to defend it from these injuries? But this cannot be allowed. No one could oppose the work of our redemption.

Sin is the cause of all that He suffers, so shouldn't we detest and shun that monster? The loving eyes of the divine Jesus pierce our souls. They are now bathed in tears, though, as Saint Bernard says, "Jesus weeps not as other children or at least not on the same account." Other children cry for their wants and weakness. Jesus cries for compassion and love for us. May these precious tears move the heavenly Father to show us mercy. May they soften, wash, and cleanse our souls! "These tears excite in me both grief and shame," says Saint Bernard, "when I consider my own insensibility amidst my spiritual miseries." But nothing in this contemplation will more strongly move us than to penetrate into the interior workings of this divine Savior's holy soul and to consider the ardor of His zeal in the praises of His Father and in His supplications to His Father on our behalf; His compassion for us; and the constant oblation He made of Himself to obtain mercy and grace for us. Such meditations and pious entertainment of our souls will have great force in kindling the fire of holy love in our hearts. But all these efforts would be weak as long as we do not labor effectually to remove all obstacles to this holy love in our affections. To cure these disorders is the chief end of the birth of Christ.

Christ's actions are important instructions to us similar to His discourses. His life is the gospel reduced to practice. It is enough to study it to understand well His doctrine. To become perfect we must imitate His example. He instructs us in His very nativity--beginning first to practice and then to preach.[33] Hence, the manger was His first pulpit and from it He teaches us the cure of our spiritual maladies. Our true Physician and Savior has come, as the holy prophets desired and foretold and as our miseries required. He wanted no honors or scepters on earth. He came not to taste of our vanities, riches, or glory. He came to seek our miseries, our poverty, our humiliation; to repair the injuries our pride had offered to the Godhead; and to apply a remedy to our souls. Therefore, He chose not a palace or a great city, but a poor mother, a little town, and a stable. He, who adorns the world and clothes the lilies of the fields beyond the majesty of Solomon in his glory, is wrapped up in rags and laid in a manger. This He chose to be the great sign of His appearance. "And this shall be a sign to you," said the angel to the shepherds, "you shall find the child wrapped in swaddling-clothes and laid in a manger."

Are rags and a manger the wonderful sign of our God appearing on earth? Are these the works of the great Messiah, of whom the prophets spoke such glorious things? This was what scandalized the Jews in His birth. "Take from us those clouts and that manger," said Marcion, who was unjustly prepossessed against the humility of such an appearance. But this is a sign that God Himself chose and planned. This is His standard; a sign intended to contradict our pride, covetousness, and sensuality. Do we not wonder at the stupendous virtue and efficacy of this sign, which is so

shocking to the senses and passions but drew to it the little and great, the magi and the shepherds, who knew their Savior by it, and returned glorifying God? How many have enrolled themselves under the same standard?

Christ set up this mark for us! It is our powerful instruction. “The grace of God the Savior hath appeared to all men, instructing us,” says the apostle[34]--all men, the rich and the poor, the great and the small, all who desire to have a share in His grace, or in His kingdom. What breast can be so stony that it is not softened by this example? Our inveterate diseases seemed almost unconquerable. But Christ is come, the omnipotent Physician, to apply a remedy to them. Our disorders flow from three sources. “All that is in the world is the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of eyes, and the pride of life.”[35]

Concupiscence of the flesh is the inordinate inclination to gratify the senses. Christ, to encourage us to renounce this love of sensual pleasures and to satisfy His justice by His own sufferings for our offences in this way, begins to suffer as soon as He begins to live. At His very birth He exposes His delicate body to the inclemency of the severest season of the year, to the hard boards of the manger for a cradle, to hunger, and to a privation of the most ordinary conveniences and necessities of human life. His tender and divine limbs tremble with cold, His eyes stream with tears, and He consecrated the first moments of His life to suffering and pain. He who directs the seasons, governs the universe, and disposes all things has designed everything for this very result. Yet we study in all things to flatter our senses, to pamper our bodies in softness and every gratification, and to remove everything that is hard or painful. Is this to imitate the model of penance and mortification that was set for us? Christ, by these sufferings and this privation of all things, shows us that He came to satisfy the justice of His Father and to repair the injury done to His glory by our sins. By His coming, He also teaches us the remedies of our disorders and shows us how they are to be applied to our souls. He came to instruct us in all we want to know and do to save our souls and to reform all our irregular passions and manners. He could not have preached this more powerfully than He has done by the example of His birth! How is it that we are not yet sufficiently persuaded that there is not a cheaper rate for our salvation than that of a constant practice of self-denial and penance?

Concupiscence of the eyes is the love of riches. This is the second root of the three primary disorders that reign in the world and the foundation of its false maxims. Our Savior teaches us to root this out of our hearts by embracing the most austere poverty and to “consecrate it in His divine body,” to use the expression of Saint Bernard. He shows us the danger of riches and the crime and disorder of a love or eager pursuit of them. Riches are good in the designs of providence and what is more noble than to have the means to relieve the distresses of others? All pretend to

have this motive when amassing riches but seek riches only in the interest of self-love. The rich and the poor adore riches. This is the disorder. Men may be poor in spirit in the midst of riches. Those who are blessed with riches must fear them, lest they find admittance into their hearts. This is truly an extraordinary grace. Riches are, moreover, most often either the cause or the effect of iniquity; faulty either in their acquisition or their use. In their acquisition, injustices are so frequent, that Seneca says, "Every rich man is either unjust or the heir of one who was unjust." The organ of the Holy Ghost declares, "He that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent." [36] A desire of riches usually attends the acquisition, which is often excessive. A desire of riches is always a spiritual fever that destroys the love of heavenly-goods and consumes the very vitals of the interior life. A desire of riches is an idolatry, as Saint Paul calls it, [37] and the same master who commanded the idols to be banished out of the world also obliges us to banish the love of riches out of our hearts. The least hesitation draws on us the curse of heaven.

This desire in the rich is insatiable. The prophet Isaiah said to them, [38] "Woe to you that join house to house and lay field to field, even to the end of the place. Shall you alone dwell in the midst of the earth?" And the Roman satirist reproached one who seemed to intend to make all Rome a single house for himself. The rich are anxious for superfluities and are tormented by extravagant desires. The poor often have as much to correct in this area. A poor man's desire for possessions is often as criminal as a rich man's attachment to possessions. The poor man's desire often exposes him to a thousand injustices, under subtle disguises, and shuts the heart to divine grace. Let all labor in the world but not for the world and let all inordinate desires and anxiety be cut off. Let the poor place themselves nearest to Jesus Christ and, learning from Him the happiness of their condition, study their own sanctification in it. Let the rich look upon their possessions as a burden hard to bear well and labor to sanctify them by a good use and by imitating Christ our model in a perfect spirit of disengagement and poverty. Is not the life of a Christian to be penitential? Where is that life in the rich? Vicious inclinations are roused and strengthened by riches, incentives and opportunities. Vicious inclinations and passions regarding them often reign with uncontrollable empire in the heart of the rich. To other dangers we must add the misfortune that the rich are surrounded by flatterers and others artfully conspire to blind and betray them amidst their dangers. How often does it happen that ministers of God deceive them, calling evil good and good evil, soothing their passions, or disguising their obligations. But without entering into this detail, Christ's curses should suffice to make all Christians tremble at the dangers of this state. This means, though Christ declares riches one of the most dangerous obstacles of grace, many saints have changed them into the means of their salvation, joining with their possession a spirit of poverty and disengagement, and making them the instruments of justice and charity. It is therefore neither to

riches nor to poverty that Christ promises the kingdom of heaven; but to the disengagement of the heart from the love of riches in whatever state persons live.

Pride of life is the third and principal source of our disorders and our deepest wound. Humility is displayed in the most wonderful manner in the birth of the Son of God. What is the whole mystery of the Incarnation but the most astonishing humiliation of the Deity? To expiate our pride and to repair the injury offered to the adorable Trinity by our usurpation, the eternal Son of God divests Himself of His glory and takes upon Himself the form of man. Who would not expect to hear that, when God descended upon earth, the heavens would bend beneath Him, the earth would be moved at His sight, and all nature would be arrayed with magnificence? “He came not,” says Saint Chrysostom,[39] “so as to shake the world at the presence of His majesty: nor did He appear in thunder and lightning, as on Mount Sinai; but He descended sweetly, no man knowing it.” “While all things were in deep silence and the night was in the midst of her course, thy Almighty Word came down from heaven, from thy royal throne.”[40] Not one of the great ones of the world was apprized of this great mystery. Those few chosen persons to whom He is pleased to reveal Himself are called to adore Him in the closest secrecy and silence. If this is the manner in which He comes, what is the appearance that He makes among men? How does the King of heaven come to make His appearance in such a state of abasement and so destitute of due honor and every convenience? His birth is, notwithstanding, the masterpiece of infinite wisdom, mercy, and omnipotence. These perfections shine nowhere more admirably than in this mystery. He came that way to be our Physician, to correct our mistaken judgment of things, to heal our pride, to bring and to encourage us to use the remedy to our grievous maladies, and to overcome our reluctance to its bitterness by taking it first Himself. Therefore humility was to be His ensign and the angel gave His rags and manger to the shepherds as a mark by which He was to be known. “This shall be to you a sign.” What do we behold? A God poor, a God humbled, a God suffering! Thus, can we any longer entertain thoughts of sensuality, ambition, or pride?

If this humility of a God is most astonishing, is not the blindness and pride of man, after such an example, something, if possible, still more inconceivable? Christ is born this way only to atone for our pride, to shower us the beauty of humility, and to plant it in our hearts. Humility is His standard and the spirit of sincere humility is the mark by which His disciples must be known to be His. Can we profess ourselves to be His followers or look upon the example He set for us and continue to entertain thoughts of ambition and pride? To learn the interior perfect spirit of humility and all other virtues we have no more powerful means than serious and frequent meditation on His nativity. Placing ourselves in spirit at

the manger, after the tender of our homage by acts of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, and love, we must study in Him the lessons of all virtues and must present to our newborn king our earnest supplications to obtain from Him all those gifts and graces that He comes to bestow upon us.

Let us learn humility from the lowliness in which He appears and from the humility of His sacred heart. Let us learn meekness by beholding the sweetness and patience with which this God-man receives all injuries from men and from the elements. Let us learn resignation from the indifference with which He bears cold, wants, wrongs, and whatever is sent Him. Let us learn obedience from the most perfect submission of our blessed Savior to the will of His heavenly Father, from His birth--offering Himself without reserve--even to His death on the cross. Let us learn charity from the ardor of His divine love. Let us learn a contempt of the world and its perishable goods from the extreme poverty that Christ made His voluntary choice. Let not the spirit and maxims of the world reign any longer in our hearts, since Christ has shown us such powerful motives and presented us such sovereign remedies against them. Prior to this, have we not been idolaters of ourselves by pride, idolaters of the world by vanity and avarice, and idolaters of our flesh by living enslaved to our senses? We renounce these idols at baptism but haven't we lived in a perfidious violation of these vows? Unless we sincerely renew these engagements now and banish these idols out of our affections, Jesus can never be spiritually born in our souls and we can never inherit His spirit, which was the result of His carnal nativity. He is meek, the king of peace, and the lover of purity and chaste affections. He is the avowed enemy to every spirit of pride, hatred, and revenge.

We must earnestly invite and entreat Him, who vehemently desires to be born in our hearts, to prepare our souls to receive Him by His graces, to cleanse our souls by His mercy, to inspire us with sincere compunction. We must invite and entreat Him to banish every inordinate passion, to fill us with His holy spirit, and, by it, to reign in all our affections, thoughts, and actions so, as by His nativity, He is all ours and so we may be entirely His. Without this condition we frustrate in ourselves the end of His coming. He is not born for us, unless by His spirit, He is born in us. Let us conjure Him by the infinite love with which He came for this very purpose, that He suffer us not wretchedly to defeat this His mercy. For this happiness we ought ardently to repeat that petition that He Himself put into our mouths, "Thy kingdom come."

The custom of one priest celebrating several masses on the same day prevailed in many places on great festivals.[41] Prudentius, in His twelfth hymn, "On the Crowns of Martyrs," mentions that on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the 29th of June, the pope On Christmas day, earlier popes said three masses--the first in the Liberian basilica, the second in the Church of Saint Anastasia, and the third in the Vatican, as Benedict XIV proves from ancient Roman orders or missals. Saint

Gregory the Great speaks of saying three masses on this day.[42] This custom of the popes was universally imitated and is everywhere retained, though not of precept. Pouget[43] says, these three masses are celebrated to honor the triple birth of Christ--the first, by which He proceeds from His Father before all ages; the second, from the Blessed Virgin Mary; and the third, by which He is spiritually born in our souls by faith and charity. That Christ was born on the 25th of December, Pope Benedict XIV proves by the authority of Saint Chrysostom, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Austin, and answers the objections of Scaliger and Samuel Basnage.[44] He doubts not but the Greek church originally kept this festival on the same day[45] and He takes notice that, among the principal feats of the year, it holds the next place after Easter and Whitsunday.[46]

END NOTES

- 1 Aggaeus ii. 7.
- 2 Gen. iii, 15.
- 3 Gen. xxii. 18.
- 4 Gen. xxvi. and xxviii.
- 5 Gen. xlix. 8.
- 6 Isa. ii. 4 Mich.. iv. 2.
- 7 Gen. xlix. 8, 10.
- 8 Aggaeus ii. 3
- 9 Malachi iii. I.
- 10 Dan. ii. 3 v. 20; viii. 3 See Rollin, or Mezengui, or Calmet.
- 11 Dan. ix. 21, &c. See Nouveau Comment. t. ix. p. 500.
- 12 Numb, xxiv, 17.
- 13 In Vespas.
- 14 Tacit, in Annal.
- 15 See the life of Josephus.
- 16 Acts v, 36; xxi, 28, Joseph, Ant. lib, xx. c. 2 et 6; lib. viii. c. I. Idem. De Bello Jud. lib. vii. c. 31, &c. Read Dissert. sur les Faux Messies, in the new Fr. Comment. t. xi. p. 21.
- 17 Luke ii. I. 2, 3.
- 18 Mich. ii. 2.
- 19 Orig. Hom. ii. in Luc.
- 20 Saint Justin, Apol. i. vol. 2.
- 21 Tert. lib.. iv. cont. Marcion.
- 22 Saint Chrys. in Mat. hic.
- 23 See Calmet's Diss. sur les Caracteres du Messie, suivant les Juifs, at the head of his comm. on Saint Matthew.
- 24 Saint Chrys. Hom, 2, in Mat. t. vii. p. 21, ed. Ben.
- 25 Saint Bonav. Vit. Christi, c. 10.

- 26 Luke ii. 9, 20.
- 27 Saint Fulgentius, Serm, ii. de Nativ.
- 28 Arnoldus Bonnevallis, Serm. do Nativ. inter Opera Saint Cypriani.
- 29 2 Heb. i. 6.
- 30 Baruch iii. 38.
- 31 John i. 14.
- 32 Saint Bern. Serm. vi. in Vigil. Nativ p. 771.
- 33 Acts i. I.
- 34 Tit. ii. II.
- 35 I John ii. 16.
- 36 Prov. xxviii. 20.
- 37 Col. iii. 5.
- 38 Isa. v. 8.
- 39 Saint Chrysost. in Ps.. 50, p. 536 t.v.
- 40 Wisd. xviii. 14, 15.
- 41 See Bona Rer. Liturg. lib. i. c. 18, n. 6; Joseph. Vicecomes, De antiquis missae ritibus, lib. iii. c. 28 &c.
- 42 Saint Greg. Hom. viii. in Evang.
- 43 Instit. Cathol. t.i.p. 814.
- 44 De Festis Christi D. c. 17, n. 45, p. 411. See F. Honore, Regles de Crib. lib. iii. Diss. 2, Art. I, and Tillemont, note 4.
- 45 N. 67, loco cit. p. 422.
- 46 N. 57, p. 417.



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