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The Meaning of Christmas

Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio



In the days of Caesar Augustus, an era of peace was established in the Mediterranean world after centuries of strife. But this peace was forged by the proud ambition of emperors and the edge of their armies' swords.

Upon this stage appears a baby acclaimed as king by eastern dignitaries. Neither Caesar nor Herod will brook any rivals. So brutal hordes are sent to slay Him at birth, though He himself comes without armies. The thugs are thwarted, but only for a season. For the royal child is laid in a manger, and the wood of that manger foreshadows the wood of the cross.

Caesar and Herod were bound to misunderstand Him. They climbed their way to the top, stepping on all who stood in their way. He emptied himself and plunged to the bottom, from the glory of heaven to the squalor of a stable. Pharaohs and Caesars strained towards immortality. Yet He who was Immortal by nature embraced mortality. The great ones of the world took every opportunity to exalt themselves. In the very act of being born, He humbled himself.

You would think that He would have chosen Rome or Athens as the place of his appearance. But He selects an obscure desert town in a dusty provincial outpost. Even in this humble spot, not even a seedy inn would make room for Him. So they had recourse to a cave, welcomed only by the animals. Isaiah said it well: "an ox knows its owner, and an ass its master's manger; but Israel does not know, my people has not understood" (Is 1:2).



Everything was in fulfillment of Scripture. He was born in Bethlehem, a town whose name means "house of bread." His crib was a manger, a feeding trough. But they did not understand that He was the Bread of Life. He was wrapped, like Solomon, in swaddling clothes (Wis 7:4-5), but they did not recognize him as the new King and embodiment of divine wisdom.

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The only people who recognize Him are shepherds, the humblest in society, and Magi, the wisest. But most Israelites, like us, were neither very humble nor very wise, so they missed it. They especially missed this—that one of the birthday gifts was incense, used in the worship of gods. He was not only king, wise man, messiah, and savior—he was God incarnate.

How could Jews have believed this? God is infinite, invulnerable, omnipotent. What is more vulnerable, fragile, and helpless than an infant? Can the Eternal be born in time? Can the Divine Word be a child at the breast, incapable of speech? Can a mere teenage girl be the Mother of God?

It was just as hard for the pagans to believe it. For their philosophers had taught that God is spirit and the body is a prison. Salvation means liberation from the confines of the physical body. So the idea that a divine Savior would embrace human flesh just did not compute.

Love sometimes does strange things. It takes great risks and goes to extreme lengths that many would call foolish. On that first Christmas day, God's foolishness was wiser than men, and his weakness was stronger than men. It took them all by surprise.

But this, of course, was part of God's strategy. The element of surprise is critical in warfare. And Christmas was an act of warfare. In fact it was D-Day, the day of deliverance. The preparation had taken centuries, but now it was time for the Conqueror to land on enemy occupied territory. He came in humility, and would finish the conquest thirty years later by the greatest act of humility the world had ever seen.



"Peace on Earth, Good will towards men." True peace can never be forged by steel, but only by love. It is the humble babe in the manger, not Caesar in his chariot, who is the real prince of peace.

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The Catholic Home - Meredith Gould

Want to really make your family's experience of Advent and the Christmas Season extra special this year? Get a copy of Meredith Gould's *The Catholic Home* before Advent begins! This book is a treasure trove of Catholic customs and traditions for all throughout the liturgical year, but is especially invaluable as we approach the Christmas Season. This book is a fun read but very practical as well. It's full of ideas for prayers, devotions, and decorations for liturgical feasts and saints days and even provides recipes for holiday foods from all over the Catholic world!

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