



"Be Holy. For I the Lord Your God am Holy."

With the Solemnity of the Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas), we are invited to reflect upon the implications of the Incarnation. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word of God, "became flesh and dwelt among us." What does that mean in effect? Since Christmas in effect has been commercialized and secularized many of us perhaps can't answer that question. With all our energies taken by present buying, writing cards and having parties (most of which take place during Advent instead of the Christmas season proper), we have little inclination to reflect upon this central mystery of our Faith. Lost in all this economic activity is the fact that with the coming of Jesus Christ the world and the lives of each and every individual would never be the same again. Why? Because the coming of Christ meant that all of us are now called to holiness. Our Lord took on our human nature in order to restore it to what it was before the Fall.

When God created our First Parents He breathed into them His very life (His image and likeness). They lived in perfect harmony with their Creator. God spoke to them face to face. Paradise is that place in which God's "original", initial, and most authentic will was realized in creation. The sin of our First Parents disturbed this order and led to their banishment from this "original home." Nevertheless this initial creative will of God remained in force. Therefore included already in the punishment was also the promise that this banishment would not be final. As the monastic father Didymos states:

Thus God "drove" Adam — and evidently his wife also — "out of Paradise". What was driven out, though, has an opportunity of returning. For God did not send him away without any hope of return, but rather since he was placed by God "over against" Paradise, he would live remembering it, having it plainly in view.

In other words, because of the Sin of Adam, we are living in exile away from our true homeland. This is one of the earliest Christian themes and is repeatedly referred to in Scripture. As St. James, brother of the Lord, states in his epistle: *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (4:4).* The “world” is under the domination of the “evil one” and hence is not our true home. Holiness, in a word, is our ticket back home: back to Paradise. Through holiness we show that we long to return to that from which our First Parents were expelled: that intimacy with God which finds beautiful expression in a Maronite Sedro prayer: *Adam heard you walking through the garden. We will not be restored to that first paradise but instead to the “Heavenly Jerusalem” spoken of in the Apocalypse of St. John. Rather than being a remote abstraction that doesn’t relate to peoples’ “real experience”, to quote some “modern” theologians and liturgists, holiness contains both the complex and the simple.*

It reflects the very nature of God Himself and is made accessible to us through His life-giving grace. Holiness appears to be a complex reality which touches on the mystery of God, but also on worship and morality. It includes the notions of sacred and pure, but transcends them. It seems to be inaccessibly reserved to God, but it is constantly attributed to creatures. The Semitic word *qodes* (holy thing, holiness), means “to cut off, separate,” points toward the idea of separation from the profane; holy things are those which one does not touch or approach except on certain conditions of ritual purity. Imbued with a dynamism, with a mystery and a majesty in which the supernatural can be seen, they evoke a feeling of mixed terror and fascination which makes man aware of his pettiness before these manifestations of the “numinous.” From this several things become apparent.

Firstly, the nature of God Himself. God is absolute and transcendent “other”. God is not human self-projection or the personification of our “aspirations for a better world”. Before God we are utterly insignificant. This can be especially seen in the lives of the saints with that most important and fundamental virtue required for holiness: **humility**. The saints realized that God was all and they were

nothing. To strive for holiness we must first of all acknowledge our creatureliness. To put it boldly: **we are NOT God**. Our present culture with its vast array of technology, wealth and knowledge offers us the same temptation which drove Adam and Eve out of the first paradise Eden: you can be God and determine what is good and evil. As Pope John Paul II stated so truthfully: the source of our troubles in the world is that fact that “man is rebelling against his creatureliness”. If we are to return to our “true home” through holiness then humility is indispensable. We must recognize that we are “useless servants” and only God’s living grace can bring about our salvation. God is everything and we are nothing. You never see a true saint bemoaning that he or she has no place in the Church because they are not “part of the decision making process.” That’s the last thing on the mind of one striving for holiness. It has been said that if a human portrait were painted of Satan it would be lacking a certain human bodily part: a pair of knees. Why? Because Satan will never kneel. He’s too proud to. Our own sinfulness should propel us to our knees and ask God’s mercy and only through humility can we kneel before Almighty God and beg His forgiveness. There is a story that Satan came before God’s presence and saw all the elect. Bewildered at who he saw among the elect he said to God: “I know many of these people. They committed this sin and that sin and they’re here? How come you forgave them and didn’t forgive me?” And God answered Satan, “Because you never asked”. Satan was too proud to ask. We must never be too proud to ask God’s forgiveness or for the holiness that makes us decrease so that He may increase.

A second essential element is that holiness must separate itself from that which is not holy. Because God is all-Holy that which is not holy cannot be in his presence. We must strive for holiness in this life and what is lacking will be accomplished in Purgatory so that our “wedding garment” will be clean and proper for entrance to our true home. For this to happen we must first of all break with sin. The Scriptures, both Old and New Testament, are quite explicit that we must break with all that entails sin. In his first epistle to the Corinthians St. Paul addresses the situation where a member of the community is living with his father’s wife. *Let him who has done this be removed from among*

you. There is no such thing as “inclusiveness” when it comes to sin. St. Paul doesn’t enter into “dialogue” but directs that he be expelled *that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

In ancient Rome Christians separated themselves from the debauchery that surrounded them. They would not go to the gladiator games (we have Hollywood and professional wrestling) and avoided all occupations which required them to compromise their Christian identity. By this witness they conquered Rome. As the late Archbishop Fulton Sheen said: *The world has heard every argument and will listen only to one –holiness. The holy priest, the holy sister and the holy lay person and we have too few of them now.*

Many of us feel ourselves unequal to the task. Our sinfulness, lack of talents, etc. Remember, God can do very much with very little. There is no sin He won’t forgive if we only bend the knee and humbly ask. Many of the saints were one-time great sinners. No talents. No problem: look who He chose for Apostles. Where do I start? How about

on your knees repenting of past sinfulness and begging God’s grace. Remember, He is constantly present to you, especially in the Church.

Remember the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers still on earth to warn them so that they do not wind up in damnation. Abraham tells him, *They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them.* But the rich man objects that they won’t listen to them but if someone were to come back from the dead, then they would listen. Well, someone has come back from the dead: Our Lord Jesus Christ. He has conquered death and gave us His Church which is the sure guide to holiness. Jesus, whose birth we are about to celebrate, has risen from the dead to bring us back home from where we were expelled. May the celebration of His Incarnation remind us of our Christian dignity and the holiness to which we are called so that at the end of our days we can go home. ✠