

+ MIDNIGHT MASS

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey

December 25, 2020

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit Amen.

*But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart.*¹

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very dear sons,

So deep is the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, that even the trivial and seemingly secondary elements of the narrative become larger than life on this night, whether it is the mention of a feed trough, a manger, of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, or of some swaddling clothes for a baby. Amid this wonderland of marvelous things (that is to say of trivial things become wonders) there is a need not to miss the central point of it all, the great revelation to which all the rest is pointing. Christmas is, perhaps, the best time of year to exercise that most excellent faculty of the human soul, one too often neglected, what we call the act of contemplation. Why don't we pause for just a moment to consider the contemplation that went on when Christ was born, in and around the Manger of Bethlehem? Surely, we will not be wasting our time. In fact, if we are able to escape for just a moment our more humdrum thoughts, we might actually be able to leave time behind us.

As unlikely as it might seem at first glance, it *is*, in fact, possible to know what the Son of God Himself, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity was thinking—what he was contemplating—when He arrived in the world: the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reveals it to us in prophetic terms:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sin offerings You took no delight. Then I said, ‘Here I am, it is written about Me in the scroll: I have come to do Your will, O God.’”²

It is quite impossible fully to understand the experience of the Baby Jesus in his Crib, but many spiritual authors claim that, owing to the fact that He is a Divine Person, and since His humanity was most perfect, He had, from the very beginning, unlike other infants, a certain rational awareness of what was happening. We can only wonder what exactly He thought, as He looked around at those who came to visit Him, whether it was the shepherds or the Ox and the Donkey.

With the Mother of God, Our Lady, we are fortunate again, as the holy evangelist, Saint Luke, presents us with the key that opens for us Mary's contemplation before her newborn Child, at the moment of the Nativity, as the shepherds and others crowded around in wonder. The evangelist tells us, in brief but poignant terms, “But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart.”³ In Hebrew, as the scholars tell us, “word” does not mean simply the spoken or written expression of a thought, it also means the event. Thus, we understand how Our Lady was there in intense contemplation, treasuring alike the events and the words heard on this most holy of nights.

¹ Luke 2:19.

² Hebrews 10:5-7.

³ Luke 2:19.

High above the surrounding fields (so to speak), the holy angels, for once, let the earth in on what they were singing and therefore what was the subject of their contemplation. “Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will.”⁴ They are the high contemplatives of Creation, and this was an occasion so solemn that they could not refrain from bursting out in song, even within the hearing of mortal men.

The contemplation of Saint Joseph is harder to discern. Surely, as this famous dreamer gazed upon the newborn Child, whose mystery he fathomed more than the others around the Crib (saving Our Lady), he continued in thought along the lines of his solemn duties as protector of the Holy Family, not allowing himself to stray too far into theoretical considerations. The Sovereign Pontiff, in his recent Apostolic Letter, *Patris Corde*, of last December 8th, speaking of Joseph’s “nobility of heart,” gives us some insights into the exalted contemplation of this simple and practical man:

Joseph set aside his own ideas in order to accept the course of events and, mysterious as they seemed, to embrace them, take responsibility for them and make them part of his own history. ... The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that *explains*, but *accepts*. Only as a result of this acceptance, this reconciliation, can we begin to glimpse a broader history, a deeper meaning. ... The faith Christ taught us is what we see in Saint Joseph. He did not look for shortcuts, but confronted reality with open eyes and accepted personal responsibility for it.⁵

The shepherds were surely not contemplatives in the ordinary sense of leading a life given to contemplative leisure. But they became great contemplatives when Christ was born. After gazing upon the angel who appeared to them to proclaim the good tidings, they went “with haste” to see the Child, as the evangelist tells us, implying their immense joy and anticipation. Even greater was their spiritual joy upon leaving the stable, and they left with sentiments similar to what we know about the angels of that Holy Night, “glorifying and praising God, for all the things they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”⁶

The ox and the donkey that we like to picture at the Manger—following the text of the royal prophet Isaiah, “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib”⁷—could not have contemplated anything in the proper sense, being but dumb animals. Still, as the star of Bethlehem bears witness, even nature sensed in a way the coming of the Messiah. And so, our poetic intuition about the awe-struck gaze of these two furry beasts, gazing upon the Child, is not entirely without merit.

But the night continues its course and so we must conclude, even though we have hardly broached the subject of contemplation around the Crib. I have not even mentioned the wisemen *en route* from the East, following the star to adore the Christ Child. But that consideration will have to wait for the luminous continuation of Christmas in the great feast of the Epiphany. Let us each one now return into his or her own contemplation of this fathomless mystery of Christmas, while the starlit darkness of Christmas Night is still upon us. Amen.

⁴ Luke 2:14.

⁵ Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*, Dec. 8, 2020, number 4.

⁶ Luke 2:16, 20.

⁷ Isaiah 1:3.