

THOUGHTS FOR THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

ST. LEO THE GREAT

Through his famous letter (“Tome”) to the Council of Chalcedon in which in classical form he expounded the traditional teaching on the hypostatic union and particularly on the two natures in Christ. Leo the Great shares with St. Cyril of Alexandria the honor of being the Doctor of the Incarnation. The Church has corroborated this title by choosing Leo’s first homily on the Nativity for the breviary lessons of Christmas. Ten of the Saint’s Christmas homilies have come down to us (P.L. 54, 190-234). There are also eight homilies for the sister feast of Epiphany. Since the first homily on Christmas is generally known, we have restricted ourselves in the following selections to his Christmas homilies 2 to 9, except for the concluding paragraph from Homily 1.

LET US be glad in the Lord, dearly beloved, and make merry with spiritual joy. For there has dawned for us the day of new redemption, of ancient preparation, and of eternal bliss. In this annual feast there is renewed for us the sacrament of our salvation, which was promised from the beginning, was accomplished in the fulness of time, and will endure for all eternity. (Homily 2,1.)

You therefore, whoever you may be, who devoutly and full of faith boast of the Christian name, rightly weigh the grace of your reconciliation. By the Incarnation of the Word power was given you to return from afar to your Maker, to recognize your true parentage, from a slave to become a freeman, from an outcast to become a son. Born of corruptible flesh, you were empowered to be reborn of the Spirit of God, and to obtain through grace what was not yours through nature. You know that by the spirit of adoption you are become a son of God: you dare call God your father. (Hom. 2,5.)

In order that we might be recalled to eternal blessedness from the bonds of original sin and from all human error, He Himself came down to us to whom we of ourselves could never rise. For although there was in many the love of truth, yet the multitude of shifting opinions was taken advantage of by the crafty and deceitful demons, and in the false name of science human ignorance was led astray into various and mutually conflicting doctrines. To put an end to this fools’ merry-go-round, moreover, by which minds were held captive to serve the arrogance of Satan, the teaching of the Law was not sufficient, nor could our nature be repaired solely by the exhortations of the prophets. The reality of redemption had to be added to moral injunctions and strivings: our nature corrupted in its very origin must needs be re-born by new beginnings (“<novis exordiis>”: i.e., the new life deriving from the new Head of the race). (Hom. 3,3.)

Worthily and zealously will each of us celebrate the day of our Lord’s Nativity if we but recall of whose body we are members, and to what Head we are joined. Consider well, dearly beloved, and with the help of the enlightening Spirit wisely bear in mind who it was that received us into Himself and whom we have received into our midst: for as the Lord Jesus was made flesh, by being born, so we are made His body by our rebirth. Thus are we members of Christ as well as temples of the Holy Ghost, and for this reason the Blessed Apostle says: “Glorify and bear God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:20). (Hom. 3,5.)

Let the righteous exult in the Lord, let the hearts of believe turn to His praise, and let the sons of men confess His wondrous deeds. For in this work of God especially (the Nativity), does our humble condition realize how highly it is esteemed by its Maker. God indeed gave much to man when He made him to His own image, but He granted him far more by the work of restoration, for the Lord Himself assumed our “form of a servant.” And although all that the Creator expends upon His creatures is suggested by one and the same paternal love, it is less wonderful that man be elevated to the divine, than that God should descend to human estate. (Hom. 4,2.)

Each one of us by regeneration received part in Christ’s spiritual origin (cf. “conceived of the Holy Spirit”). To every one who is re-born, the water of baptism is as the Virgin’s womb, for the same Holy Spirit fills this font who filled the Virgin. Thus the sin which that sacred conception overthrew is taken away by this mystical washing. (Hom. 4,3.)

But you, O dearly beloved, to whom I can address no words more worthy than those of St. Peter: “you are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (1 Pet. 2:9): you have been built upon the

impregnable rock Christ, you have been planted into our Lord and Savior by His true assumption of our flesh. Remain firm then in that faith which you have confessed before many witnesses, and in which, having been born through water and the Holy Ghost, you received the chrism of salvation and the seal of eternal life. (Hom. 4,6.)

Unless faith is one, it is none, for the Apostle has said: "One Lord, one faith." (Hom. 4,6.)

It was for the sake of our weakness, who were incapable of receiving Him, that Christ lowered Himself. Because the eye of man could not bear to look upon the brilliance of His majesty, Christ hid it with the veil of a body. (Hom. 5,2.)

In assuming our nature, Christ became for us a ladder, so that through Him we can now ascend even unto Himself. (Hom. 5,3.)

Father and Son are co-eternal. For brilliance born of light is not posterior to the light, nor is true light ever without its splendor. Moreover to radiate is as essential to light as is its own being. The manifestation of this radiance, however, His appearance on this earth, is called Christ's mission. While He ever filled all things with His invisible majesty, He came as it were from His remote and exalted secret place to those who knew Him not, and healed them of their blindness of ignorance, as it is written: "To those that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, a light is risen" (Is. 9:2). (Hom. 5,3)

Let Catholic faith recognize the glory of the Lord in His humility; and let the Church, which is the body of Christ, exult in the sacraments of her salvation. For unless the Word of God had become flesh and had dwelt amongst us, unless the Creator Himself had descended to enter into communion with His creature and in His birth had restored the old man by a new beginning, death would have reigned from Adam even unto the end (Rom. 5:14), Irrevocable condemnation would have been all men's lot, and the very fact of birth would have been unto all cause of perdition. But He became a man of our race, that we might become partake of the divine nature. The birth that was His from the virginal womb, He made available to us in the baptismal font. He gave to water the same power that He gave to His mother. For the power of the Most High and the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35) which made Mary give birth to the Savior, likewise effect that water gives new life to the believer. (Hom. 5,5.)

Adam contemned the command of God, and led the race into sin's damnation; Jesus, born under the Law, restored to us the liberty of justification. Adam, agreeing to the wiles of Satan even unto the fall, merited that in him all die; Jesus, obedient to the Father even unto the cross, merited that all in Him find life. Adam was jealous of angelic honors, and destroyed the dignity of his own nature; Jesus took upon Himself the condition of our infirmity, and raised up to heaven those for whom He descended into the abyss. To Adam who fell by pride it was said: "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return" (Gen. 3:19); but to Jesus, who was glorified because of His abasement, it was said: "Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thy enemies Thy footstool" (Ps. 109:1). (Hom. 5,5.)

On all days and at all times, dearly beloved, do the thoughts of the faithful who meditate on divine things dwell on the birth of our Lord and Savior from the Virgin-Mother. For the mind that is lifted up in acknowledgment of its Maker, whether it be in groaning supplication, in the gladness of praise, or in the offering of sacrifice, directs its spiritual gaze on nothing more frequently or with more confidence than the fact that the same God the Son of God who was begotten of the co-eternal Father was also born by a human birth. No other day, however, calls upon us to venerate the Nativity, worthy as it is of adoration both in heaven and on earth, so insistently as does the present, which reveals to our gaze the brightness of this wondrous sacrament, and on which even nature herself is radiant with new light. [*Winter solstice is passed*] For the angel Gabriel's converse with the astonished Mary and the conception that took place through the Holy Ghost, as wondrous because promised as because believed, are not merely recalled to mind, but as it were occur before our very eyes. For today did the Author of the world issue forth from the virginal womb, and He who made all natures today was made a Son of her whom He created. Today the Word of God appeared clothed in flesh, and that which had never been visible to human eyes, now became tangible to human hands as well. Today shepherds, taught by angels' voices, came to the Savior born in the substance of our flesh and soul; and thus today was established the form in which the gospel was to be preached by the shepherds of the Lord's flocks for all our preaching is no more than an echoing of the angelic host: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will" (Luke 2:4). (Hom. 6,1.)

Although the infancy which the majesty of God's Son did not disdain passed into the maturity of manhood, and

although all the acts of humility undertaken for us ceased once the triumph of the passion and resurrection had been attained, yet today's festival renews for us the sacred infancy of Jesus born of the Virgin Mary; and while we adore the birth of our Savior, we find that we are celebrating too the commencement of our own life. For the birth of Christ is the origin of the Christian race, since the birthday of the Head is the birthday of the body.

Though each of those who are called have his own station in life, though the sons of the Church are separated from each other by the passage of the years, yet the entire body of the faithful, having a common origin in the baptismal font, are crucified together with Christ in His passion, are raised up in His resurrection, and in His ascension are placed with Him at the Father's right hand—and so likewise are they all with Him born in this Nativity. For every believer, in whatever part of the world he may be, who is reborn in Christ, quits the evil path of his first origin, and by being born again is changed into a new man. For no longer is he considered as an offspring merely of an earthly father, but as belonging now to the seed of the Savior, who for this reason became the Son of man that we might have the power of becoming sons of God. (Hom. 6,2.)

In no other way can God be worthily worshipped, than if we offer Him what He Himself has given us. But in the entire treasury of the Lord's bounty, what more suitable gift can we find to honor the present day, than <peace> that peace which was first proclaimed by angels' chant on the Lord's Nativity. For this peace it is that begets sons of God, that is the nurse of love and the mother of unity; this peace is the rest of the blessed and our eternal home; its proper task and special benefit it is to join to God those whom it separates from the world. Wherefore the Apostle urges us to attain this blessing, saying: "Being justified by faith, let us have peace with God" (Rom. 5:1). In this short sentence is summed up the effect of almost all the commandments; for where there is true peace, there no virtue can be lacking. But, dearly beloved, what does it mean to have peace with God except to will what He commands, and not to desire what He forbids.... You are a chosen and kingly race. Live up, then, to the dignity of your regeneration, love what your Father loves, and in nothing dissent from your Maker, lest the Lord should again declare: "I have brought up children and exalted them: but they have despised Me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel hath not known Me, and My people hath not understood" (Is. 1:2f.).(Hom. 6,3.)

Great, O dearly beloved, is the sacrament of this gift, and far does it excel all other gifts: that God should call man His son and man call God father. (Hom. 6,4.)

If we are of one mind with God, if we will what He wills, and condemn what He abhors, He Himself will bring all our battles to good issue. For He who gave the will, will also give the power ("*<ipse qui dedit velle, donabit et posse>*"): thus we shall be cooperators of His works, and in exultation of faith shall cry out with the prophet: "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the protector of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps. 26:1). (Hom. 6,4.)

The birthday of our Lord is the birthday of peace. For the Apostle says: "He is our peace, who hath made both one" (Eph. 2:14), and whether we be Jew or Gentile, "by Him we have access both in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2:18). It was this doctrine in particular that Christ taught His disciples the very day before His passion, when He said: "My peace I give you, My peace I leave with you" (John 14:17). And lest in the generic term of peace the particular character of <His> peace be lost to view, He added: "Not as the world gives do I give to you." The peace of the spiritual-minded and of Catholics comes from on high and itself leads to the heights. It refuses to hold communion with the lovers of this world. For "where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also" (Matt. 6:22): that is to say: if what you love is here below you will descend to the depths; but if your love is above, you will attain to the heavenly summits Thither may the Spirit of peace lead and accompany us who all will the same, who are of one mind, who are united in faith and hope and charity. For "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). (Hom. 6,5.)

That "the Word was made flesh" does not mean that the nature of God was changed into flesh, but that flesh was assumed by the Word into the unity of His person. The word "flesh" moreover signifies the whole man, with whom the Son of God so inseparably united Himself within the womb of the Virgin, fecundated by the Holy Spirit and destined to remain for ever virginal, that He who was begotten of the essence of the Father before time, in time was born of the Virgin's womb. For in no other way could we be released from the chains of eternal death, except He become humble in our nature who remained almighty in His own.

The Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Therefore He so united Himself to us and us with Him, that the descent of God to man's estate became the exaltation of man to God's. (Hom. 7,2.)

Though all the divine utterances exhort us, dearly beloved, to rejoice in the Lord always, yet today we are no doubt inspired to a fuller spiritual joy, since the sacrament of the Lord's Nativity is shining so brightly upon us. Today especially we have recourse to that unutterable condescension of the divine mercy whereby the Creator of men deigned to become man, that we might be found in His nature whom we worship in ours. For God the Son of God, the only-begotten of the eternal and unbegotten Father, while eternally remaining in the form of God, and unchangeably and beyond time possessing the same being as the Father, took unto Himself the form of a servant without suffering loss of His majesty, and thus did He advance us to His own estate without lessening Himself in ours. Thus each nature remains the same in its properties, yet such is the community of their union that whatever there is of the Godhead is not disjoined from the humanity, and whatever there is of man, is not separated from the divinity. (Hom. 8, 1.)

The greatness of the divine event (which we are celebrating), dearly beloved, far exceeds the power of human eloquence. Moreover, the difficulty in speaking adequately of it derives precisely from the reason for our not keeping silent about it. For it was not only of the divine essence in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, but also of His human nature that the words of the prophet were spoken: "Who shall declare His generation?" (Is. 53,8). Unless faith held fast, no speech could declare the union of twofold nature in one sole person. And thus there is never lack of matter for praise, for never does the strength of him who praises suffice for the subject.

Indeed, let us rejoice that we are unequal to the task of giving due praise to so great a sacrament of mercy (i.e., the Nativity); and if we are unable to express the sublimity of the manner of our redemption, let us know that it is good for us to be so helpless. For none approaches more closely to the knowledge of the truth than he who realizes that in matters divine there ever remains far more to attain, no matter how far he progresses. (Hom. 9,1.)

The angel sent of God, Gabriel, had said to blessed Mary: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). But of this same Spirit, of whom Christ was born out of the womb of the immaculate Mother, is reborn the Christian out of the womb of holy Church. True peace for him lies solely in not being separated from the will of God, in loving those things only which are beloved of God. (Hom. 9,1.)

Let us then, most dearly beloved, give thanks to God the Father, through His Son, and in the Holy Spirit, who "for His great mercy wherewith He hath loved us" has taken pity on us, and "when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together in Christ" (Eph. 2:5): that in Him we may be a new creature and a new creation. Let us put off, therefore, the old man and all his works. Having received a share in the birth of Christ, let us renounce the works of the flesh. Recognize thy dignity, O Christian! Made a partaker of the divine nature, do not dare by degenerate conduct to return to former baseness. Remember of what Head and what body thou art a member. Call to mind that thou wert snatched from the power of darkness and translated into the light and kingdom of God. In the sacrament of baptism thou wert made a temple of the Holy Spirit: do not by evil actions drive from thee so great a Guest in order once again to subject thyself to Satan's thralldom. For the blood of Christ is thy purchase money, and He who ransomed thee in mercy will one day judge thee in justice: who with the Father and the Holy Ghost reigns for all ages. Amen. (Hom. 1,3.)
