

CHRISTMASTIDE

O ADMIRABILE COMMERCIIUM!

by Abbot Marmion, O.S.B.

SUMMARY.—The mystery of the Incarnation is a wonderful exchange between divinity and humanity.—I. The Eternal Word asks of us a human nature in order to unite it to Himself by a personal union: Creator... *animatum corpus sumens*.—II. In becoming Incarnate, the Word brings us, in return, a share in His Divinity: *Largitus est nobis suam deitatem*.—III. This exchange appears still more wonderful when we consider the manner in which it is wrought. The Incarnation renders God visible so that we may hear and imitate Him.—IV. It renders God passible, capable of expiating our sins by His sufferings and of healing us by His humiliations.—V. We are to take our part in this exchange by faith: those who receive the Word-made-flesh by believing in Him have “power to be made the sons of God.”

The coming of the Son of God upon earth is so great an event that God willed to prepare the way for it during centuries. He made rites and sacrifices, figures and symbols, all converge towards Christ; He foretold Him, announced Him by the mouth of the prophets who succeeded one another from generation to generation.

And now it is the very Son of God Who comes to instruct us:

Multifariam multisque modis olim Deus loquens patribus... novissime locutus est nobis in Filio (Heb 1:1,2). For Christ is not only born for the Jews of Judea who lived in His time. It is for us all, for all mankind, that He came down from Heaven:

Propter nos et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis. He wills to distribute to every soul the grace that He merited by His Nativity.

This is why the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, appropriates to herself, in order to place them upon our lips and with them to fill our hearts, the longings of the patriarchs, the aspirations of the just of ancient times, and the desires of the Chosen People. She wills to prepare us for Christ’s coming, as if this Nativity was about to be renewed before our eyes.

See how when she commemorates the coming of her Divine Bridegroom upon earth, she displays the splendour of her solemnities, and makes her altars brilliant with lights to celebrate the Birth of the “Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6), the “Sun of Justice” (Mal 4:2), Who rises in the midst of our darkness to enlighten “every man that cometh into this world” (Jn 1:5, 9). She grants her priests the privilege, almost unique in the year, of thrice offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

These feasts are magnificent, they are likewise full of charm. The Church evokes the remembrance of the Angels singing in the sky the glory of the new-born Babe; of the Shepherds who come to adore at the manger; of the Magi who hasten from the East to offer Him their adorations and rich presents.

And yet, like every feast here below, this solemnity, even with the prolongation of its octave, is ephemeral: it passes by. Is it for the feast of a day, howsoever splendid it may be, that the Church requires such a long preparation from us? Certainly not! Why then? Because she knows that the contemplation of this mystery contains a special and choice grace for our souls.

I said at the beginning of these conferences that each one of Christ’s mysteries constitutes not only a historical fact which takes place in time, but contains a grace proper to itself wherewith our souls are to be nourished so as to live thereby.

Now what is the intimate grace of the mystery of the Nativity? What is the grace for the reception of which the Church takes so much care to dispose us? What is the fruit that we ought to gather from the contemplation of the Christ Child?

The Church herself indicates this at the first Mass, that of midnight. After having offered the bread and wine which, in a few moments, are to be changed, by the consecration, into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, she sums up her desires in this prayer:

“Grant, O Lord, that the oblation which in we offer today’s festival may be acceptable unto Thee, and, by Thy grace, through this most sacred and holy intercourse, may we be found like unto Him in Whom is our substance united to Thee.”

(*Accepta tibi sit, Domine, quaesumus, hodiernae festivitatis oblatio: ut tua gratia largiente, per haec sacrosancta commercia, in illius inveniatur forma, in quo tecum est nostra substantia.* Secret of the Midnight Mass.) The word *forma* is here taken in the sense of “nature,” “condition” *natura*, as in the text of St Paul: *Christus cum in forma Dei esset... exinanivit semetipsum formam servi accipiens et habitu inventus ut homo.*)

We ask to be partakers of that divinity to which our humanity is united. It is like an exchange. God, in becoming incarnate, takes our human nature and gives us, in return, a participation in His Divine nature.

This thought, so concise in its form, is more explicitly expressed in the secret of the second Mass: “Grant, O Lord, that our offerings may be conformed to the mysteries of this day’s Nativity, that as He Who is born as man is also God made manifest, so this earthly substance (which He unites to Himself) may confer upon us that which is divine.” (*Munera rostra, quaesumus, Domine, nativitatis hodiernae mysteriis apta proveniant, ut sicut homo genitus idem refulsit et Deus, sic nobis haec terrena substantia conferat quod divinum est.* (Secret of the Mass at Break of Day.)

To be made partakers of the Divinity to which our humanity was united in the Person of Christ, and to receive this Divine gift through this humanity itself,—such is the grace attached to the celebration of today’s mystery.

Our offerings will be “conformed to the mysteries of this day’s Nativity,” according to the words of the above quoted secret, if—by the contemplation of the Divine work at Bethlehem and the reception of the Eucharistic Sacrament,—we participate in the eternal life that Christ wills to communicate to us by His Humanity.

“O admirable exchange,” we shall sing on the octave day, “the Creator of the human race, taking upon Himself a body and a soul, has vouchsafed to be born of a Virgin, and, appearing here below as man, has made us partakers of His Divinity”: *O admirabile commercium! CREATOR generis humani, ANIMATUM CORPUS SUMENS, de virgine nasci dignatus est; et procedens homo sine semine, LARGITUS EST NOBIS SUAM DEITATEM* (Antiphon of the Octave of Christmas).

Let us, therefore, stay for a few moments to admire, with the Church, this exchange between the creature and the Creator between heaven and earth, an exchange upon which all the mystery of the Nativity is based. Let us consider what are the acts and the matter of it;—under what form it is wrought;—we will afterwards see what fruits are to be derived from it for us;—and to what it engages us.

I

Let us transport ourselves to the stable-cave at Bethlehem; let us behold the Child lying upon the straw. What is He in the sight of the profane, in the sight of an inhabitant of the little city who might happen to come there after the Birth of Jesus?

Only a new-born Babe to Whom a woman of Nazareth had given birth; only a son of Adam like unto us, for His parents have Him inscribed upon the register of enrolment; the details of His genealogy can be followed. There He lies upon the straw, a weak Babe Whose life is sustained by a little milk. Many Jews saw nothing more in Him than this. Later on you will hear His compatriots, astonished at His wisdom, ask themselves where He could have learnt it, for, in their eyes, He had never been anything but “the son of a carpenter”: *Nonne hic est fabri filius?...* (Mt 13:55; cf. Mk 6:3; Lk 4:22).

But to the eyes of faith, a life higher than the human life animates this Child: He possesses Divine life. What does faith, indeed, tell us on this subject? What revelation does it give us?

Faith tells us that this Child is God’s own Son. He is the Word, the Second Person of the Adorable Trinity; He is the Son Who receives Divine life from His Father, by an ineffable communication: *Sicut Pater habet vitam in semetipso, sic dedit et Filio habere vitam in semetipso* (Lk 4:22). He possesses the Divine nature, with all its infinite perfections. In the heavenly splendours, in *splendoribus sanctorum* (Ps 109:3). God begets this Son by an eternal generation.

It is to this Divine Sonship in the bosom of the Father that our adoration turns first of all; it is this Sonship that we extol in the midnight Mass. At day-break, the Holy Sacrifice will celebrate the Nativity of Christ according to the flesh, His Birth, at Bethlehem, of the Virgin Mary; finally, the third Mass will be in honour of Christ’s coming into our souls.

The Mass of the night, all enveloped with mystery, begins with these solemn words: *Dominus dixit ad me: Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te* (Introit of the Mass of Midnight), This cry that escapes from the soul of Christ united to the Person of the Word, reveals to earth for the first time that which the heavens hear from all eternity. “The Lord hath said to Me: Thou art My Son: this day have I begotten Thee.” “This day” is first of all the day of eternity, a day without dawn or decline.

The Heavenly Father now contemplates His Incarnate Son. The Word, although made man, nevertheless remains God. Become the Son of man, He is still the Son of God. The first glance that falls upon Christ, the first love wherewith He is surrounded, is the glance, the love of His Father. *Diliget me, Pater* (Jn 15:9). What contemplation and what love! Christ is the Only-begotten Son of the Father; therein lies His essential glory. He is equal to and “consubstantial with the Father, God of God, Light of Light... by Whom all things were made,” “and without Him was made nothing that was made.” It is of this Son that these words were spoken: “Thou in the beginning, O Lord, didst found the earth, and the works of Thy hands are the heavens. They shall perish, but Thou shalt continue; and they shall all grow old as a garment; and as a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall be changed; but Thou art the self-same, and Thy years shall not fail!” (Epistle for the Mass of Christmas Day.)

And this “Word was made Flesh”: *Et Verbum caro factum est.*

Let us adore this Word become Incarnate for us: *Christus natus est nobis, venite adoremus* (Invitatory for Christmas Matins)... A God takes our humanity: conceived by the mysterious operation of the Holy Ghost in Mary’s womb, Christ is born of the most pure substance of the blood of the Virgin, and the life that He has from her makes Him like unto us! (Creator generis humani) *de virgine nasci dignatus est, et procedens homo sine semine.*

This is what faith tells us: this Child is the Incarnate Word of God; He is the Creator of the human race become man. (Creator generis humani); if He needs a little milk to nourish Him, it is by His hand that the birds of heaven are fed.

Parvoque lacte pastus est Per quem nec ales esurit (Hymn of Christmas Lauds)

Let us contemplate this Infant lying in the manger. His eyes are closed, He sleeps, He does not manifest outwardly what He is. In appearance, He is only like all other infants, and yet, being God, being the Eternal Word, He, at this moment, is judging the souls that appear before Him. “He lies upon straw, and as God, He sustains the universe and reigns in heaven”: *Jacet in praesepio et in caelis regnat* (12th response at Matins on the Sunday of the Octave of Christmas), This Child, just beginning to grow, *Puer crescebat... et proficiebat aetate* (Lk 2:40, 52), is the Eternal Whose divine nature knows no change: *Tu idem ipse es, et anni tui non deficient.* He Who is born in time is likewise He Who is before all time; He Who manifests Himself to the shepherds of Bethlehem is He Who, out of nothing, created the nations that, “are before Him as if they had no being at all” (Is 40:17).

Palamque fit pastoribus Pastor creator omnium (Hymn of Christmas Lauds.)

To the eyes of faith there are two lives in this Babe; two lives indissolubly united in an ineffable manner, for the Human Nature belongs to the Word in such wise that there is but a single Person, that of the Word, Who sustains the Human Nature by His own Divine existence.

Undoubtedly, this human nature is perfect: *perfectus homo* (Creed attributed to St. Athanasius): nothing of that which belongs to its essence is lacking to Him. This Babe has a soul like to ours; He has faculties:—intelligence, will, imagination, sensibility— like ours. He is truly one of our own race Whose existence will be revealed, during thirty three years, as authentically human. Sin, alone, will be unknown to Him. *Debit per omnia fratribus similis* (Heb 2:17) ...*absque peccato* (Ibid. 4:15). Perfect in itself, this human nature will keep its own activity, its native splendour. Between these two lives of Christ—the Divine, which He ever possesses by His eternal birth in the bosom of the Father; the human which He has begun to possess by His Incarnation in the bosom of a Virgin—there is neither mingling nor confusion. The Word, in becoming man, remains what He was; that which He was not, He has taken from our race; but the divine in Him does not absorb the human, the human does not lessen the divine. The union is such, as I have often said, that there is however but a single Person—the Divine Person,—and that the human nature belongs to the Word, is the Word’s own humanity: *Mirabile mysterium declaratur hodie: innovantur naturae, Deus homo factus est; id quod fuit permansit et*

quod non erat assumpsit, non commixtionem passus neque divisionem (Antiphon of Lauds in the Octave of Christmas.)

II

This then, if I may so express myself, is one of the acts of the contract. God takes our nature so as to unite it to Himself in a personal union.

What is the other act? What is God going to give us in return? Not that He owes us anything: *Bonorum meorum non eges* (Ps 15:2). But as He does all things with wisdom, He could not take upon Himself our nature without a motive worthy of Him.

What the Word Incarnate gives in return to humanity is an incomprehensible gift; it is a participation, real and intimate, in His Divine nature: *Largitus est nobis suam deitatem*. In exchange for the humanity which He takes, the Incarnate Word gives us a share in His Divinity; He makes us partakers of His Divine Nature. And thus is accomplished the most wonderful exchange which could be made.

Doubtless, as you know, this participation had already been offered and given, from the creation, to Adam, the first man. The gift of grace, with all its splendid train of privileges, made Adam like to God. But the sin of the first man, the head of the human race, destroyed and rendered this ineffable participation impossible on the part of the creature.

It is to restore this participation that the Word becomes Incarnate; it is to reopen to us the way to heaven that God is made man. For this Child, being God's own Son, has Divine life, like His Father, with His Father. In this Child "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead corporeally" (Col. 2:9); in Him are laid up all the treasures of the divinity (Cf. Ibid. 3). But He does not possess them for Himself alone. He infinitely desires to communicate to us the Divine life that He Himself is: *Ego sum vita* (Jn 14:6). It is for this that He comes: *Ego vend UT vitam habeant* (Ibid. 10:10). It is for us that a Child is born; it is to us that a Son is given: *Puer natus est NOBIS et Filius datus est nobis* (Introit of the Mass of the day). In making us share in His condition of Son, He will make us children of God. "When the fulness of time was come, God sent His Son, made of a woman,... that we might receive the adoption of sons (Gal 4:4-5). "What Christ is by nature, that is to say the Son of God, we are to be by grace; the Incarnate Word, the Son of God made man is to become the author of our divine generation: *Natus hodie Salvator mundi DIVINAE NOBIS GENERATIONIS est auctor* (Postcommunion of the Mass of Christmas Day). So that, although He be the Only-begotten Son, He will become the First-born of many brethren: *UT sit IPSE PRIMOGENITUS in multis fratribus* (Rom 8:29).

Such are the two acts of the wonderful "bargain" that God makes with us: He takes our nature in order to communicate to us His divinity; He takes a human life so as to make us partakers of His divine life: He is made man so as to make us gods: *Factus est Deus homo, ut homo fieret Deus* (Sermon attributed to St. Augustine, number 128 in the appendix to his works). And His human Birth becomes the means of our birth to the divine life.

In us likewise there will be henceforth two lives. The one, natural, which we have by our birth according to the flesh, but which, in God's sight, is not only without merit but, before baptism, is stained in consequence of original sin; which makes us enemies of God, worthy of His wrath: we are born *filiis irae* (Eph 2:3). The other life, supernatural, infinitely above the rights and exigencies of our nature. It is this life that God communicates to us by His grace, since the Incarnate Word merited it for us.

God begets us to this life by His Word and the infusion of His Spirit, in the baptismal font: *Genuit nos Verbo veritatis* (Jac 1:18)... *Per lavacrum regenerationis et renovationis Spiritus Sancti* (Tit 3); it is a new life that is superadded to our natural life, surpassing and crowning it; *In Christo nova creatura* (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). It makes us children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, worthy of one day partaking of His beatitude and glory.

Of these two lives, in us as in Christ, it is the divine that ought to dominate, although in the Child Christ it is not as yet manifested, and in us it remains ever veiled under the outward appearance of our ordinary existence. It is the divine life of grace that ought to rule and govern, and make agreeable to our Lord, all our natural activity, thus deified in its root.

Oh! if the contemplation of the Birth of Jesus and participation in this mystery by the reception of the Bread of Life would bring us to free ourselves, once and for all, from everything that destroys and lessens the divine life within us; from

sin, wherefrom Christ comes to deliver us: *Cujus nativitas humanam repulit vetustatem* (Postcommunion for the Mass of Day-break); from all infidelity and all attachment to creatures; from the irregular care for passing things: *Abnegantes saecularia desideria* (Tit 2:12; Epistle for the midnight Mass); from the trying preoccupations of our vain self love!...

If we could thus be brought to give ourselves entirely to God, according to the promises of our baptism when we were born to the divine life; to yield ourselves up to the accomplishment of His will and good pleasure, as did the Incarnate Word in entering into this world: *Ecce venio... ut faciam Deus voluntatem tuam* (Heb 10:7); to abound in those good works which make us pleasing to God: *Populum acceptabilem, sectatorem bonorum operum* (Tit 2:14. Epistle for the midnight Mass.)!

Then the divine life brought to us by Jesus would meet with no more obstacles and would freely expand for the glory of our Heavenly Father; then “we who are bathed in the new light of the Incarnate Word should shew forth in our deeds what by faith shineth in our minds” (*Da nobis quaesumus omnipotens Deus; ut qui nova incarnati Verbi tui luce perfundimur, hoc in nostro resplendat opere, quod per fidem fulget in mente.* Collect for the Mass at Daybreak); then, “our offerings would befit the mysteries of this day’s Nativity”. *Munera nostra nativitatis hodiernae mysteriis apta proveniant* (Secret for the Mass at Day-break):

III

What further renders this exchange “admirable” is the manner in which it is effected, the form wherein it is accomplished. How is it accomplished? How does this Child, Who is the Incarnate Word, make us partakers of His divine life? By His Humanity. The humanity that the Word takes from us is to serve Him as the instrument for communicating His divine life to us; and this for two reasons wherein eternal wisdom infinitely shines out; the humanity renders God visible; it renders God passible.

It renders Him visible.

The Church, using the words of St. Paul, celebrates with delight this “appearing” of God amongst us: *Apparuit gratia Dei Salvatoris nostri omnibus hominibus* (Tit 2:11. Epistle for the midnight Mass): “The grace of God our Saviour hath appeared to all men” *Apparuit benignitas et humanitas Salvatoris nostri Dei* (Tit 3:4, Epistle for the Mass at Day-break). “The goodness and kindness of God our Saviour hath appeared.”

Lux fulgebit hodie super nos, quia natus est nobis Dominus (Introit of the Mass at Day-break): “a light shall shine upon us this day: for our Lord is born to us”; *Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis*: “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”

The Incarnate Word brings about this marvel: men have seen God Himself abiding in the midst of them.

St. John loves to dwell upon this side of the mystery. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life. For the life was manifested; and we have seen and do bear witness and declare unto you the Life Eternal which was with the Father, and hath appeared in us. That which we have seen and have heard, we declare unto you that... your joy may be full” (1 Jn 1:1-4).

What joy indeed, to see God manifesting Himself to us. not in the dazzling splendour of His omnipotence, nor in the unspeakable glory of His sovereignty, but under the veil of humble, poor, weak humanity, which we can see and touch!

We might have been afraid of the dreadful majesty of God: the Israelites fell on their faces to the ground, full of terror and fear, when God spoke to Moses upon Sinai, in the midst of lightnings. We are drawn by the charms of a God become a Babe. The Babe in the Crib seems to say to us: “You are afraid of God? You are wrong: *Qui videt me, videt et Patrem* (Jn 14:9). Do not heed your imagination, do not form yourselves a God from the deductions of philosophy, nor ask of science to make My perfections known to you. The true Almighty God is the God that I am and reveal; the true God is I Who come to you in poverty, humility and infancy, but Who will one day give My life for you. I am “the brightness of [the Father’s] glory, and the figure of His substance” (Heb 1:3). His Only-begotten Son, God as He is; in Me you shall learn to know His perfections, His wisdom and His goodness, His love towards men and His mercy in regard to sinners: *Illuxit in cordibus nostris... in facie Christi Jesu* (2 Cor 4:6). Come unto Me, for, God as I am, I have willed to be a man

like you, and I do not reject those who draw near to Me with confidence: *Sicut homo genitus IDEM refulsit et Deus.*”

Why did God thus deign to render Himself visible?

First of all so as to instruct us: *Apparuit erudiens nos*. It is indeed God Who will henceforth speak to us by His own Son: *Locutus est nobis in Filio* (Heb 1:2); we have but to listen to this beloved Son in order to know what God wills of us. The Heavenly Father Himself tells us so: *Hic est Filius meus dilectus: ipsum audite* (Mt 17:5); and Jesus delights in repeating to us that His doctrine is that of His Father: *Mea doctrina non est mea, sed ejus qui misit me* (Jn 7:16).

Next the Word renders Himself visible to our sight so as to become the Example that we are to follow.

We have only to watch this Child grow, only to contemplate Him living in the midst of us, living like us as man, in order to know how we ought to live in the sight of God, as children of God: for all that He does will be pleasing to His Father: *Quae placita sunt ei, facto semper* (Ibid. 7:29).

Being the Truth Who has come to teach us, He will point out the way by His example; if we live in His light, if we follow this way, we shall have life: *Ego sum via, et veritas et vita* (Ibid. 14:6). Thus, in knowing God manifested in the midst of us, we shall be drawn by Him to the love of invisible things: *Ut dum VISIBILITER Deum cognoscimus, PER HUNC in invisibilium amorem rapiamur* (Preface for Christmas).

IV

The humanity of Christ renders God visible, and above all—and it is in this that Divine Wisdom is shown to be “admirable”—it renders God passible.

Sin which destroyed the divine life within us demands a satisfaction, an expiation without which it would be impossible for divine life to be restored to us. Being a mere creature, man cannot give this satisfaction for an offence of infinite malice, and, on the other hand, the Divinity can neither suffer nor expiate. God cannot communicate His life to us unless sin be blotted out; by an immutable decree of Divine Wisdom, sin can only be blotted out if it be expiated in an adequate manner. How is this problem to be solved?

The Incarnation gives us the answer. Consider the Babe of Bethlehem. He is the Word made flesh. The humanity that the Word makes His own is passible; it is this humanity which will suffer, will expiate. These sufferings, these expiations will belong, however, to the Word, as this humanity itself does; they will take from the Divine Person an infinite value which will suffice to redeem the world, to destroy sin, to make grace superabound in souls like an impetuous and fructifying river: *Fluminus impetus laetificat civitatem Dei* (Ps 65:5).

O admirable exchange! Do not let us stay to wonder by what other means God might have brought it about, but let us contemplate the way wherein He has done so. The word asks of us a human nature to find in it wherewith to suffer, to expiate, to merit, to heap graces upon us. It is through the flesh that man turns away from God: it is in becoming flesh that God delivers man:

Beatus auctor saeculi Servile corpus induit Ut carne carnem liberans Ne perderet quos condidit (Hymn for Lauds at Christmas.)

The flesh that the Word of God takes upon Himself, is to become the instrument of salvation for all flesh. *O admirabile commercium!*

Doubtless, as you know, it was necessary to await the immolation of Calvary for the expiation to be complete; but, as St. Paul teaches us, it was from the first moment of His Incarnation that Christ accepted to accomplish His Father’s will and to offer Himself as Victim for the human race: *Ideo ingrediens mundum dicit: Hostiam et oblationem noluit: CORPUS autem aptasti mihi... Et tunc dixit: Ecce venio... ut faciam Deus voluntatem tuam* (Heb 10:5, 7. Cf. Ps 39:8). It is by this oblation that Christ begins to sanctify us: *In qua voluntate sanctificati sumus* (Heb 10:10).. It is from the Crib that He inaugurates this life of suffering such as He willed to live for our salvation, this life of which the term is at Golgotha, and that, in destroying sin, is to restore to us the friendship of His Father. The Crib is certainly only the first stage, but it radically contains all the others.

This is why, in the Christmas solemnities, the Church attributes our salvation to the temporal Birth itself of the Son of God. “Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new Birth of Thine Only-begotten Son in the flesh may deliver us

who are held captive by the old bondage under the yoke of sin” (*Concede quaesumus, omnipotens Deus, ut nos Unigeniti tui nova per carnem nativitas liberet, quos sub peccati jugo vetuita servitus tenet.* Collect for the Mass of Christmas Day.). This is why, from that moment, “deliverance, redemption, salvation, eternal life,” will be spoken of constantly. It is by His Humanity that Christ, High Priest and Mediator, binds us to God; but it is at Bethlehem that He appears to us in this Humanity.

See, too, how from the moment of His Birth, He fulfils His mission.

What is it that causes us to lose divine life?

It is pride. Because they believed that they would be like unto God, having the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve lost, for themselves and for their race, the friendship of God. Christ, the new Adam, redeems us, brings us back to God, by the humility of His Incarnation. Although He was God, He annihilated in taking the condition of the creature, in making Himself like unto men; He manifested Himself as man according to all appearances (Phil 2:6-7).. What a humiliation was that! Later, it is true, the Church will exalt to the highest heavens His dazzling glory as the conqueror over sin and death; but now, Christ knows only self-abasement and weakness. When our gaze rests upon this little Child, Who is in no way distinguished from others, when we think that He is God, and that in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge, we feel our souls deeply moved, and our vain pride is confounded in the face of such abasement.

And what besides pride? Our refusal to obey. See what an example of wonderful obedience the Son of God gives. With the simplicity of little children, He yields Himself up into the hands of His parents; He allows Himself to be touched, taken up and carried about; and all His Childhood, all His Boyhood and Youth are summed up in the Gospel in these few words which tell how He was subject to Mary and Joseph: *Et erat subditus illis* (Cf. Lk 2:51).

And next there is our covetousness “the concupiscence of the eyes” (1 Jn 2:16), all that appears, glitters, fascinates and seduces; the essential inanity of the passing trifles that we prefer to God. The Word is made flesh; but He is born in poverty and abjection. *Propter nos egenus factus est cum esset dives* (2 Cor 8:9). “Being rich, He became poor.” Although He is “the King of ages” (1 Tim 1:17), although He is the One Who drew all creation out of nothing by a word, and has only to open His hand to fill “with blessing every living creature” (Ps 144:16), He is not born in a palace; His Mother, finding no room in the inn, had to take refuge in a stable cave: the Son of God, Eternal Wisdom, willed to be born in destitution and laid upon straw.

If with faith and love we contemplate the Child Jesus in His Crib, we shall find in Him the Divine Example of many virtues; if we know how to lend the ear of our hearts to what He says to us, we shall learn many things; if we reflect upon the circumstances of His Birth, we shall see how the Humanity serves the Word as the instrument to instruct us, but likewise to raise us, to quicken us, to make us pleasing to His Father, to detach us from passing things, to lift us up even to Himself.

“Divinity is clad in our mortal flesh... and because God humbles Himself to live a human life, man is raised towards divine things”: *Dum divinitas defectum nostrae carnes suscepit, humanum genus lumen, quod amiserat, recepit. Unde enim Deus humana patitur, inde homo ad divina sublevatur* (S. Gregor. Homil. I, in Evangel.)

V

Thus from whatever side our faith contemplates this exchange, and whatever be the details of it that we examine, it appears admirable to us.

Is not this child-bearing of a virgin indeed admirable: *Natus ineffabiliter ex virgine?* (Antiphon for the Octave of Christmas).

“A young Maiden has brought forth the King Whose name is Eternal: to the honour of virginity she unites the joys of motherhood; before her, the like was never seen, nor shall it ever be so again” (*Genuit puerpera regem, cui nomen aeternum, et gaudia matris habens cum virginitatis honore, nec primam similem visa est, nec habere sequentem.* Antiphon for Lauds at Christmas.) “Daughters of Jerusalem, why do you admire me? This mystery that you behold in me is truly divine” (*Filiae Jerusalem, quid me admiramini? Divinum est mysterium hoc quod cernitis.* Antiphon for the Feast of the

Expectatio partus virginis, Dec. 18).

Admirable is this indissoluble union, that is yet without confusion, of the divinity with the humanity in the one Person of the Word: *Mirabile mysterium: innovantur naturae*. Admirable is this exchange, by the contrasts of its realisation: God gives us a share in His divinity, but the humanity that He takes from us in order to communicate His divine life to us is a suffering humanity, “acquainted with infirmity,” *homo sciens infirmitatem* (Is 53:3), that will undergo death and, by death, will restore life to us.

Admirable is this exchange in its source which is none other than God’s infinite love for us. *Sic Deus dilexit mundum, ut Filium suum Unigenitum daret* (Jn 3:16). “God so loved the world as to give His Only-begotten Son.” Let us, then, yield up our souls to joy and sing with the Church: *Parvulus natus est nobis et filius DATUS est NOBIS*. And how is He given? “In the likeness of sinful flesh.” This is why the love that thus gives Him to us in our passible humanity, in order to expiate sin, is a measureless love:

Propter NIMIAM caritatem suam, qua dilexit nos Deus, misit Filium suum in similitudinem carnis peccati (Antiphon for the Octave of Christmas).

Admirable, finally, in its fruits and effects. By this exchange, God again gives us His friendship, He restores to us the right of entering into possession of the eternal inheritance; He looks anew upon humanity with love and complacency.

Therefore, joy is one of the most marked characteristics of the celebration of this mystery. The Church constantly invites us to it, remembering the words of the angel to the shepherds: “Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy... for this day is born to you a Saviour” (Lk 2:10-11). It is the joy of deliverance, of the inheritance regained, of peace found once again, and, above all, of the vision of God Himself given to men: *Et vocabitur nomen ejus Emmanuel* (Is 7:14; cf. Mt 1:23).

But this joy will only be assured if we remain firm in the grace that comes to us from the Saviour and makes us His brethren. “O Christian”, exclaims St. Leo, in a sermon that the Church reads during this holy night, “recognise thy dignity: *Agnosce, O Christiane, dignitatem tuam*. And made a partaker of the divinity, take care not to fall back from so sublime a state” (Sermo I de Nativitate).

“If thou didst know the gift of God” (Jn 4:10), said our Lord Himself. If thou didst know all that this Son is Who is given to thee! If, above all, we were to receive Him as we ought to receive Him! Let it not be said of us: *In propria venit, et sui eum non receperunt* (Gospel for the Mass on Christmas Day). “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” By our creation, all of us are “His own”; we belong to God; but there are some who have not received Him upon this earth. How many Jews, how many pagans have rejected Christ, because He has appeared in the humility of passible flesh! Souls sunk in the darkness of pride and sensuality: *Lux in tenebris lucet, et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt*.

And how ought we to receive Him ? By faith: *His qui credunt in nomine ejus*. It is to those who—believing in His Person, in His word, in His works,—have received this Child as God, that it has been given, in return, to become themselves children of God: *Ex Deo nati sunt*.

Such is, in fact, the fundamental disposition that we must have so that this “admirable exchange” may produce in us all its fruits. Faith alone teaches us how it is brought about; wherein it is realised; faith alone gives us a true knowledge of it and one worthy of God.

For there are many modes and degrees of knowledge.

“The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his Master’s Crib,” wrote Isaias, in speaking of this mystery (Is 1:3). They saw the Child lying in the crib. But what could they see? As much as an animal could see: the form, the size, the colour, the movement,—an entirely rudimentary knowledge that does not pass the boundary line of sensation. Nothing more.

The passers-by, the curious, who approached the stable-cave saw the Child; but for them He was like all others. They did not go beyond this purely natural knowledge. Perhaps they were struck by the Child’s loveliness. Perhaps they pitied His destitution. But this feeling did not last and was soon replaced by indifference.

There were the Shepherds, simple-hearted men, enlightened by a ray from on high: *Claritas Dei circumfulsit illos* (Lk 2:9), They certainly understood more; they recognised in this Child the promised Messiah, long awaited, the *Excitatio*

gentium (Gen 49:10); they paid Him their homage, and their souls were for a long time full of joy and peace.

The Angels likewise contemplated the New-born Babe, the Word made Flesh. They saw in Him their God; this knowledge threw these pure spirits into awe and wonderment at such incomprehensible self-abasement: for it was not to their nature that He willed to unite Himself: *Nusquam angelos, but to human nature, sed semen Abrahae apprehendit* (Heb 2:16).

What shall we say of the Blessed Virgin when she looked upon Jesus? Into what depths of the mystery did her gaze penetrate—that gaze so pure, so humble, so tender, so full of bliss? Who shall be able to express with what lights the soul of Jesus inundated His Mother, and what perfect homage Mary rendered to her Son, to her God, to all the states and all the mysteries whereof the Incarnation is the substance and the root.

There is finally—but this is beyond description—the gaze of the Father contemplating His Son made flesh for mankind. The Heavenly Father saw that which never man, nor angel, nor Mary herself could comprehend: the infinite perfections of the Divinity hidden in a Babe... And this contemplation was the source of unspeakable rapture: Thou art My Son, My beloved Son, the Son of My direction in Whom I have placed all My delights (Mk 1:2; Lk 3:22)...

When we contemplate the Incarnate Word at Bethlehem, let us rise above the things of sense so as to gaze upon Him with the eyes of faith alone. Faith makes us share here below in the knowledge that the Divine Persons have of One Another. There is no exaggeration in this. Sanctifying grace makes us indeed partakers of the divine nature. Now, the activity of the divine nature consists in the knowledge that the Divine Persons have the One of the Other, and the love that they have One for the Other. We participate therefore in this knowledge and in this love. And in the same way as sanctifying grace having its fruition in glory will give us the right of seeing God as He sees Himself, so, upon earth, in the shadows of faith, grace enables us to behold deep down into these mysteries through the eyes of God: *Lux tuae claritatis infulsit* (Preface for Christmas).

When our faith is intense and perfect, we do not stay to look only at the outside of the mystery, but we go deeply into it; we pass through the Humanity to penetrate as far as the Godhead which the Humanity at the same time hides and reveals; we behold divine mysteries in the divine light.

And ravished, astounded at such prodigious abasement, the soul, vivified by this faith, falls prostrate in adoration and yields herself up entirely to procure the glory of a God Who, from love for His creature, thus veils the native splendour of His unfathomable perfections. She can never rest until she has given all, in return, to fill up her part in the exchange that He desires to contract with her, until she has brought herself wholly into subjection to this “King of Peace Who comes with so much magnificence” (Antiphon at Vespers on Christmas Day) to save, sanctify and, as it were, to deify her.

Let us then draw near to the Child God with great faith. We may wish to have been at Bethlehem to receive Him. Yet He is here giving Himself to us in Holy Communion with as much reality although our senses are less able to find Him. In the Tabernacle as in the Crib, it is the same God full of power, the same Saviour full of tender mercy.

If we will have it so, the admirable exchange still continues. For it is likewise through His Humanity that Christ infuses divine life into us at the Holy Table. It is in eating His Flesh and drinking His Blood, in uniting ourselves to His Humanity, that we draw at the very wellspring of everlasting life: *Qui manducat meam carnem, et bibit meum sanguinem, habet vitam aeternam* (Jn 6:55)...

Thus, each day, the union established between man and God in the Incarnation, is continued and made closer. In giving Himself in Communion, Christ increases the life of grace in the generous and faithful soul, making this life develop more freely and expand with more strength; He even bestows upon such a soul the pledge of that blessed immortality of which grace is the germ and whereby God will communicate Himself to us fully and unveiled: *Ut natus hodie Salvator mundi, sicut divinae nobis generationis est auctor, ita et immortalitatis sit IPSE largitor* (Postcommunion of Christmas Day).

This will be the consummation, magnificent and glorious, of the exchange inaugurated at Bethlehem in the poverty and humiliations of the Crib.
