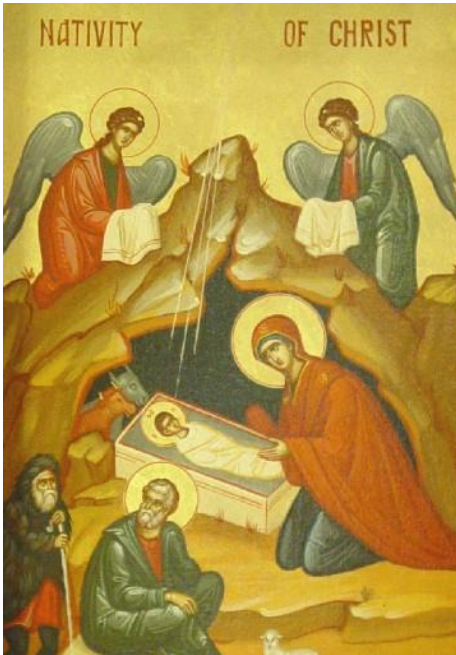


Christmas Day 2014



I hope you were listening carefully at the beginning of Mass to those words of the prayer which was sung by the Abbot just before the readings: “grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” This prayer, called the ‘Collect’, collects together all that our celebration of Christmas is about and summaries it in a single prayer and petition. The same words in fact will reappear later on in this Mass, as they do at every Mass, when you’ll see me, as deacon, pour wine and water into the chalices at the offertory, after the gifts of bread and wine have been presented to the Abbot. Whilst I do so, I’ll quietly pray the words:

“By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

What does all this signify? Well, essentially that the coming of Christ, the Son of God, as a human being at Christmas and what we do at every celebration of Mass are inextricably linked together. It’s a link seen in the word Christmas itself: Christ-mas (the Mass of Christ, that is, of the birth of Christ). Of course both components of the word are conveniently camouflaged by our pronouncing ‘Christ’ as ‘Chris’ and by our omitting the last ‘s’ from ‘Mass’. If we sometimes hear the rallying cry to put Christ back into Christmas, we should also not neglect, as Catholics, to put the Mass back into Christmas or indeed into our everyday lives. How important and irreplaceable the Mass is for our celebration of this great feast today, as well as of every Sunday and other significant feast day throughout the year.

Perhaps you have heard that saying: it’s the Mass that matters. What is it about the Mass that makes it so important then? Are you still able to recall those words from the prayer said at the offertory? – “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” This “mystery” is referred to by St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (in present-day Tunisia), who wrote, way back in the third century, that: “in the water is understood the people, but in the wine is showed the blood of Christ. But when the water is mingled in the chalice with wine, the people are made one with Christ” (*Letter 62, to Caecilius*). This wine (with a few drops of water added), together with the bread, will during Mass, when the priest pronounces Christ’s own words at the

Last Supper: “This is my Body” and “This is the chalice of my Blood,” become the Body and Blood of Christ, the Son of God. By our participation at Mass and by our receiving him in Holy Communion we, the people, “are made one with Christ.”

In being “made one with Christ” we hope to share in his divinity, as expressed by the prayer accompanying the pouring of wine and water into the chalice, as well as by today’s Collect. The whole idea of our partaking of the divine nature is perhaps a bit too startling for us to properly take in just before we start tucking into our turkey, but it is what the message, the wonder, of Christmas and the crib is all about. In the Gospel, we heard once again that familiar, yet at the same time utterly awe-inspiring, statement of St. John: “the Word was made flesh and he lived among us” (Jn 1:14). Christ, the “Word” of God, “humbled himself to share in our humanity” by his becoming “flesh” and by subsequently living “among us.” He shared “in our humanity” so that we, in union with him, might share in his divine life. As one Christian writer of the fourth century, St. Athanasius, rather strikingly put it: “The Son of God became man so that we might become God” (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54, 3).

If we remember and don’t forget such inspiring thoughts, we hopefully won’t get too bogged down in all the trivia of this, let’s face it, all too fleeting life. Where, we may ask, can we find the divine life which Christ is offering us? Well, precisely in what we mentioned a few moments ago: our participation at Mass and our receiving him in Holy Communion. It’s true that we encounter Christ in a variety of ways, and hopefully this Christmas season will present us with many: in our family and friends or in the beauty of art and nature, yet these don’t sufficiently compare with what we’re doing here today, or possibly even every day, at Holy Mass.

What’s the meaning of Christmas? Simply unwrap the word.