

A Child Is Born To Us

Christmas Thoughts from “The Family For Families”

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PROLOGUE.

“WHEN God in His mercy decided to carry out the work of man’s redemption, so long expected through the centuries, He arranged to perform His task in such a way that in its beginnings it might show forth to the world the august spectacle of a divinely founded family.

“In this all men were to behold the perfect exemplar of domestic society as well as of all virtue and holiness.

“A benign Providence established the Holy Family in order that all Christians in whatever walk of life or situation might have a reason and an incentive to practice every virtue, provided they fix their gaze on the Holy Family.” Thus did Pope Leo XIII write in 1892. {Decree 3777, Sacred Congregation of Rites.}

A divinely founded family... the perfect exemplar of all virtue and holiness... for all Christians in whatever walk of life. “Why!” you say, “my family life is to make me holy? Did Pope Leo mean that ordinary people can be and should be saints? We who live in the world, who have to spend most of our time watching the budget and earning enough to support ourselves and our children? Our ideals are subjected to continual battering by the un-Christian teachings and practices of so many of our neighbors. We can’t spend our whole day in prayer like the saints of old. Evidently, the Pope did not realize how ordinary we are. We try to live a good Catholic life, but we don’t deserve special credit for that. Holiness is something reserved for a few select laymen, for priests and religious, for monks and nuns in austere monasteries and convents.”

But the Pope did mean you — you and your husband or wife as well as your whole family. You can be and should be saints, for saints are those common-sense people who act according to their realization that all their happiness lies in obeying God’s law perfectly as it is shown them by the Church and by their conscience. Holiness means happiness. Holy people are happy people at peace with God, with others, and with themselves.

There is only one requirement. You must do God’s will. This embraces various obligations and gives you corresponding rights and privileges. God’s will in your regard is not something frightening and preternatural, brought down to you by angels amid trumpet blasts, thunder, lightning, and earthquakes. No, it consists in the observance of the commandments, the frequent reception of the sacraments, and the practice of certain virtues in your everyday life. That is all. Call it homely, call it an everyday, ordinary, humdrum rule of life if you wish; but you can’t call it difficult and beyond your strength. God’s grace is with you at every turn, sufficient and more than sufficient to help you serve Him.

Sometimes in your efforts, you perhaps will fall out of weariness or discouragement; but you rise quickly, and trusting in God's abundant grace, you go forward again. Your goal must ever be the perfect love of God manifested in perfect love for His creatures, your "neighbors" — your husband or your wife, your children, your friends, all with whom you come into contact.

You look for inspiration to attain such an ideal. You ask for a proof to convince yourself that everyday joys can be the means to serve God perfectly; or on the other hand, you are possibly too close to the earthly conditions of daily work attended with monotony, disappointment, worry, and fatigue. This makes it hard to believe that in so ordinary a way you can become someone so extraordinary as a saint, known to God as His special image, His temple in whom He loves to dwell.

You want proof and inspiration? You wish to see everyday life made into a steppingstone to the very heights of heaven? Then you need only look at the Holy Family. In the following pages, that is what you will see. You are going to behold Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. They not only possessed human nature like yours, but they performed workaday tasks as you do. They ate and drank and slept and cleaned house and earned a living and prayed and had their neighbors just like you. Yet who were they? They were Jesus Christ, God, Second Person of the eternal Blessed Trinity, who took to Himself a body and soul like ours: Mary, the blessed Virgin mother of God, all-perfect, in whom there was never the slightest sin or imperfection; and Joseph, he whom Jesus called "Father," the virginal husband of the Mother of God.

Have you ever stopped to do a little arithmetic in studying Christ's life? Jesus had a tremendous mission to accomplish. He was to teach mankind the new and difficult law of brotherly love; He was to redeem us by means of intense suffering and a painful and disgraceful death; He was to found a Church that would last for all time as the only certain road to salvation. Nonetheless, with such a task before Him, the Son of God spent ten times as much of His life in obscurity as in His public apostolate. We are told of no miracles, no preaching, no teaching of the multitudes during that period. There was merely a hidden and ordinary family life with two lovable persons as His intimate and chosen companions, Joseph and Mary.

No human being has ever been or will ever be holier than this husband and wife. Yet these two souls did not help Jesus in His preaching and teaching, for Joseph was already dead when Jesus left Nazareth to begin His career; and as far as we know, Mary stayed quietly at home during almost all of the Public Life. Actually, then, Joseph and Mary gained their immeasurable holiness by offering Jesus the love of a father and mother in a true family, while Jesus in His turn tendered them the homage of a son. Could any lives have been more ordinary than those at Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth — yet were any lives ever more holy?

This is the lesson of the Holy Family. The will of God must count for everything in our daily lives. Prosaic deeds done for God can lead to spectacular holiness. We will be repeating this lesson again and again throughout this book. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were human, intensely human in the best sense of the word. They show us how our lives, too, should be human — truly warm and Godlike. By this means, we can be sanctifying ourselves more and more. The method is simple. Perhaps we have been following it all along without realizing the fact. At any rate, the leaders are set before us. All we need do is follow.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SETTING.

ACTUALLY it should strike us like a thunderbolt to read in Holy Scripture that Jesus was like us in all things, sin alone excepted (Heb. 4:15). Only too often, however, our appreciation of the fact of

the Incarnation is dulled because we do not realize vividly that true God became true man. In proportion as the divineness of Christ impresses us, His humanness tends to recede into the background of our minds, and we lose the benefit of that tremendous attractive power of knowing that God walked our earth in human form nineteen hundred years (and more) ago.

In parallel fashion, we are prone to be left cold by the sanctity of Mary and Joseph. The dizzy heights of their holiness draw our eyes upward, but our feet remain fixed in the chasm scooped out by our sins and imperfections. We are afraid to call Mary and Joseph our own. We are afraid to imitate them.

That is why we should make every effort to think of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as living in our world: close to us, real, our best friends, human and understanding, whom no fault or misfortune can drive away, provided only that we try to model our lives on theirs. Once we know the actual conditions in which the Holy Family lived, once we see the human world in which Jesus, Mary, and Joseph spent their family life, we can more easily appreciate their holiness.

What was the environment of the Holy Family? We are all naturally curious on this score; but over and above mere curiosity, we ought to seek out the details of the careers of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in order to persuade ourselves how closely they resemble us. There is no need to go to the mass of pious but unhistorical legends that have grown up around the early life of our Lord. The gospel story is more than enough to paint the essentials of the picture we are seeking. If we amplify the Gospels with data gained from other reliable sources, the pageant of the Holy Family passes before our eyes with all its winsomeness and charm.

It would be well at the outset to explain the sources from which we learn the nature of the Holy Land scene amid which Jesus, Mary, and Joseph passed their lives. For one thing, the Gospels are full of deft touches referring to details of their times. Archeology, too, uncovers the well-preserved ruins of age-old buildings; from it, we can deduce customs and culture. Best of all, there is the present oriental civilization which has changed little throughout the centuries. Houses, dress, implements, food, and social usages have withstood the changes that repeatedly revolutionized our Western way of living. Combining all these facts, we gain a rather detailed and highly probable estimate of life in the Holy Land two thousand years or so ago.

“Palestine”, which derived its name from the Philistines of Old Testament times, is surprisingly small. Lying at the southeastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, it is only 150 miles long from north to south. The Jordan River cuts it roughly in half as the river courses south from Lake Genesareth (the Lake of Galilee) to empty itself into the Dead Sea.

We are more concerned with the western half of Palestine, for most of the life of the Holy Family was spent there. This section varies greatly in width. In Judea in the south, it is 60 miles wide, but it grows more narrow until finally at its northern extremity in Galilee its width is hardly 25 miles. Western Palestine is only half the area of the state of Maryland — 5,000 square miles. It would fit ten times within New York State or Illinois, fifty times within Texas. Except for its coastal plain along the Mediterranean, it is quite hilly, and a few mountain-tops can usually be discerned along the horizon.

Because the traveling described in the Gospels was so often done on foot, we think of the distances as far greater than they are in actuality. Nazareth in Galilee in the north is 75 miles from Jerusalem in Judea in the south. Bethlehem is five miles south of Jerusalem. All in all, the territory which the

Holy Family covered by slow and tiresome journeys of days can now be traversed by a fast airplane in a matter of minutes.

In the white Christmas scene so popularly represented, Palestine's climate is not pictured correctly. Snow falls rarely during the winter, and even then, it melts within a few hours. The winter months — November to March inclusive — should more properly be called the rainy season. The average temperature of the coldest month, January, is only forty-six degrees Fahrenheit. From April to October the hot "dry season" sets in, but evening breezes and heavy morning dews are sufficient to temper the worst heat of this summer.

The crops and other vegetation of the Holy Land are influenced, of course, by its climate. In the time of the Holy Family there existed numerous forests and terraced vineyards. These have long since disappeared because of the shiftlessness and misrule of the Turks from the Middle Ages down to World War I. Consequently, erosion and denudation of the land can be seen where formerly many a Palestinian family — and probably our own Holy Family — raised small 'truck gardens' to help stock the household larder. [There might be garden herbs and vegetables including cucumbers, figs, mulberries, pistachio nuts, almonds, pomegranates, onions, garlic, leek, mint, anise, cummin, and mustard growing in these gardens.] Near-by farms grew mainly wheat and barley. Other crops consisted of corn (cereal grains not maize), millet, spelt, lentils, beans, flax, olives, grapes, and sometimes cotton. Rice was not yet introduced.

One of the most interesting facts we can learn about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph concerns the kinds of food they ate. The gospel accounts intimate that they followed the customs of their times. Other historical sources as well as incidental references in the Bible tell us what those customs were.

The usual meals were two: a midday dinner and an evening supper, which was the large meal of the day. Breakfast was too scanty to be called a meal. It was no more than a cup of milk, a piece of butter, or a few baked cakes with olive oil. Wooden spoons might have been used instead of our modern silverware, but more likely eating was done with the hands.

Bread, as always, was the staff of life, and was made of barley, various kinds of wheat, or lentils. Mary baked her bread each day as it was needed, although she could purchase it from the town baker if she wished. She formed it into flat circular cakes about an inch thick and nine inches across. For an oven, she used a clay-lined hole in the ground or an earthen or stone jar about three feet high, inside which fuel was placed. Baking took place on the outside of this portable oven or on the hot inside of the clay hole, once the embers were removed. In preparing her bread our Lady did not use new leaven each day but kept a portion of the old dough from day to day with which to start fermentation in a new batch.

The rest of the diet of the Holy Family was made up largely of vegetable food. Olives and olive oil, butter, milk, cheese, eggs, and stewed fruit helped out this menu. Meat appeared rarely on the table, and then it was mutton and beef.

Relish consisted of onions, garlic, or leek. For the equivalent of our present-day dessert, figs, mulberries, pistachio nuts, almonds, and pomegranates were available. Grapes were served either fresh or sun dried as pressed cakes of raisins. Cucumbers were an ever popular vegetable.

Mary's ordinary way of cooking food was to boil it, but she occasionally roasted meat and broiled the fish from Lake Genesareth much as her Son was to do for His apostles after His Resurrection, years later. Often on the menu, this fish was considered quite a delicacy in Galilee, and was pickled

and dried to be preserved. In preparing cereals or 'corn', Our Lady parched or roasted it at the fire. Lentils and beans were boiled into a delicious pottage, often with meat seasoned with mint, anise, cummin, or mustard.

For sweetening, Mary used wild honey instead of sugar. The salt she bought was either rock salt from the shores of the Dead Sea or that evaporated from the water of the Mediterranean.

The two beverages on the table at Nazareth were goat's milk and wine. The butter made from this milk was sometimes solid, sometimes merely semi-fluid heavy cream, sometimes the thick curds from sour milk. Our Lady did the churning herself by jerking a skin of milk back and forth or by beating the container with a stick. The wine was kept in large goatskins in the cool cellar of the house. From these it was drawn off into smaller goatskin "bottles" for use at table.

We can hardly repeat often enough the value of knowing these homely details of the life of the Holy Family. Jesus referred to some of them in various of His parables or sermons, and showed how well He was acquainted with everyday life in Palestine. Could we ask for greater assurance from God that His gifts are good, and that we should use the good things He has given us in this world as helps to obtain our salvation and perfection?

Another personal detail that is highly interesting to us is the appearance of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Following the customs of their day Jesus and Joseph had three types of garments. In a climate so mild as that of Palestine no more were necessary. The innermost garment next to the body resembled our modern nightshirt and was called a sheet or sindon. During strenuous labor, other clothing was discarded in order to permit freedom of action. Thus, for example, when some of the apostles were fishing "naked" on the Lake of Galilee at the time Jesus appeared to them (John 21), they were actually clad in this undergarment. In other words, to wear only this sindon was to be in a state of undress.

Over the sindon, Jesus and Joseph wore the tunic — a sort of cassock or dressing gown open down the front. This made up the usual indoor costume at home or in the shop. A wide sash or girdle at the waist and rather billowy long sleeves gave the garment pleasing lines. For freedom in walking, the ankle-length skirt was slit about a foot from the bottom on each side. Blue was its common color although white with brown stripes or red, too, were favorites.

The third and outermost article of clothing was the cloak. The foster father and his Son wore this cloak outdoors for protection against cold and rain, or as a covering during sleep. When made of fleece it was especially warm, although cotton and woolen cloth were more usual. It resembled a vest in that it was sleeveless and had an open front, but in length, it reached almost to the ground. Either this cloak or the tunic was the valuable "seamless garment" for which the soldiers cast lots when Christ was crucified on Calvary.

For headdress, Jesus and Joseph wound a sort of long kerchief into a turban. Another kerchief covered the neck and shoulders for protection against the blazing sun. In Nazareth as in all the Orient it was considered disrespectful to pass anyone bareheaded, so the two men must have worn the turban almost always.

They were bearded and wore their hair long, as paintings universally represent them. Two locks — ringlets — dropped from their temples as a vestige of the old Hebrew tradition whereby the Israelites were distinguished from idolatrous peoples who cut these locks as an offering to their gods.

For foot covering the Holy Family used sandals during the summer and shoes during the winter or rainy season. The ordinary sandal consisted of a wood or leather sole with thongs attached, to be strapped around the instep. Shoes were made of coarse material and protected the entire foot. Socks were seldom if ever worn. Since footwear was prescribed strictly for outdoor use, it was always left at the entrance of the house.

Mary's dress resembled the attire of her men-folk rather closely. Her distinctive mark was a veil and (for outdoor use) a mantle or great shawl. Judging from the colors usually employed, she wore a red dress with a blue mantle and a large white veil covering her whole body when she traveled in public. Her hair fell in long tresses, probably left unbraided, as it was more modest to do.

From our knowledge of Palestinian houses, we can deduce rather closely the nature of the home of the Holy Family at Bethlehem and Nazareth. At the outset, however, we must rid ourselves of the preconceived notions which Western experience and legendary tale have given us.

Palestinian houses followed a rather uniform pattern. Like the present-day houses at Bethlehem, that of the Holy Family was probably built of rough-hewn limestone blocks cemented with limestone mortar. It had at least one upper room, built above a lower room at street level, and reached by outside stone stairs. The dimensions of these rooms approximated 15 feet in length, 12 feet in width, and 6 feet in height.

The lower room at Nazareth may well have been St. Joseph's workshop, extending back as a cave into the hill rising directly behind the house. Artisans like St. Joseph worked in the street outside their shops. The shops themselves were merely places to keep equipment.

The living room of the Holy Family (the upper chamber) was windowless and very simply furnished. Its only light came through the doorway. There was no fireplace or chimney, but a hearth placed near the door provided a spot for cooking where the smoke could easily escape. On a ledge running around the wall, the gaily colored mats which were spread on the floor at night for sleeping purposes were rolled up during the day.

A large lamp hanging from a center beam shed a dim light at night — a rather curious looking lamp to us. It resembled a saucer with its sides folded together at one place, to form a neck for the cloth wick that rested in the supply of olive oil. Underneath this lamp was a painted stool or table together with a few chairs. Here the Three took their quiet meal.

The roof of their house was flat — a cemented or earthen surface overlaid on the beams that spanned the side walls. It was reached by the outside stairway. During the cool evenings of the summer Jesus, Mary, and Joseph retired to it for conversation and quiet prayer. They used the roof much as we use a front porch or veranda.

Joseph's position as carpenter placed him in the respectable middle class of artisans. Judging from his occupation, he was not desperately poor, nor on the contrary could he be called wealthy. His tools were the hammer, saw, ax, plane, chisel, and bow drill. Working in wood, he was a general handyman for making plows, milking tubs, winnowing fans, yokes, forks, and household furniture. Joseph on many occasions did not receive pay for each article as he fashioned it. Instead, he agreed under a sort of "blanket contract" barter system to look after the farm implements of his neighbors in so far as was necessary. In return for these services, he received produce from his various customers at harvest time.

At this point, we close our introductory picture of daily life with the Holy Family. One feature in particular stands out: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph lived a genuinely “human” life, using the good things of this earth as was proper. There was no puritanical refusal on their part to accept the blessings of God’s creation as if these gifts were evil in themselves. Rather, the inherent bounty of Nature gave them ever so many opportunities to praise and thank the eternal Father in heaven for what He saw fit to bestow on them according to His wisdom and providence.

This is a lesson we, too, should bear in mind. Everything God has created is good in itself, and evil and sin enter only in the misuse of a creature. The great rule of life is always the same, whether in the Holy Family of Nazareth or the Jones family of twentieth-century Smithville: Because all creation is good, we should make use of it in so far as it helps us to serve God and to save our souls. [This is true for the twenty-first century as well!]

“What a simple rule to remember!” you say. “How easy to live by!

“Why call it to my attention so sharply?”

Why? Because the cold pages of history testify that scores of heresies crashed, morally bankrupt, since they rested somehow or other on confusion of this truth of the goodness of creation. Before Christ came on this earth, the pagan world was in moral chaos because it could not accept the fact. It could choose only between the two extreme errors. One group of pagans — the Stoics — thought that creation in itself was evil, and everything material must be avoided completely. Others held that creation could not be misused in any way whatever. These men represented the two excesses of human conduct that continued to harass the Church’s efforts later.

For instance, in Christian times there were heretics like the Manicheans of the second century, the Albigensians of the twelfth, and the rigid Calvinists of the sixteenth, who frowned on legitimate pleasures and looked on material things as evils to be tolerated at best if not to be shunned absolutely. However, such a mode of living was impossible for a man made up of body and soul. It was an insult to the wisdom and goodness and love of his Creator, and it could lead him only to unhappiness, sin, and despair. One primitive heresy built on this philosophy of the anti-material (the Docetist group) even taught that Christ’s body was an appearance, that He was only a phantom, because as God He could not possess so evil a thing as a human body!

At the other extreme in all ages were the frankly materialistic pleasure seekers, who sank into all sorts of excesses in reveling in utter license and luxury.

Meanwhile the Church serenely kept pure the truth which Christ had confided to its charge, dauntlessly guarding it even though it conflicted violently with the extremists. Catholics were always taught that man is composed of soul and body; that the body is not something sinful although tendencies to sin are present in it because of original sin; that material things are to aid the body directly and the soul indirectly in order to attain man’s purpose in this world and in the next; and therefore that creation should be used (because it is good) but not misused (because it is only a means to eternal life, not eternal life itself).

The Church went further. It taught that the body had dignity because it is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It sanctified the body during life with the sacraments instituted by Christ, and it blessed the body in death and buried it in consecrated ground. Despite all the sneers and scoffs of heretics and infidels it set forth Christ’s doctrine that the glorified body as well as the soul would receive the reward of eternal life.

The Church in its liturgy, again and again recalls the goodness of creation for our benefit. In fact, to take a specific example, the whole doctrine of the sacramentals is based on this principle.

The sacramentals are things or actions which the Church uses in a sort of imitation of the sacraments in order to obtain temporal and spiritual favors for the faithful. Sacramentals such as medals and scapulars are badges of belief, created things that are external signs of internal faith in God's goodness and kindness to us, marks of trust that He will hear our prayers.

Well known are the sacramentals which call down God's blessing. With the attitude of employing everything God has made as a means for eternal salvation, the Church has approved blessings for a host of articles so diverse — and apparently so unholy — as automobiles, fire-fighting equipment, blast furnaces, radios, bees, bridges, and beer.

Around four hundred years ago, the "Spiritual Exercises," the "golden book" of St. Ignatius of Loyola, was a major factor in throwing back the moral anarchy of the Protestant Revolt and supplanting it with the revived Catholic Counter-reformation. Yet the bedrock element of the "Spiritual Exercises," its "Principle and Foundation" upon which Ignatius built his entire system of bringing souls back to God, was simply a restatement of the lesson of the Holy Family on the proper use of created things.

"Man was created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth were created because of man, and that they might help him to obtain the end for which he was created. Whence it follows that man should use these creatures in so far as they help him to reach his end, and he ought to free himself from them in so far as they hinder him from that purpose."

Practically, then, the Holy Family's lesson of the "good earth" can exemplify several cardinal principles:

If failure, disappointment, sickness, or any sort of suffering come into your life, remember that they come from the same Father who can give only good gifts. He sends or at least permits trials to enter your life only for your greater good. Therefore, make the supreme act of love by trusting in His providence, knowing that no slightest event can occur outside the influence of His all-perfect wisdom. Thus, even hardships can help you.

In this connection, too, it is well to understand correctly the attitude of the great ascetical saints who voluntarily gave up many lawful pleasures. They did not act in an attitude of pain-for-pain's-sake. Rather, while recognizing the intrinsic worth of all creation, they felt that they should offer their sacrifices as penance for their own sins and as reparation for the sins of the world. Prudence led them always. So, too, you can freely make small sacrifices occasionally in the spirit of penance, reparation, and love. The easiest yet most selfless abnegation of this sort lies in accepting willingly what God sends you each day.

When you see clearly that some created thing is an obstacle in your path toward God, that it robs you of your peace of conscience or is an occasion of sin, be generous in removing it from your life at once. The thing is good in itself, but it is not good for you.

However, these foregoing principles refer to the use of creation more or less negatively. Much more important for our present purpose is the positive aspect: to use creation in so far as it helps you.

For instance, don't be afraid to see the hand of God in the legitimate pleasures of your life. It would be puritanical and downright erroneous to think that your married life is any less holy in proportion as it is more intimate. By accepting the good things of life with gratitude to Him who created them, you can gain merit, for every such action becomes a prayer of thanksgiving. In fact, you should look on your temporal blessings as a faint foretaste of the exuberant goodness of Almighty God, who wishes to bestow on you His own everlasting happiness in heaven.

In your work or in your recreation you should not think that your merit is necessarily less because your enjoyment is greater. Similarly, the mutual love of husband and wife as well as the love of children are probably the keenest and deepest sources of joy in family life. God intended that you should relish this affection. Accept it, then, in the same spirit: "What love gives, love should take."

Perhaps you wonder why Catholic teaching seems to say so little about this sanctification of the happiness and the pleasant things in life. The reason is not too far to seek. Usually, to spiritualize joy is easy: to spiritualize sorrow is hard, for it is more difficult to be faithful to God in times of discouragement. Hence, the emphasis is placed where it is needed.

Later in this very book, we shall have occasion to call attention to the hardships Joseph and Mary encountered. This does not mean that their life was somber and dreary, nor that married life in imitation of theirs is full of suffering. True, the difficulties are not to be minimized. They should be foreseen and prepared for in a general way. That will be our purpose in mentioning them frankly. But the fact that they will be discussed does not mean that they are predominant. They are far outweighed by the sunshine and joy which God instills into every home where Christian ideals are the rule of the day and the hour.

And it is this sunshine which you will doubly enjoy if you accept it from God's hands with explicit thanksgiving and love.

CHAPTER TWO: BEFORE CHRIST WAS BORN.

NO NARRATIVE can excel the accuracy and charm of the accounts of the Holy Family given by Matthew and Luke. However, our twentieth-century Western minds are often unacquainted with the old oriental customs, geography, and history to which the Gospels refer. We are confronted with obscurities and difficulties that call for further comment not because of a fault in the gospel text but by reason of our own lack of information. Hence, the gospel story must be amplified with incidental side lights and explanations before we pause to reflect on the story itself.

"Now the origin of Christ was in this wise. When Mary his mother had been betrothed to Joseph, she was found, before they came together, to be with child by the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:18).

This betrothal which St. Matthew mentions was in a sense equivalent to the engagement of our modern times. It was, however, much more binding. The bridegroom conducted all arrangements with the father of the bride and gave him a purchase price for his daughter. Then the betrothal took place. It lasted about a year, and during that time, the couple was called husband and wife although they did not live together. The wife was bound most strictly to remain virginal as a special sign of loyalty to her husband. That is why Mary's predicament was so serious when by divine intervention she became the mother of Jesus. The miracle of miracles had taken place. God took on human nature within her womb. But who would believe her story even if she felt free to reveal it?

Although Mary "was found to be with child" while she was yet merely espoused to Joseph, it seems certain that her neighbors were not the ones who discovered her pregnancy. Later, Jesus was to be

criticized sharply by His bitter enemies who looked in vain for any pretext to vilify Him. Nonetheless, they never cast the slightest shadow on the legitimacy of His birth. Instead, they used the humbleness of His apparent descent from Joseph, a craftsman, to rebuke Him for His high aspirations. The secret of the Incarnation was evidently well kept.

Contrariwise, Joseph himself, apparently, as well as the Nazarenes did not personally discover Our Lady's motherhood. St. Matthew's words, "was found," strongly suggest that Joseph was informed of the fact; but by whom? Not by Mary, else she would have manifested the divine source of her maternity. Accordingly, it would appear that some close relative — perhaps her mother — was deputed by Our Lady before her marriage took place to tell Joseph that she had conceived. Keeping the matter secret would have been gravely unjust to her spouse.

All this must have happened no later than four months after the angel Gabriel visited Nazareth and Mary consented to become the Mother of God. Such a period appears reasonable, for after that time there would have been external evidence of Mary's pregnancy, and her subsequent marriage to Joseph would have been useless to guard the honor of the virgin mother and her divine Son.

Meanwhile, "Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to expose her to reproach, was minded to put her away privately" (Matt. 1:19). This passage is classic for its short but meaningful description of the towering nobility of Joseph's character. St. Matthew bestowed a precious title when he called him the "just man," for he told us in this manner that Joseph observed God's law in its fullness and excelled in every virtue and good quality.

Joseph's conduct as further portrayed excellently bears out Matthew's estimate. By Jewish law, Joseph could have broken off his engagement and divorced his spouse publicly if he found her guilty of adultery. This type of divorce would have revealed the disgraceful charge, and according to the letter of the law, Mary would have been liable to stoning to death. Whether or not so drastic a penalty would have been carried out is doubtful, but Joseph would not enforce it. He could not believe that Mary had sinned. Nonetheless, he was bound to observe the law of the Jews. Terribly perplexed and dismayed, in his mental anguish he decided to adopt the course that was most favorable to Mary and yet was consonant with justice. By choosing to divorce his spouse privately (instead of publicly), he would not be forced to make known the cause of the divorce. But always he was hesitant, and his hesitancy shows the force of his belief that Mary had been faithful to him.

As St. Jerome puts the case, "This is evidence for Mary, that Joseph, knowing Mary's chastity and wondering at what had occurred, concealed in silence the mystery which he did not fathom." Ultimately, faced with a problem that seemed insoluble, Joseph began to feel that the private divorce was the only means of being fair to Mary while not disobeying his conscience. Unless the circumstances were somehow altered, he certainly could not proceed to marry his spouse.

"But while he thought on these things, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Joseph, son of David, to take to you Mary, your wife, for that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.' So Joseph, arising from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took unto him his wife" (Matt. 1:20, 21, 24).

Here St. Matthew relates that at the angel's command Joseph married his betrothed. Realizing keenly now his role in the plans of Divine Providence, the prudent husband bent every effort to protect Mary. With the Roman census already announced, he was obliged to leave for Bethlehem where he had to register. What better course of action could he adopt than to take his wife with him

to Bethlehem, a strange town, and thus remove her from Nazareth, dangerous for the gossip that would surely arise there?

“And he did not know her till she had brought forth her first-born son” (Matt. 1:25). Throughout Church history, various heretics have alleged that according to this sentence Joseph was the natural father of other sons of Mary after Christ was born. Against this warping of the text Church writers from earliest times have insistently pointed out that St. Matthew uses “till” and “first-born” in a sense often found in Holy Scripture. “Till” can refer to action or lack of action up to a point, without necessarily implying that the action then changes. For example, St. Paul writes to Timothy, “Until I come, be diligent in reading, in exhortation, and in teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). Quoting Psalm 109:1, (it is Psalm 110:1 in the Hebrew) he adds, “[Christ] must reign until ‘he has put all his enemies under his feet’.” (1 Cor. 15:25). Certainly, in these texts St. Paul does not intend Timothy to stop being diligent after he arrives, nor does he think that Christ’s supremacy will cease with the defeat of His enemies.

Similarly, “first-born” as applied to Christ does not mean that Mary had other children. Jewish custom gave this title to the first son whether or not other brothers followed him. Even in modern English, we have an analogous usage when we speak of first-aid treatment without understanding that further medical care must always follow.

Yet the greatest difficulty in these passages concerns the perplexing question: why did God send this strange type of suffering to His two most loyal creatures? Mary was all-sinless, not even momentarily subject to that deprivation of sanctifying grace which we call original sin. Even more, her fidelity to her Creator made her worthy, as no other human creature ever was to fashion the body of God incarnate in her womb for nine months. As for Joseph, he was second in dignity and holiness to Mary alone. God entrusted to him His two choicest treasures so that Joseph was to become the virginal husband of Mary and the foster father of Jesus. Nevertheless, God sent this couple a heavy cross, most difficult to explain.

Mary’s conception, when first disclosed, was compromising evidence. Had Joseph been a selfish, jealous spouse, the estrangement would have been complete. As it was, these two hearts who loved each other to a degree unequaled by any other husband and wife, could only suffer intensely until God stepped in to remedy the situation. The very perfection of Mary’s love for Joseph and of Joseph’s love for Mary made their pain keener.

Mary felt in conscience that she was not permitted to reveal the divine nature of her conception to her husband. Joseph knew that he was not permitted to marry an unfaithful spouse. Mary could take no external action to solve the problem. Joseph had in a sense the harder choice of taking action. He evidently was forced to do something; but what could he do? No matter which course he followed, grave difficulties faced him.

We can be certain that both Mary and Joseph prayed to God for help and light. Mary, in full conformity to God’s will, was ready to sacrifice the love of her spouse as well as her own reputation if need be. Joseph asked only for inspiration to do what was right. And in God’s good time the angel was sent to remove the trial by revealing to Joseph that he was the virginal husband of the very Mother of God.

Did God repay Joseph and Mary for their fidelity? No, it was more than mere repayment. It was the hundredfold of supernatural grace and joy and justified mutual confidence, “pressed down and flowing over,” so that the souls of the two spouses thrilled toward each other as they naturally and

humanly could never have done. They realized now their full destiny. Two wills made one in the love of a virginal marriage, they knew that together they were to rear the infant Jesus to the full stature of the man Christ. Although Jesus as God was to have all knowledge, nonetheless as a human child He was to imitate the magnificent mutual love He would see in His parents.

Henceforth, Joseph and Mary knew that together they were to cooperate with the special plans of the Three Persons in One God — those mysterious plans hidden in the depths of eternal eons of the Godhead. They were to be favored as none of their fellow creatures had ever been although their responsibilities and their crosses would be proportionately greater. But they were to work out their destiny together — that was the great point, the new content of the angel's message to Joseph. Joseph was initiated into the incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the mystery of mysteries of which Mary was already a participant. All this was part of the hundredfold reward God bestowed on this couple, and from the bottom of their hearts, they could only say, as they began to fathom it all, "In You, O Lord, have we hoped. We have not been confounded!" It was joy almost too deep to be experienced on this earth, but they did experience it because they were espoused husband and wife as well as the two saints of saints.

What lessons here for every husband and wife! They, too, are to work out their salvation and their perfection together, each depending on the other, each assisting the other. In the perfection of married love, their personalities become merged, as it were, as completely as possible. For them God's commandment, "You shall love your neighbor," finds its first and chief expression in their love one for the other. Each is bound by obligations toward the other, each possesses the rights handed over by the other at the moment of their marriage. In the fullness of this mutual love, this mutual unselfish give-and-take, is included their love and service of Almighty God — together.

Then, too, the experience of Mary and Joseph offers a true example of a misunderstanding that can arise without the fault of either party. In this case, two saints were involved, more closely united by flawless love than was any other couple in the history of the world. Our Lady knew the price her course of action would cost her, but she was even more distressed over the pain it caused her spouse. Until the time when God saw fit to manifest His plans, Mary's only course was that of trust. God's plans were far grander than anything a created intellect — even one so uniquely attuned as Mary's — could plumb or imagine. Consequently, the only course to adopt in the meantime was a wholehearted submission and conformity to His will.

Joseph's heroism was of the same caliber. Had he been spiteful, self-centered, resentful, he would have indulged in harsh recriminations of Mary. However, because he was convinced that somewhere and somehow all the facts would become evident and Mary would be justified, he withheld a rash judgment that would only have made matters worse.

In your own life when can you say that a misunderstanding arose in which you were in no wise at fault? Joseph and Mary were perfect; we ordinary mortals are not — that is the difference between them and us. Remembering this difference if misunderstandings occur in family life, you must try to realize that there is another side to every argument even though at the moment you do not or cannot see it. It is very rare that a problem has only one solution which of necessity must be right; and it is even more rare that that single solution must uniformly be your own. Ordinarily there are various ways of adjusting a difficult situation, which causes distressing friction in the family.

Realistic couples bear in mind that with human nature as it is, married life cannot be one everlasting honeymoon. Two minds and two wills, even though united most intimately and sincerely in

matrimony, belong to two different people. As a result, there will occasionally be different outlooks, different opinions, different reactions, all of which have to be adjusted lest harmony be lost when they clash. Such differences are normal even before we admit the possibility that one or both parties may be at fault.

Human faults! — and there a whole new chapter of possibilities for misunderstanding opens out. Gained in childhood, kept and perhaps strengthened in adult years, those faults will be taken with us to the grave. They are with every individual constantly. The most attractive characters of husbands and wives, try as they may, will find their faults ever recurring, mixed with all their good points. Faults are in reality based on virtues. They are good things gone to excess. We are not speaking here of vice, of course — of habitual faults so serious that they lead to grievous sin. We are talking of the “little things” that raise the bumps in life’s highway: self-centeredness, unwillingness to admit error, slovenliness in dress or at table, disregard for the feelings of others, sarcasm, irritability, reluctance to overlook and forget accidental mistakes — these are only a few of the “little things” that cause mutual pain to two souls who love each other dearly.

Usually, the best way to deal with misunderstandings is to bring the trouble out into the light. If possible, discuss a sore point frankly and coolly before the end of the day. Feelings that are hurt over long periods fester like sores; and as troubles pile up, the vicious circle begins that adds imaginary new troubles merely because the old ones are supplying the momentum.

Above all, be ready to arbitrate. When ruffled tempers have calmed down, sit down side by side and analyze the argument as if you were a third-party umpire called in for the purpose. Find just where and why the point of difference occurs; and from there, a little yielding on each side should bring satisfaction.

Don’t forget the moods to which you, like every human, are subject. When tired or slightly ill, you say and do things, which normally you would avoid. This is why a misunderstanding between two tired people cannot be settled very easily on the spot. In such a case drop the argument for the time being (even though you think you know you are right!), and perhaps a good night’s sleep will reduce the troublesome question to the insignificant status of a soap bubble or even — and this is quite possible — a laughing matter.

The trial of Joseph and Mary has still another great lesson. If trials and sufferings come into our lives, we complain almost involuntarily. We wonder why God has sent us this cross; we ask what we have done to deserve it. All the good deeds we have ever performed appear as so many reasons why God should have spared us.

From Joseph and Mary we learn the answer to such a complaint. Should God spare us because of our goodness? Then what should He have done to Joseph and Mary? No one ever surpassed them in holiness. Moreover, they were engaged in the very act of closest cooperation with the divine plan to send a Redeemer to this earth.

Spiritual writers have often enunciated the truth of the Christian life that nearness to Jesus means nearness to the cross. Nearness to Jesus does mean self-abnegation, which is merely another word for self-denial or selflessness. It does not mean unhappiness, for by the paradoxical law of God’s providence, suffering borne for Him does not take away happiness but rather deepens and intensifies it.

Since Christ chose to redeem the world by suffering, those who are closest to Him act as co-redeemers of the world by uniting their sufferings to His. Then, too, there is the exalted union with Him whereby His friends imitate Him in every detail not for any “practical” purpose but solely and wholly for love, for he or she who loves desires always to become more and more like the beloved. If we apply these maxims to the conduct of Joseph and Mary, we understand why these two hearts had to suffer most (and knew they had to suffer most), for they loved most and were nearest to the Heart of Jesus.

For ourselves, these reflections remove all cause of complaint. Unlike Joseph and Mary, we are sinners and have done wrong or at least have been unfaithful repeatedly. In one sense we are receiving our just reward; we deserve to be punished for transgressing the law of our Maker. In another sense, our crosses are favors from the hand of God. They are opportunities to gain merit here on earth, so that the eternal reward for fidelity may be greater. They are chances to atone for sin here on earth so that the temporal punishment in purgatory may be less. They are forms of cautery that remove habits of sin from our souls; or even, as the highest favor from God, they are invitations to unite our trials to the sufferings of Jesus so that His redemptive act may be applied more fully to souls, to save souls who otherwise might be lost.

Despite all this, the great problem of suffering still remains a deep mystery, and we admit that our minds have never been able to fathom its full solution. Why suffering at all? It is a consequence of the presence of sin in the world. We simply know that there must be suffering, which no one, rich or poor, good or bad, can escape. We also know that Jesus has marked out a way for us to follow. Without Him, we would be lost in the fog that beset the pagans of old (and which still besets our modern intellectual pagans) when they tried to escape suffering, and when, having failed to avoid it, they could only ask fruitlessly, “Why?”

Christ could have redeemed us without suffering for us. Instead, He actually chose pain, disgrace, and disappointment because He knew that by imitating Him we could sweeten the sufferings we sometimes would have to bear. This is the Christian answer to the problem, and never in any circumstance will it fail to be the sole, all-satisfying answer.

Joseph and Mary have gone ahead of us in following the path of Jesus, and that is enough for us to know. In following them, we will always find internal peace, no matter what problem or trial might befall us.

CHAPTER THREE: “A CHILD IS BORN TO US.”

“NOW it came to pass in those days that there went forth a decree from Caesar Augustus that a census of the whole world should be taken. This first census took place while Cyrenus was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:1-2).

What were “those days”? Since the greatest event in the history of the world was about to be described by St. Luke, the divinely inspired historian was very careful to give us the general period in which it occurred. Nonetheless, the exact year is problematical. For us to say that Jesus was born in A.D. 1 would be an easy matter. The facts do not permit so simple a solution.

The early Church counted the years from the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian (A.D. 285-305), or used the Roman system, “A.U.C.” — *ab urbe condita*, “from the founding of the city of Rome.” Our present method of basing the calendar on the year of Christ’s birth was not introduced until the middle of the sixth century, and even then, its starting point was reckoned erroneously.

In detail, this is how it happened. Some time before 544, a Roman abbot, Dionysius Exiguus, conceived the plan of making the Nativity the focal point of every date. Dionysius erred in his computation, and to this day, no one has been able to determine the exact extent of his mistake! That is why we do not know the precise year in which Christ was born. Although estimates have ranged all the way from 22 B.C. to A.D. 9, the evidence points to 5, 6, or best of all, 7 B.C. This date is obtained by correlating St. Luke's account, Roman and Jewish history, and archeological findings.

Since Augustus Caesar ordered a census of his empire in 8 B.C., we can be certain that the birth of Christ occurred soon thereafter. The Cyrinus mentioned by St. Luke was not, it is true, governor of Syria at the time, but he did act then as the military officer in charge of the census. St. Luke's language in the original Greek does not have to be translated, "Cyrinus was governor," but can simply mean, "Cyrinus was in charge of Syria."

Luke continues: "And all were going, each to his own town, to register. And Joseph also went from Galilee out of the town of Nazareth into Judea to the town of David which is called Bethlehem — because he was of the house and family of David — to register, together with Mary his espoused wife, who was with child" (2:3-5).

As was noted in an earlier chapter, Joseph may have used the census as a pretext to take Mary from Nazareth in order to protect her honor and that of Jesus. The fact that he was obliged to register at Bethlehem indicates that in all likelihood he owned property there. For all we know, Bethlehem may have been his birthplace just as Mary's seems to have been at Nazareth.

Bethlehem was about 80 miles south of Nazareth. At this period, it was a hamlet with a population of no more than 2,000 souls. About three days were required to complete the trip. Judging from the ordinary modes of travel of common folk in Palestine, Mary rode on an ass while Joseph walked alongside, leading the animal. They probably had no servant. Their road first descended into the Plain of Esdraelon, then began to rise more and more, passing through frequent towns that alternated with farm country. Finally, about five or six miles south of Jerusalem the two travelers reached their journey's end.

It should be noted carefully that St. Luke does not say that Christ was born immediately after the journey from Nazareth. "It came to pass while they were there that the days for her to be delivered were fulfilled" (2:6). Luke seems to suggest that Joseph and Mary lived at Bethlehem for some time before the Nativity. According to the computation we are following, Joseph married Our Lady after her pregnancy was four months advanced. This would mean that the stay at Bethlehem could have been of any length up to five months. Against this theory, age-old legends are responsible for the idea in our popular Christmas story that Jesus came into the world as soon as Mary reached Bethlehem. Up to the present time, nothing certain can be established to settle the question.

The Church in its position as divinely appointed guardian of faith and morals has always taught and now solemnly teaches that Jesus was born miraculously of Mary so that the blessed Mother of God was ever virgin — before, during, and after the Nativity. This is called the Virgin Birth. Outside the Church, it is ridiculed and misunderstood by many who think it synonymous with the Immaculate Conception (Mary's freedom from original sin). Yet the fact remains that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth was held from the very earliest days of Christianity; and to deny it now would be tantamount to denying the Church's mission as God's mouthpiece on earth. If Christ could pass through

material objects (as He passed through the doors of the Upper Room after His Resurrection), why could He not pass through the body of His mother, leaving her virginal membranes intact?

Moreover, since Mary had been preserved from original sin by reason of her Immaculate Conception in the womb of her mother, she was free of the penalty Eve transmitted to every daughter of Adam. Mary bore Jesus without travail.

“And she wrapped him in swaddling clothes” (Luke 2:17). There are several interesting features about the swaddling clothes in which Jesus was given His first protection from cold and dampness. The custom of using swaddling bands had first been introduced while the Israelites were a wandering desert people. The binding was intended to provide warmth for the newly born infant as well as protection for his weak spine and soft bone structure.

A square piece of material formed the swaddling cloth proper, across the diagonal of which the babe was laid. Then the corners were tucked together, leaving only the infant’s head exposed. Finally, two or three strips of cloth were wrapped around this tiny bundle, and the baby was thus snugly enclosed in a firm, warm, and comfortable sleeping bag. It took a genius in words like [Blessed] Cardinal Newman to capture the overwhelming paradox of this appealing scene when he described the lovable young virgin mother as tucking in “Omnipotence in bonds.”

“And she laid him in a manger” (Luke 2:7). St. Luke implicitly tells us that the Nativity occurred in a stable. The manger used in Bethlehem was a trough hewn out of wood or scooped out of the soft limestone which abounds in the Holy Land. Jesus probably rested on a bed of wheat or barley straw, for hay, as we understand it, was not made in Palestine.

The inn in which “there was no room for them” (Luke 2:7) was no more than a small caravansary or khan, inasmuch as Bethlehem was only an insignificant hamlet. Vastly dissimilar to the hotels to which we are accustomed, the khan consisted of a courtyard for the animals, surrounded by alcoves in which the travelers spent the night. The entire enclosure was made safe against robbers by a high fence and by a gate that was strongly barred at nightfall.

Mary and Joseph were not turned away by a hardhearted innkeeper, greedy for money from richer patrons. The popular misconception arose from the medieval legends and miracle plays of Europe. It contradicts the traditional hospitality found all over the East. The real reason was simply the fact that other travelers were living in the inn. Over and above this circumstance, a lodging so public was no place for Mary, whose time was fast approaching. Joseph therefore led his wife to the only refuge available — a cave hollowed into the rock and used as a shelter by the shepherds of the vicinity. Such grottoes have served and still serve as a common place of refuge for man and beast on rainy chilly nights.

Were an ox and ass present at the side of Mary when she brought forth the Savior of the world? We have no evidence. The stories of the ox and ass grew out of a pious application of a text from the prophet Isaiah, “The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib” (Isa. 1:3). It would seem more likely that if any animals at all were in the cave, they should have been sheep that belonged to the near-by shepherds.

Yet the one great question remains unanswered. What circumstances prevented Joseph, the official protector of Jesus and Mary, from obtaining adequate shelter for his dear charges when they needed it so badly? Many theories have been propounded by expert scholars who have spent long years in studying every possible clue ranging from the climate of the Holy Land to the minutest detail of the

text of Holy Scripture. Perhaps Joseph tried to get shelter better than the temporary home he acquired when he first came to Bethlehem; we do not know. But this seems certain: Mary's time was suddenly shortened by the direct providence of God so that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, by His own choice would come into the world in poor circumstances, a lesson of detachment to all men of all time.

Evidently, Jesus was born during the night, for "there were shepherds in the same district living in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). The weather may have been cool and raw, but not cold or snowy. Otherwise, the shepherds would have taken their flocks to some cave or other enclosure for shelter. Although tradition disagrees on the exact date of the first Christmas, it is rather uniform in holding that our Lord came into the world during the rainy or winter season — that is, some time between November and April.

"And behold, an angel of the Lord stood by [the shepherds], and said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all the people; for there has been born to you today in the town of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign to you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among men of good will.' And it came to pass, when the angels had departed from them into heaven, that the shepherds were saying to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste, and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in the manger. And when they had seen, they understood what had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard marveled at the things told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept in mind all these words, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, even as it was spoken to them" (Luke 2:9-20).

Thus does St. Luke draw the curtain over the Christmas scene he has described in inimitable words — a scene whose richness painters and poets and preachers have never been able to exhaust. It is the first appearance of the Holy Family before men: "Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in the manger." Mutual love shines forth in the faces of this earthly trinity: loving respect in the face of Joseph, loving adoration in the face of Mary, loving generosity in the face of the Eternal God with us. Joseph and Mary are, as it were, the mediators through whom the shepherds come to Jesus. In our own day and forever, they are the mediators through whom we, too, come to Jesus.

The all-pervading indefinable sense of deep peace that belongs to Christmas has come down to us through the ages. If we carefully search for the cause of this Christmas peace, we find that it lies in the unshakable calm brought forth by security. And if we search further for the cause of this security, we find it in the knowledge that God is with us.

"God with us!" We are children spoiled by twenty centuries of Christianity — spoiled because we have God with us and we do not appreciate the fact. We have had no experience of bleak paganism where in early youth our star-seeking ideals would be thrown down again and again, as they sought to turn a rebellious nature to obey a God they were not favored to know as we know Him. We have had no experience (as had the pagans of old) of trying to drown all those ideals in an ocean of sinful pleasure, yet finding their craving for the good and pure and the noble and unselfish still unsatisfied. We cannot appreciate the pagans' despair at having no one to turn to — absolutely no one; because

deep down in our hearts we know that even if all humans fail us, if we ourselves fail Jesus Christ, He can never and will never desert us.

Yes, the source of our Christmas peace is the realization that God is with us. And not merely God in heaven spiritually and invisibly at our side, but God in heaven come down to earth, clothed in flesh and bone as we are, like to us in all things, sin alone excepted.

The two thousand years that separate us from the midnight of the Nativity, vanish, and we kneel beside Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and we see that we are not in the past. It is a present moment that can never become part of the past. Even if Jesus had not perpetuated His bodily presence on earth by means of the Blessed Sacrament of His love, this one moment at the cave in Bethlehem, when the earth first saw its Savior, would be so all-inclusive that the passing of time could never dim its perpetual newness. The fact that Almighty God should take on our human nature and walk among us is too stupendous to be held by one moment or even by all the moments of time. Because Christ was with us once, He is with us always. The moment when the Infinite came into the realm of time becomes, as it were, eternal.

The lesson of the Nativity, then, is the bodily presence of God with us. The Preface for the Masses of Christmas Day rightly phrases this lesson as a stirring keynote. "Through the mystery of the Incarnate Word, the new light of God's glory has shone on the eyes of our mind, so that while we look upon God present to our eyes, through Him we may be drawn to the love of the invisible." From this point, "while we look upon God present to our eyes," we must rely on our faith in order that "we may be drawn to the love of the invisible." [This is the current approved translation of these beautiful Latin phrases of the Preface: "For in the mystery of the Word made flesh, a new light of your glory has shone upon the eyes of our mind, so that, as we recognize in him God made visible, we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible."]

But what is our faith? It is the "substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen" (Heb. 11:2). It is our belief in the word of God that what He tells us is true, despite the lack of evidence or even the apparently contrary evidence on the part of our senses.

Here in the cave at Bethlehem we see a newborn infant, his young mother, and her stalwart husband. Our faith tells us that the Infant is God Himself, become man without ceasing to be God; the mother is the person most exquisitely fashioned by the Lord Almighty; and the husband is the foster father closest to the Virgin and her Child in awesome holiness.

Before this Child came on earth, there was the law of God to be fulfilled. Like all laws it tended to be a "thing invisible," a rule hard to follow because unseen. But now that Christ is among us, the law takes shape before our eyes. We behold a Person now, no longer an abstract mandate. We see Him carry out the two great commandments of the love of God and the love of our fellow men — "things invisible" — to which we are drawn now because we look upon them concretized in "God present to our eyes." By the fact that Christ has come down to our earth, we are provided not only with an exemplar to show us how to live as we ought, but also we are fired by enthusiasm and love of Him to want to live as we ought.

Faith must enter into your daily life if you wish to live holily and happily. For instance, can you behold with your own eyes the sanctity and sacramental nature of Christian marriage? Hardly; yet your faith tells you that it is so.

Suppose that a serious problem turns up in your married life. It might be any of the thousand-and-one problems that can and do arise — misunderstanding, illness, financial distress, bereavement, difficulties with the children. Your faith tells you that because of the sacrament you received at the moment of your marriage, you have a right to receive from God those special benefactions, the actual graces, for carrying out the obligations of your married life. Can you believe this in a moment of trial? Can you bravely and generously go forward and attempt to solve your problems with a confident heart, serene in the knowledge that God has given you the grace to do so? You require faith, and faith requires a submission of your intellect to God's promises.

For that faith look at Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem. It is this very same Infant who in the years of His manhood will exalt your marriage to the height of a sacrament. The Christ is not a god dwelling far in the starry reaches of heaven; He came into your midst, a Babe subject to all the discomforts and helplessness natural to His state. With your own eyes you can see that He knows what you are describing when you tell Him of your troubles, for He Himself has shared our life on this earth. He is sympathetic to your needs, and His promises are not deceptions but come from the depths of His Sacred Heart that beats like your very own.

It is true that if Jesus had not come down to earth, we still would have had the consciousness of a loving Father in heaven who tenderly remembers His children on earth. It is also true that we need faith to see in the Babe the infinite God of love and majesty. But the lesson of Bethlehem lies in this extra help to our faith, this knowledge of Christ's personal presence among us — again to repeat from the Preface of the Christmas Masses — “that while we look upon God present to our eyes, we may be drawn to the love of things invisible.”

From this, you can understand why the Church uses this same Preface for Christmas in its Masses of the Blessed Sacrament [in the rubrics of Saint Pius V]. Christ's body on earth at Bethlehem was the same body which is now on earth in our tabernacles all over the world. The only difference is that now He is veiled beneath the species of bread and wine. The Blessed Sacrament is the continuation of Christmas; we cannot think of Christ's first personal visit two thousand years ago without instinctively thinking of His constant visit at every present moment. We owe the Blessed Sacrament to Bethlehem.

Each recurring Christmas Day should refresh in your mind the magnificent import of the bodily presence of God among us. As you receive Holy Communion on each occasion, the story of Bethlehem is being renewed and continued in your heart, for the cave was the first tabernacle and the manger was the first ciborium. You have the opportunity of “wrapping the Child in swaddling clothes and laying Him in the manger” of your own heart every day if you wish.

In the Blessed Sacrament, you will find the greatest, the most tangible help and inspiration for your family life. If you and your husband or wife can make it a practice to receive Holy Communion together, your union will be all the deeper because it is rooted all the more deeply in the love of Christ. There can be no doubt that the frequent reception of Holy Communion by husband and wife does infallibly make their marriage holier and happier.

It is hardly possible to speak satisfactorily of the Blessed Sacrament. The subject is too tremendous to do it justice. Just as the moment of the Incarnation could not hold its awesome reality for itself as the one moment when the Infinite took on the limits of time, so, too, the words that try to portray the quiet majesty of Christ's reign among us in the Tabernacle cannot convey their full message of truth. Jesus Christ, God and man, is present with His glorified living body under the appearance of

bread and wine in the Blessed Sacrament. What then? The action of the frequent communicant is the only reasonable action, and the answer of the father of the possessed boy is the only reasonable answer: “Lord, I believe, help you my unbelief!” (Mark 9:23.)

Every time we look on the mystery of the Nativity at Bethlehem, a little deeper sense of its meaning penetrates our souls. Sometimes, for a few fleeting moments, we feel that we can almost grasp the full realization of what it means to have God as man on this earth. The extension of Christ’s life in the Blessed Sacrament adds to this realization still another note: “God as man is on this earth now, as my closest, dearest Friend, in whose love I can rest my love of my husband or wife, and in whom we two are united in the ideal of the selfless love toward which we are striving.”

Do not be deceived by the fallacy that because of unworthiness you ought not approach Christ closely, receiving Holy Communion often. Who would be so proud as to imply that anyone could become fully worthy? To receive Communion only two things are necessary and sufficient: the state of grace and the proper disposition. The proper disposition simply consists in approaching the Holy Table for the good which the Eucharist will effect in your soul and body, not for public show or merely to please someone else. The results will be a closer union of love with Christ, the growth of every virtue in your soul, the blotting out of venial sin, strength against mortal sin, and powerful assistance to die in the peace of the Lord when your time comes.

All these considerations on the meaning of the Nativity and the Blessed Sacrament have grown out of our looking more or less at the Infant Jesus. There were two other people next to Him whom we look at now — the virgin mother and the foster father. Their radiant love is all directed toward the Babe in the manger, and because it is directed toward the Babe, it also goes through Him from husband to wife and from wife to husband in the thrill of ecstasy that takes hold of the two greatest saints as they look on their God, their Son. Again must we stress this great love of Joseph and Mary for each other as the model for every husband and wife.

It is here at Bethlehem while we watch them together at the crib that we can discuss frankly and settle finally a point that sometimes bothers Catholics when they pray to Joseph instead of Mary or to Mary instead of Joseph. In venerating one, they experience a sort of uneasy feeling that perhaps they are taking honor from the other. The same type of feeling can come to converts who have not yet developed the instinctive habit of praying to Mary, while realizing nevertheless that such an action not only does not derogate from God’s rights but is highly pleasing to Him.

Cardinal Newman has said that ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt. So in this case. There is no doubt that devotion to St. Joseph honors Mary and gives glory to God, and there is no doubt that Joseph more than any other saint wishes Mary to be honored above all mere creatures including himself. There is merely the difficulty that we find it hard to comprehend the complete selflessness of the husband and the wife, and their total devotion to one cause alone: the will of God. We fear that one would be jealous of the other! At any rate, in examining their love more closely as we are doing, another aspect of ideal family love will be brought into focus.

In our limited human experience, we rarely if ever succeed in erasing absolutely every trace of selfishness in dealing with even our nearest and dearest; but in the case of Joseph and Mary, the two know that their mutual glorification redounds to the praise of their Creator. Mary is His choicest handiwork as the most delicately beautiful person God made, conceived without stain of original sin. All her dignity arises out of the fact that she is the Mother of God, for she it was who brought this Infant Jesus into the world here at Bethlehem.

In the same way honor paid to St. Joseph is honor paid to Mary, and through Mary, to God. The dignity of St. Joseph ultimately stems from the fact that he is the virginal husband of the Mother of God. Because of his marriage to Our Lady, he possesses the rights of a father over this Jesus her Son, who lies in the manger before them. Had he not been Mary's husband, he would have been merely the guardian of Christ. He would not have had so intimate a share, as theologians tell us, in cooperating in Christ's work of redemption by educating and protecting Him during His childhood until He was ready to begin His public life.

Joseph and Mary realize all this as they kneel beside Jesus. Their humility does not deny the existence in themselves of the great gifts which Almighty God has bestowed on them. They understand the awesome heights of the dignity that belongs to their privileged positions, but they understand at the same time that all credit for their holiness must be given to the Infant they are serving, and to the workings of His grace in them. Their free will co-operated with Him in every detail; that, too, they realize. And while they see themselves rewarded for their fidelity by being the two chosen lovers to welcome Christ into the world, they see manifested in themselves God's justice and mercy and faithfulness to His promises.

If only we could grasp the depth of the love of Joseph for Mary and of Mary for Joseph as they adore their Son together! Next to God, or rather in God Himself, they bear an all-generous affection toward each other that could exist only in the husband and wife of the Holy Family.

Mary is not any less human because she is more holy. She looks at the Child and looks at His foster father, who is to guard Him (and act as His father) for possibly the next thirty years. She knows Joseph's fidelity and generosity and bravery. And she has another reason for her affection. She sees in him the tremendous nearness to God that made him worthy to be called the father of Christ. She wishes him to be honored for all he has done and will do for the newborn Redeemer.

And on Joseph's part, he loves Mary as no one except the Infant before them has ever done or can do. No angel or saint can be closer to Mary than her husband. He sees in her the sanctity that made her worthy to become the habitation of the Son of God. Since she is the mediatrix of all graces, Joseph goes to Jesus through Mary.

Yes, here in Bethlehem for the first time we behold the Holy Family, united on earth in that love and mutual confidence which continues to be our model here while they are united in even closer intimacy in heaven. We simply cannot honor St. Joseph without implicitly paying honor to Mary; and we cannot pay homage to Our Lady without honoring her Son, who is God, "to whom be all glory forever."

We must leave the manger now but the manger will be our heart, and the Infant will lie there often as we receive Him again and again in the sacrament of His love. Joseph and Mary will help us welcome Him each time as they welcomed Him for that wonderful first time in Bethlehem.
