

The Christmas Season Continues...

Many people think of Christmas as a one-day celebration, and understandably so. The Church, however, has an entire Christmas Season for celebrating and contemplating the birth of our Lord, the first coming of Christ. The Christmas season begins with the Vigil on Christmas Eve and runs through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (right after Epiphany). Our Lord began (what is now called) His “public ministry” at the baptism of John, so it makes sense that the feast of His baptism would be the transition from the Christmas season to Ordinary Time.

We might back up a little bit and consider why the Church has special seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Triduum, Easter) and Ordinary Time. What the Church herself tells us is that during special seasons we contemplate a *particular* mystery of the faith or a particular mystery of Christ, while in Ordinary Time (the longest season) the Church contemplates the mystery of Christ in its totality. Advent and Christmas are linked insofar as both contemplate the coming of Christ, of God – the focus of Advent is His second coming, the focus of Christmas is His first coming. The two comings are of course linked and one helps to think about the other.

I would like to continue our contemplation of Christmas by reiterating a couple of things that I have already said, but have really stuck in my mind during this year’s Advent and Christmas seasons. One comes from St John Damascene – Doctor of the Church from (say) the 700’s. St John Damascene, in his deep contemplation of the mysteries of the faith, points out that the Incarnation shows us, simultaneously, the justice of God and the wisdom of God. How so? Man sinned, he broke relation with God, it was his choice to do so, and so the debt incurred was, in justice, his debt to pay. But this presents an impossible situation, a conundrum that cannot be resolved. The debt is infinite (because the offense was against infinite goodness) and man is finite, which means he cannot repay an infinite debt. The situation is hopeless: man has to pay an infinite debt but he cannot pay an infinite debt. There is no hope for restoration. There is no way through. *There is no way through*, period. But then...enters the great wisdom of God. No one could possibly ever think of this or even imagine it. God intervenes. He says: there *is* one way through – I Myself will take flesh, I Myself will become man, will take on a human nature, and then I Myself will pay the debt on man’s behalf. It is unthinkable, shocking, stunning, and yet there it is. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the Incarnation. Man spits in the face of God with his sin, and God responds by lowering Himself into humanity so as to offer reconciliation and salvation to each and every individual person. One cannot help but fall silent in the face of it.

The Incarnation is the single, biggest, most significant, *most consequential* event in all of human history. Almost all, if not all, of the good teachers of the faith – the Church Fathers, Doctors of the Church, other saints, and popes – have written and spoken on the Incarnation, which also indicates the immenseness of this event. Let us also return, then, to a few of the words of St Augustine, Father and Doctor of the Church, and one of the greatest teachers of the faith in the entire history of the Church. Augustine also named a number of things the Incarnation does for us or shows us, one of which is that it gives us God Himself as the exemplar of humanity – the example par excellence to follow. And what is one of the things He shows, right from the beginning, starting with His birth? It is the epitome of simplicity and humility. One can barely turn a page of Sacred Scripture without at least an implicit exhortation to humility and a warning or condemnation about/of pride. But, as the old saying goes, a picture is worth a 1000 words. This Christmas season spend some time in silence in front of your Nativity set or, even better yet, come to the church, silence yourself, put everything else out of your mind, and contemplate that scene in the actual physical presence of our Lord. Is it possible? Is it possible to really live and

be this way? Could I really live, and happily so, in such an unburdened way? The Lord is calling us to it with the simple, humble scene of His birth. Come to Me all you who are burdened and weary and I will give you rest. This is the way.

Of course what the saints say about the Incarnation all ties together and overlaps with one another. This is true with Damascene and Augustine as well. St John Damascene points out that the Incarnation shows the goodness of God. St Augustine went so far as to say: “God was made man, that man might be made God.” This might sound blasphemous at first but what Augustine is bringing out here is what our Lord really wants to do for us, what He wants to bestow upon us. Of course this does not mean that man would literally become equal to the one true God – all-powerful, self-existent, all-knowing, and so on; such a thing is impossible – there can be only one God. But what Augustine is emphasizing is that our Lord wants to bestow upon a real participation in His own Divine life, to be sons and daughters in His own Kingdom. Imagine an all-powerful king with a vast kingdom. His sons (princes) and daughters (princesses) are not equal to the king but at the same time, beloved by their father, they move about in the Kingdom with complete freedom, peace, and absolute security – fearing nothing, revered by all, and with every encounter being a good and pleasant encounter. This is what our Lord has in store for us, if we choose to accept it, if we choose to conform ourselves to Him and what He teaches us in and through His Church. This truth, this reality, is most certainly something to really let sink deeply into our minds. It will be a great aid in rejecting temptation. Why would I give that up or even risk it for some passing thing of this life and this world? It’s a bad trade.

I would like to come back to one last thing that has really stuck in my mind this Advent and Christmas season, one thing that really helps us see that contemplation of our Lord’s first coming helps to contemplate His second coming. As I mentioned several times in Mass, one of the things emphasized in the readings in the last week of Advent are the prophecies made about the first coming of our Lord and about His life. Many, not all but many, are from Isaiah. For example, God sent Isaiah to Ahaz, king of Judah to tell him that He would deliver him from his enemies – the Assyrians who were threatening Judah. God even told Ahaz – ask for a sign and I will do it. Ahaz decided to trust in worldly power and machinations instead (as a result they were conquered) but God said He would give a sign of His power anyway, that a virgin would conceive and bear a Son. So again – there are many such prophecies, and they are brought out especially in that last week of Advent. But *when* were these prophecies, or we might say promises, made? Isaiah lived 7 or 8 *hundred* years before the birth of our Lord. We can go even further. A Savior was first promised at the very beginning of mankind – right after the fall of Adam of Eve. What is the significance of this? If it is one thing that the first coming of our Lord, as well as all the prophecies about His life, teaches us it is that God does what He says He will do – He fulfills His promises...and His warnings. He will fulfill those relative to our future as well – both warnings and promises. How easy it is to slide into saying something like: yeah, yeah, yeah – I have heard it all before, and go on our merry way thinking there will be no consequences to what we do and don’t do. In fact, our Lord warned us about this multiple times, directly (e.g., be vigilant) and through parables (e.g., the 10 virgins; and the landowner). If it is one thing that the first coming of our Lord teaches us, in conjunction with the entire Old Testament, it is that God does what He says He will do. Thinking about this reality and letting it sink deeply into our minds removes doubt and strengthens our resolve to be as He taught us to be.

God bless you and Merry Christmas Season, Fr Kuhn.