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A Blessed, Eucharistic, Merry Christmas

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 24, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Today, our celebration of Advent reaches its goal. ?Our yearnings anticipate landfall,? wrote St. Augustine, answering definitively, and almost 1500 years early, the charge of the skeptics that our faith is a mere projection of human need, a myth designed to provide comfort and solace. The fact that we desire the coming of the Messiah does not preclude the reality of a Messiah but rather discloses the fact that our desires, our deepest desires, are no more irrational than our desire for shelter or a loving family.

At the beginning of Advent, I recalled a passage from Pope Benedict?s first volume in his trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth and recommended it to readers of this blog as an appropriate way of framing our Advent preparations for Christmas:

Now, it is true that this leads to the great question that will be with us throughout this entire book: What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world? What has he brought? The answer is very simple: God. He has brought God?..He has brought God, and now we know his face, now we can all upon him. Now we know the path that we human beings have to take in this world. Jesus has brought God and with God the truth about our origin and destiny: faith, hope and love. It is only because of our hardness of heart that we think this is too little.

Here, profoundly, is the reality we celebrate. Jesus brings God into the world. That is why we celebrate Christmas.

Of course, some might note that for those who are destitute, those who are living in entrenched poverty, those who are marginalized, perhaps they cannot discern this sublime truth, such is the painfulness of their condition. Perhaps, they do think ?this is too little.? Human experience, however, tends to lead to the opposite conclusion. It is the poor who do not ask for more, it is the poor for whom the coming of God in Jesus is enough. It is the acquisitive, the affluent, the successful who want more, whose hardness of heart, encouraged by the thickness of their wallets, leads them to think ?this is too little.?

Advent and Christmas are profoundly Marian. Throughout Advent we have prayed especially over her revolutionary words in the Magnificat. (I wonder if Mr. Rush Limbaugh thinks she was ?spouting Marxism? too?) Mary?s revolutionary words about casting the mighty from the thrones, lifting up the lowly and sending the rich away empty are preceded by words we moderns tend to overlook but which are the prerequisite for the revolution she announces: ?Let it be done to me according to thy word.? Mary responds to God?s invitation with self-surrender, with obedience, with trust. She did not evidence the ?adolescent progressivism? Pope Francis rightly condemned. The adolescent, as opposed to mature, progressivism overlooks the fact that our work for justice is rooted in our prior reception of the gift of God?s call, or else it is mere egoism.

St. Joseph is an enigmatic figure, quiet, even silent, receiving his messages from God only in dreams, working to fend for his family, trusting in God under truly strange, demanding circumstances. He is also the avatar of tolerance, not the modern sense of tolerance which is drowning in relativism, but that tolerance that overlooks human distinctions and discriminations to God?s purpose. One of the highlights of the season is the re-broadcast of classic movies. The other night, I watched ?Auntie Mame? with Rosalind Russell. The next time one of our neo-conservative friends waxes nostalgic about how the ambient culture was not hostile to religion until the 1960s, ask them what they thought of Claude, Doris and Gloria Upson? I am quite sure they were paragons of their church despite their obvious bigotry and gross materialism. It is Mame, the libertine, who proclaims a sense of religious fervor when she says they will have Christmas early ?because we need it early.? I suspect St. Joseph would have found in Auntie Mame someone who would look kindly on his circumstances: Mary, like Agnes Gooch, was almost an unwed mother after all.

In my years here at NCR, some of our commentators object when I write about the Nativity story or some other biblical event. ?Myth? they say, something debunked by biblical scholarship. I would remind readers that for us Catholics, biblical scholarship is helpful, but it is not normative. Just as for Jews, the rabbinic understanding of the sacred texts is normative, not the results of scholarship, for Catholics, it is the canon of Scripture and the Church?s reflection upon them that are normative. I do not care if Jesus was not born on December 25, or if this date was chosen on account of the solstice, or if Luke?s entire Nativity narrative is a later addition, not an historical fact. Who cares? Luke?s narrative is a soteriological fact. It speaks to us about an event that transcends history and cannot be bound by it. We do not want a biography of Jesus, we want to believe that Jesus came to us in the flesh and that is what Christmas is all about. And, believe we must or the whole thing falls apart and we Catholics are rather foolish.

Jesus did not only come to us once, at Christmas. He comes to us always. He comes to us most especially in the Eucharist. Christmas is a profoundly Eucharistic reality, is it not? How many of the Advent hymns we have listened to these past weeks have noted that the birth of the Child is already seen in the shadow of the Cross? How many hymns reflect upon the connection between this First Coming at Christmas and the Second Coming for which we still eagerly anticipate landfall?

In his book, "Bread of Life: Exploring the Presence of Eucharist in Our Lives," Father Lou Cameli writes about his first memory of the Eucharist:

I cannot pinpoint the exact time, but I must have been three and a half years or maybe closer to four. I was brought to San Rocco Church early in the morning. I do not remember who brought me, but we went into a pew about three-quarters of the way to the back of the church, reflecting the usual gravitational pull of Catholics to the back of the church. I stood on the kneeler but could barely see the altar up front. It was brightly lit and crowded with colorful statues. The place smelled funny too ? now I know it was the smell of burning wax. Whoever took me to church tried to calm me down, told me to be quiet, and pointed to the altar and said, ?God?s up there.? That did make me quiet, at least for a while, and left an impression on me because I still remember it. I did not yet know the word mystery, but I met it that day. This was the beginning of my contact with the Eucharist.

God was up there. He is up there still. He is also found whenever we encounter the needy. He is also found whenever we encounter our own sins with a sense of repentance rather than self-justification. He is also there in the comfort we give and receive with our families and friends. And, tonight, we reflect and confirm our belief that He was there, in the manger, and the angels sang and the shepherds came, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. A Blessed, a Eucharistic, and a Merry Christmas to you all.

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