

Christmas, 2016  
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes

The gospel you just heard may not be the one you expected to hear. But be assured, Christmas is also a lot more than what most of us think it is, even different than what many think.

One of my very early parish Christmas experiences was with an extended family that included more than 50 children of various ages, most of them young. They were actually cousins of mine who happened to be members of the parish to which I was assigned. With this family it was the custom that grandma and grandpa had a wrapped gift for each of the children. Coming from a family of 2 children, I was overwhelmed, and my honest fear was that, after the gifts were opened, there was a child hidden somewhere under all the wrapping paper. I could hardly find my way to the door when leaving. It is easy to get all 'wrapped up' in the stuff that accompanies Christmas. That is what I mean when saying that 'Christmas is not merely what most of us think it is'.

So you may have come today to hear the story of Bethlehem. It is a great story! If you were here with us last Christmas, you may remember that I read the Bethlehem story from St. Luke, but then followed it soon with the proclamation of the Christmas story from St. John, the one you just heard. My point last year was that if we stick only to the Bethlehem story, we get stuck in HISTORY. But if we dare to hear the Christmas story according to St. John, we have a chance at least of touching upon the MYSTERY of the Feast.

I am a product of seminary education in the 1960's. Thinking back on that, I often credit three persons as greatly influencing the kind of priest I am today. One of these you certainly know ... St. Paul; one you may know ... Teilhard de Chardin; but the third I would be very surprised if you recognized the name. He is Dom Odo Casel. During my years of seminary and a few years later during grad school, I learned of the thinking of these three. Somehow they also fit with Christmas for me.

Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit priest and paleontologist. He studied fossils and evolution, and how this all connected to the growth of human consciousness. He saw the unification of life as it developed, and came to believe that all of life is in an upward spiral, reaching toward unification. The end-point of all of this is God. Life, including human life, continues to spiral upward in consciousness until we all arrive in union with God. Most often, this goes unnoticed and unattended.

Dom Odo Casel was a German monk. He gave his life to the study of '*the mysterion, or mystery*'. This does not refer to things unknown, as in a mystery novel, but to divine reality itself. He said that this 'mysterion, this mystery of God' proceeds from eternity, is realized in time and the world, and then returns once again to God in eternity. It is like the rain and snow that fall, water the earth and then eventually return through

evaporation to the atmosphere. Again, these two cycles, both the rain/snow and the divine cycle, just happen. They go on whether I acknowledge them or not. Dom Odo Casel said that in the Divine Liturgy, what we are engaged in here at this very moment, (and every time we come to Mass), we have contact and engage with this 'mysterion, this divine mystery of God.'

Then of course there is St. Paul, with whom we are all familiar. St. Paul says in several places in Scripture, *"everything is Christ", "in baptism we are born into Christ, and if so, then we are involved with Christ all through our lives". Thus it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."*

For me, then, the word INCARNATION is really a more important and significant term than the word Christmas. Some years ago, as a culture, we had a little 'spit-fight' over whether we said "Happy Holidays" or "Merry Christmas". But even the latter misses the fullness of what we celebrate here today. What we gather to celebrate is that "the mysterion, the mystery of God, Himself, the Omega point to which all of conscious life is moving" came to live among us. In one place of Scripture, it says that God 'pitched his tent among us'. All of this Mystery, all of this End-Point, toward which all life moves, comes to dwell with us. God abides with us .... here where we live .... Incarnation means "God came in flesh .... check the Creed we will soon pray together .... "For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man."

And the really amazing part of all of this is that this happened 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, where political strife was rampant ... enough so that Herod was so threatened by a 'new born king' that he would eventually order all infant children killed. And it happens this Christmas, when we are so tired of hearing about Aleppo, and bombings in Paris, and now Berlin, mass shootings Orlando, Newtown, San Bernadino, Fort Hood, and even in Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston. But it happens especially at these times .... when darkness covers the earth and invades our spirits. Yes, *"we the people who walk in darkness, have seen a great light"*. The divine mystery of God comes among us. The upward spiral of all humanity continues to move upward and onward. The reality of Jesus living within us through our baptisms, and that Jesus is in all ... my friends it is indeed amazing. Emmanuel ... God is with us!

I don't know who or what gives you hope. I don't know who your Teilhard de Chardin, your Dom Odo Casel, and your St. Paul is .... but may you have some. Actually you need some. How else will you really believe and live the mystery that occurs this day. And more than ever we need this day. Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, God-with-Us, Wonder Counselor. *"He was in the beginning with God, what came to be through him was life. The Mystery became flesh, and made his dwelling among us."* MAY YOU SEE HIS GLORY, .... AND MAY YOU SHARE HIS GLORY WITH ALL WHOM YOU SEE THESE DAYS. May you find hope in the celebration of this mystery of God with us.