

## **Do Not Go to Bethlehem to Find the Obvious \***

by Fr. Leonard Feeney,

*Another Christmas Story*

Christianity is not the religion which holds that God exists. Every religion holds this dogma, whether it conceives God to be one or many. Christianity is the religion which holds that God became man, that He entered our ranks, assumed our nature, translated Himself into our idiom, "sifted Himself to suit our light," and was born in Bethlehem in a temporal generation, Who was born in eternity in an eternal generation.

When we betake ourselves on Christmas morning, it is not to see just another baby, nor even to see just another mother. This is the most different Child and the most different mother who have ever existed. Nobody like them ever was before, or ever will be again. Take the mother.

Her child was born of the love of the Holy Ghost; sheer Love made her fruitful. She is the Fulfillment of a thousand prophecies uttered in the Old Testament. As a special preparation for this most holy prerogative, she was herself conceived free from Original Sin, never tainted by evil that beset our nature when Adam spoiled us all in Paradise.

A few brief notes in connection with the Lady who bends over her child with awe and reverence on the first Christmas night, may not be unwelcome even to those who know in substance the details of the mystery. There was established between the young girl and God Himself, a sublime relationship which we call the state of Sanctifying Grace. This relationship was determined by God to be permanent quality of human nature. Adam and Eve, the father and mother of the human family, were endowed with the gift of sanctification and were given the opportunity of handing it on as an heirloom to their children. God's plan was excellent and simple. By applying the gift of Sanctifying Grace to human nature at its sources, in the persons of the parent mother and father who contained potentially the natures of all human children, God could devise most generously and expeditiously to sanctify all mankind without compromising, as He never could, the gratuitous character of His gift.

But by a most contemptible abuse of their liberty, this man and woman desecrated our nature and unsanctified it by sin. They were false to

their trust and robbed the human race of the supernatural excellence which God had attached to it. We are the children of that sinful pair, and we pay the toll. We come into this world deprived of the heavenly adornment which would make us eternally desirable in the sight of God. There is a lack in us of something God's love had wanted to be there. Our nature is now crippled and unable to achieve its primal destiny. There is a void in us, a darkness, an incapacity for fulfilling our original purpose. We bear a wound, a guilt; we are soiled with a stain, a *macula*, which is called Original Sin.

To restore human nature to the Divine excellence it once possessed, God became man. He wanted to redeem us and adopt us back again into our original state of Divine childhood. Nineteen hundred years ago He came to fulfill this task. He took possession of a human nature and made it his own. He came to pay the price of our ransom and be our Saviour.

Please do not think I am attempting to exaggerate this mission of Our Lord in coming into our world. About Baptism, the normal means by which a Christian is restored to the state of Sanctifying Grace, Our Lord has said: "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." And of Sanctifying Grace, the "living water" of which He spoke to the woman of Samaria, He said: "If thou didst know the gift of God." Sanctifying Grace is no catchword. It is the fundamental benefit Christianity has to offer to the world through the Incarnation. Its realization and fulfillment in the souls of men is the only reason for the existence of the Catholic Church. A sanctifying Jesus Christ has been the Catholic Church's Messiah from the beginning. God did not become man to make us contented with this world; He came to make us discontented with this world. He came to amaze us with a revelation about a world to come. He came to talk about a pearl of great price, a wedding garment of incomparable beauty which humanity could put on and thus enter the wedding feast of Eternal Life.

Listen to the way Christ prayed for us to His Heavenly Father on the night before He died:

Sanctify them in truth...that they all may be one, as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee;...that they may be one as we also are one: I in them, and thou in me;...and the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast also loved me. Father I will that where I am, they also whom thou hast given me may be with me; that they may see my glory which thou hast given me, because thou has loved me before the creation of the world...And I have made known thy name to them, and will make it known; that the love wherewith thou has loved me, may be in them, and I in them.

What is the meaning of this constant repetition of one...one...on Our Saviour's lips? With whom are to be made one? With God? "Yes," said St. Augustine, "God became man that man might become God." He became man to adopt us into the sunlight of His everlasting beatitude, to make us participators of the life of God, to unite us to the perfection of His single nature and take us to live in an eternal ecstasy with the Blessed Trinity.

To the young Mother who stands in silence and wonderment beside the manger-box in the cave of Bethlehem, this gift of Sanctifying Grace was bestowed in its fullness.

Our Blessed Lady was a little Jewish girl. She lived in the northern province of Palestine, which is called Galilee, and was the only child of an aged couple, Joachim and Anna, and her name as we know, was Mary. Nine months before her birth, Mary of Nazareth was conceived in the womb of Anna. Her physical conception occurred naturally, according to the manner of every other human child, through the humble processes of her father and mother cooperating as husband and wife. This much of her was usual and ordinary.

But being destined, as she was, to become the Mother of Jesus Christ, she was presanctified for this sublime function by being given at the first moment of her conception the gift of Sanctifying Grace. The darkness which exists in human nature in the first phase of its development was not allowed to enter the soul of Mary. As a beautiful gesture of Divine courtesy and filial respect, Our Saviour saw to it that this maiden from whose body He would one day derive the substance of His own, should enjoy the benefits of Redemption in a fashion all her own. At the first instant when there was life in the womb of Anna, God sanctified it. He destined Mary at that moment for the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the Immaculate Conception.

The Immaculate Conception has nothing to do, as is commonly supposed, with Our Lady's chastity, nor with the chastity of her father and mother. The Immaculate Conception refers to Our Lady's *Christianity*. Its meaning is best studied, not in connection with the Nativity or the Annunciation, but in connection with the third chapter of Genesis and with the discourse of Our Lord at the Last Supper; for there is a world of difference between the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth. The Immaculate Conception refers to Our Lady *at her own birth* and the sanctified condition of her soul in the nine months that preceded it. The Virgin Birth refers to heart *Our Lord's birth*, and to the fact that she conceived Him without the aid of man. The Immaculate Conception refers to Our Lady *as a child*; the Virgin Birth has to do with her

*as a mother.* The Immaculate Conception has reference to the condition of Our Lady's *soul* at the first instant of its creation; the Virgin Birth to the condition of her *body* before, during, and after the time that she became fruitful with the Divine Child. This is the woman, the miracle woman of all the centuries, who stands so quietly by her Infant in the cold of the first Christmas Eve, and at whose side stands meekly her husband, St. Joseph, marveling at the Child of predilection which was not his own.

And now about the Child Himself. One does not go down to Bethlehem to see an ordinary child, for the little Jesus is the wonder child of our earth, fashioned and structured in a way no child has ever been since the human race began. To begin with, He possesses two natures, the nature of God and the nature of man: He possesses the Divine Nature because it was such that the Eternal Father gave to Him Its fullness when He generated Him in eternity. He is true man because He possesses a human body and a human soul. But there is only one person in Him, the person who coexists in beatitude with the Father and the Holy Ghost in Heaven. The same "I" who says, "I am the Father's only begotten Son," also says in truth, once Bethlehem has occurred, "and I am also Mary's Child." The theological implication behind this great mystery should not be ignored simply because of the strangeness of our Emmanuel. To love Him we must know Him, and we must know Him as He is, and realize that there is no one in this world like Him. He has two minds, two wills, two spirits (one of them a human soul), one body. From the very first moment of His conception by the power of the Holy Ghost, He was in possession of the Beatific Vision, and saw with His human mind the eternal beauty of God face to face. He was also gifted with infused knowledge to enable Him to fulfill His role as Messiah and prophet; and lastly, there came through the medium of His little senses, through the windows of His eyes, and the doorways of His ears, human sights and sounds just as they come to any other child, and this we call His "experimental knowledge."

Having known the Eternal Beatitude in the bosom of His Father, it was more terrible that He should ever experience suffering in the temporal sphere into which He moved. This little Child should never have been cold, should never have been abandoned or neglected or forced to go into exile. No one should ever have been unkind to Him, or ungrateful. Never should His poor body have been scourged at the pillar, His beautiful head crowned with thorns, and nails impressed into His sacred hands and feet. He should never have been covered with mud and spittle, never been called a sinner and a fool; not even after His death should the Centurion, save for fulfilling the prophecy, have pierced His side with a spear.

But we will forget at Christmas time that such things are to happen in the course of His short life. We shall only be glad that a Child is born to us who is the salvation of the world, and we shall join our minds and hearts

to some simple shepherds, and adore Him, and be glad there is another Christmas.

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