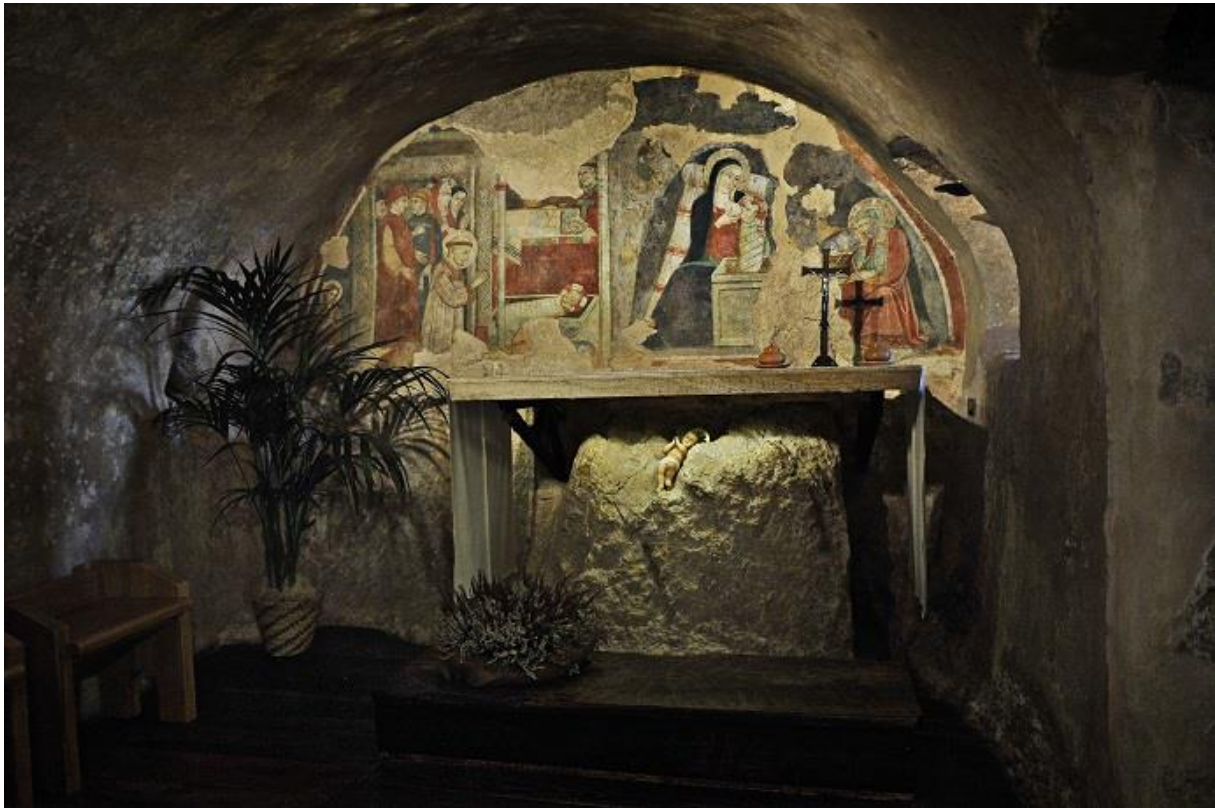


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Towards Christmas: the feast of humility.



With the start of the new church year, the journey towards Christmas begins. Just 800 years ago, St Francis of Assisi built his first living nativity scene in Greccio, Italy. He wanted to make this special event in our history vividly present and remembered. Since then, it became a fine tradition to decorate churches, squares and houses with a nativity scene, and the Napolitans in particular became the specialists to create miniature villages, in which it is sometimes very difficult to find the Holy Family. Today, in many places, this very nativity scene seems to have been supplanted by lavish Christmas decorations, and replaced by a Santa Claus who, as the central figure, has to lure people especially in the shop windows to make Christmas a predominantly mundane and mainly commercial event. If the Christmas tree still had a religious connotation as a reference to the new life that began here at the birth of the Messiah, with the red orbs as a reference to the apple from the story of the Fall, with Santa Claus any link with the religious has been severed. It is a regrettable evolution that we certainly do not want to participate in, but on the contrary want to continue emphasising the Christmas event in its full reality. Let us but with great care give the nativity scene a central place again in our homes and chapels, and where possible in our squares.

But the Christmas event is above all a religious event that marked and continues to mark our humanity fundamentally. Man was recreated, as it were, by the coming of God himself into our human nature. Our human nature was deified through it. Or to quote St Athanasius, "*God became man, that man himself might become God*". From being created by God, man was elevated to become a child of God. It is an event that we can never estimate enough and show enough gratitude for. It is not without reason that from the moment of Christ's birth, the reckoning of time was reset to zero, to start the counting again from that moment. We had truly entered a new era.

The incarnation of God cannot leave us indifferent. It is the most extreme expression of God's love for human beings, for every human being, including you and me. It is actually staggering to remember that Almighty God made Himself so small to come among us, to show us the image and likeness He has imprinted of Himself in us and how we should consistently live according to it. For in Christ we see the perfect man, the unblemished image of God, the image that God also planted in each of us but which has been distorted and violated by the power of evil. We hear the centurion under the cross exclaim: "*Truly, this man was the Son of God*" (Mk 15:39). And just moments before, Pilate had said as he showed the scourged and thorn-crowned Jesus to the crowd, "*Ecce homo - behold man*" (Jn 19:5). Pilate must not have thought at the time that in doing so he was giving the most accurate description of what Jesus really was: the human being in whom the image of God was present in an utter way to which we should all look up and orientate and identify with. But with the Incarnation, our salvation also came into perspective, definitively breaking the absolute power of evil and offering resurrection to us as the perspective over death.

With Jesus, we received the model of how to live as human beings and, at the same time, what awaits us as prospects after this life. Can we expect anything more and better during our life here on earth? It is actually impossible that we are not scarred by this.

As believers, and more specifically as religious, Christmas therefore remains a special event, apart from all the romanticism that comes with it. Our contemplation of the nativity scene will always have to focus on the little child in the manger. It is not easy to recognise God in it. Just as it is not easy to recognise in the Eucharist the true presence of Jesus. Our beloved Founder Father Triest said something very beautiful and poignant about this: "*It seemed at the incarnation that God had put aside his divinity to become present among us in the form of a child. But at the Eucharist, it seems that He has set aside His humanity to become present among us in a piece of bread*". In the incarnation, God wanted to come to man; in the Eucharist, God wants to stay with man. Every Eucharist and communion is an encounter with that living God in Jesus. Do we allow this to penetrate us sufficiently when we celebrate Eucharist and receive communion? We should actually sing the Magnificat like Mary after communion to express like Mary our joy and gratitude that we have been found worthy to become one with God in Jesus. For with every communion, the incarnation is realised anew, this time in

ourselves! With every communion, Christ is born anew in us. Hence the connection I want to underline between the Christmas event and the Eucharist and communion in particular.

Our reflection at the nativity scene is also a time when we may become more aware of the importance of humility in our lives. In a world overflowing with the conviction that the important thing is to realise ourselves, without yet asking the question of how we can arrive at this self-realisation, here we receive the paradoxical message that we will find our true self-realisation only at the moment when we empty ourselves, free ourselves from everything that binds and blinds us such as power, possessions and pleasures, and which lead us to the antithesis of humility, namely pride. *"He who existed in divine majesty did not want to cling to equality with God; He humbled Himself and assumed the existence of a human being"* (Phil. 2:6-9). We know the Christ hymn in which Paul describes how Jesus obediently went the way of self-emptying to become who He truly was: the Son of God. *"For therefore God has exalted Him on high and granted Him the name which is above all names...Jesus Christ is the Lord"*. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted and in all consequence, whoever exalts himself here on earth in pride will be humbled later. Humility also leads us to true fraternity, and makes us skilled in positively appreciating the other in his alteration. When we are trapped in pride, the other is and always remains a threat and we will try to humiliate the other, cast him aside like dirt, and lose respect for each other. With pride, we end up in the situation of Cain and Abel, where Cain will eventually exclaim that he does not feel responsible for his brother, and meanwhile killed his brother because he saw in him only a rival whom he looked down upon with envy.

We therefore want to designate Christmas as the feast of humility, first praising and thanking God for the way in which He has deigned to become one with His creature. And we want to pray to the Child in the manger to make something of this humility ours, and from this humility we try to see and love Jesus himself in everyone we meet. Just as it is difficult to discern God in this child, it will of course remain difficult to see Jesus himself in every fellow human being. But for this we can count on God's grace, just as the shepherds were set on their way by the angels to descend to the stable to worship God there with eyes of faith.

And when a Christmas tree is also present, may it remind us of the redemption God bestowed on us through the Incarnation. After all, the red Christmas bulbs, formerly red apples, refer to the fruits in earthly paradise, which have not been ignited by the worm of destruction and not eaten away by sinful lust. They are again flawless, glistening, referring to the eternal paradise where we hope to one day reside and where they will abound.

A new ecclesiastical year refers us to a new beginning, a fresh start. It is the moment when we look back evaluatively at what the past year brought us in worries, in disappointment, but also in what was good and especially of the grace to transcend all

this and still see the hand of God even in what was less good. Of course, above all, it remains the time to look forward, with hope and confidence from the certainty that we are not alone. Because with God's grace, with the support of others and our own small efforts, a lot can happen. Didn't Christ say that with firm faith we can even move mountains? The mountains are there, but it is often faith that is lacking and makes us anxious. Here too, then, the message from the manger rings out: "*Don't be afraid, I am there, do you not see me?*"