

CHRISTMAS 2020 – Nativity of the Lord

[Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2:1-16]

(Excerpts from the 3rd Advent reflection of Father Cantalamessa 2020)

by Father Charles Fillion

I receive daily news feed from the Vatican. One title caught my eye and I said this would be good for Christmas. Well, I should say the French version is the one that caught my eye. When I saw the English title, it wasn't the same. So, this is the translation from the French: **Christ, union of divinity and humanity in humility**. It comes from the 3rd Advent reflection of the preacher of the Pontifical Household, Cardinal Cantalamessa, on December 18 of this year. Christmas is the feast of God's humility because God humbled Himself and made His dwelling among us, taking upon himself the poor, the humble and the suffering of the world. In order to celebrate Christmas in spirit and in truth, humility is needed in order to recognize God who, by making His dwelling among us, took upon Himself the poor, the humble and the suffering.

With the incarnation, an irreversible action was accomplished. The Son of Man came down on earth and God cannot perish. Emmanuel, or "God-with-us", is on humanity's side, as a friend and an ally against the forces of evil. The perfect union between divinity and humanity in the person of Christ was the greatest of all possible novelties, Cardinal Cantalamessa pointed. However, some could not accept the paradox and scandal of the Word making His dwelling among us, because according to them no God ever mixes with humanity.

At the origin of the rejection of the Incarnation, there is the dogma of the philosopher Plato, according to which "The divine nature never enters in direct communication with man". In other words, God is all powerful, eternal, while humans are weak and mortal. The obstacle to believing in the incarnation is the lack of humility. St. Augustine acknowledges this when he says, "failing to be humble, I could not understand God's own humility". This, Cardinal Cantalamessa said, is the ultimate root of modern atheism. It takes little power to show off but it takes a lot more power to step aside and to efface yourself. And this is what God does in His infinite power of self-effacement. He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave and humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Hence the two claims 'God is love' and 'God is humility' are like two sides of the same coin. It is about making yourself small out of love, to let other people emerge. In that sense, only God is truly humble. The heart of the mystery of incarnation, which is the Word becoming flesh and making His dwelling among us, means that God is with us for good, which is irreversible. When John the Baptist preached about Jesus, as "one among you whom you do not recognize", people found it difficult to believe that the long-awaited Messiah could be a man so humble and ordinary, about whom we know everything, including his village. The stumbling block at the time of the Baptist was Jesus's physical body, which was like ours, except for sin.

Today, the main stumbling block is His mystical body, the Church, which is like the rest of humanity, including in sin. Today, God also needs to be recognized in the poverty and misery of His Church **and** in the poverty and misery of **our** own lives. This sheds a special light on the current issue of poverty and on how the Christian responds to it. Jesus instituted the Eucharist when He said, ‘This is my body’. In the same way, He also instituted this sign, this ‘sacrament’ of poverty, taking upon himself the poor, the humble and the suffering when he said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

The concept of the ‘the Church of the poor’, does not consist only of the poor within the Church itself but in a certain sense, all the poor of the world, whether they are baptized or not. Just as there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn, so too nowadays there is no room for the poor in the inn of the world. However, history has shown on which side God is and on which side the Church is meant to be. To go to the poor is to imitate God’s humility. It is making oneself small out of love, to raise those who are below. Christ is therefore not only **present** on the boat of the world **or** of the Church; it is **present** in the small boat of my life.

The pandemic and the restrictions imposed on public worship and church attendance could be an opportunity for many to discover that it is not simply by going to church that we meet God; that we can worship God “in spirit and in truth” and talk with Jesus, even when we are locked in our house or in our room. Indeed, if one has never met Christ in one’s heart, we will never meet him elsewhere in the strong sense of the word. The great doctors and teachers of the Church boldly declared about Christmas: “Christ was born hundreds of times in Bethlehem, but if He is not born in you, then you are lost”. And so, let us welcome the Presence of the humble child Jesus in us, so we may bring His presence to others. Let us do it with humility, letting the Lord work in us.