

Christmas: Coincidence or Divine Plan?

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths 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 on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!’ “When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.” Luke 2:4-19 RSV-CE

When I was a child, Mom would pull out the nativity set shortly after Thanksgiving and set up the stable with the cattle and sheep. She used cookie sheets lined with foil and filled with sand to add realism. Grass, weeds and rocks were encouraged because they added to the effect. A small mirror buried in the sand formed the pool where sheep and cattle quenched their thirst in the burning Bethlehem sun. For a couple of weeks there were only sheep and cattle in the scene; it wasn't until the day before Christmas that Mary and Joseph showed up. Jesus arrived on Christmas Day and the shepherds followed. On Epiphany the Magi, three wise men from the east, arrived with their camels and servants to present their gifts to the newborn king. I was catechized by this simple plaster set and my mother's deliberate plan and placement of every detail. As an adult, I reflect with great fondness and thanks that such simple figurines could produce such lasting memories. Mom and Dad have passed on, but I still have the nativity set.

Such are my childhood memories and they are probably shared by a lot of kids my age. Mom was right on target when she connected the liturgy to the nativity scene, each mystery revealed in its own time. These were some of the ways that my Mom catechized her children but Holy Mother Church also has some great ways of catechizing her children.

As summer gives way to fall in the regular changing of the seasons, the days get shorter and darkness comes earlier. There is less light and more night. This is kind of like the world we live in where the darkness of sin in all of its forms seems to overpower the light of God's goodness. But we know that the darkness of sin cannot overcome the will of God. So it was into such a world that God appeared. To an uneducated Hebrew laborer named Joseph, who was of the family line of King David, and to a young virgin named Mary, Jesus was born. God took on human flesh in the form of a baby. Light came into the world when the days seemed to be lost in deepest darkness. Because no one knows exactly the date of the birth of Jesus, the Church, by her authority, has appointed Dec. 25 the date that we celebrate this event. The shortest day of the year is December 21st this year; and, as we celebrate salvation coming into the world, springtime warmth comes and the length of day chases away the darkness. So just as my mother catechized her children using props and statuary, so Holy Mother Church catechizes her children using the changing of the seasons to emphasize God's plan of salvation in ways that we can understand. But there is still more, much more.

Consider these connections that we read in the Bible: when Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem his mother wrapped him in swaddling cloths before placing him in a manger. A manger is a wooden feeding box for animals. In the Old Testament story of Moses leading the Hebrew slaves out of captivity in Egypt, the false gods the Egyptians worshiped were animals like donkeys, cows, cats and dogs. The Egyptians also worshiped frogs, the river Nile and the Sun. Moses, who was a type or precursor of Jesus, embarrassed Pharaoh by proving that none of his gods had any power, they were just farm animals. In the stable in Bethlehem many of the animals that Pharaoh had worshiped were there. The civilization of the pharaohs was over and its ruins were buried in sand. The animals he worshiped as gods were living in the stable waiting to be fed. Jesus was placed in the manger, the feeding box. Pharaoh's gods couldn't eat, because the true God blocked their way. Jesus is the true God and the true Bread that comes down from Heaven and gives Himself that we might eat his body. The name Bethlehem, the town where Jesus was born, means "house of bread". Jesus is the bread of life.

Swaddling cloths are long strips of cloth that are wrapped snugly around a newborn. Baby Jesus was bundled in long strips of cloth and placed in the wooden feed box for angels, shepherds and plain uneducated country folk to adore. Thirty three years later, Jesus would be put to death on a wooden cross. When He was taken down he was wrapped in the long cloths of a burial shroud. Angels, shepherds and poor uneducated folk still adore him. This is the way God catechizes us through the sacred scriptures and I dare say that there are many more examples throughout the Bible.

If you have a nativity set of your own I invite you to take some time with a cup of coffee or chocolate and delve into the first two chapters of the gospel of St. Luke. Those two chapters are dense with the fulfillment of God's promise.

December business meeting is on Thursday December 2nd at 7:00pm. Mass for the deceased Knights of this council is on Friday, December 10th at 5:45pm followed by adoration and confession. Pray that God send more workers to the harvest. Pray for the Brothers of this council. Pray that politicians have a conversion of heart.

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