



THE ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL OF CHRISTMAS

By Bishop Giaquinta - 12-25-76

To speak of Christmas is very easy and at the same time extremely hard. It is very easy because it strums a chord of our heart, of our sensibilities: Christmas is a day of celebration, of joy, above all of the family. All that is beautiful, serene, and joyous that we can think and say of the family, we must say and live especially at Christmas.

But at the same time it is a feast hard to talk about because either -we enter into a profound theological meditation on its meaning, or -we must content ourselves to repeat things on which we have so many times thought, meditated, and reflected, that we perhaps therefore prefer to keep silent rather than talk.

What is Christmas? Undoubtedly it is the first, the great mystery that we can summarize in but one expression: the beginning of salvation. The history of salvation, on the practical, the visible level, began right here, with Christmas. But what is this mystery of salvation of which we all speak but perhaps forget to look at in depth? The mystery of salvation is not simply, as we could have thought at one time, the relationship between the power of evil that keeps us enslaved --St. Paul is explicit on this point -- and the divine power that comes down among us to free us. It is something immensely greater, it is an ineffable mystery, an inexpressible mystery of an infinity of love, that without any plausible motivation loves its creature, even when the creature estranges itself from that Love, and further—also here there is mystery beyond words—the majesty, the omnipotence of God comes in the midst of us taking to itself the weakness, the frailty, of a baby. Eternity that has no limits becomes part of time, our limited time: God who is above all that is passing, all that is transitory, becomes our history so that He can insert Himself in our history. And so He gives a response to the expectations, the needs, the intimate tragedy of man, and He gives not only a response of hope in general, but indeed, takes to Himself our nature, by which He makes Himself true man and, at the same time, consequently, man is elevated to the infinite height of divinity, by which we become adopted children of God in the measure of Christ our brother. And so for us a new dimension opens itself, the dimension of hope that means a return: no more just that eternity became time and history, but that time and history become eternity. This is, in a few words, the "mystery of salvation", that is as much as to say the unfathomable mystery of the infinite love of God toward His creature. If then we go down to the details of how this incarnation of infinite love came about, and we enter into the poor cave at Bethlehem, then, I tell you, the proportions of the mystery become gigantic because we find ourselves before the divine condescension, that is. God who lowers Himself to the point of our poverty: the poverty of human maternity through the Madonna, the poverty of a cave, the poverty of an announcement to poor shepherds, the poverty of a baby who, does not know how to speak. This is the mystery of the love that we call 'the mystery of salvation'.

However, all this undoubtedly is very high, it is marvelous. Perhaps it risks remaining beyond the border of our life: these things we understand, rationally we accept that they are very exalted, but in their depth they make no dent in us, and the mystery of salvation risks remaining an historical fact, a very high mystery to be sure, but one that does not affect our life.

I want instead to stop this evening, at least for some moments, on the relationship of Christmas with our life, on Christmas as the alternative proposal of life. For this is what it was: an alternative proposal, that is, a different reality from that which in fact the world found itself living. The world was waiting for the Christ Alternative as we know also from historical documents: the Oriental world, the Western world, the Jewish world and those outside Judaism were in expectation of something that would come, turn everything inside out, and change the world's situation. Today we would say the world felt the need of changing its structures. Christ comes and offers an alternative proposal to those structures—for an idea, just read over the first chapter of the Letter to the Romans—that had brought humanity to the brink of the abyss, to the pit of the abyss.

What was the response of humanity before this proposal? St. John in the first chapter of his Gospel says explicitly, "*In propria venit et sui eum non receperunt*— He came to His own, and His own did not accept Him"; they did not accept this alternative proposal of life, and we know the history of those tragic events humanity has lived apart from Christ. And for those who received Him, it is enough instead to stop and dwell on the historic and societal miracle of Christianity in order to understand what has been the concrete, practical, historic consequence of accepting the alternative proposal of life, the mystery of Christmas.

But this alternative proposal was not made once only: every Christmas, we could say, the Church re-proposes it to the world, and, at least in the great historic periods, this proposal shows itself to have been made with greater force, with greater urgency.

It could be very interesting to go through the various periods and see which were these various alternative proposals throughout the whole arc of history. I read some days ago a very interesting article by a modern philosopher which considered two very well known philosophers of the last century, almost contemporaries: Newman, the great convert, whom we hope to see soon with the honors of the altar, and Kierkegaard, the Danish Protestant philosopher. The author noted that these two men, totally different, one who remained always outside the Catholic Church, the other who entered the Church, for different reasons affirmed substantially one thing that is exactly what could be called the alternative proposal of Christmas of the last century. Newman posed a dilemma: "in the future, in a future that depends on what happens today, either we will have Christianity or atheism", and Kierkegaard said, "in the future, we will have either Christianity or secularization". These two voices were not heard, and now we are immersed in this double ocean of atheism and secularization. In this new situation, today, for what little I can see, what is the alternative proposal of Christmas? I express it in these terms: if Christianity wants to say a word still valid for today, to this atheistic and secularized world, it must return to the Gospel maximum, to the maximum of Christ.

However, along with this conclusion presented as the alternative proposal of Christmas, I have the sensation that we remain thus, a little short of breath, half in the air, because it is a formula undoubtedly valid, profoundly demanding, but which has the need then of being translated into concrete terms, into the poverty of our language, into the practicalities of our life. And here an infinite number of things could be said on our speaking and presenting a radical, evangelical Christianity, Christianity of Christ.

Just two thoughts that perhaps can be useful. The first; what is the mystery of Christmas if not the entering by God into time and history, I would say the leaving of Christ from God to enter into man? It is •the word that we find in the Gospel: has come from the Father and into the world. Christ, the eternal Word, has gone out of the Father, and come into the world so that we would have the courage to go out of ourselves. It is not that one can compare in an absolute way the going out of Christ with ours, because the moment in which the Word goes forth there is a passage from infinity to littleness; we instead must go forth from our littleness toward a wide-open dimension of the world and our brothers who await us. I know I am saying things very simply and in an ordinary way but they are tremendously true and affect our life. For very often we are closed inside ourselves, inside our egoism, inside our sensitivity, inside our tastes, inside our point of view, inside our memories, inside our experiences, and we do not succeed at going out of ourselves, at leaving ourselves out of the picture, at opening ourselves to others. Just look at how we can express the radicalism of the Gospel—the others do not need our troubles, our poverty, our schemes, our limits: they need to see us as the transparency of God. This is the maximum approach: to have the courage of breaking with all our inner ways that we hold dear and that then in fact limit us immensely, that condition us, and very often do not make us credible because we present ourselves, not the Lord.

Second remark, also a very simple and ordinary thought: Christmas is a feast of joy, the radicalism of joy. You think on St. Francis who was happy in suffering, in grief. "Write, write. Brother Leone, that here there is perfect joy. When we arrive tired, soaked through, and they do not receive us but beat us with cudgels, write: Here there is perfect joy." Think of St. Philip Neri: "I give you thanks, my Jesus, that things do not go my way'." The world needs joy, the world is tragically serious, the world is frightened because now it has no more hope, with all the things that have happened one after the other. We are pervaded by a sense of pessimism and fear, by a constriction of the heart at the thought of our future: what will befall us tomorrow, what will our future be? The world has no more joy, peace, and serenity. Our radicalism of love, our Christian maximum must succeed at putting joy back into this world: not our miseries, not our tears, not our whining, not our miseries, but joy that comes from the fullness of Christ, from the certainty that He has resolved the problems and will take care also of ours.

This is the radicalism of the Gospel, of Christ, this is the alternative proposal that becomes believable to the degree we make it so.

And here I just touch on a final thought. Christmas is the moment of evangelization: the angels announce Christ's birth, the shepherds announce it, and the stars tell of it, the

Magi spread it. Also we must announce—by words? The world does not know what to make of words, it needs now an announcement made through life, because only thus will we become credible. The Gospel maximum, of which we first spoke, the succeeding to go out of ourselves to give the joy of Christ, does not happen with many words, but with a life that adheres to Christ, that overcomes ourselves; it communicates joy because it is the joy of love. Will we do new things? I do not think so. This is the evangelization that already was lived by Our Lady: I do not believe that the Virgin Mary had many words to pity herself, but went out of herself and gave joy to others: "Magnificat anima mea Dominum—My soul proclaims the glory of the Lord." We must do so with the Madonna, we must give to others the witness of our life, and do so in a way that the others can believe, and accept as credible the alternative proposal of Christmas 1976.

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