



“AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US”



What does this mean? That in His infinite goodness, God became man by His Incarnation. This is the cardinal truth of Christianity, on which everything else depends and from which everything else derives. This is what Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, truly means. We celebrate the Son of God coming among us as man to “save His people from their sins”. And that saving mystery continues in His Body the Church. “The fullness of time” begins at Christmas and continues until “He comes again in Glory” at the “end of the age.” We participate in this mystery by our faithful living in the Church of which “He is the Head” and we are the body. Christmas is not an occasion simply for parties, presents, Santa Claus and the like to be celebrated for one day than promptly forgotten until it’s time to get the decorations out next year. So let us look at this continuation of Christ’s

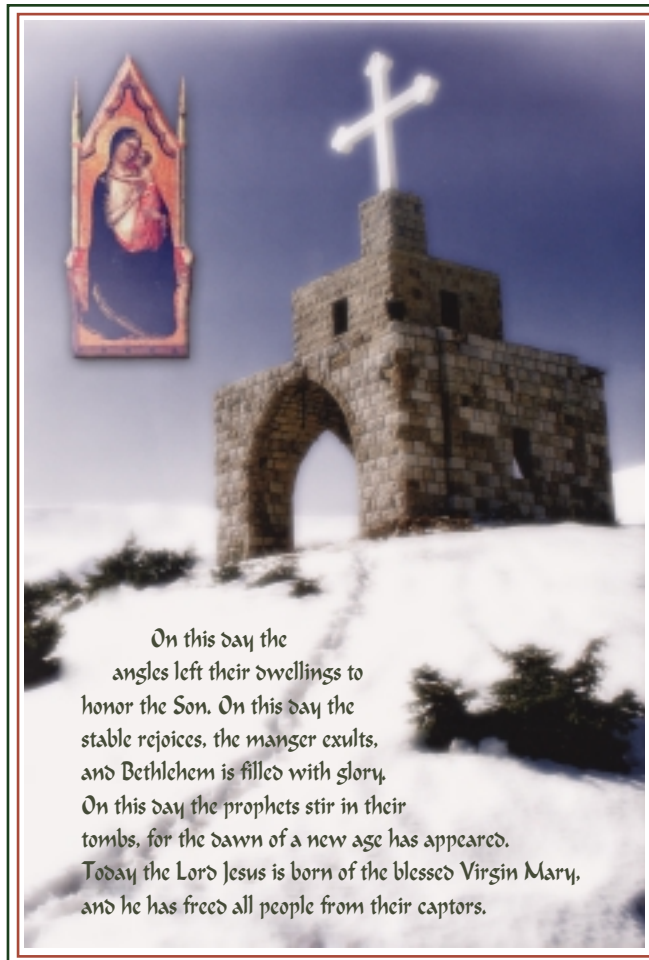
presence in the world through the mystery of the Church

If there’s one central area that many Catholics are confused about today, it is “What is the Church”?

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, as Cardinal Ratzinger, stated that misunderstanding the nature of the Church was the pivotal error of our time. “My impression is that the authentically Catholic meaning

of the reality ‘Church’ is tacitly disappearing without being expressly rejected. Many no longer believe that what is at issue is a reality willed by the Lord himself ... the Church appears to be a human construction, an instrument created by us and one which we ourselves can freely reorganize according to the requirements of the moment.” In a word, many no longer believe that the Church is a divine institution but simply another human organization no different from any other. So many of us consider our membership in a corporation, political party, labor union, etc., to be far more important than belonging to the Body of Christ. It’s important to understand that while the Church is “the People of

God”, that is not to be taken in a sociological or political sense (a reason for much of the confusion). To understand this mystery we must go back first of all to the Qahal (assembly or community) of Israel.



On this day the
angles left their dwellings to
honor the Son. On this day the
stable rejoices, the manger exults,
and Bethlehem is filled with glory.
On this day the prophets stir in their
tombs, for the dawn of a new age has appeared.
Today the Lord Jesus is born of the blessed Virgin Mary,
and he has freed all people from their captors.

-From the Maronite Liturgy: Mass for Christmas Day

The Qahal begins with God's call of Abraham (our father in faith). His descendants go to dwell in Egypt (story of Joseph) where they will be enslaved. God then raises up Moses to bring His People out first to the desert, then to the Promised Land. During their forty years in the desert, they receive the Covenant (Ten Commandments) and are made into His People. God called them to be His People. The initiative comes from God. That popular song that goes "People are gathering the Church is born" has it all wrong. The Church didn't come about because "people gathered together", but started with God's call to Abraham. That call continues now through His Son who calls us through Baptism.

The Qahal was hierarchically organized (no egalitarianism or democratic elections) under Moses, Aaron and the priesthood, the Levites and the seventy-two elders. The human weakness of its members asserted itself. The people rebelled by making a golden calf to worship (they wanted more of a community celebration), Miriam the sister of Moses rebelled (she thought she had the "right" to be ordained) and Moses himself disobeyed (he wasn't permitted to enter the promised land). Yet, through all this sin and scandal, God never abandons them. They are punished, but God never withdraws His Love or Call from them.

The Qahal becomes the Church when God sends His only-begotten Son. It begins at Christmas (the Incarnation), reaches its fullness with the Paschal Mystery (death and resurrection of Christ) and when He ascends to His Heavenly Father he promises to remain with us always. As our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI says, "But anyone who speaks about Jesus Christ as the One who brings salvation to all, and thus for all times, cannot remain silent about the fact that henceforth Christ is always present in history and about how it is that He does not remain in the past. This christological presence is called Church. Church is based on the fact that Christ perpetually keeps His promise: 'Behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age.'" So therefore, the Church is a DIVINE institution because it is the continuation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Probably a major reason for this confusion in the



nature of the Church stems from the fact that so many Catholics no longer believe that Jesus Christ is divine. Many now see Him as simply a "good man" no different than Buddha or other figures. This is seen in the attitude of "one faith is just as good as another", or what church you belong to doesn't really matter as long as you are a person of "good will." Our Holy Father tells us, "Today in broad circles, even among believers, an image has prevailed of a Jesus who demands nothing, never scolds, who accepts everyone and everything, who no longer does anything but affirm us...The Jesus of the Gospels is quite different, demanding, bold. The Jesus who makes everything okay for everyone is a phantom, a dream, not a real figure. The Jesus of the Gospels is certainly convenient for us...We must again set out on the way to this real Jesus."

The Feast of the Incarnation invites us to come back to "this real Jesus." It can be quite convenient for us to simply look at baby Jesus in the manger scene and say "How nice" and leave it at that. After all cute babies are non-threatening. This baby, however, will grow up to be a broken, bloodied crucified man who will tell us, "Take up your cross and come follow me." That can be very threatening to us. Yet throughout the Christmas story there will be constant references to his future passion.

The divinity of Christ, the divinity of the Church, and His real presence in the Eucharist all go together. We are joined to Christ to the degree that we are joined to His Church. May the celebration of Christmas remind us of this mystery of faith and that He is always with us "until the close of the age."

