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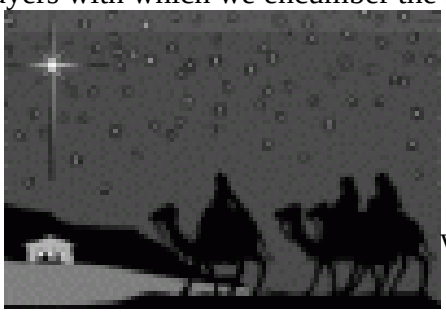
Advent: Approaching the birth of the self-emptying Christ

Rich Heffern | Dec. 15, 2010 Eco Catholic

Early Christianity was honed and shaped in the deserts of the Middle East. The desert fathers and mothers from the second and third centuries went to the wilderness so that they could strip from themselves all but the basics of life, to remove all the layers with which we encumber the self, in order to know who they really were, what their place in the universe  was. Thoreau-like, they sought to pare life down to its essence, and in the silence and emptiness be able to know something of the divine presence, the tangible murmurings of eternity that penetrate when all distractions are swept away.

Desire and fulfilling those desires keep us so often from seeing the depth of what is. As all we thought we wanted or needed is taken away from us, we come closer and closer to the Mystery at the heart of being.

Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner coined the wonderful definition of God as ?the past-all-graspness.? He describes the emptying that is the paschal mystery thusly:

?When death has built a monstrous silent void, and we have silently accepted this in faith and hope as our true identity; when then our life so far, however long it has been, appears only as a single, short explosion of our freedom that previously presented itself to us stretched out in slow motion ? when then we are shown in the monstrous shock of a joy beyond saying that his monstrous, silent void, which we experience as death, is in truth filled with the originating mystery we call God, with God?s light and God?s love that received all things and gives all things? (then) by experiencing the submergence that is death (we will know) already the rising of what is coming.?

Today?s Christianity is so often a turning away from that emptying dynamic; it?s a very consumer-friendly Christianity.

The religion often presented is about how to get into heaven, says Unitarian preacher John Robinson, ?a religion that is about Jesus and turns him into only a God, but that is not what he lived. Jesus in the end is left to surrender to a reality beyond his own. His religion, the one that he taught and lived, was not how to get to be you or me forever and ever in some Shangri-La in the sky. His religion was always precisely about giving up trying to get our own way. And not just as a delayed gratification to be had later.

?(Jesus) teaches: If we are compelled to go a mile with a person, go two ? if a person asks for our coat, give also our vest ? forgive the offenses of others over and over again .. do not be anxious about our lives (or our afterlives) ? love other people as much as we love ourselves. Jesus was about teaching us the insecurity of all we

think will make us secure, of all we want, even after life. It is a terrifying message for those who want what we have and more, now or later.?

The consumerism so prevalent in our culture (especially at Christmas) fosters the opposite of surrender, of emptying. We are exhorted rather to stock up, fill up, acquire ? the one who ends up with the most toys wins. It gives rise to truly fiendish lifestyles, with little time for rest, real recreation, Sabbath, for any joy or quiet prayer.

Fr. Timothy Varvarek writes: ?By some demonic alchemy, love of God has come to mean giving thanks for his gifts by maximizing productive ?self-actualization? while love of neighbor has come to mean providing them with consumer goods. One need only examine the financial situation of any typical Christian family during the aftermath of Christmas to see how pervasive this dynamic has become.?

The self-emptying that is at the heart of Christianity, on the other hand, is eloquently summed up by Jesus: ?Into your hands I commend my spirit.? In fact, it is the very last word on the subject.

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