

THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST,

OR CHRISTMAS DAY

Rev. Alban Butler

THE world had subsisted about four thousand years, and all things were accomplished which, according to the ancient prophets, were to precede the coming of the Messiah, when Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, having taken human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and being made man, was born of her for the redemption of mankind. The all-wise and all-merciful providence of God had, from the fall of our first parents, gradually disposed all things for the fulfilling of his promises, and the accomplishing the greatest of all his mysteries, the incarnation of his divine Son. Had man been restored to grace as soon as he had forfeited it, he would not have been sufficiently sensible of the depth of his horrible wounds, nor have had a just feeling of the spiritual blindness, weakness, and wretchedness in which he lay buried under the weight of his guilt. Neither would the infinite mercy, power, and goodness of God, in saving him, have appeared in so great lustre. Therefore man was left grovelling in his miseries for the space of so many thousand years, only enjoying a glimpse of his future redemption in the promise and expectation of it; which still was sufficient to raise those to it who did not shut their eyes to this light. God always raised several faithful servants, and even when most nations, from following the bent of their passions, fell into the most deplorable spiritual blindness, and abandoned His knowledge and true worship to transfer His honour to the basest of creatures and the most criminal objects, He reserved to Himself a peculiar people among which He was known and served, and many were saved through faith and hope in this promised Redeemer, then to come. All this time the saints never ceased with sighs and tears to beg that this “Desired of all Nations” [1] might speedily make His appearance; and by these inflamed desires they both disposed themselves to receive the fruit of His redemption, and moved God to hasten and most abundantly to pour forth His mercy.

God, who with infinite wisdom brings things to maturity and perfection in their proper season, disclosed this to men partially and by degrees. He gave to Adam a promise and some knowledge of it.[2] He renewed the same to Abraham, limiting it to his seed.[3] He confirmed it to Isaac and Jacob.[4] In the prophecy of this latter it was fixed in the tribe of Judah.[5] It was afterwards clearly determined to belong to the posterity of David and Solomon; which was repeated in all the succeeding prophets. In these all the particular circumstances of Christ’s birth, life, death, and spiritual kingdom in His church are expressed; the whole written law which was delivered to Moses consisted of types expressive of the same, or alluding to Him. The nearer the time approached the fuller was the revelation of Him. The prophecy of turning “swords into ploughshares, and lances into pruning-hooks,”[6] &c., expressed that a profound peace in which the world should be was to be an emblem of the appearance of the “Prince of Peace.” According to the prophecy of Jacob,[7] the sceptre was to be removed from the tribe of Judah’ to show the establishment of the new spiritual kingdom of the Messiah, which is to endure to the end of the world. According to Aggaeus,[8] and Malachi,[9] the Messiah was to appear whilst the second temple stood, which was thee of Solomon, restored after the captivity. Daniel foretold the four great empires which succeeded one another, the first of which were to be destroyed by the latter, viz.: of the Medes, Persians, Macedonians, and Romans, each marked by very distinguishing characters.[10] The seventy weeks of years predicted by Daniel[11] determine the time of the coming of the Messiah and of his death. For from the order of King Artaxerxes Longimanus for the rebuilding of Jerusalem seven weeks were to pass in the execution of that work in difficult times; and sixty-two more, that is, with these seven, sixty-nine to the manifestation of Christ, who was to be slain in the middle of the seventieth week, and his death was to be followed by the destruction of the city and temple; it was to expiate <iniquity>, to establish the reign of eternal <justice>, and to accomplish the visions and prophecies. The Gentiles had also received some glimmerings of this great event; as from the prediction of Balaam foretelling a star to arise from Jacob[12] All over the East, at the time of our Saviour’s birth, a great deliverer of mankind was firmly expected, as the pagan historians expressly affirm. Suetonius[13] writes as follows:

“There had prevailed all over the East an ancient and constant notion that the fates had decreed that about that time there should come out of Judea those who should obtain the empire of the world.” And Tacitus says,[14] “A firm persuasion had prevailed among a great many that it was contained in the ancient sacerdotal books that, about this

time, it should come to pass that the East should prevail, and that those who should come out of Judea should obtain the empire of the world.” Josephus, the Jewish historian, took occasion from hence to flatter Vespasian, as if he had been the Messiah foretold by the prophets:[15] “and the great number of impostors who pretended to this character among the Jews in that and the following century is a clear proof of this belief amongst them about the time.[16]

When Jesus Christ was born, the seventy weeks of Daniel were near being accomplished, and the sceptre was departed from the house of Judah, whether we restrain this to that particular tribe, or understand it of the whole Jewish nation, so as to give a main share only to that tribe. For Herod, though a Jew by religion, was by birth an Idumean, as Josephus, whose testimony is unexceptionable, informs us, relating how his father, Antipas, who chose rather to be called by the Greek name Antipater, was made, by King Alexander Jannaeus, governor of his own country, Idumea. Herod was raised to the throne by the Romans, excluding the princes of the Asmonean or Jewish royal family, whom Herod entirely cut off; as he did also the principal members of the Sanhedrim, or great council, by which that nation governed itself by its own laws under its kings. This tyrant, moreover, stripped that people of all their other civil rights. Soon after, they were made a Roman province; nor was it long before their temple was destroyed and their whole nation dispersed, so that the Jews themselves are obliged to confess that the time foretold by the prophets for the coming of the Messiah is long since elapsed. Christ was born at the time when the Roman or fourth empire, marked by Daniel, was exalted to its zenith by Augustus, who reigned fifty-seven years from his first command of the army at nineteen years of age: and forty-four from the defeat of Antony, his partner in the empire, in the battle of Actium. God had preordained the greatness of the Roman empire for the more easy propagation of the gospel over so many nations which formed one monarchy. Augustus had then settled it in peace. A decree was issued by Augustus, and published all over the Roman empire, ordaining that all persons, with their estates and conditions, should be registered at certain places, according to their respective provinces, cities, and families. It was the custom at Rome to make a census or registration of all the citizens every five years, which term was called a lustrum. This general register of all the subjects of the empire, with the value of their estates, was probably ordered that the strength and riches of each province might be known. It was made in Syria and Palestine by Cyrinus. Quintilius Varus was at that time proconsul of Syria, on whom the procurator or governor of Judea in some measure depended after it was made a Roman province. Cyrinus succeeded Varus in the government of Syria about ten years after Herod’s death, when his son Archelaus was banished and Judea made a province of the empire. Cyrinus then made a second register; but he made the first in the time of Varus, in which he might act as extraordinary deputy, at least for Palestine, then governed by Herod; or this enregistration is all attributed to him because it was finished by him afterwards. This decree was given by the emperor for political views of state; but proceeded from an overruling order of providence that, by this most authentic public act, it might be manifest to the whole world that Christ was descended of the house of David and tribe of Judah. For those of this family were ordered to be registered at Bethlehem, a small town in the tribe of Judah, seven miles from Jerusalem to the south-west. This was called David’s-town; and was appointed the place where those that belonged to his family were to be enrolled.[17] Joseph and Mary were perhaps natives of this place, though they then lived at Nazareth, ninety miles almost north from Jerusalem. Micheas had foretold[18] that Bethlehem (called by the Jebusites who first built it, Ephrata) should be ennobled by the birth of Christ. Mary, therefore, though with child, by the special direction of providence, undertook this tedious journey with her husband in obedience to the emperor’s order for their enrolment in that city; and it is believed that with St. Joseph, also Mary and her infant Jesus were enrolled; of which Origen,[19] St. Justin,[20] Tertullian,[21] and St. Chrysostom[22] make no doubt. All other characters or marks of the Messiah, mentioned by the prophets, agree to Jesus Christ.[23]

To show the divine Jesus’s descent from David and Judah, the evangelists, St. Matthew and St. Luke, give his pedigree—but designedly different, that this noted character of the Messiah might be demonstrated by his double genealogy. The reason of this difference was at that time public and known to everyone, and so was not mentioned. It seems most probable that St. Luke gives the natural and St. Matthew the legal line of Joseph, who had been adopted into the latter by the frequent case specified in the law of Moses. St. Chrysostom puts us in mind to take notice of the astonishing mercy and humility of our divine Redeemer in this circumstance, that he did not disdain, in order to save sinners, to choose a pedigree in which several notorious sinners are named; so much did he humble Himself to satisfy for, and to cure our vanity and pride. The same father, upon reading the exordium of St. Matthew’s gospel and of this

pedigree, breaks out into this vehement pathos[24] “What cost thou say, O evangelist? Thou hast promised to speak of the only begotten Son of God, and cost thou name David? Admire that the natural Son of God, who is without a beginning, would suffer Himself to be called the son of David, that He might make you the Son of God.” The circumstances of the great mystery, and the wonderful manner in which it was performed, ought to attract our whole attention, and be the object of our pious meditations and devotions, particularly on this holy festival.

The Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, after a painful journey of at least four days in a mountainous country, arrived at Bethlehem. There they found the public inns, or caravansaries (such as is customary in the East), already full; nor were they able to procure any lodgings in the town, every one despising and rejecting their poverty. Do we spiritually invite Jesus into our hearts and prepare a lodging for his reception in our affections? This is the entertainment He is infinitely desirous of, and which He came from heaven to seek. By spiritual nakedness, coldness, sloth, or sin, a Christian soul refuses Him admittance. Of such treatment He will justly complain much more than of the people of Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary, in this distress, retired into a cave made on the side of a rock, which is called a stable, because it served for that purpose, perhaps for the use of those who lodged at the caravansary. It is a common tradition that an ox and an ass were in it at that time. This circumstance is not mentioned in holy scripture, but it is supported by the authority of St. Jerome, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and Prudentius produced by Baronius; and if the blessed travellers came not on foot, they must have had their own ass with them. In this place the holy mother, when her time was come, brought forth her divine Son without the pain of other mothers; remaining both in and after his conception and birth a pure virgin. With what joy and holy respect did she behold and adore the newborn infant; the Creator of all things made man for us! She wrapped Him in swaddling-clothes, such as her poverty had allowed her to prepare, and with holy awe laid Him in the manger. “With what solicitude did she watch Him!” says St. Bonaventure.[25] “With what reverence did she touch Him whom she knew to be her Lord! In like manner are we to admire, with St. Bernard, “How the holy man Joseph would often take Him upon his knees, smiling at Him.” We ought also to contemplate how the choirs of angels, descending from above in raptures of astonishment, adore their God in this new wonderful state to which mercy and love have reduced Him, and salute Him with hymns of praise. We are invited to join them in the persons of the holy shepherds. God was pleased that his Son, though born on earth with so much secrecy, and in a state of the most astonishing humiliation, should be acknowledged by men, and receive the first fruits of their homages and devotion upon his first appearance among them. Who are they that are favored with the honour of this heavenly call? The great ones of the world are passed over on this occasion. They are chosen whose character, by their very station, is simplicity and humility; and whose obscurity, poverty, and solitude removed them from the principal dangers of worldly pride and were most agreeable to that love and spirit of retiredness, penance, and humility which Christ came to recommend. Nor can we doubt but they adorned their state with the true spirit of this simplicity and devotion. These happy persons were certain shepherds who, being strangers to the sensuality and pride of the world, were at that time keeping the watches of the night over their flock. Whilst the sensual and the proud were asleep in soft beds, or employed in pursuits of voluptuousness, vanity, or ambition, an angel appeared to these humble poor men, and they saw themselves encompassed with a great brightness. They were suddenly seized with exceeding great fear, but the heavenly messenger said to them, “Fear not: for behold I bring you good tidings of exceeding great joy, that shall be to all the people. For this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign to you: you shall find the child wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger.” Suddenly then appeared with the angel a multitude of heavenly spirits praising God and saying, “Glory be to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good-will.” After the departure of the angels, the wondering shepherds said one to another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem, and let us see this word that is come to pass, which the Lord hath showed to us.” They immediately hastened thither and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. Here they did homage to the Messiah as to the spiritual king of men, and then returned to their flocks, glorifying and praising God.[26] Mary was very reserved amidst these occurrences and continued silent in her deportment, but observed all these things, with secrecy pondering them in her heart.

The angel calls this wonderful mystery a subject of great joy to all the people. Indeed, our hearts must be insensible to all spiritual things if they do not overflow with holy joy at the consideration of so glorious a mercy, in which is displayed such an excess of the divine goodness, and by which such inestimable benefits and so high an honour accrue

to us. The very thought and foreknowledge of this mystery comforted Adam in his banishment from Paradise. The promise of it sweetened the laborious pilgrimage of Abraham. The same encouraged Jacob to dread no adversity, and Moses to brave all dangers and conquer all difficulties in delivering the Israelites from the Egyptian slavery. All the prophets saw it in spirit with Abraham, and they rejoiced. If the expectation of it gave the patriarchs such joy, how much ought the accomplishment to create in us! Joy is defined the delight of a rational creature arising from the possession of a desired object. It must then be proportioned to the nature of the possession; consequently, it ought to be as much greater in us as the fruition of a good surpasses the promise, possession the hope, or fruit the blossom. This St. Peter Chrysologus illustrates with regard to this difference of the Old and New Law as follows:

“The letter of a friend,” says he, “is comfortable, but his presence is much more welcome; a bond is useful, but the payment more so; blossoms are pleasing, but only till the fruit appears. The ancient fathers received God’s letters, we enjoy his presence; they had the promise, we the accomplishment; they the bond, we the payment.” Christians who rejoice with a worldly, vain, or carnal mirth are strangers to the Spirit of God and his holy joy. Some exterior marks of this joy are allowed, provided they be not sought for themselves, but such as suit a penitential state and Christian gravity, both by their nature and extreme moderation that is held in them; and, lastly, provided motives of virtue sanctify them, and they express and spring from an interior spiritual joy, which is altogether holy. If sensuality have any share in our festivals, they are rather heathenish Bacchanals than Christian solemnities, and on them we feed and strengthen those passions which Christ was born only to teach us to subdue. To sanctify this feast we ought to consecrate it to devotion, and principally to the exercises of adoration, praise, and love. This is the tribute we must offer to our newborn Saviour when we visit Him in spirit with the good shepherds. With them we must enter the stable and contemplate this mystery with a lively faith, by which, under the veils of this infant body, we discover the infinite majesty of our God.

To contemplate immensity shut up in a little body, omnipotence clothed with weakness, the eternal God born in time, the joy of angels bathed in tears, is something far more wonderful than to consider God creating a world out of nothing, moving the heavens, and weighing the universe with a finger. This is a mystery altogether unutterable; to be adored in silence and in raptures of admiration not to be declared by words. “How can anyone speak of the wonder which is here wrought amongst us?” says St. Fulgentius[27] “A man of God, a creature of his Creator, one who is finite, and was born in time, of Him who is immense and eternal.” Another eminent servant of God cries out upon this mystery[28] “O Lord our God, how admirable is thy name over all the earth! Truly thou art a God working wonders. I am not now astonished at the creation of the world, at the heavens, at the earth, at the succession of days and seasons; but I wonder to see God inclosed in the womb of a virgin, the Omnipotent lain in a manger, the eternal Word clothed with flesh.” The eternal Father, when He brought his Son into the world, laid on them his commands, saying, “Let all the angels of God adore Him.”[29] Though they neither wanted invitation nor command, their own devotion being their prompter. O! what must have been their sentiments when they saw a stable converted into heaven by the wonderful presence of its king, and beheld that Divine Infant, knowing His weak hands to be those which framed the universe and bordered the heavens with light; and that by Him both the heavens and the earth subsist? Are they not more astonished to contemplate Him in this humble hidden state than seated on the throne of His glory? Shall not man, for whom this whole mystery is wrought, and who is so much favoured and so highly privileged and ennobled by the same, burn with a holy ardour to perform his part in this duty, and make the best return he is able of gratitude, adoration, and praise? To these exercises we ought to consecrate a considerable part of our devotions, especially on this festival, repeating with fervour the psalms which chiefly consist of acts of divine praises, the hymn of thanksgiving used by the church, commonly ascribed to St. Ambrose and St. Austin, and the angelical hymn, “Glory and praise be given by all creatures to God alone in the highest heavens; and peace (or pardon, reconciliation, grace, and all spiritual happiness) to men of goodwill.” In our devotions, also, acts of love ought to challenge a principal part, the Incarnation of the Son of God being the mystery of love; or, properly, a kind of ecstasy of love in which God strips Himself, as it were, of the rays of his glory to visit us, to become our brother, and to make Himself in all things like to us.

Love is the tribute that God challenges of us in a particular manner in this mystery: this is the return which He requires of us for all He has done and suffered for us. He says to us, “Son, give me thy heart.” To love Him is our

sovereign happiness, and the highest dignity and honour to which a creature can aspire. But we are bound to it upon the title of the strictest justice. God, being infinite in all perfections, is infinitely worthy of our love, and we ought to love Him with an infinite love if we were capable of it. We are also bound to love Him in gratitude, especially for the benefit of his Incarnation, in which He has given us Himself, and this in order to rescue us from extreme miseries and to bestow on us the most incomprehensible graces and favours. Man had sinned and was become the associate of the devil. Almost all the nations of the earth had, by blindly following their passions, at length fallen into a total forgetfulness of God who made them, and deified first inanimate stars and planets, afterwards dead men, the most impious and profligate of the human race; also the works of their own hands, often beasts, monsters, and their own basest passions: the most infamous crimes they authorized by the sanction of pretended religious rites; and from every corner of the earth vice cried to heaven for vengeance. The Jews, who had been favoured by God above all other nations, and declared his peculiar people, were nevertheless abandoned to envy, jealousy, pride, and other vices; so that even amongst them the number of privileged souls which remained faithful to God appeared to be very small. Such was the face of the earth when the Son of God honoured it with his divine presence and conversation. Who would not have imagined when he heard that God was coming to visit the earth that it must have been to destroy it by fire from heaven, as He had done Sodom, and to bury its rebellious inhabitants in hell? But no: whilst the world was reeking with blood and oppressions, and overrun with impiety, He came to save it. How does the ingratitude and baseness of man set off his lover At the sight of our miseries his compassion was stirred up the more tenderly and his bowels yearned toward us. He came to save us, when we deserved nothing at his hands but eternal torments. Also the manner in which He came to visit us shows yet in a more astonishing manner the excess of his goodness and charity for us. To engage our hearts more strongly, He has made Himself like to us taking upon Him our nature. "God was seen upon earth, and has conversed with men[30] The word was made flesh." [31] a God is born an infinite babe, the Eternal is become a young child, the Omnipotent is made weak, He who is essentially infinite and independent is voluntarily reduced to a state of subjection and humbled beneath his own creatures. It is love, and the love of us sinful men, that hath done all this.

St. Francis of Assisi appeared not able to contain himself through excessive tenderness of love when he spoke of this mystery and named the Little Babe of Bethlehem. St. Bernard says, "God on the throne of His majesty and greatness commands our fear and our homages: but in His littleness especially our love." This father invites all created beings to join Him in love and adoration, and to listen in awful silence to the proclamation of the festival in honour of this mystery made in the Roman Martyrology: "Hear ye heavens," says he, "and lend your ears, O earth. Stand in raptures of astonishment and praise, O you whole creation. but you chiefly, O man. 'Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, was born in Bethlehem of Judah.' O short word of the Eternal Word abridged for us! but filled with heavenly sweetness. The affection of this melting sweetness struggles within, earnestly labouring widely to diffuse its teeming abundance, but finds not words. For such is the grace and energy of this speech that it relishes less if one 'iota' in it be changed." In another sermon, having repeated the same words, he adds, "At these words my soul melts and my spirit boils within me, hastening with burning desire to publish to you this exultation and joy.[32] If this love were kindled in our breast, nothing were sweeter to us than to abide in spirit at the feet of Jesus, pondering the motive, that is, the excess of divine love, which brought Him from heaven, and contemplating the other circumstances of this mystery, HOW ought we to salute and adore those sacred hands which are weakened, wrapped in clouts, or stretched on the manger, for love of us, but which move the heavens and uphold and govern the universe. Also those divine feet which will undergo so many fatigues, and at length be bored on the cross for us. That blood which purples His little veins and dyes His blessed cheeks, but which is the price of our redemption, and will be one day poured out upon the cross. How is this sweet countenance, which is the joy of angels, now concealed! But it will one day be buffeted, bruised, and covered with filthy phlegm. How ought we respectfully to honour it! His holy flesh, more pure than angels, even now begins to suffer from the cold and other hardships: do we not desire to defend it from these injuries? But this cannot be allowed. Nor could anyone oppose the work of our redemption. Sin is the cause of all that He suffers, and shall not we detest and shun that monster?. The loving eyes of the divine Jesus pierce our souls. They are now bathed in tears; though, as St. Bernard says, "Jesus weeps not as other children, or at least not on the same account." They cry for their wants and weakness, Jesus for compassion and love for us. May these precious tears move the heavenly

Father to show us mercy; and may they soften, wash, and cleanse our souls “These tears excite in me both grief and shame,” says the same father, “when I consider my own insensibility amidst my spiritual miseries,” But nothing in this contemplation will more strongly move us than to penetrate into the interior employment of this divine Saviour’s holy soul, and to consider the ardour of His zeal in the praises of His Father, and in His supplications to Him on our behalf; His compassion for us, and the constant oblation which He made of Himself to obtain for us mercy and grace. Such meditations and pious entertainment, of our souls will have great force in kindling the fire of holy love in our hearts. But all endeavours would be weak so long as we do not labour effectually to remove all obstacles to this holy love in our affections. To cure these disorders is the chief end of the birth of Christ.

Christ’s actions are no less instructions to us than His discourses. His life is the gospel reduced to practice. It is enough to study it to understand well His doctrine: and to become perfect we must imitate His example. By this He instructs us in His very nativity, beginning first to practice, then to preach^[33] Hence the manger was His first pulpit, and in it He teaches us the cure of our spiritual maladies. He is come such as the holy prophets had desired and foretold, such as our miseries required, our true Physician and Saviour. He wanted not on earth honours or sceptres; He came not to taste of our vanities: riches and glory He abounded with.⁸ He came among us to seek our miseries, our poverty, our humiliation, to repair the injuries our pride had offered to the Godhead, and to apply a remedy to our souls. Therefore He chose not a palace or a great city; but a poor mother, a little town, a stable. He who adorns the world and clothes the lilies of the fields beyond the majesty of Solomon in his glory, is wrapped up in rags and laid in a manger. And this He chose to be the great sign of His appearance. “And this shall be a sign to you,” said the angel to the shepherds, “you shall find the child wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger.” Are then rags and a manger the wonderful sign of our God appearing on earth? Are these the works of the great Messiah, of whom the prophets spoke so glorious things? This it was that scandalized the Jews in His birth.” Take from us those clouts and that manger,” said Marcion, unjustly prepossessed against the humility of such an appearance. But this is a sign which God Himself hath chosen and set up for His standard; a sign to be the contradiction to our pride, covetousness, and sensuality. And do not we wonder at the stupendous virtue and efficacy of this sign, so shocking to the senses and passions, when we see how it drew to it the little and great, the magians and the shepherds, who knew their Saviour by it, and returned glorifying God? How many have enrolled themselves under the same standard!

Christ set up this mark for us: it is our powerful instruction. “The grace of God the Saviour hath appeared to all men, instructing us,” says the apostle.^[34] All men, the rich and the poor, the great and the small, all who desire to have a share in His grace, or in His kingdom. And what breast can be so stony as not to be softened at this example? Our inveterate diseases seemed almost unconquerable. But Christ is come, the omnipotent Physician, to apply a remedy to them. Our disorders flow from three sources. “All that is in the world, is the concupiscence of the flesh, and the concupiscence of eyes, and the pride of life.”^[35] What is concupiscence of the flesh but the inordinate inclination to gratify the senses? Christ, to encourage us to renounce this love of sensual pleasures, and to satisfy His justice by His own sufferings for our offences in this way, begins to suffer as soon as He begins to live. At His very birth He exposes His delicate body to the inclemency of the severest season of the year, to the hard boards of the manger for a cradle, to hunger, and to a privation of the most ordinary conveniences and necessaries of human life. His tender and divine limbs tremble with cold, His eyes stream with tears, and He consecrated the first moments of His life to suffering and pain. He who directs the seasons, governs the universe, and disposes all things, has ordained everything for this very end. Yet we study in all things to flatter our senses, to pamper our bodies in softness and every gratification, and to remove everything that is hard or painful. Is this to imitate the model of penance and mortification that is set us? Christ, by these sufferings, and this privation of all things, shows us that He came to satisfy the justice of His Father, and to repair the injury done to His glory by our sins. But by the same He teaches us the remedies of our disorders, and shows us how they are to be applied to our souls; as He came to instruct us in all we want to know and do in order to save our souls and to reform all our irregular passions and manners. Could He have preached this more powerfully than He has done by the example of His birth? How comes it, notwithstanding, that we are not yet sufficiently persuaded that we cannot be saved at a cheaper rate than by a constant practice of self-denial and penance?

By concupiscence of the eyes is understood the love of riches; the second root of the disorders which reign in the world, and the foundation of its false maxims. This our Saviour teaches us to root out of our hearts by embracing the

most austere poverty, and consecrating it in His divine body, to use the expression of St. Bernard. He shows us the danger of riches, and the crime and disorder of a love or eager pursuit of them. Riches are good in the designs of providence; and what is more noble than to have the means of relieving the distresses of others? This motive all pretend in amassing riches; but seek in them only the interest of self-love. The rich and the poor adore them in their desires. This is the disorder. Men may be poor in spirit in the midst of riches. But this is truly an extraordinary grace. Those that are blessed with riches must fear them, lest they find admittance into their hearts. They are, moreover, most frequently either the effect or the cause of iniquity; faulty either in their acquisition or their use. In their acquisition, in which injustices are so frequent, that Seneca says, "Every rich man is either unjust, or the heir of one who was unjust." And the organ of the Holy Ghost declares, "He that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent." [36] At least a desire of riches usually attends the acquisition, which is in many ways inordinate; and is always a spiritual fever which destroys the relish of heavenly-goods, and consumes the very vitals of the interior life. It is an idolatry, as St. Paul calls it, [37] and the same master who commanded the idols to be banished out of the world, obliges us to banish the love of riches out of our hearts. The least reserve draws on us the curse of heaven.

This desire in the rich is insatiable. The prophet Isaiah said to them [38] "Woe to you that join house to house, and lay field to field, even to the end of the place: shall you alone dwell in the midst of the earth?" "And the Roman satirist reproached one that seemed to design to make all Rome a single house for himself. The rich are anxious for superfluities, and are tormented by extravagant desires. The poor have here often as much to correct; the desire of possessions is as criminal as an attachment to the possession; it often exposes to a thousand injustices, under subtle disguises, and shuts the heart to divine grace. Let all labour in the world, but not for the world; and let all inordinate desires and anxiety be cut off. Let the poor place themselves nearest to Jesus Christ and, learning from Him the happiness of their condition, study their own sanctification in it. Let the rich look upon their possessions as a burden hard to bear well, and labour to sanctify them by a good use, and by imitating Christ our model in a perfect spirit of disengagement and poverty. Is not the life of a Christian to be penitential? Where is that of the rich such? Vicious inclinations are roused and strengthened by riches; and by incentives and opportunities the passions often reign in the heart of the rich with uncontrollable empire. To other dangers we must add the misfortune that the rich are surrounded by flatterers, and that others artfully conspire to blind and betray them amidst their dangers. How often does it happen that ministers of God deceive them, calling evil good, and good evil; soothing their passions or disguising their obligations. But without entering into this detail, do not the curses of Christ suffice to make all Christians tremble at the dangers of this state? By this means, though Christ declares riches one of the most dangerous obstacles of grace, many saints have changed them into the means of their salvation, joining with their possession a spirit of poverty and disengagement, and making them the instruments of justice and charity. It is therefore neither to riches nor to poverty that Christ promises the kingdom of heaven; but to the disengagement of the heart from the love of riches in whatever state persons live.

Pride being the third and principal source of our disorders, and our deepest wound, humility is displayed in the most wonderful manner in the birth of the Son of God. What is the whole mystery of the Incarnation but the most astonishing humiliation of the Deity? To expiate our pride, and to repair the injury offered to the adorable Trinity by our usurpation, the eternal Son of God divests Himself of His glory and takes upon Him the form of Man. Who would not expect to hear, that when God descended upon earth, the heavens would bend beneath Him, the earth be moved at His sight, and all nature arrayed with magnificence? "He came not," says St. Chrysostom, [39] so as to shake the world at the presence of His majesty: nor did He appear in thunder and lightning, as on Mount Sinai; but He descended sweetly, no man knowing it." "While all things were in deep silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, thy Almighty Word came down from heaven, from thy royal throne." [40] No one of the great ones of the world is apprized of this great mystery, Those few chosen persons to whom He is pleased to reveal Himself, are called to adore Him in the closest secrecy and silence. If this be the manner in which He comes, what is the appearance which He makes among men? How comes the King of heaven to make His appearance in such a state of abasement, and so destitute of due honour and of every convenience! His birth is, notwithstanding, the masterpiece of infinite wisdom, mercy, and omnipotence. These perfections nowhere shine more admirably than in this mystery; for He came thus to be our Physician, to correct our mistaken judgment of things, to heal our pride, to bring, and to encourage us to

use the remedy to our grievous maladies, and to overcome our reluctancy to its bitterness by taking it first Himself. Therefore humility was to be His ensign, and the angel gave His rags and manger to the shepherds for the mark by which He was to be known. "This shall be to you a sign." What do we behold! A God poor, a God humbled, a God suffering! And can we any longer entertain thoughts of sensuality, ambition, or pride?

If this humility of a God be most astonishing, is not the blindness and pride of man, after such an example, something, if possible, still more inconceivable? Christ is born thus only to atone for our pride, to shower us the beauty of humility, and to plant it in our hearts. Humility is His standard; and the spirit of sincere humility is the mark by which His disciples must be known to be His. Can we profess ourselves His followers, can we look upon the example which He has set us, and yet continue to entertain thoughts of ambition and pride? To learn the interior perfect spirit of humility and all other virtues, we cannot make use of any more powerful means than serious and frequent meditation on His nativity a divine life. Placing ourselves in spirit at the manger, after the tender of our homages by acts of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, and love, we must study in Him the lessons of all virtues, and must present to our newborn king our earnest supplications to obtain of Him all those gifts and graces which He comes to bestow upon us. Let us learn humility from the lowliness in which He appears, and from the humility of His sacred heart. Let us learn meekness by beholding the sweetness and patience with which this God-man receives all injuries from men and from the elements. Let us learn resignation from the indifference with which He bears cold, wants, wrongs, and whatever is sent Him. Let us learn obedience from the most perfect submission of our blessed Saviour to the will of His heavenly Father, from His birth offering Himself without reserve, even to the death of the cross. Let us learn charity from the ardour of His divine love. Let us learn a contempt of the world and its perishable goods from the extreme poverty which Christ made His voluntary choice. Let not the spirit and maxims of the world reign any longer in our hearts, since Christ has shown us such powerful motives, and presented us such sovereign remedies against them. Have we not hitherto been idolaters of ourselves by pride, idolaters of the world by vanity and avarice, and idolaters of our flesh by living enslaved to our senses? These idols we renounce at baptism; but have we not lived in a perfidious violation of these vows? Unless we now sincerely renew these engagements, and banish these idols out of our affections, Jesus can never be spiritually born in our souls, and we can never inherit His spirit, which was the end of His carnal nativity. He is meek, and the king of peace, the lover of purity and of chaste affections, and the avowed enemy to every spirit of pride, hatred, and revenge. We must earnestly invite and entreat Him who vehemently desires to be born in our hearts, that He prepare our souls to receive Him by His graces, that He cleanse them by His mercy, and by inspiring us with sincere compunction, that He banish every inordinate passion, fill us with His holy spirit, and by it reign in all our affections, thoughts, and actions; that as by His nativity He is become all ours, so we may be altogether His. Without this condition we frustrate in ourselves the end of His coming; He is not born for us, unless by His spirit He be born in us. Let us conjure Him by the infinite love with which He came for this very purpose, that He suffer us not wretchedly to defeat this His mercy. For this happiness we ought ardently to repeat that petition which He Himself has put into our mouths, "Thy kingdom come."

The custom of one priest celebrating several masses on the same day prevailed in many places on great festivals.[41] Prudentius, in His twelfth hymn, "On the Crowns of Martyrs," mentions that on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, the 29th of June, the pope said mass first at the Vatican, and afterwards in the Church of St. Paul without the city. The popes on Christmas day formerly said three masses, the first in the Liberian basilica, the second in the Church of St. Anastasia, the third in the Vatican, as Benedict XIV proves from ancient Roman orders or missals. St. Gregory the Great speaks of saying three masses on this day.[42] This custom of the popes was universally imitated and is everywhere retained, though not of precept. Pouget[43] says, that these three masses are celebrated to honour the triple birth of Christ; the first, by which He proceeds from His Father before all ages; the second, from the Blessed Virgin Mary; and the third, by which He is spiritually born in our souls by faith and charity. That Christ was born on the 25th of December, Pope Benedict XIV proves by the authority of St. Chrysostom, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Austin, &c., and answers the objections of Scaliger and Samuel Basnage[44] He doubts not but the Greek church originally kept this festival on the same day;[45] and He takes notice, that among the principal feasts of the year it holds the next place after Easter and Whitsunday.[46]

ENDNOTES

- 1 Aggaeus ii. 7. 2 Gen. iii, 15. 3 Gen. xxii. 18. 4 Gen. xxvi. and xxviii. 5 Gen. xlix. 8. 6 Isa. ii. 4 Mich.. iv. 2. 7 Gen. xlix. 8, 10.
- 8 Aggaeus ii. 3
- 9 Malachi iii. I.
- 10 Dan. ii. 3 v. 20; viii. 3 See Rollin, or Mezengui, or Calmet.
- 11 Dan. ix. 21, &c. See Nouveau Comment. t. ix. p. 500.
- 12 Numb, xxiv, 17.
- 13 In Vespas.
- 14 Tacit, in Annal.
- 15 See the life of Josephus.
- 16 Acts v, 36; xxi, 28, Joseph, Ant. lib, xx. c. 2 et 6; lib. viii. c. I. Idem. De Bello Jud. lib. vii. c. 31, &c. Read Dissert. sur les Faux Messies, in the new Fr. Comment. t. xi. p. 21.
- 17 Luke ii. I. 2, 3.
- 18 Mich. ii. 2.
- 19 Orig. Hom. ii. in Luc.
- 20 St. Justin, Apol. i. vol. 2.
- 21 Tert. lib.. iv. cont. Marcion.
- 22 St. Chrys. in Mat. hic.
- 23 See Calmet's Diss. sur les Caracteres du Messie, suivant les Juifs, at the head of his comm. on St. Matthew.
- 24 St. Chrys. Hom, 2, in Mat. t. vii. p. 21, ed. Ben.
- 25 St. Bonav. Vit. Christi, c. 10.
- 26 Luke ii. 9, 20.
- 27 St. Fulgentius, Serm, ii. de Nativ.
- 28 Arnoldus Bonnevallis, Serm. do Nativ. inter Opera St. Cypriani.
- 29 2 Heb. i. 6.
- 30 Baruch iii. 38.
- 31 John i. 14.
- 32 St. Bern. Serm. vi. in Vigil. Nativ p. 771.
- 33 Acts i. I.
- 34 Tit. ii. II.
- 35 I John ii. 16.
- 36 Prov. xxviii. 20.
- 37 Col. iii. 5.
- 38 Isa. v. 8.
- 39 St. Chrysost. in Ps.. 50, p. 536 t.v.
- 40 Wisd. xviii. 14, 15.
- 41 See Bona Rer. Liturg. lib. i. c. 18, n. 6; Joseph. Vicecomes, De antiquis missae ritibus, lib. iii. c. 28 &c.
- 42 St. Greg. Hom. viii. in Evang.
- 43 Instit. Cathol. t.i.p. 814.
- 44 De Festis Christi D. c. 17, n. 45, p. 411. See F. Honore, Regles de Crib. lib. iii. Diss. 2, Art. I, and Tillemont, note 4.
- 45 N. 67, loco cit. p. 422.
- 46 N. 57, p. 417.
