

A Meditation on Christmas

We moderns love Christmas with all the lights, gifts and good cheer of friends and family. It has become, in a sense, the “Feast of Relational Holism.” To celebrate Christmas is to share life with another, for that is what God has done, shared divine life with created life in a simple yet profound way: the birth of a baby.

It may surprise us to know that the first thousand years of Christianity likely did not celebrate Christmas with a nativity scene, for the early Church was an Easter Church not a Christmas Church. Emphasis was on the risen Christ not the birth of Jesus. In the Middle Ages, however, a new emphasis on the Word made flesh, the Incarnation, took place, beginning in the twelfth century with Cistercian spiritual writers, such as Bernard of Clairvaux.

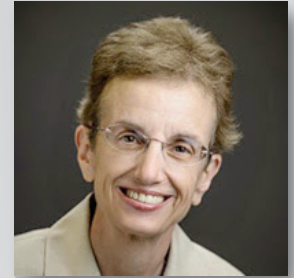
The Cistercians were among the first to focus on the Incarnation and hence the earthly life of Jesus, drawing on the imagination and spiritual senses to identify with the miracle of God’s birth in the flesh.

In the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi celebrated Christmas in a new and profound way, as a liturgical celebration of all creation awakened to the indwelling presence of God. His biographers tell us that three years before his death, Francis decided to celebrate the memory of the birth of the Child Jesus with the greatest solemnity, in order to awaken devotion to the splendor of God among us.

He petitioned Pope Innocent IV for permission to celebrate the birth of Jesus in the small mountainous village of Greccio. Francis wanted everyone to see the drama of Christ’s birth, so he had a manger prepared and hay carried in; an ox and an ass were led to the spot of the manger.

Two things about the Greccio story are significant: First, Christmas is a present reality for Francis, the act of God becoming flesh. It is a drama, a dynamic reality that we are invited into. It is the story of the great marriage between heaven and earth. Second, we are to awaken to this reality and respond to God’s overflowing love with an outpouring of love. As Francis himself sang: “The love of him who loved us is greatly to be loved.”

His biographer, Bonaventure, wrote that as the people of Greccio arrived at the manger, all creation sang with joy: the forest amplified its cries, the night was rendered brilliant and solemn by a multitude of bright lights and by resonant and harmonious hymns of praise. The man of God stood before the manger, filled with piety and overcome with joy. He had an altar built over the manger to celebrate the Eucharist, the sacrament of the cosmic Body of Christ. Francis, dressed as a deacon, chanted the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was made flesh and dwells among us” (Jn 1:1). Hence, our third lesson from Saint Francis is that all creation is made holy by the celebration of Christmas.



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The biographers tell us that Francis was “bathed in tears” as he stood by the manger because he believed wholeheartedly that God was present in the trees, the stars, the ox, the ass and the people gathered. All of heaven and earth were brought into a unity of love in the celebration of Christmas, symbolized by the Eucharist.

Perhaps this Christmas we can reflect on the way Francis of Assisi celebrated Christmas and be attentive to how we are celebrating Christmas. Are we too worried about the dinner meal? Or the gifts we did or did not buy for another? Are we too focused on ourselves? Or are we bathed in tears at the profound mystery of God bending low to embrace us, to become one of us.

Christmas is the celebration of deep relationship. We are invited to realize that we are not alone in the universe. God, who is a trinity of love, swirls amidst the galaxies and stars searching for human hearts, where God seeks to dwell. Bonaventure wrote: “God bends low in love and lifts us up so that we may be where God is.”

We do not have to worry about things going right on Christmas day, or any day for that matter. God has come to us, is with us, and will forever be born in us as our future, if we make space for God in our lives. Let us celebrate this Christmas with song and dance, for all creation is bubbling with the Spirit of Love, alive with the presence of God.

A Christmas Prayer by Ilia Delio

O God, during this Christmas season, help us see Your light
 –radiating in the tiniest grain of sand,
 In the fungi that grows beneath our feet, in the wildflowers
 and trees,–and in every living creature.
 For You are love, and love is the energy
 that ignites and enkindles.
 To live in Your love is
 to realize that darkness is simply differing–degrees of light,
 And light pervades our universe!

Dispel our fears, O God, and awaken
 the hope that lies within us,
 For justice, for peace, for unity, for a sustainable earth,
 Knowing that with You, all things are possible, \n
 and that living in You, All fear surrenders to joy.
 As we celebrate Your birth O God;
 –help us to know that it is our birth as well.
 Help us to know that without us,
 You have no place to dwell, to call ‘home.’
 Without us You cannot come to birth.
 And if You cannot be born in us, then what do we live for?
 Help us to see that, like You, we are undergoing
 the pangs of new birth, like You, we are not finished,
 Our work together, You and I, O God,
 is to become whole and complete,
 You in me and I in You.
 Christmas is the feast of the whole person,
 –the whole creation,
 –the whole cosmos
 –celebrating the wonder of new birth.
 The universe is Theotokos,
 –God-bearing.
 Everything alive is seeking You,
 –longing for You.
 Christmas is the celebration of love:
 In love with love and through love, You and me and all fragile
 creatures
 –are being born
 –into a new future together, a new reality.
 This new reality is the Christ; the humanity of Jesus is our
 humanity.
 Awaken in me the truth of Christmas:
 You and I are bound together in love.
 Together, You and I and all creation, we are the Christ;
 And only through us can your dream for the earth be realized.
 Joy to the future fullness of love!

–Ilia Delio, OSF