

The Incarnation: God-becoming-Man and Our Humanity being Touched by the Divine

Recently I was asked by my fraternity (St. Francis of Assisi, Cornwall PEI) to provide a sharing on the Incarnation as an On-going Formation session at our monthly meeting in December. This proved to be challenging and caused me to devote time, reflection and study to this endeavour. The result proved to be spiritually most rewarding. What commenced as a task ultimately became a gift...my understanding of the Incarnation was greatly enhanced. As a result, I wish to share this gift with others. Dear OFS brothers and sisters, here is my presentation:

I have been asked to help us focus on and celebrate the Incarnation. To do this effectively, I would like to suggest that first we need to (individually and collectively) acknowledge that the Incarnation is a mystery...indeed it is one of the greatest sacred mysteries that God has bestowed upon us.

So initially, before I present what I have to share about the Incarnation I want to help us better appreciate the nature of "mystery". In a way, mystery offers a certain richness and beauty to our lives. Accordingly, I propose that rather than our viewing mystery as a conundrum to be solved, we need to perceive mystery as a sacred reality to be entered into... to be embraced...to be lived and ultimately celebrated.

To help connect these words about mystery with the Incarnation, I want to refer us to the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. In this letter Paul calls "Christ a mystery" and sees Christ as "an unfathomable treasure" and refers to his coming among us as " a mystery....a mystery kept hidden through all the ages" and that Christ's birth was "according to God's plan [a plan beyond human understanding]...formed from all eternity". Finally, it may interest you to know that In the New Jerusalem Bible translation, Chapter 3 of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is entitled: Paul, servant of the mystery.

*Thus, notwithstanding any of the thoughts/ideas I share with you this day, **the Incarnation will remain quintessentially a mystery...yes indeed a sacred mystery that we are all invited to celebrate joyously.** With that in mind, let me begin.*

It has been said that Franciscans are more Christmas people than Easter people i.e. that the Birth of Christ is more central to our charism. In this we receive direction from St. Francis who called Christmas "the feast of all feasts". Why was Francis so enthralled with Jesus' birth? I have seven explanations to share with you...undoubtedly there are many more:

- *First, Francis was utterly amazed that his God would choose to come among us...to assume our humanity.*
- *Second, and perhaps most importantly, Francis firmly believed that Christ came among us out of love for us...this is a core Franciscan belief and a central tenet of our charism.*
- *Third, this act of love by God penetrated Francis' heart...convinced him... converted him...convicted him.... that he was loved through and through by his God.*
- *Fourth, this conviction of God's love for him became the driving force in his life...and the anchor of his life...it gave him a profound way at looking at life.*

- *Fifth, it was not just the fact that God became human...it was the manner that He did so...born humbly in a stable because there was no room for the Son of God in the local inn.*
- *Sixth, this led Francis to adopt the virtue of poverty for his life...if God came into this world poor...unlike Francis who was born into a well-to-do family...he would also become poor...in his imitation of his God, Jesus.*
- *Seventh, the birth of Christ...born to a woman...led Francis to have a great affection and devotion to Mary, the Mother of God...who by carrying Jesus in her womb made Christ Francis' brother...a reality that he treasured, throughout his life.*

So as you can see, the Incarnation had an overwhelming influence on Francis....and how he chose to live his life. Murray Bodo in his latest book, "The Seven Teachings from St. Francis" reminds us that one of the best ways that we learn is through story. We are all familiar with the story of Christ's birth as portrayed in Luke's Gospel....it is a beautiful story filled with drama, majesty, humbleness and mystery. Francis sought to bring this story of Christ's birth alive for his fellow believers at Greccio one Christmas Eve. In doing so he perpetuated people's engagement with God's story. And we continue the narrative by enacting and celebrating Christ's birth with the use of our traditional Christmas creche, each and every year. This iconic nativity scene reappears annually in churches, in homes and in communities throughout the world. In this way Francis helped make God's story known and celebrated.

But let us step outside Franciscan circles for just a moment...for many have written about the Incarnation. I have a series of statements for your consideration that are worthy of thoughtful reflection:

- *One author described Christ's birth as the pivotal event of the Divine-Human Encounter.*
- *Another has asserted that Christ's birth was the major turning point in human history*
- *Some theologians portray our God as self-communicating...and thus the Incarnation can be seen as the ultimate act of self-communication...God coming among us so that we might come to know Him more personally, more intimately.*
- *Pope Francis in his treatise on Mercy invites us to see Christ as the face of God's mercy...in this light the Incarnation can be viewed as act of God's love, compassion and mercy.*
- *In a text entitled "The Abundance of Love" Archbishop Joseph Raya, of the Melkite Greek Catholic church offers a number of thought-provoking statements regarding the Incarnation. This is what he has written:*
 - *"The Incarnation is the pure act of love by which God desired to be one with his creation"*
 - *"[God] offered himself as a grace and gift to our humanity and elevated [our humanity] to a higher level of being"*
 - *"[By the Incarnation] our humanity was penetrated by divinity"*
 - *Archbishop Raya quotes Athanasius of Alexandria as saying "God came to bear our flesh in order that we may become bearers of the Spirit."*
 - *Archbishop Raya asserts that "because of the Incarnation the sanctification ...of our humanity is...[evidenced by] the gift of God's indwelling in us"*
 - *Finally he offers that "for Christ ...the Man-God ...nothing human could ever be alien" ...underlying how fully and completely Christ understands our humanity*

As a way of underlining the centrality of the Incarnation in our spiritual lives, it may be interesting to pose the question: what would our lives be like if Christ had not come? Spiritually where would we be? For me, the word "darkness" comes to mind. It could be suggested that we would be living in spiritual darkness. Our knowledge of God would be limited and perhaps skewed. Without a guiding light...Jesus

our Light...we would not be Christians or Catholics as the Church would not exist. We would not be Franciscans since Francis would not have fallen in love with Christ. It would certainly be a dismal existence...with little hope or promise or understanding.

I want to share a short excerpt from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. This is what Paul has to say about the profundity of Christ's birth:

"...when the completion of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman...so that we [might] receive adoption ...[and] God sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son crying 'Abba Father' ...so you are ...an heir by God's own act." Ga 4: 4-6

Thus, in the words of St. Paul, the Incarnation is God reaching out to his people...in love and friendship...inviting us to become part of His family. It was act of promise and covenant: to be with us always...to lead us out of darkness...with the light of knowledge of God...to feed us...to nourish us...to strengthen us ...on our journeys...with truth...with life....with abundant spiritual blessings.

So my friends, the Incarnation was an integral part of God's plan: to share with us His Divinity by sharing in our humanity. In short, the Incarnation changed the world...changed our world...changed Francis' world. It is little wonder that Francis held this God-come-among-us event in such high esteem and wanted to teach us to celebrate Emmanuel's coming with abundant joy!

In closing I wish to extend best wishes for a Blessed and Holy Christmas celebration in 2020 to all my fellow OFS members. It has been a year with many challenges given the Covid-19 restrictions preventing many of us to meet face-to-face in fraternity gatherings. May we meet each other spiritually "at the crib" this Christmas!