

—AD 2013—
**The First Christmas Present:
“Give It A Way.”**

Back in 1958, the first member of my class at the University of Notre Dame I met was Jack Curtin—*Requiescat in pace*. After introducing ourselves, our first question was this one: “Where are you from, Charlie?” “Malden.” “Where are you from, Jack?” “Wellesley.” And so it was with scores of other strangers who became classmates at Notre Dame in 1958, and so it has been in normal introductory conversation throughout all of recorded history. Even Jesus’ identity is tied to the question, “Where are you from?” He is from Nazareth: He is Jesus of Nazareth.

An initial question concerning a person’s origins is not irrational. Since human beings are probably more made by others than they make themselves—or are at least significantly made by others—the answer to the question “Where are you from?” may well tell us something about the person we are meeting.

It is to precisely answer this question that in the Roman Catholic Church, the Gospel read on Christmas Day is the opening of the Gospel of Saint John:

*In the beginning was the Word (logos);
the Word was with God,
and the Word was God
and through Him all things came into being,
and without Him nothing came to be...
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*

On Christmas Day, it might seem more fitting to read a Gospel narrative relating the story of Jesus’ birth that could include the manger, shepherds, angels, star and the magi. Such a choice would seem especially fitting since the structure and symbolism of the narratives of Jesus’ birth are meant to evince the sense of the Holy One present and at work in a new way. Nevertheless, on the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus, the Roman Catholic Church chooses to proclaim the Good News via the opening of the Gospel of John. Why?

Be it in AD 33 or AD 2013, an encounter with Jesus is an encounter with a great and incomprehensible mystery. Of course, the encounter with any person is an encounter with a great and incomprehensible mystery if we chose to see who is in our presence. Whether Giorgio Armani or the local Salvation Army has garbed the person before us, there is infinity behind each face and an incomprehensible mystery beneath the attire.

And so also it is with Jesus. For, whatever the incomprehensible mystery is that abides in each and every human being, that mystery also abides within Jesus for He is human like us in all things but sin (Phil 2:6-11; Heb 2:17). But with Jesus there is more. Perhaps it is unnamable, but its presence is clearly sensed.

Pontius Pilate became aware of this as he was judging Jesus. The Gospel tells us that after Jesus was scourged, crowned with thorns, and brought before him in the praetorium, Pilate—in a state of growing fear—asked Him, “*Where are you from?*” (Jn 19:9). Jesus did

not respond. Pilate knew that Jesus was, physically, from Nazareth. But he also intuited that “Nazareth” was not the answer to the question he was now asking with escalating urgency and trepidation. There was more. He sensed that this person’s place of origin might not be Nazareth but from a source he dare not offend. So powerful was this intuition, that the Gospel tells us a few lines later that “*Consequently, he tried to release Him*” (Jn 19:12).

It is to unambiguously answer Pilate’s question—the same question asked by everyone who has ever heard of Jesus—that the Roman Catholic Church uses the opening of the Gospel according to the Evangelist John as the universal Christmas Day Gospel reading: *In the beginning was the Word (logos)... and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. Against the commercial tsunami of shining and shimmering simulacra that is today’s secularized Christmas, the Church liturgically places as a counterpoint the truth of what happened on this day two thousand years ago and what should be the laser-like focus of our attention and memory on this day: *In the beginning was the Word (logos)... and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*.

The infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke are, of course, suffused by signs and symbols, quotations and metaphors, which point to the entrance of the *mysterium tremendum* into history in a manner hitherto unimagined. Over the centuries, Christian men and women with artistic gifts—hymnographers, artists, poets—have entered into these Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus and illuminated, ever more brilliantly, the ineffability and uncreated peace of Divinity residing within and beneath them. Something wonderful, something staggering of cosmic proportions—of more than cosmic proportions—has taken place with the birth of this child

God from all Eternity has become a human being. Now, the one, true God is with us in a manner never before known—as one of us. God has crossed over the infinite distance that separated Creator from creature and is now literally on our side. This should be the memory and the truth that we Christians should exclusively ponder and celebrate on Christmas Day. The Incarnation is not just another of the great deeds of God. No deed of God prior to it, not even creation itself, surpasses it. Unfortunately in our time, on December 25 we devote about an hour at Church remembering and celebrating it, and pondering what it calls those chosen by Christ (Jn 15:16) as His disciples to be and to do.

To claim that consciousness of the Incarnation is today totally absent from the Christian consciousness at Christmas would be to claim too much. However, Incarnation consciousness has certainly been told to sit over in the corner of Christmas consciousness, until called upon to make its *de rigueur* cameo appearance. And, this has consequences. Songs such as *Jingle Bells*, *White Christmas*, *Santa Baby*, etc., and fictional characters such as Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer have as much to do with proclaiming the great deed of God’s love taking place on this day as the song *Easter Parade* and the fictional character of the Easter Bunny have to do with proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. They may induce feelings that are pleasant, even delightful, and may leave a person with fond memories for decades to come. But they are songs and symbols that point only to the transitory, the totally perishable tinsel of life.

The balance between the enormity of the reality that took place two thousand years ago and the paucity of time, mind and money expended to remember, celebrate, ponder and proclaim it is disproportionate in the extreme. The causes for this are beyond the scope of

this reflection, with one exception. The exception is the cause that I think is the cause behind all the others causes. To put that cause in a nutshell, I will paraphrase Saint Paul's famous "cut to the chase" sound bite, "*If Christ has not risen our faith is in vain.*" I would paraphrase this in relation to Christmas thusly: "If the Word of God, God, did not become human on that first Christmas Day, our faith is in vain." So many have lost even a feel for the magnitude of what happened on the day Christ was born. To try to convey a bit of the immensity of the event that is the source of Christmas, but whose momentousness is radically downplayed in a supercharged commercialized Christmas, here is a speck of history from my life.

In the late 1970s I invited Lanza del Vasto—to whom Gandhi gave the name Shantidas, Servant of Peace, which Lanza used for the remainder of his life—to come to the U.S. to direct a retreat and to lecture at various venues on the Nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels and His way of Nonviolent Love of friends and enemies, a subject on which he was very well versed. The Trappist's community at Saint Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, MA, was one of the places in which he spoke. After the lecture, a monk, Theophane, who was our escort, asked him why he kept talking about Jesus as *the way*. Theophane bolstered his question by saying, "*Gandhi is a way. Buddha is a way. Moses is a way. Mohammed is a way. Dorothy Day is a way. You, Lanza del Vasto, are a way. Why do you keep referring exclusively to Jesus as the way?*" Del Vasto responded, "*Because Jesus says, 'I am the way', not 'I am a way.'*" Theophane rejoined by saying, "*Human history is like a lake that the sun is shining down on. Every once in a while, there is a momentary sparkle on this lake. Gandhi is a sparkle. Buddha is a sparkle. Moses is a sparkle. Mohammed is a sparkle. Dorothy Day is a sparkle. You, Lanza de Vasto, are a sparkle. Jesus also is a sparkle. Indeed, he is the biggest and brightest sparkle of all the sparkles, but he is not the only sparkle on the lake.*" Del Vasto in response said, "*I agree. Those you mention are sparkles that reveal in greater or lesser voltage the glory of God. And I agree Jesus is the biggest and brightest of the sparkles. But, Jesus is also the Sun! He is the Sun that is the source of all sparkles, without which nothing would have sparkled in this world, without which no sparkle would ever have come to be.*"

There lies, albeit analogously, the truth of the opening of the Gospel of St. John and the supereminent truth of Christmas. This baby in the arms of Mary and Joseph is God! The son that Mary and Joseph are holding in their arms is not only another momentary sparkle on the human scene, but is also the never setting Sun that enlightens all humanity, whose rays heal every wound great and small, and whose energy enters all, the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt 5:45), and bestows upon them the power to run, walk or drag themselves along the Way that brings each and all to an eternally graced union with God.

But who can believe it?

Who can believe the child in Joseph and Mary's arms is God Incarnate? Few do. Yet, such is the touchstone truth of the Gospel and of our Catholic/Christian faith. Such is the truth on which all other truths of the Gospel depend. Restoring this truth to its supreme place in the celebration of a Christmas experience that has become primarily a commercial-palooza is the task of the Church, domestic and institutional. (It most definitely is not the task of the state.)

But first and foremost it is a task of truth, maybe a *battle* for truth, in the individual Christian's mind and heart. Once the truth of the matter is firmly settled there, the Christian will be able to discern which activities are authentically Christmas-appropriate and which befog, besmirch or short circuit the truth and the power of the ineffable mystery of that most sublime present given on that first Christmas Day: God with us as one of us!

At the nativity of Jesus the gift, the present, that God bestows on us is that He becomes a partaker of our humanity so that we can become partakers of His Divinity. Or, as it is prayed and proclaimed at the time of the offertory in the Catholic Roman Rites Eucharist, "*May we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.*" Or, as the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches exultingly and accurately proclaim the sublimity of this Gift of the First Noel, "*God became a human being so that human beings could become God!*" Or, as the New Testament teaches, "*He has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Pt 1:4). Now there is a Christmas present to joyfully proclaim as directed by the words of the African American spiritual (1865):

*Go tell it on the mountain
Over the hill and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born!*

And, who is this Jesus Christ who is born? He is God "*made flesh.*" And who is God? "*God is love (agapé)*" (1Jn 4:7-8, 16). And why did God become human? So, human beings could become God. Love became a human being so that human beings could become Love. But there are many definitions, spirits, forms, understanding and experience of love. How can a human being possibly know amidst them all which partakes in the nature of divinity, which unites him or her with God, which is the very life of God, which when chosen is participation in Eternal Life? God Incarnate tells us how at His Last Supper, the First Eucharist: "*My children I will be with you only a little while longer, so now I say to you. I give you a new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another*" (Jn 13:33-34; 15:12).

There is the Christmas present of all Christmas presents. There is the unsurpassable Christmas present. God becomes a human being so that human beings can know, see, experience and understand on a totally human scale —and thereby choose—that love that is Divine. They now have a human model, God Himself, for that love that partakes in the nature of God, that love that leads one and all to Eternal Life, that love that is participation in Eternal Life the moment it is chosen, that love that vanquishes evil and death forever, that love that is of God, that love that is God. And, that love, as it is lived by Jesus Christ from the cradle to the cross, is a Nonviolent Love of all, friends and enemies.

Christ is born! Let us glorify Him! Let us follow Him, for our sake and for the sake of others, from here to Eternity.

—EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY