

# Christmastide

## O Marvelous Exchange! O ADMIRABILE COMMERCIUM!

### ‘O Admirable Exchange!’ From “Christ in His Mysteries”

By Abbot Marmion, O.S.B.

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[Abbot Marmion was beatified in the year 2000.] [Obviously, Blessed Columba Marmion will refer to the prayers and rubrics as laid down for the liturgy by Pope Saint Pius V.]

#### SUMMARY.

— The mystery of the Incarnation is a wonderful exchange between divinity and humanity.

— I. The Eternal Word asks of us a human nature in order to unite it to Himself by a personal union: Creator... animatum corpus sumens. (The Creator... has deigned to become an inspirited (living) body.) — II. In becoming Incarnate, the Word brings us, in return, a share in His Divinity: Largitus est nobis suam deitatem. (He bestowed upon us His Godhead.) — III. This exchange appears still more wonderful when we consider the manner in which it is wrought. The Incarnation renders God visible so that we may hear and imitate Him. — IV. It renders God possible, capable of expiating our sins by His sufferings and of healing us by His humiliations. — V. We are to take our part in this exchange by faith: those who receive the Word-made-flesh by believing in Him have “power to be made the sons of God.”

The coming of the Son of God upon earth is so great an event that God willed to prepare the way for it during centuries. He made rites and sacrifices, figures and symbols, all converge towards Christ; He foretold Him, announced Him by the mouth of the prophets who succeeded one another from generation to generation.

And now it is the very Son of God Who comes to instruct us:

Multifariam multisque modis olim Deus loquens patribus... novissime locutus est nobis in Filio (Heb 1:1-2). “At sundry times and in divers manners, God spoke in times past to our fathers... last of all, in these days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

For Christ is not only born for the Jews of Judea who lived in His time. It is for us all, for all mankind, that He came down from Heaven:

Propter nos et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis. (For our sakes and for our salvation He descended from heaven.) He wills to distribute to every soul the grace that He merited by His Nativity.

This is why the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, appropriates to herself, in order to place them upon our lips and with them to fill our hearts, the longings of the patriarchs, the aspirations of the

just of ancient times, and the desires of the Chosen People. She wills to prepare us for Christ's coming, as if this Nativity was about to be renewed before our eyes.

See how when she commemorates the coming of her Divine Bridegroom upon earth, she displays the splendor of her solemnities, and makes her altars brilliant with lights to celebrate the Birth of the "Prince of Peace" (Is 9:6), the "Sun of Justice" (Mal 4:2), Who rises in the midst of our darkness to enlighten "every man that comes into this world" (John 1:5 and 9). She grants her priests the privilege, almost unique in the year, of thrice offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

These feasts are magnificent; they are likewise full of charm. The Church evokes the remembrance of the Angels singing in the sky the glory of the new-born Babe; of the Shepherds who come to adore at the manger; of the Magi who hasten from the East to offer Him their adorations and rich presents.

And yet, like every feast here below, this solemnity, even with the prolongation of its octave, is ephemeral: it passes by. Is it for the feast of a day, howsoever splendid it may be, that the Church requires such a long preparation from us? Certainly not! Why then? Because she knows that the contemplation of this mystery contains a special and choice grace for our souls.

I said at the beginning of these conferences that each one of Christ's mysteries constitutes not only a historical fact which takes place in time, but contains a grace proper to itself wherewith our souls are to be nourished so as to live thereby.

Now what is the intimate grace of the mystery of the Nativity? What is the grace for the reception of which the Church takes so much care to dispose us? What is the fruit that we ought to gather from the contemplation of the Christ Child?

The Church herself indicates this at the first Mass, that of midnight. After having offered the bread and wine which, in a few moments, are to be changed, by the consecration, into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, she sums up her desires in this prayer:

"Grant, O Lord, that the oblation which in we offer today's festival may be acceptable unto You, and, by Your grace, through this most sacred and holy intercourse, may we be found like unto Him (in form) in Whom is our substance united to You."

(Accepta tibi sit, Domine, quaesumus, hodiernae festivitatis oblatio: ut tua gratia largiente, per haec sacrosancta commercia, in illius inveniamur forma, in quo tecum est nostra substantia. Secret prayer {after the Offertory} of the Midnight Mass.)

The word 'forma' is here taken in the sense of "nature," "condition," *natura*, as in the text of St Paul: *Christus cum in forma Dei esset... exinanivit semet ipsum formam servi accipiens et habitu inventus ut homo.* 'Christ Who being in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man.' (Phil 2:6-7)

We ask to be partakers of that divinity to which our humanity is united. It is like an exchange. God, in becoming incarnate, takes our human nature and gives us, in return, a participation in His Divine nature.

This thought, so concise in its form, is more explicitly expressed in the secret prayer of the second Mass: "Grant, O Lord, that our offerings may be conformed to the mysteries of this day's Nativity, that as He Who is born as man is also God made manifest, so this earthly substance (which He unites to Himself) may confer upon us that which is divine." (Munera nostra, quaesumus, Domine,

nativitatis hodiernae mysteriis apta proveniant, ut sicut homo genitus idem refulsit et Deus, sic nobis haec terrena substantia conferat quod divinum est. (Secret prayer of the Mass at Break of Day.)

To be made partakers of the Divinity to which our humanity was united in the Person of Christ, and to receive this Divine gift through this humanity itself, — such is the grace attached to the celebration of today's mystery.

Our offerings will be “conformed to the mysteries of this day's Nativity,” according to the words of the above quoted secret, if — by the contemplation of the Divine work at Bethlehem and the reception of the Eucharistic Sacrament, — we participate in the eternal life that Christ wills to communicate to us by His Humanity.

“O admirable exchange,” we shall sing on the octave day, “the Creator of the human race, taking upon Himself a body and a soul, has vouchsafed to be born of a Virgin, and, appearing here below as man, has made us partakers of His Divinity”: O admirabile commercium! CREATOR generis humani, ANIMATUM CORPUS SUMENS, de virgine nasci dignatus est; et procedens homo sine semine, LARGITUS EST NOBIS SUAM DEITATEM (Antiphon of the Octave of Christmas).

[Another translation: ‘O marvelous exchange! The CREATOR of the human race HAS DESIGNED TO BECOME AN INSPIRITED (living) BODY of a man, born of a virgin without admixture of seed. HE BESTOWED UPON US HIS GODHEAD. (We have been made sharers in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity).’]

Let us, therefore, stay for a few moments to admire, with the Church, this exchange between the creature and the Creator between heaven and earth, an exchange upon which all the mystery of the Nativity is based. Let us consider what are the acts and the matter of it;—under what form it is wrought; — we will afterwards see what fruits are to be derived from it for us; — and to what it engages us.

## I.

Let us transport ourselves to the stable-cave at Bethlehem; let us behold the Child lying upon the straw. What is He in the sight of the profane, in the sight of an inhabitant of the little city who might happen to come there after the Birth of Jesus?

Only a new-born Babe to Whom a woman of Nazareth had given birth; only a son of Adam like unto us, for His parents have Him inscribed upon the register of enrolment; the details of His genealogy can be followed. There He lies upon the straw, a weak Babe Whose life is sustained by a little milk. Many Jews saw nothing more in Him than this. Later on you will hear His compatriots, astonished at His wisdom, ask themselves where He could have learnt it, for, in their eyes, He had never been anything but “the son of a carpenter”: Nonne hic est fabri filius?... (‘Is not this the carpenter's son?’) (Mt 13:55; and see Mark 6:3; Luke 4:22).

But to the eyes of faith, a life higher than the human life animates this Child: He possesses Divine life. What does faith, indeed, tell us on this subject? What revelation does it give us?

Faith tells us that this Child is God's own Son. He is the Word, the Second Person of the Adorable Trinity; He is the Son Who receives Divine life from His Father, by an ineffable communication: Sicut Pater habet vitam in semet ipso, sic dedit et Filio habere vitam in semet ipso (‘For as the Father has life in himself, so he has given the Son also to have life in himself.’) (John 5:26). He possesses the Divine nature, with all its infinite perfections, ‘In the heavenly splendors’, in

splendoribus sanctorum (Ps 109:3 in the Vulgate or Psalm 110:3 in the Hebrew). God begets this Son by an eternal generation.

It is to this Divine Sonship in the bosom of the Father that our adoration turns first of all; it is this Sonship that we extol in the midnight Mass. At day-break, the Holy Sacrifice will celebrate the Nativity of Christ according to the flesh, His Birth, at Bethlehem, of the Virgin Mary; finally, the third Mass will be in honor of Christ's coming into our souls.

The Mass of the night, all enveloped with mystery, begins with these solemn words: Dominus dixit ad me: Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te (Introit or entrance antiphon of the Mass of Midnight), 'The Lord has said to me: You are my son, this day have I begotten You'. (See Psalm 2:7.) This cry that escapes from the soul of Christ united to the Person of the Word, reveals to earth for the first time that which the heavens hear from all eternity. "The Lord has said to Me: You are My Son: this day have I begotten You." "This day" is first of all the day of eternity, a day without dawn or decline.

The Heavenly Father now contemplates His Incarnate Son. The Word, although made man, nevertheless remains God. Become the Son of man, He is still the Son of God. The first glance that falls upon Christ, the first love wherewith He is surrounded, is the glance, the love of His Father. Dilixet me Pater (John 15:9) 'the Father has loved me'. What contemplation and what love! Christ is the Only-begotten Son of the Father; therein lies His essential glory. He is equal to and "consubstantial with the Father, God of God, Light of Light... by Whom all things were made," "and without Him was made nothing that was made." It is of this Son that these words were spoken: "You in the beginning, O Lord, did found the earth, and the works of Your hands are the heavens. They shall perish, but You shall continue; and they shall all grow old as a garment; and as a vesture shall You change them, and they shall be changed; but You are the self-same, and Your years shall not fail!" (Epistle for the Mass of Christmas Day. Hebrews 1:10-12.)

And this "Word was made Flesh": Et Verbum caro factum est.

Let us adore this Word become Incarnate for us: Christus natus est nobis, venite adoremus (Invitatory antiphon for Christmas Matins – Early Morning Prayer or 'Office of Readings'). 'Christ has been born for us, come let us adore.' ... A God takes our humanity: conceived by the mysterious operation of the Holy Ghost in Mary's womb, Christ is born of the most pure substance of the blood of the Virgin, and the life that He has from her makes Him like unto us! Creator generis humani de virgine nasci dignatus est, et procedens homo sine semine. 'The Creator of the human race has deigned to become a living body of a man, born of a virgin without admixture of seed.'

This is what faith tells us: this Child is the Incarnate Word of God; He is the 'Creator of the human race' become man. Creator generis humani; if He needs a little milk to nourish Him, it is by His hand that the birds of heaven are fed.

Parvoque lacte pastus est Per quem nec ales esurit (Hymn of Christmas Lauds – Morning Prayer.) 'and with little milk he was fed, Who does not allow even the birds to hunger.'

Let us contemplate this Infant lying in the manger. His eyes are closed. He sleeps. He does not manifest outwardly what He is. In appearance, He is only like all other infants, and yet, being God, being the Eternal Word, He, at this moment, is judging the souls that appear before Him. "He lies upon straw, and as God, He sustains the universe and reigns in heaven": "Jacet in praesepio et in caelis regnat" (12th response at Matins on the Sunday of the Octave of Christmas). This Child is

just beginning to grow, ‘Puer crescebat... et proficiebat aetate’ (Luke 2:40, 52). ‘The boy grew... and he advanced in age.’ Yet He is the Eternal Whose divine nature knows no change: ‘Tu idem ipse es, et anni tui non deficient.’ ‘You are always the selfsame, and your years shall not fail’. (Psalm 101:28 in the Vulgate, or Psalm 102:27 in the Hebrew.) He Who is born in time is likewise He Who is before all time; He Who manifests Himself to the shepherds of Bethlehem is He Who, out of nothing, created the nations that, “are before Him as if they had no being at all” (Is 40:17).

‘Palamque fit pastoribus, Pastor creator omnium’. (Hymn of Christmas Lauds – Morning Prayer.) ‘And to the shepherds is now made known, The Shepherd who is the creator of all.

To the eyes of faith, there are two lives in this Babe; two lives indissolubly united in an ineffable manner, for the Human Nature belongs to the Word in such wise that there is but a single Person, that of the Word, Who sustains the Human Nature by His own Divine existence.

Undoubtedly, this human nature is perfect: *perfectus homo* (Creed attributed to St. Athanasius) “the perfect human man”: nothing of that which belongs to its essence is lacking to Him. This Babe has a soul like to ours; He has faculties: — intelligence, will, imagination, sensibility — like ours. He is truly one of our own race, Whose existence will be revealed, during thirty three years, as authentically human. Sin, alone, will be unknown to Him. ‘*Debuit per omnia fratribus similare*’ (Heb 2:17) ‘it behooved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren... absque peccato’ (Heb 4:15) ‘without sin’. Perfect in itself, this human nature will keep its own activity, its native splendor. Between these two lives of Christ — the Divine, which He ever possesses by His eternal birth in the bosom of the Father; the human which He has begun to possess by His Incarnation in the bosom of a Virgin — there is neither mingling nor confusion. The Word, in becoming man, remains what He was; that which He was not, He has taken from our race; but the divine in Him does not absorb the human, the human does not lessen the divine. The union is such, as I have often said, that there is however but a single Person — the Divine Person, — and that the human nature belongs to the Word, is the Word’s own humanity: *Mirabile mysterium declaratur hodie: innovantur naturae, Deus homo factus est; id quod fuit permansit et quod non erat assumpsit, non commixtionem passus neque divisionem* (Antiphon of Lauds in the Octave of Christmas.) ‘A wondrous mystery is declared today, an innovation is made upon nature, God is made man; that which he was, he remains, and that which he was not, he takes on and assumes, suffering neither commixture nor division.’

## II.

This then, if I may so express myself, is one of the acts of the contract. God takes our nature so as to unite it to Himself in a personal union.

What is the other act? What is God going to give us in return? Not that He owes us anything: *Bonorum meorum non eges* (Psalm 15:2 in the Vulgate or Psalm 16:2 in the Hebrew). ‘For you have no need of my goods’. But as He does all things with wisdom, He could not take upon Himself our nature without a motive worthy of Him.

What the Word Incarnate gives in return to humanity is an incomprehensible gift; it is a participation, real and intimate, in His Divine nature: *Largitus est nobis suam deitatem.* (‘He bestowed upon us His Godhead’.) In exchange for the humanity which He takes, the Incarnate Word gives us a share in His Divinity; He makes us partakers of His Divine Nature. And thus is accomplished the most wonderful exchange which could be made.

Doubtless, as you know, this participation had already been offered and given, from the creation, to Adam, the first man. The gift of grace, with all its splendid train of privileges, made Adam like to God. But the sin of the first man, the head of the human race, destroyed and rendered this ineffable participation impossible on the part of the creature.

It is to restore this participation that the Word becomes Incarnate; it is to reopen to us the way to heaven that God is made man. For this Child, being God's own Son, has Divine life, like His Father, with His Father. In this Child "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally" (Col. 2:9); in Him are laid up all the treasures of the divinity (Col 2:3). But He does not possess them for Himself alone. He infinitely desires to communicate to us the Divine life that He Himself is: *Ego sum vita* (John 14:6). 'I am the life.' It is for this that He comes: *Ego veni UT vitam habeant* (John 10:10). "I am come THAT they may have life." 'It is for us that a Child is born; it is to us that a Son is given': *Puer natus est NOBIS et Filius datus est nobis* (Introit antiphon of the Mass of the day). In making us share in His condition of Son, He will make us children of God. "When the fullness of time was come, God sent His Son, made of a woman,... that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal 4:4-5). What Christ is by nature, that is to say the Son of God, we are to be by grace; the Incarnate Word, the Son of God made man is to become the author of our divine generation: *Natus hodie Salvator mundi DIVINAE NOBIS GENERATIONIS est auctor* (Post-communion prayer of the Mass of Christmas Day). 'Today the Savior of the world is born; He is the author of the Divine generation to us.' So that, although He be the Only-begotten Son, He (Himself) will become the First-born of many brethren: *UT sit IPSE PRIMOGENITUS in multis fratribus* (Rom 8:29).

Such are the two acts of the wonderful "bargain" that God makes with us: He takes our nature in order to communicate to us His divinity; He takes a human life so as to make us partakers of His divine life: 'He (God) is made man so as to make us gods': *Factus est Deus homo, ut homo fieret Deus* (Sermon attributed to St. Augustine, number 128 in the appendix to his works). And His human Birth becomes the means of our birth to the divine life.

In us, likewise there will be henceforth two lives. The one, natural, which we have by our birth according to the flesh, but which, in God's sight, is not only without merit but, before baptism, is stained in consequence of original sin; which makes us enemies of God, worthy of His wrath: we are born filii irae (Eph 2:3) 'children of wrath'. The other life, supernatural, is infinitely above the rights and exigencies of our nature. It is this life that God communicates to us by His grace, since the Incarnate Word merited it for us.

God begets us to this life by His Word and the infusion of His Spirit, in the baptismal font: *Genit nos Verbo veritatis* (James 1:18) 'He has begotten us by the Word of truth'... *Per lavacrum regenerationis et renovationis Spiritus Sancti.* ('He saved us, by the laver of regeneration, and renovation of the Holy Ghost.') (Titus 3:5) It is a new life that is superadded to our natural life, surpassing and crowning it; *In Christo nova creatura.* ('If then any be in Christ he is a new creature.') (2 Corinth 5:17; Gal 6:15). It makes us children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, worthy of one day partaking of His beatitude and glory.

Of these two lives, in us as in Christ, it is the divine that ought to dominate, although in the Child Christ, it is not as yet manifested, and in us, it remains ever veiled under the outward appearance of our ordinary existence. It is the divine life of grace that ought to rule and govern, and make agreeable to our Lord, all our natural activity, thus deified in its root.

Oh! if the contemplation of the Birth of Jesus and participation in this mystery by the reception of the Bread of Life would bring us to free ourselves, once and for all, from everything that destroys and lessens the divine life within us; from sin, wherefrom Christ comes to deliver us: Cujus nativitas humanam repulit vetustatem ‘Whose birth caste away all the old things of human nature’ (Post-communion prayer for the Mass of Day-break); from all infidelity and all attachment to creatures; from the irregular care for passing things: Abnegantes saecularia desideria (‘that we should be denying ungodliness and worldly desires,’) (Tit 2:12; Epistle for the midnight Mass); from the trying preoccupations of our vain self love!

If we could thus be brought to give ourselves entirely to God, according to the promises of our baptism when we were born to the divine life; to yield ourselves up to the accomplishment of His will and good pleasure, as did the Incarnate Word in entering into this world: Ecce venio... ut faciam Deus voluntatem tuam (Heb 10:7) ‘Behold I come... that I should do your will, O God.’ Oh that we to abound in those good works which make us pleasing to God: Populum acceptabilem, sectatorem bonorum operum (Tit 2:14. Epistle for the midnight Mass.)! ‘Christ gave himself for us that he might cleanse to himself a people acceptable, a pursuer of good works’.

Then the divine life brought to us by Jesus would meet with no more obstacles and would freely expand for the glory of our Heavenly Father; then “we who are bathed in the new light of the Incarnate Word should show forth in our deeds what by faith shines in our minds” (Da nobis quaesumus omnipotens Deus; ut qui nova incarnati Verbi tui luce perfundimur, hoc in nostro resplendeat opere, quod per fidem fulget in mente. ‘Grant to us, we beseech you, almighty God: that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word, the light of faith, which illumines our minds, may also shine through in our deeds.’ Collect prayer for the Mass at Daybreak). Then, “our offerings would befit the mysteries of this day’s Nativity”. Munera nostra nativitatis hodiernae mysteriis apta proveniant (Secret prayer for the Mass at Day-break). “Grant, O Lord, that our offerings may be conformed to the mysteries of this day’s Nativity, that as He Who is born as man is also God made manifest, so this earthly substance (which He unites to Himself) may confer upon us that which is divine.”

### III.

What further renders this exchange “admirable” is the manner in which it is effected, the form wherein it is accomplished. How is it accomplished? How does this Child, Who is the Incarnate Word, make us partakers of His divine life? By His Humanity. The humanity that the Word takes from us is to serve Him as the instrument for communicating His divine life to us; and this for two reasons wherein eternal wisdom infinitely shines out; the humanity renders God visible; it renders God possible.

It renders Him visible.

The Church, using the words of St. Paul, celebrates with delight this “appearing” of God amongst us: Apparuit gratia Dei Salvatoris nostri omnibus hominibus (Tit 2:11. Epistle for the midnight Mass): “The grace of God our Savior has appeared to all men.” Apparuit benignitas et humanitas Salvatoris nostri Dei (Tit 3:4, Epistle for the Mass at Day-break). “The goodness and kindness of God our Savior has appeared.”

Lux fulgebit hodie super nos, quia natus est nobis Dominus (Introit antiphon of the Mass at Day-break): “a light shall shine upon us this day: for our Lord is born to us”; Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis: “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14.)

The Incarnate Word brings about this marvel: men have seen God Himself abiding in the midst of them.

St. John loves to dwell upon this side of the mystery. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life: For the life was manifested; and we have seen and do bear witness and declare unto you the Life Eternal which was with the Father, and has appeared in us. That which we have seen and have heard, we declare unto you that... your joy may be full” (1 John 1:1-4).

What joy indeed, to see God manifesting Himself to us; not in the dazzling splendor of His omnipotence, nor in the unspeakable glory of His sovereignty, but under the veil of humble, poor, weak humanity, which we can see and touch!

We might have been afraid of the dreadful majesty of God: the Israelites fell on their faces to the ground, full of terror and fear, when God spoke to Moses upon Sinai, in the midst of lightnings. We are drawn by the charms of a God become a Babe. The Babe in the Crib seems to say to us: “You are afraid of God? You are wrong: Qui vidit me, vidit et Patrem (John 14:9). ‘He that sees me, sees the Father also’. Do not heed your imagination, do not form yourselves a God from the deductions of philosophy, nor ask of science to make My perfections known to you. The true Almighty God is the God that I am and reveal; the true God is I Who come to you in poverty, humility and infancy, but Who will one day give My life for you. I am ‘the brightness of {the Father’s} glory, and the figure of His substance’ (Heb 1:3). I am His Only-begotten Son, God as He is; in Me you shall learn to know His perfections, His wisdom and His goodness, His love towards men and His mercy in regard to sinners: Illuxit in cordibus nostris... in facie Christi Jesu (2 Corinth 4:6) ‘For God has shined in our hearts... in the face of Christ Jesus’. Come unto Me, for, God as I am, I have willed to be a man like you, and I do not reject those who draw near to Me with confidence: One of your Christmas prayers says: ‘He who was born as man, shone forth also as God,’ Sicut homo genitus IDEM refulsi et Deus.” Why did God thus deign to render Himself visible?

First of all so as to instruct us: Apparuit erudiens nos. ‘(God) has appeared, instructing us’ (Titus 2:11-12). It is indeed God Who will henceforth speak to us by His own Son: Locutus est nobis in Filio (Heb 1:2 ‘(God) has spoken to us by his Son); we have but to listen to this beloved Son in order to know what God wills of us. The Heavenly Father Himself tells us so: Hic est Filius meus dilectus: ipsum audite (Mt 17:5 ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear him, all of you’); and Jesus delights in repeating to us that His doctrine is that of His Father: Mea doctrina non est mea, sed ejus qui misit me (John 7:16 ‘My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me’).

Next, the Word renders Himself visible to our sight so as to become the Example that we are to follow.

We have only to watch this Child grow, only to contemplate Him living in the midst of us, living like us as man, in order to know how we ought to live in the sight of God, as children of God: for all that He does will be pleasing to His Father: Quae placita sunt ei, facio semper (John 8:29 ‘for I do always, the things that please him.’).

Being the Truth Who has come to teach us, He will point out the way by His example; if we live in His light, if we follow this way, we shall have life: Ego sum via, et veritas et vita (John 14:6 ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life.’). Thus, in knowing God manifested in the midst of us, we shall be drawn by Him to the love of invisible things: Ut dum VISIBILITER Deum cognoscimus, PER

HUNC in invisibilium amorem rapiamur (Preface for Christmas “So that while we acknowledge God in VISIBLE FORM, we may THROUGH HIM be drawn to the love things invisible.”).

#### IV.

The humanity of Christ renders God visible, and above all — and it is in this that Divine Wisdom is shown to be “admirable” — it renders God possible.

Sin which destroyed the divine life within us demands a satisfaction, an expiation without which it would be impossible for divine life to be restored to us. Being a mere creature, man cannot give this satisfaction for an offence of infinite malice, and, on the other hand, the Divinity can neither suffer nor expiate. God cannot communicate His life to us unless sin be blotted out; by an immutable decree of Divine Wisdom, sin can only be blotted out if it be expiated in an adequate manner. How is this problem to be solved?

The Incarnation gives us the answer. Consider the Babe of Bethlehem. He is the Word made flesh. The humanity that the Word makes His own is possible; it is this humanity which will suffer, will expiate. These sufferings, these expiations will belong, however, to the Word, as this humanity itself does; they will take from the Divine Person an infinite value which will suffice to redeem the world, to destroy sin, to make grace super-abound in souls like an impetuous and fructifying river: *Fluminis impetus laetificat civitatem Dei.* (Psalm 45:5 in the Vulgate ‘The stream of the river makes the city of God joyful.’ It is Psalm 46:4 in the Hebrew.)

O admirable exchange! Do not let us stay to wonder by what other means God might have brought it about, but let us contemplate the way wherein He has done so. The word asks of us a human nature to find in it wherewith to suffer, to expiate, to merit, to heap graces upon us. It is through the flesh that man turns away from God: it is in becoming flesh that God delivers man:

*Beatus auctor saeculi, Servile corpus induit, Ut carne carnem liberans, Non perderet quod condidit* (Hymn for Lauds – Morning Prayer - at Christmas. ‘Blest Author of this earthly frame, To take a Servant’s form (body) he came, That liberating flesh by flesh, Whom he had made might live afresh and Not perish’.)

The flesh that the Word of God takes upon Himself, is to become the instrument of salvation for all flesh. O admirabile commercium! ‘O admirable Exchange!’

Doubtless, as you know, it was necessary to await the immolation of Calvary for the expiation to be complete; but, as St. Paul teaches us, it was from the first moment of His Incarnation that Christ accepted to accomplish His Father’s will and to offer Himself as Victim for the human race: *Ideo ingrediens mundum dicit: Hostiam et oblationem noluisti: CORPUS autem aptasti mihi... Et tune dixit: Ecce venio... ut faciam Deus voluntatem tuam* (Heb 10:5, 7. ‘Wherefore when he comes into the world, he says: Sacrifice and oblation you would not: but a BODY you have fitted to me.... Then said he: Behold I come... that I should do your will, O God’. See Psalm 39:8 in the Vulgate or Psalm 40: 6-8 in the Hebrew). It is by this oblation that Christ begins to sanctify us: *In qua voluntate sanctificati sumus* (Heb 10:10 ‘In the which ‘will’ we are sanctified’). It is from the Crib that He inaugurates this life of suffering such as He willed to live for our salvation, this life of which the term is at Golgotha, and that, in destroying sin, is to restore to us the friendship of His Father. The Crib is certainly only the first stage, but it radically contains all the others.

This is why, in the Christmas solemnities, the Church attributes our salvation to the temporal Birth itself of the Son of God. “Grant, we beseech You, Almighty God, that the new Birth of Your Only-

begotten Son in the flesh may deliver us who are held captive by the old bondage under the yoke of sin" (Concede quae sumus, omnipotens Deus, ut nos Unigeniti tui nova per carnem nativitas liberet, quos sub peccati jugo vetuita servitus tenet. Collect prayer for the Mass of Christmas Day.). This is why, from that moment, "deliverance, redemption, salvation, eternal life," will be spoken of constantly. It is by His Humanity that Christ, High Priest and Mediator, binds us to God; but it is at Bethlehem that He appears to us in this Humanity.

See, too, how from the moment of His Birth, He fulfills His mission.

What is it that causes us to lose divine life?

It is pride. Because they believed that they would be like unto God, having the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve lost, for themselves and for their race, the friendship of God. Christ, the new Adam, redeems us, brings us back to God, by the humility of His Incarnation. Although He was God, He annihilated in taking the condition of the creature, in making Himself like unto men; He manifested Himself as man according to all appearances (Phil 2:6-7). What a humiliation was that! Later, it is true, the Church will exalt to the highest heavens His dazzling glory as the conqueror over sin and death; but now, Christ knows only self-abasement and weakness. When our gaze rests upon this little Child, Who is in no way distinguished from others, when we think that He is God, and that in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge, we feel our souls deeply moved, and our vain pride is confounded in the face of such abasement.

And what besides pride? Our refusal to obey. See what an example of wonderful obedience the Son of God gives. With the simplicity of little children, He yields Himself up into the hands of His parents; He allows Himself to be touched, taken up and carried about; and all His Childhood, all His Boyhood and Youth are summed up in the Gospel in these few words which tell how He was subject to Mary and Joseph: *Et erat subditus illis.* (See Luke 2:51 'And he was subject to them.'

And next, there is our covetousness "the concupiscence of the eyes" (1 John 2:16), all that appears, glitters, fascinates and seduces; the essential inanity of the passing trifles that we prefer to God. The Word is made flesh; but He is born in poverty and abjection. *Propter vos egenus factus est cum esset dives* (2 Corinth 8:9 'Being rich he became poor, for your sakes; that through his poverty you might be rich.'). "Being rich, He became poor." Although He is "the King of ages" (1 Tim 1:17), although He is the One Who drew all creation out of nothing by a word, and has only to open His hand to fill "with blessing every living creature" (Psalm 144:16 in the Vulgate and Psalm 145: 16 in the Hebrew), He is not born in a palace; His Mother, finding no room in the inn, had to take refuge in a stable cave: the Son of God, Eternal Wisdom, willed to be born in destitution and laid upon straw.

If with faith and love we contemplate the Child Jesus in His Crib, we shall find in Him the Divine Example of many virtues; if we know how to lend the ear of our hearts to what He says to us, we shall learn many things; if we reflect upon the circumstances of His Birth, we shall see how the Humanity serves the Word as the instrument to instruct us, but likewise to raise us, to quicken us, to make us pleasing to His Father, to detach us from passing things, to lift us up even to Himself.

"Divinity is clad in our mortal flesh... and because God humbles Himself to live a human life, man is raised towards divine things": *Dum divinitas defectum nostrae carnes suscepit, humanum genus lumen, quod amiserat, recepit. Unde enim Deus humana patitur, inde homo ad divina sublevatus.* (Saint Gregory, Homily I, on the Evangelical Gospels.) 'While divinity received (is clad) in the defects of our (mortal) flesh, the human race is given back the light that was lost. Because hence,

God is acted upon (humbles himself) as a human (a man), consequently the human (man) is raised up to the divine things.'

V.

Thus from whatever side our faith contemplates this exchange, and whatever be the details of it that we examine, it appears admirable to us.

Is not this child-bearing of a virgin indeed admirable: *Natus ineffabiliter ex virgine?* (Antiphon for the Octave of Christmas: 'Born from a virgin in a way that cannot be described'.)

"A young Maiden has Brought forth the King Whose name is Eternal: to the honor of virginity she unites the joys of motherhood; before her, the like was never seen, nor shall it ever be so again" (*Genuit puerperal Regem, Cui nomen Aeternum, et gaudia matris habens cum virginitatis honore, nec primam similem visa est, nec habere sequentem.* Antiphon for Lauds – Morning Prayer - at Christmas.) "Daughters of Jerusalem, why do you admire me? This mystery that you behold in me is truly Divine" (*Filiae Jerusalem, quid me admiramini? Divinum est mysterium hoc quod cernitis.* Antiphon for the Feast of the Expectation of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the coming Birth – 'Expectatio partus virginis', on December 18 – a feast emerging from Spain which originally recalled the Annunciation).

Admirable is this indissoluble union, that is yet without confusion, of the divinity with the humanity in the one Person of the Word: *Mirabile mysterium: innovantur naturae.* 'A Wonderful mystery: It is the restoration of nature'. Admirable is this exchange, by the contrasts of its realization: God gives us a share in His divinity, but the humanity that He takes from us in order to communicate His divine life to us is a suffering humanity, "acquainted with infirmity," *homo sciens infirmitatem* (Is 53:3 'A man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity'), that will undergo death and, by death, will restore life to us.

Admirable is this exchange in its source which is none other than God's infinite love for us. *Sic Deus dilexit mundum, ut Filium suum Unigenitum daret* (John 3:16). "God so loved the world as to give His Only-begotten Son." Let us, then, yield up our souls to joy and sing with the Church: *Parvulus natus est nobis et filius DATUS est NOBIS.* 'A Child is born to us, and a Son is GIVEN, yes, TO US.' - Isaiah 11:6. And how is He given? "In the likeness of sinful flesh." This is why the love that thus gives Him to us in our possible humanity, in order to expiate sin, is a measureless love:

*Propter NIMIAM caritatem suam, qua dilexit nos Deus, misit Filium suum in similitudinem carnis peccati.* (Antiphon for the Octave of Christmas 'By reason of his GREAT love, wherewith he has loved us, God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh,').

Admirable, finally, in its fruits and effects. By this exchange, God again gives us His friendship, He restores to us the right of entering into possession of the eternal inheritance; He looks anew upon humanity with love and complacency.

Therefore, joy is one of the most marked characteristics of the celebration of this mystery. The Church constantly invites us to it, remembering the words of the angel to the shepherds: "Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy... for this day is born to you a Savior" (Luke 2:10-11). It is the joy of deliverance, of the inheritance regained, of peace found once again, and, above all, of the vision of God Himself given to men: *Et vocabitur nomen ejus Emmanuel* (Is 7:14 'And his name shall be called Emmanuel.'; and see Mt 1:23).

But this joy will only be assured if we remain firm in the grace that comes to us from the Savior and makes us His brethren. “O Christian”, exclaims St. Leo, in a sermon that the Church reads during this holy night, “recognize your dignity”: ‘Agnosce, O Christiane, dignitatem tuam’. “And made a partaker of the divinity, take care not to fall back from so sublime a state.” (Sermon I de Nativitate – ‘About the Birth of Christ’.)

“If you did know the gift of God” (John 4:10), said our Lord Himself. If you did know all that this Son is Who is given to you! If, above all, we were to receive Him as we ought to receive Him! Let it not be said of us: *In propria venit, et sui eum non receperunt* (Gospel for the Mass on Christmas Day: John 1:11). “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” By our creation, all of us are “His own”; we belong to God; but there are some who have not received Him upon this earth. How many Jews, how many pagans have rejected Christ, because He has appeared in the humility of possible flesh! Souls sunk in the darkness of pride and sensuality: *Lux in tenebris lucet, et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt.* ‘The light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.’ (John 1:5.)

And how ought we to receive Him? By faith: *His qui credunt in nomine ejus, ‘to them that believe in his name’* (John 1:12). It is to those who — believing in His Person, in His word, in His works, — have received this Child as God, that it has been given, in return, to become themselves children of God: *Ex Deo nati sunt.* ‘Who are born out of God’. (John 1:13.)

Such is, in fact, the fundamental disposition that we must have so that this “admirable exchange” may produce in us all its fruits. Faith alone teaches us how it is brought about; wherein it is realized; faith alone gives us a true knowledge of it and one worthy of God.

For there are many modes and degrees of knowledge.

“The ox knows his owner, and the ass his Master’s Crib,” wrote Isaiah, in speaking of this mystery (Is 1:3). They saw the Child lying in the crib. But what could they see? As much as an animal could see: the form, the size, the color, the movement, — an entirely rudimentary knowledge that does not pass the boundary line of sensation. Nothing more.

The passers-by, the curious, who approached the stable-cave saw the Child; but for them He was like all others. They did not go beyond this purely natural knowledge. Perhaps they were struck by the Child’s loveliness. Perhaps they pitied His destitution. But this feeling did not last and was soon replaced by indifference.

There were the Shepherds, simple-hearted men, enlightened by a ray from on high: *Claritas Dei circumfulsit illos* (Luke 2:9 ‘the brightness of God shone round about them’). They certainly understood more; they recognized in this Child the promised Messiah, long awaited, the *Exicctatio gentium* (Gen 49:10 ‘the expectation of nations.’); they paid Him their homage, and their souls were for a long time full of joy and peace.

The Angels likewise contemplated the New-born Babe, the Word made Flesh. They saw in Him their God; this knowledge threw these pure spirits into awe and wonderment at such incomprehensible self-abasement: for it was not to their nature that He willed to unite Himself: *Nusquam angelos*, but to human nature, *sed semen Abrahae apprehendit* (Heb 2:16 ‘For no where does he take hold of the angels: but of the seed of Abraham he takes hold.’ He never took upon him the nature of angels, but that of the seed of Abraham.).

What shall we say of the Blessed Virgin when she looked upon Jesus? Into what depths of the mystery did her gaze penetrate — that gaze so pure, so humble, so tender, so full of bliss? Who shall be able to express with what lights the soul of Jesus inundated His Mother, and what perfect homage Mary rendered to her Son, to her God, to all the states and all the mysteries whereof the Incarnation is the substance and the root.

There is finally — but this is beyond description — the gaze of the Father contemplating His Son made flesh for mankind. The Heavenly Father saw that which never man, nor angel, nor Mary herself could comprehend: the infinite perfections of the Divinity hidden in a Babe.... And this contemplation was the source of unspeakable rapture: ‘You are My Son, My beloved Son, the Son of My delight in Whom I have placed all My pride and delights’ (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). The Son of His delectation.

When we contemplate the Incarnate Word at Bethlehem, let us rise above the things of sense so as to gaze upon Him with the eyes of faith alone. Faith makes us share here below in the knowledge that the Divine Persons have of One Another. There is no exaggeration in this. Sanctifying grace makes us indeed partakers of the divine nature. Now, the activity of the divine nature consists in the knowledge that the Divine Persons have the One of the Other, and the love that they have One for the Other. We participate therefore in this knowledge and in this love. And in the same way as sanctifying grace, having its fruition in glory will give us the right of seeing God as He sees Himself, so, upon earth, in the shadows of faith, grace enables us to behold deep down into these mysteries through the eyes of God: *Lux tuae claritatis infulsit.* (Preface for Christmas ‘The new Light of Your glory has shone upon the eyes of our mind,’).

When our faith is intense and perfect, we do not stay to look only at the outside of the mystery, but we go deeply into it; we pass through the Humanity to penetrate as far as the Godhead which the Humanity at the same time hides and reveals; we behold divine mysteries in the divine light.

And ravished, astounded at such prodigious abasement, the soul, vivified by this faith, falls prostrate in adoration and yields herself up entirely to procure the glory of a God Who, from love for His creature, thus veils the native splendor of His unfathomable perfections. She can never rest until she has given all, in return, to fill up her part in the exchange that He desires to contract with her, until she has brought herself wholly into subjection to this “King of Peace Who comes with so much magnificence” (Antiphon at Vespers – Evening Prayer - on Christmas Day) to save, sanctify and, as it were, to deify her.

Let us then draw near to the Child God with great faith. We may wish to have been at Bethlehem to receive Him. Yet He is here giving Himself to us in Holy Communion with as much reality although our senses are less able to find Him. In the Tabernacle, as in the Crib, it is the same God full of power, the same Savior full of tender mercy.

If we will have it so, the admirable exchange still continues. For it is likewise through His Humanity that Christ infuses divine life into us at the Holy Table. It is in eating His Flesh and drinking His Blood, in uniting ourselves to His Humanity, that we draw at the very wellspring of everlasting life: *Qui manducat meam carnem, et bibit meum sanguinem, habet vitam aeternam* (John 6:55 ‘He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has everlasting life.’)

Thus, each day, the union established between man and God in the Incarnation, is continued and made closer. In giving Himself in Communion, Christ increases the life of grace in the generous and faithful soul, making this life develop more freely and expand with more strength; He even bestows

upon such a soul the pledge of that blessed immortality of which grace is the germ and whereby God will communicate Himself to us fully and unveiled: Ut natus hodie Salvator mundi, sicut divinae nobis generationis est auctor, ita et immortalitatis sit IPSE largitor. (Post-communion prayer of Christmas Day ‘Grant, O merciful God, that just as the Savior of the world born today is for us the author of divine generation, so too may He, HIMSELF be the bestower of immortality.’)

This will be the consummation, magnificent and glorious, of the exchange inaugurated at Bethlehem in the poverty and humiliations of the Crib.

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