

My friends in Christ, our Scripture passage from the Prophet Baruch is a veritable plethora of great rejoicing and wondrous celebration. “Put on the splendor of glory from God,” he tells us; people look east, “rejoicing that they are remembered by God...for God is leading Israel in joy by the light of His glory.”

And the cause for such wondrous celebration is, as Saint Paul teaches us in his letter to the Philippians, “the day of Christ Jesus.” And Saint Paul is inviting us – *exhorting* us – to join in all of this great rejoicing – *first* to be *prepared* for it and *then* to be *filled* with it: “be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, *filled* with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

Our Catholic liturgical context of such great rejoicing, such wondrous celebration...that is, the broader setting in which we encounter “the day of Christ” is, of course, this blessed Season of Advent. We are preparing for the *birthday* of Jesus Christ; we are getting ready for that wondrous celebration when “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us,” God-made-man, in our world, in our very midst.... It is the celebration of the Incarnation.... But perhaps we wonder *what* is the Incarnation? *What is* this *confounding* mystery that we dare proclaim? And also, perhaps we wonder *why* the Incarnation? Why would God even *do* this in the *first* place?

The Incarnation, first of all, is an historical *fact*. It is a religious and moral *truth*, that much is for certain...*and* it is historical *fact*. Perhaps our greatest and most important Church historian is the Evangelist himself, Saint Luke. He took his job *very* seriously, and he says so, stating thus right there at the very beginning of his Gospel account:

*Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the Word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence...so that [we] may realize the certainty of the teachings [we] have received.*

Just because Saint Luke's historical record *also* happens to be in the Bible does *not* mean that we get to dismiss it as *unhistorical* or wave it off like some fantastic fluff. The details of his account are simply *astonishing*, if only from the viewpoint of historical scholarship – primarily because he was able to obtain the details from *eyewitnesses*, as he himself says.

David McCullough wrote the amazing biography *John Adams* one hundred and seventy-five years after John Adams died...and yet his biography is held in high regard as excellent biographical and historical scholarship. Saint Luke, meanwhile, wrote his amazing biography of Jesus only some forty or maybe even as far out as fifty years after Jesus died (and rose again)...and yet *his* writing so often is laughed right out of the classrooms and lecture halls – taken seriously *not at all* by the ivory towers and leather armchairs of the quote-unquote *learnéd* scholars.

And Saint Luke's brilliant scholarship and historical analysis of these events is *further* put on display in today's Gospel text; note the very specific time and place of when and where his research shows these events to have taken place:

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...  
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea...  
and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee...  
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis...  
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene...  
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas....*

Egads! So much historical detail! Come on, Luke – just get to the point already! (...But of course, you see what I am getting at: the sheer detail of historical *fact* in which we find the historical *fact* of the Jesus event.)

And so, the *first* thing to know about *what* the Incarnation *is*: it *is* an historical *fact*. And it *is* the human birth of Almighty God. God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity – eternally begotten of the *Father* – took *flesh* from His human *mother*, the Blessed Virgin Mary. That flesh, that body, that blood, those bones, those organs, that pus and sweat, that hair and that beard, those eyes that gazed with mercy and love and indomitable justice – those were *His*; that was *Him!* He did not

wander into the costume closet backstage at the civic theater and put on a really swell costume; and Rick Baker did not win an Academy Award for Best Make-up because he managed to make our all-spirit *God* look convincingly (and frighteningly) realistic and all too *human*. God did not *appear* as a man; God *was* a man – *the* Man, the *Son* of Man, the *God-Man*: Jesus Christ.

And *that*, in brief, is *what* the Incarnation is. *In carx* (in the Latin). “In the flesh.” God, “in the flesh,” *in carx*, became Man, “became flesh and made His dwelling among us.”

But *why* the Incarnation? And for this, I turn to a bishop of medieval England and a Doctor of the Church, Saint Anselm. In his book *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why God Became Man”), he sets out to understand and explain *why* the Incarnation. A brief, *brief* summary.

God is infinite and all-good.... God created man and woman.... Man and woman are finite, and they sinned, and sin is *not* good.... Finite man and finite woman committed an offense, a crime, against the *infinite* God; *ergo*, their crime is of *infinite* offense – for although committed by them, and although they are merely *finite*, *because* the Victim of their crime is the *infinite* God, their crime, *too*, is infinite (it is of infinite offense).

But how can the merely *finite* make up for an *infinite* offense? We seem to be at an impasse; perfect *justice* demands that God does not simply *ignore* the offense or *dismiss* it out of hand, and the demands of perfect justice further dictate that man and woman (the offenders – the criminals, as it were) *must* do *something* to make it up to the Victim of their crime...and yet at the *same* time perfect *mercy* demands that the man and woman be forgiven, thereby saved from utter, final destruction in spite of the infinite offense of their crime. The classic *battle royale* of Justice *versus* Mercy! And lest we forget, there is the mathematics of it all that we need to consider, for the math simply does not compute; the *finite* simply, logically, mathematically *cannot* fill an *infinite* void; the *finite* does *not* equal infinity! Our first-graders at All Saints can tell you that! One does *not* equal one-*quadrillion*!

So what to do? Of course! We need Someone Who is *infinite* to fill that infinite void. And we need Someone *finite* to represent the finite criminals who made that void to begin with. And so what we need...is a God-man. And thus it was that God the Son became incarnate and was born.

Now, as I mentioned already: the Incarnation is God *in carnis* – God “in the flesh.” And the Incarnation is distinctly Christian. No other religion in the whole world in all of human history has ever dared to propose such a ludicrous claim that God actually would (and *did*) become *truly* one of us. Even the Greeks, in their ancient mythology, *never* claimed that their gods actually *were* us...but merely that they *appeared* to us in something of our human form – but they never actually *were* us.

And so, the Incarnation stands as the single most distinctly *Christian* aspect of our *Christian* religion...and, therefore, the most controversial. And offshoots of that controversy have affected other aspects of our Catholic Christian faith. How dare we “worship” statues! How dumb we are to believe that mere bread and wine is the Sacred Body and Precious Blood of Jesus Christ! Even amongst our own brethren, I hear things on occasion. “Why do we *have* to use incense? Why are we wasting money on sacred art? Why are we supposed to kneel?”

Answers to these objections from without and questions from within all can be derived in essence from our Catholic Christian belief in the Incarnation. God truly became one of us. God, after all, *made* us – made *everything* – and calls us *very* good. And with the Incarnation, God actually *redeemed* all that is – for thus is how much God loves and values the *physical, created* order. This too gives us reasons for *why* the Incarnation – to *redeem* the created order that God had made, but that we have ruined. And every *physical* thing that Jesus Christ ever did, from His first poopy diaper in the manger to His last drop of blood on the Cross, has *profound* redeeming value. (...And by the way, this is the *last* time you will *ever* hear me mention Baby Jesus and His poopy diapers!)

Take, for example, our Catholic Christian veneration of holy images in sacred art. All who are opposed to this – they are called “iconoclasts” – they say that it is sinful vanity (even *idolatry*) to

depict heavenly realities in physical form because to do so is complete debasement of God's divine majesty. But to argue *that* is to argue *against* the Incarnation itself – for sacred art merely depicts in some visual form what we can only but *glimpse* of the heavenly realities; whereas what the Lord did for *Himself* was far *more*; He actually took on and embraced our physical human nature – making it truly His own, such that *now*, God-Incarnate is truly God *and* truly man.

God did *that* – emptied Himself utterly and took the form of a mere slave. And if the Lord would debase *Himself* like *that*...then surely it is hardly a debasement *merely* to depict Him in art.

For ourselves, we cannot allow ourselves to be dismissive of the *physical* aspects of our lives, our faith, our worship of God, just as we cannot allow ourselves to be dismissive of an utterly stark historicity of the Jesus event just because some of the world's very *best* historical records of *anything* just *happen* to be in the Bible. Yes, we dare not be distracted by the world. At the same time, what the physical offers us are ways of engaging all five of the bodily senses so that we may use the *whole* body *and* our souls to worship God – Who, after all, made *everything*. We *see* the sacred art. We *hear* the beautiful chant. We *feel* the warmth of the candlelight. We *smell* the incense rising up, together with our prayers. We *taste* (and see) the goodness of the Lord in the Sacred Body and the Precious Blood in the Eucharist. We use the physical to engage in the spiritual – to worship God.

And God became one of us; the Word became flesh; the Lord came into this world truly as one of His very own creatures. Clearly then, He does not *hate* it but in fact *loves* it – loves it *so* much that He wants and wills to *redeem* it – with His very *life*, if need be (and so He did). And He loves *us* so much that He would *die* for us – and *did* die for us, God be praised! He did not *avoid* us (and the world) after the Fall; and upon entering it, He did not try to *escape* it. And so, neither are *we* to *avoid* or *escape* the world but rather to *love* it and *embrace* it and thus to cooperate with God's grace so as to help *save* it. For God so loved the world, and so are *we* to love the world – not the world thus as *we* have made it (or rather, *ruined* it), for that is the fallen, broken world. But, rather, the world as thus

*God* made it and *now* wants and wills to *redeem* it. We are *immersed* in the world so as to *change* it, and, again, so as to help *save* it – *change* it and *save* it from *within*, save it from *itself* – make it *beautiful* again, make it *holy* again, make it to embrace the *truth* again. Just as the Lord is the very personification of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth.

We are the *light* of the world. We Christians are *life* in the world. As the soul is to the body, so the *Christian* is to the *world*. And all of *this* is encapsulated and celebrated in that sublime mystery of the Incarnation – *what* is the Incarnation and *why* the Incarnation.... And so may it be that as our pilgrim's journey of faith through the Advent season continues and we come forward to receive the Incarnate God humbly, worthily, and well in the Eucharist, we would be strengthened anew in holy ministry and mission, as Catholic Christians, to proclaim God-Incarnate, Christ crucified and risen, to every people and nation and to all the world.