

After some last-minute Christmas shopping, a woman was rushing her grandchildren into the car. It was then that 4-year-old Jason said, "Grandma, Susie has something in her pocket." He then proceeded to reach into Susie's pocket and pulled out a new red barrette. Though she was tired, this grandmother knew it was important for Susie to put the item back where she had taken it. They did just that. Then they headed to the grocery store. Later at the checkout, the clerk asked, "Have you kids been good so Santa will come?" "I've been very good," replied Jason, "but my sister just robbed a store." Hope you've all done better than that!

This is the coldest Christmas I've experienced since I moved to North Carolina 37 years ago. Fr. Oschwald sent me a note that says "If you've ever said 'I'll do that when hell freezes over, you're scheduled to do that now.'"

First, where we are in America with Christmas. From time to time we get a glimpse of an advertising campaign that shows a picture of Jesus and Santa Claus. The lettering underneath reads: "Whose birthday is it, anyway?"

But I don't think the angle of entry into the feast of Christmas must be phrased in this either-or way. Yes, it is Jesus' birthday. But that does not mean we banish Santa Claus. Of course Christmas is one of our premier Christian feasts – but it is also a cultural feast – which means that it is an exercise in the relationship between faith and culture. I do not believe that the most creative pastoral strategies involve denunciation of the culture and separation of the faith. The Church has a long history of baptizing pagan things and incorporating them. Christmas is a classic example. What was once the Roman, pagan, December feast of Saturnalia – celebrating the shortest day of the year and the beginning of the return of the light in the sun, the Church chose to celebrate as the coming of the ONE WHO IS LIGHT, and fixed the birth of Christ just a few days after on the 25th; we don't know really WHEN Christ was born. There's a lot of water in our country – and we can forever be re-baptizing Christmas! Vatican II spoke of the church as being in dialogue with the culture. Christmas gives us a chance to have a very lively discussion! We just have to face it – Christmas is a hodgepodge of faith, tradition, and culture, and there's nothing wrong with that. (adapted from John Shea, CHURCH, Winter '92, p. 64)

And so a few years ago the cartoon strip FAMILY CIRCUS showed what happens so often to Christmas. It pictured a little girl holding her baby brother in her lap and telling him the story of Christmas. Here is how her account read: "Jesus was born just in time for Christmas, up at the North Pole, surrounded by tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary. Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff and some swaddling clothes. The three wise men and elves all sang carols while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree. In the meantime, Frosty the Snowman saw this star...." (Author not specified, in DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2007)

This is the freewheeling character of the feast of Christmas. It usually asserts itself when we attempt to organize Christmas. All of us, at one time or another, have tried to plot the flow of Christmas, got everything perfectly in place – and then have come down with the flu – or COVID. The message, which we never quite seem to get, is that the spirit of Christmas does not submit to control. It is a sled gathering speed down a steep hill. It is best to enjoy the ride, but not to oversteer. The feast gives itself to those willing to indulge in a 4-hour meal, to luxuriate in a labyrinthine story, to rummage through an attic of ideas, to turn an image like a diamond and marvel at each slant of light. Christmas is best when we relax and let it happen beyond our expectations. Christmas brings together Bible, tradition, experience, culture, reason, memories, and imagination, but not in a systematic way. Each element makes a surprise appearance, says more than was

in the script, and then wanders off stage. Undoubtedly, this is because when it comes to Christmas, our minds have become 'drunken monkey,' as Buddhist thought so picturesquely puts it. Let's face it -- Christmas is so much fun because it's a mighty mess. The babe in the manger is essential – but I'm sure Christ doesn't mind the presence of Rudolph, the Little Drummer Boy, Buddy the Elf, and old St. Nick. (adapted from STARLIGHT, John Shea, p. 15)

Second, what's the message? INCARNATION. That God-became-flesh. That God became one of us. That the almighty descended, came among us, took off divinity and stuffed it into our human flesh. C.S. Lewis once said if you want to get the hang of it, think about YOU becoming a SLUG or a CRAB. (People have told me I already am a crab – so do they mean that I'm becoming more Christ-like?! Naaaa....)

So this baby in the manger is God become human. Which means that if Jesus is fully divine, fully God, then all other definitions of God are rendered false because we like to think of God as being, well, God – and nothing else! Certainly not human. And second, if Jesus is fully human, then all other definitions of true humanity are also false, because we do not want to burden ourselves with the knowledge that we could be better than we are.

This is a problem in a world in which, from the very beginning, people have tended to manufacture their own gods and where people have tended to see being human as a limited and undesirable thing. We tend to like our gods to be 'spiritual' and consign them to a distant sort of heaven where we can keep them at arm's length and not have them interfere with us very much, and we tend to hold up our humanity as a default excuse for our brokenness and sin. After all, we're 'only human,' we protest.

In Jesus, however, we learn that God is not unknowable, distant and unconcerned with human affairs. We learn that the God who created the heavens and the earth is intimately involved in creation to the point of coming to walk among people in person. A God who become human is a God who must be reckoned with, and that makes this baby dangerous to the way the world normally works. We cannot consign Him to heaven because He has come to earth. We cannot push Him aside as a figment of our imagination, because He has come with a human face.

He is a God who has entered fully into the human mess, living in poverty, living as a refugee and living with people who have major issues. When He lived among us, He associated with outcasts and gave help to the poor, the sick and the broken. He cared about immigrants and strangers. He didn't care that much about money, sex, or power.

He is a God who calls us to follow Him, to be like Him and do as He does. He is a God who has come not only to live with but to die for the people He created.

The people of Jesus' own day couldn't wrap their heads around this sort of God who was also human and who deigned to come down off Olympus and live as a mortal. The world continues to struggle with this concept. Better to have a God we can control and keep out of the public square and our politics and tax laws and how we are NOT caring for creation than one who enters our mess and gets personal. Jesus revealed what it means to be fully human and, at the same time, fully indwelt and one with the Divine. He isn't merely a perfect icon to admire but an example to follow in how to fully engage our capacity for relationship with God. (adapted from HOMILETICS, Nov-Dec 2017, p. 64-65)

Third, how do we practice an incarnational life, a life-like-the-Christ-who-is-fully divine-and-fully-human? If we want to teach a child how to do a somersault, we don't sit on the patio and read from a book with step-by-step instructions on how to crouch, lean and roll. We get down in the grass and show them. This

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is how God acted among us. God's means of modeling grace and truth and goodness to the world was to come and live it out before us. The God who has become incarnate in human flesh is found, first and foremost, not in meditation and monasteries, albeit God is found there, but in our homes. As Nikos Kazantzakis puts it: "Wherever you find husband and wife, that's where you find God; wherever children and petty cares and cooking and arguments and reconciliation are, that is where God is too." The God of the incarnation is more domestic than monastic.

"God is love and whoever abides in love abides in God." When scripture affirms this, the love of which it speaks is not so much romantic love as it is the flow of life within a family. God is not 'falling in love,' but failing as a family, in our shared existence. The God of the incarnation lives in a family, a Trinity, a community of shared existence. Hence, to say that God is love is to say that God is community, family, shared existence, and whoever shares his or her existence inside of family and community experiences God and has the very life of God flow through her or him.

If this is true, and it is, then a lot changes in how we should seek to experience God. If God is incarnate in ordinary life, then we should seek God, first of all, within ordinary life. Too often, even though we know this theoretically, practically we still look for God in the extraordinary. For example, why do we go on pilgrimages to holy places and not instead sit barefoot and feel the holiness of the soil of our backyard? Why do we go to places like Lourdes and Fatima, to see where the Blessed Virgin might have cried, but not notice the tears in the eyes of the person sitting across the family table? Why are we all enthralled by a person like Padre Pio, who carried the wounds of Jesus in his hands and feet, and blind to the wounds of Christ in the face of the emotionally needy person we so much try to avoid? There is nothing wrong with pilgrimages, Marian shrines, and Padre Pio, but it is not through them that God says the most important things to us. A friend of mine shares how he used to golf regularly with a very sincere and enthusiastic, evangelical Christian who was always praying that God might give him a vision. One day my friend said to him, "Do you want to see a vision? Get up tomorrow and watch the sun rise. That's as good as God does!"

That is an incarnational perspective. The God who is love and family, who was born in a barn, is a God who is found, first of all, in our homes, in our families, at our tables, in sunrises, in our joys, and in our arguments. To be involved in the normal flow of life, giving and receiving, as flawed and painful as this might be at times within any relationship, is to have the life of God flow through us.

Christian, incarnational spirituality is not as much about admiring God, or even trying to imitate God, as it is about undergoing God and participating, through taking part in the ordinary give and take of relationships, in the flow of God's life. The God who became flesh in order to be experienced by the ordinary senses, still has flesh and is primarily to be experienced through the ordinary senses. (adapted from THE HOLY LONGING, Rolheiser, p. 100-101) And God is incarnated in our laughter. As Anne Lamott says "Laughter is carbonated holiness." So one last story. Shortly before Christmas, a business man was anxious to get home. The business trip had been grueling and he was not in a good mood. The airport loudspeakers blared Christmas carols he was sick of hearing. He thought the decorations were tacky. The worst decoration, he thought, was the plastic mistletoe hung over the luggage scale. Being in a grumpy mood, he said to the woman at the counter, "You know, even if I weren't married, I wouldn't kiss you." "That's not what it's there for," said the attendant. "It's so you can kiss your luggage goodbye." (LECTIONAID, Donald D. Denton, Dec 2015-Feb 2016, p. 60)

HODIE CHRISTUS NATUS EST! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! TODAY CHRIST IS BORN! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!
HODIE SALVATOR APPARUIT! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! TODAY THE SAVIOR HAS APPEARED! ALLELUIA!
ALLELUIA!