

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

PUBLISHED EACH MONTH BY THE REDEMPTORISTS

DECEMBER 2011

Vol. 48, No. 12



Scrupulous Anonymous
One Liguori Drive
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The Word Became Flesh

Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

In December, the Church celebrates the season of Advent. In our liturgical celebrations, in our personal prayer and devotion, and even in the secular decorations of the season, men and women of faith are invited to focus on one event: the stable at Bethlehem so many centuries ago. In this unique historical moment Jesus, the Son of God, became for us the Word made flesh and dwelt among us. Our attention focuses on this event at this specific moment because this liturgical season helps us celebrate a uniquely Christian event.

Christmas and its preceding season of Advent celebrate the Incarnation—the Word of God’s becoming a human being.

But, believe it or not, this isn’t the uniquely Christian part of the event. Other gods of ancient stories have become flesh. For example, many Greek and Roman gods took on human flesh. They



coupled with a human to produce offspring who were half human and half god. Still others assumed the human form to cause mischief or to test human beings in some kind of competition. The proclamation that the Christian god became a human being is therefore not unique. What is unique is the *reason* Jesus became a human being.

The Incarnation is different

The ancient and dead gods became human for their own purposes and their own pleasures. Never during their “transformation” did these dead gods truly empty themselves or let go of who they really were. Their assumed humanity was a kind of shield or distraction so they could accomplish the mischief they had dreamed up, often as a result of competition with another god. Not so the Christian belief we celebrate, in which we’re invited to truly embrace and celebrate

the uniquely Christian component that molds our faith.

Unlike the gods of mythology, Jesus became a human being not so he could play or frolic or for his own pleasure, nor was his humanity a shield for his divinity. No, we as believing Christians proclaim that Jesus became a human being because he was sent by his Father into the world to redeem the people of God—to set us free, to be our salvation.

Jesus became a human being to finally and completely cement the relationship between God and humankind. This relationship of intimacy, shared responsibility, and cocreation was promised to God's people in the covenant with Abraham. We celebrate this uniquely Christian insight and belief in all its wonder and glory. Every Christmas tree, every Christmas cookie, every Christmas present—each in its own way—is part and parcel of what we hold in faith. Each event and experience leading up to the feast of Christmas, and certainly the events and the experiences of the day itself, help us come to a deeper and more profound appreciation of what it means when we proclaim that Jesus became human.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Louisville, Kentucky, wrote that the mysteries of God focus God's light into a fire that lights the spirit of humankind in the same way a magnifying glass focuses sunlight into a fire that lights an object (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, 2007).

He was trying to explain that the Incarnation was intended to focus our attention on our relationship with God. The Incarnation gives humanity an intensity of emotion that was unknown in

the human person before the coming of Jesus. Abraham didn't understand this kind of relationship with God. Neither did Moses or Jacob or Rebecca or Esther or, for that matter, any other person of the Old Testament. This new focus, this new experience comes to each of us as a result of the Word of God becoming human. It changes us, just as the fire of God's love changes all it touches.

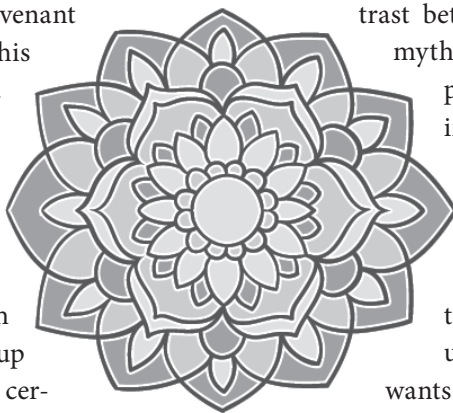
The Incarnation draws us to God

Although all Christians are invited to this kind of reflection, it's most important for members of our SA family to spend time thinking about the contrast between the Incarnation and the myths. We must understand and appreciate the Incarnation as a saving event intended to draw God's people into ever-increasing intimacy with God.

God doesn't play with us. God doesn't set up multiple tasks and temptations to trip us up or draw us into sin. God wants to be with us, not against us. God is with us in the struggle; he isn't the source or the root of the struggle.

What makes us feel far from God isn't the manifestation of God's presence. It is, rather, the manifestation of a sickness—the power of scrupulosity to twist, obscure, cloud over, and confuse our real relationship with God. When we feel the most vulnerable, the most unloved, we must permit the magnifying glass of the Incarnate Christ to burn away all those negative feelings and permit the burn of grace—of the Holy Spirit—to fill us with hope and blessing.

This is my Advent and my Christmas prayer for each of you: to experience the healing intimacy of the unique presence of God at work in your life.



Catholic Faith in Jesus

The following is adapted from *Jesus 101: God and Man* by John L. Gresham, PhD (Liguori Publications, ©2010).

At the heart of Catholic teaching is a person, the person of Jesus Christ. According to the Catholic faith, Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God who became man, who taught us by his words and example, who died for us on the cross, who was raised from death, and who now lives forever as God and man—two natures united in one person. The goal of catechesis, the teaching and handing on of the Catholic faith, is to bring others into communion with Jesus that in union with him, they may know the love of the Father and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The person of Jesus Christ brings us into communion with the Holy Trinity. Through Jesus Christ, we come to share in the eternal exchange of love between Father and Son in the Spirit (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 426). We come to know the triune God because the Father sent his eternal divine Son to be born in the world as man to reveal the fullness of divine truth. The book of Hebrews contrasts Jesus to all those who came before him. God spoke in the past in many ways through many prophets and teachers; but now, in the fullness of time, God has spoken by his Son. As divine Son, Jesus is the mediator and fullness of divine revelation (Hebrews 1:1–2, CCC 65).

The confession and proclamation of Jesus as

Son of God is at the center of the Catholic Church. When Jesus asks his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds by renaming Simon as Peter, the rock, and declares

that it was on this rock that he would build his Church (Matthew 16:15–19).

When Jesus names Simon Peter as the rock, he acknowledges both his office as the first pope and his confession of faith (CCC 424, 552, 881). The rock of Peter and his confession of faith point us to Jesus Christ himself as the ultimate foundation stone upon which the Catholic Church is built. Through the ministry of Peter and his successors and the faith they proclaim, we come to know Jesus as the living stone, rejected by men but chosen as

the foundation stone for the new people of God, to whom we are united as living stones in his Church (1 Peter 2:4–9, CCC 756).

Catholic faith in Jesus Christ is centered in the mystery of the Incarnation. The word *Incarnation* refers to God becoming “flesh.” The eternal divine Son assumed our human nature to be born, live, die, and to be raised as the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh. Saint Paul speaks of Christ as the glory of God revealed in a human face (2 Corinthians 4:6).



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SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS
MAILBOX

One Liguori Drive • Liguori, MO 63057-9999

Q *This time of year I receive all sorts of letters asking for a donation. Some contain gifts such as Christmas cards. Am I required to send a donation for all of these unsolicited "gifts"?*

A No. Those gifts are sent as a premium in anticipation of your donation. However, because they're unsolicited, you have no moral obligation to actually send a donation. You're free to use the items in any manner you feel appropriate unless the organization says you can use them only if you make a donation. In that case, simply dispose of the solicitation and the gift with the rest of your junk mail. You have incurred no obligation.

Q *At Christmas Mass, many people receiving Communion obviously haven't been in a church since last Christmas. Do I have an obligation to say something, in particular to the members of my own family who might be Christmas Communion people?*

A It's been the advice of the directors of SA since the inception of this newsletter that all scrupulous people refrain from providing directions to others in circumstances such as you have described.

You aren't committing any sin of omission or commission by not intervening. Such decisions are better left in the hands of God, or as Father Miller used to say, "Leave it to the angels."



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