



Things to Ponder

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the annual celebration of Christmas dawns, it would be good to recall its purpose. Pope St. Leo the Great put it this way:

“In the fullness of time, chosen in the unfathomable depths of God's wisdom, the Son of God took for himself our common humanity in order to reconcile it with its creator. He came to overthrow the devil, the origin of death, in that very nature by which he had overthrown mankind.”

(from [Office of Readings for Christmas Day](#))

The nativity stories with which we are most familiar come from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark begins with the public ministry of Jesus. John summarizes the mystery of the incarnation with the awesome proclamation of his *prologue*, which in the *extraordinary form of the liturgy* is called the *last gospel*. It is largely believed by scholars that Matthew and Luke derive their infancy stories from a common source. They seem to have been added on to the body of the gospel, and, in a sense, summarize the message of the gospel. Already in the words of the old man Simeon and in the murderous threats of jealous Herod the cross casts its shadow over the crib!

Christmas is a season - not a day! It begins with the vigil Masses on December 24 and concludes with the celebration of the Baptism of Our Lord on January 10. Despite our fondness for Luke's story of the birth of Jesus in a stable, the proper gospel for the vigil is that which details the ancestry of Jesus as told by Matthew. Ponder the generations; pay particular attention to the women. Each is rather unusual, especially the last - Mary! Luke proclaims the birth of Jesus in time much like the announcement would have been made of the birth or mighty deeds of an emperor of Rome. God comes to us in our time to change forever the meaning and course of human life. Matthew's focus on Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy highlights the figure of Joseph and draws special attention to the value of family life.

Two days after Christmas Day, the Church celebrates the *Feast of the Holy Family*. The joys and sorrows, tensions and triumphs of family life form us as a people. We are as strong or as weak as the families that comprise our society. When we gather as families at Christmas, all the treasured memories and ancient tensions emerge. Our challenge is both to *give thanks* and to seek *reconciliation*.

The Octave of Christmas, New Year's Day is the *Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God*. This is the most ancient title given to Mary. It reaffirms our profound belief in the mystery we proclaim every week: Jesus Christ as *true God and true man*. The eighth day after the birth of a Jewish boy was also the day of circumcision, the mark of the covenant. Thus, January first is also a commemoration of this event in the life of Jesus. New Year's Day is also called a day of prayer for *world peace*. Amid the peaceful scene of the nativity which Mary treasured in her heart the seething tensions of humanity were already evident. The need to pray for peace is constant throughout history.

The Nativity scene is not complete until the *three kings* or *astrologers* arrive. Although January 6 is

the traditional date for the celebration of *Epiphany*, the Roman Church has moved the celebration to Sunday, January 3. *Epiphany* means *manifestation*. There are actually three *epiphany mysteries*: the visit of the magi, the baptism of Our Lord, and the wedding at Cana. All show forth the *glory of God* in this Jesus who is our *Messiah*.

We are strongly encouraged to spend time before the creche at Church or at home and ponder the mystery of our own identity in the light of the mystery of the incarnation. Once again, I quote Pope St. Leo the Great:

“Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition. Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom.”

Blessed Christmas,

Rev. Bill Foley

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