

ON THE INCARNATION

A CHRISTMASTIDE HOMILY by [J. Augustine Di Noia, O.P.](#) 12 . 26 . 15



The following is a homily that was given at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C.:

Dear friends in Christ, a warm welcome to all who join the Dominican friars on this Christmas morning to rejoice in the “marvelous exchange—*O admirabile commercium*—[by which] man’s Creator has become man, born of a virgin, [and] we have been made sharers in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” The mystery of the Incarnation, borne to us in the sights and sounds of the Christmas liturgy, fills our hearts with joy.

For us and for our salvation, God, who is infinite and omnipresent, creator of the universe, transcending and yet present in every part of it, nonetheless squeezes himself, as it were, into a tiny babe—“God’s infinity / Dwindled to infancy” (G. M. Hopkins). And not only that. As the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews affirms, God does this in a way that unsurpassably locates and identifies him with this child, and uniquely so with respect to all other conceivable manifestations or divine appearances before or afterwards.

The ineffaceable particularity of the Incarnation has seemed a quaint belief to some, a preposterous one to others, and, to the more polite and theologically up-to-date, nothing but a comforting myth. We don’t make it easy for them, do we? We confess not merely that God is present in this child (God who is after all present everywhere), but more robustly that God the Son of God personally assumed the human nature of, and is thus uniquely—hypostatically, the tradition affirms—joined to this child. For some, this is hard to swallow: how can the unbounded be contained or the infinite be made particular?

We can confront the incredulity of unbelief only with faith seeking the inexhaustible intelligibility of divine wisdom. Given what God has revealed to us about his purposes, beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, the mystery of the Incarnation makes—dare we say it?—perfectly good divine sense, and perfectly good human sense too. And for two reasons.

In the first place, by faith we know that God wants to share the communion of his trinitarian life with us. In other words, he wants to make us his sons and daughters—in short, as the Christian tradition has not hesitated to say, his intimate friends. How better to accomplish this than by becoming one of us. While a shared human nature is fundamental to our relationships with others, it is only with particular human beings that we can have such relationships. Even a generous love for mankind as a whole is no substitute for knowing and loving particular people whom we can see, hear, address, touch, hold, and kiss. These people have names, they live somewhere, they have ethnic and social backgrounds, and so on. To bring us into the communion of trinitarian life, God first enters into the

round of human existence and thus, as Aquinas loved to say, he adapts his action to our nature. He even has a mother whose “hand leaves his light / Sifted to suit our sight” (G. M. Hopkins). At the same time, God adapts our nature to his. “A Boy is born in Bethlehem,” we sing, “Wherefore rejoice Jerusalem / The Father’s Word on high doth take / A mortal form for mortals’ sake / ... He took our flesh, to man akin / In all things like us, save in sin / That he might make our mortal race, Alleluia / Like God and like himself by grace, Alleluia, alleluia” (“Puer Natus Est in Bethlehem”). How could we share in the communion of trinitarian life if we were not made sharers—“partakers”—of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4)? Listen to St. Athanasius: “the Son of God became man so that we might become God”.

From the divine point of view, then, the Incarnation makes perfectly good sense for this reason: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of his boundless love became what we are the he might make us what he himself is” (St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*). But there is a second reason. Not only must our human nature be elevated, but the sin and death that oppress us must be overcome. To be at home in the communion of the Blessed Trinity we need to be redeemed as well as divinized. What the Son is by nature we become by the twofold grace of adoption, that fills us with joy, and redemption, that dispels our sadness. “There cannot rightly be any room for sorrow,” insists St. Leo the Great in the first Christmas sermon of his pontificate, “in a place where life has been born. By dispelling fear of death, life fills us with joy about the promised eternity....[T]he Word of God, God the Son of God, who ‘in the beginning was with God, through whom all things were made and without whom was made nothing,’ to free human beings from eternal death was himself made human” (Sermon 21, 1 & 2).

Viewed with the eyes of faith, the mystery of the Incarnation again displays how exquisitely tailored to the human condition are the divine provisions for our redemption. “In the conflict undertaken on our behalf,” declares St. Leo, “battle was joined on the most remarkably fair terms. Omnipotent Lord engages...[the devil], *not in his own majesty but in our lowliness*, bringing against him the very same form and the very same nature [that had been overcome], partaker indeed in our mortality but wholly without sin” (Sermon 21, 2). The work of redemption engages the fullness of divine power, without which it would be futile, exercised at the same time, and indeed fittingly, from within the very zone in need of remedy. Our champion in the struggle against sin is one like us in all things but sin—and one who, though succumbing to death for a time, conquered it by his resurrection and thereby won for us eternal life.

He took our flesh, to man akin
In all things like us, save in sin
That he might make our mortal race
Like God and like himself by grace
Now lies he in a manger poor
Whose kingdom shall for aye endure
This day let joyful praises flow, Alleluia
Benedicamus Domino, Alleluia, alleluia (“Puer Natus Est in Bethlehem”)

Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia OP, serves as Assistant Secretary for the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in Rome. He is a friar of the Dominican Province of St. Joseph (Eastern).