

The Manger and the Cross The Real Meaning of Christmas

While Jesus' nativity has lost much of its religious significance for American culture, even the Christmas remnant has found itself under a fierce assault that ranks as one of the most vitriolic skirmishes in the culture war. Defenders of the traditional Christmas such as Bill O'Reilly and John Gibson have found themselves personally rebuked for attempting to preserve such a conventional American tradition.

AN UNCOMMON ERROR

Along with the frontal assault on public Christmas displays, there is a concerted effort to remove any quotidian mention of Christ's birth or life. According to these revisionists, Jesus' existence must be expunged from the historical record. One means to their end is changing the standard nomenclature of BC and AD to BCE and ACE, that is from Before Christ and Anno Domino, (the Year of the Lord) to the utterly ambiguous Before the Common Era and After the Common Era.

According to Catholic essayist Frank Sheed's 1962 book, *To Know Christ Jesus*, the BC and AD distinctions date back to a 6th century monk, Dionysius Exiguus. Two centuries later England adopted the distinctions. Rome followed 200 years later. Dionysius estimated the birth of Christ in the year 753 after the founding of *Old Rome*, but his was not an accurate measurement. He overlooked the fact that Herod had died in 750 or 4 BC. Since Jesus was born during Herod's reign his birth could have been as early as 8 BC.

During the French Revolution the Jacobins recognized that the temporal importance of Christ's *First Advent* had been written into the system for recording time. In their unwavering effort to create a godless society, they rewrote the calendar. According to Harold J. Brown's book, *The Sensate Culture, the division of history into BC and AD prevails almost everywhere in the world*. Black's Law Dictionary states that the computation of time according to the Christian era dates from the birth of Christ. Since early Christian times this has been used, particularly in legal documents to distinguish time from the birth

of Christ.

Like their French forbears, secular humanists have been determined to remove all Christian-based distinction from the American culture. To them Jesus should be a non-person, much like the posthumous fate that befell Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union. Most history and textbooks and even some Catholic texts, have already adopted the new terminology as part of this Marxist-inspired movement.

RUSTY GATES

Revisionist historians can deconstruct the birth of Christ all they want. It is still the most memorable event in world history and will never disappear. As historian Anne Carroll puts it Jesus is *Christ the King: Lord of History*. The Son of God chose to enter the world on a silent night, through the back door of history in the tiny hamlet of Bethlehem. His incarnational birth was the supernatural union of God and Man, which makes God both human and personal. His human nature was derived from a miraculous conception by Mary, in which the Divine overshadowing of the Spirit and the human *Fiat* of a woman were beautifully blended into a mystical union that still reverberates throughout all human history.

Through the Virgin Birth, Jesus Christ became an operative in human history without being personally subject to its evil. It is truly the *greatest story ever told*. He is *Emmanuel*, which is Greek for *God with us*. Taken with the name *Jesus*, His Incarnation assumed the deeper meaning of a *Divine presence, which delivers and saves*. All of His words, pains, sufferings, and thoughts, while properly human, were at the same time those of the Son of God.

Jesus was also the *Logos*, who became man to live and die for the sins of the world. Greek philosophers always held that *Logos* was an abstraction. Unlike the words of man, which will wither and die like flowers, the Word of God became *Personal* and will last for eternity.

The late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen points out in his 1958

classic *Life of Christ* that Jesus was the only real figure whose birth was announced several centuries in advance. Since His birth was *the focal point of salvation history*, it has been called *the most important moment in history*. Pope Benedict XVI states in his book *God and the World* that in the history of religions, Christ's *connection with real history is among the most distinctive features of the Christian faith*. Jesus is the *Word made Flesh*. Without the Incarnation, there would have been no salvific history. The Rusty Gates of Heaven would have been locked for eternity.

THE INFANCY NARRATIVES

The story of Christ's birth is told in the first few chapters of Luke and Matthew, known as the *Infancy Narratives*. These narratives are often attacked as *mere picturesque stories or legends*. But the *Catholic Encyclopedia* lists a convincing bibliography of both secular and religious sources that authenticate Christ's birth.

Caesar Augustus, *the master bookkeeper of the world*, sat in his palace by the Tiber River. Before him stretched a map labeled *Orbis terrarum, Imperium Romanum*. Because Rome was the world's capital and Latin its official language, he recognized the need for an imperial census. Every Roman citizen had to register in the town of his family's origin. Joseph, who was a carpenter, was a distant descendant of King David and was therefore required to register in Bethlehem, the City of David.

As a result of Caesar's order, Joseph took his pregnant wife on a four-day journey to Bethlehem, a peaceful town of about 1,000 inhabitants. Bethlehem enjoyed a glorious past, having given nurture to such Old Testament figures as Rachel, Ruth, and King David. It had been 500 years since the prophet Micheas had prophesied that from Bethlehem, the land of Judea, a leader will come *to be shepherd to my people Israel*. Unwittingly, Augustus had co-operated with God's will in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

The House of David had declined over the centuries because the Roman Emperor Domitian had ordered the destruction of David's lineage for fear of a revolt against Roman rule. Only David's poor or downtrodden descendants had been spared. Many speculate that Domitian must have known about the prophecies concerning the Jews, their Messiah, and the House of David. It is not known if Mary was also from the House of David but it is usually assumed she was. As Joseph's adopted son, it did not matter what Mary's origins were. The prophecies were intact.

Since Bethlehem was over-crowded because of the census, Joseph was directed to a cave that served as a stable in a hillside where shepherds sometime took their flocks in time of storms. In the virtual isolation and the lonely abandonment of a cave the Son of Man was born. As a footnote, the exact spot was shown to

visitors to Bethlehem as early as 155 AD. Bethlehem and it became a Christian town almost immediately after the Ascension. It is still Christian today.

SCHOLARS OF THE SKY

There has been some confusion over the Magi. One thing is certain, the Magi were not *kings*. It was a term that was generally used for men of learning, such as students of the stars, maybe even astronomers. These *scholars of the sky* were not magicians, but serious philosophers. They were from the East, which could have meant Arabia or Persia, where they were referred to as Wise Men who studied the heavens. Because Jews lived in the Persian Empire, the Wise Men were certainly aware of the prophecies about the Messiah and would have come to Jerusalem to find Him. In fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, these Gentiles *came to Him from the ends of the earth*.

They had seen a star from which they concluded that one had been born who was the *King of the Jews*. They went to Jerusalem, led not by the star but because they reasoned that is where the King of Jews would be. The arrival of three Gentiles caused a commotion in Jerusalem. They visited King Herod to explain their mission. He bid them to report back to him because he was anxious to worship the child. The star which disappeared while they were with Herod suddenly re-appeared, leading them directly to the place where the Child had been born.

Upon seeing the newborn, they immediately fell to their knees and worshiped Him. According to Bishop Sheen, their gifts each had a special significance. The gold represented His kingship, incense His Divinity, and myrrh His humanity. Their visit not only brought great joy to the Holy family but also warning of Herod's sinister inquiries. To Herod's chagrin the Wise Men returned to the East by an alternate route as Joseph gathered up his wife and baby and fled to Egypt.

Most Christian art depicts three Wise Men, though the Gospels do not number or name them. The Latin tradition of the 7th century identified them as *Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasaar*. In his *Life of Christ* Bishop Sheen states *though coming from a land that worshiped stars, they surrendered that religion as they fell down and worshiped Him who made the stars*.

HEROD'S PARANOIA

Herod, whose name means *descended from heroes*, was not a real Jew. Since his mother was an Arab and his father an Idumean, the Messiah meant nothing to him. While he built the Great Temple in Jerusalem, he also built temples to all the gods, even Roman ones. In Palestine he was a tyrant but to Rome he was a courtier, who served at the pleasure of Caesar.

Herod was visibly shaken by the rumors of the birth of the Messiah in fulfillment of the prophecies, just five miles from his palace. So great was his fear of a rival that he ordered the slaughter of all male babies in his kingdom two years and under. He hoped to stifle all rumors at birth so that no power could ever threaten his tenuous hold on his kingship. Such an atrocity as the willful *slaughter of the innocents* was consistent with Herod's high degree of paranoia, which had first manifested itself with his execution of his own sons to prevent them from prematurely taking his crown. It was also a harbinger of what was in store for Christ's followers.

All of Herod's anxiety was for naught. The salvation Jesus promised was not an earthly one. His was a heavenly promise, wrapped in love and the forgiveness of sin. He was not going to save people from poverty or oppression but from their personal sins. Since the Jews had been enslaved under Roman rule for a long time, they wrongly assumed that their Messiah would deliver them from the yoke of Roman rule. The modern world is no better. With its sense of collective guilt, it has thoroughly rejected Jesus' moral theology and His forgiveness of sins.

CALVARY'S INSCAPE

To Pope Benedict XVI, Bethlehem was *the decisive breakthrough in world history, leading toward the uniting of creatures with God*. Christ's birth, death, and resurrection served as a watershed that separated an unredeemed world from its heavenly destiny in the history of salvation. Humanity was born anew. The fallen race of man had been redeemed and united with the Eternal Word in a mystical union that still continues through the Catholic Church. But Bethlehem had an even greater significance.

Jesus' modest beginnings heralded His pending death. His birth foretold of His coming crucifixion. Bethlehem is mysteriously and cosmically linked with Calvary. The tiny manger in the stable led directly to His crucifixion on Calvary. Like the *Sword of Damocles*, Christ's cross cast a dark shadow on His nativity. Jesus was the only man in history who was born, not to live, but to die.

As the Messiah, Jesus was not what they had expected. Bishop Sheen notes that the only two classes of people who found the Babe were shepherds and the Wise Men. Only the humble of heart can find Christ. The proud will never see Him. As His redemptive destiny, Jesus had to accept the humbleness of the manger because there was no room in the Inn. He had to accept the humility of the cross because men did not have any room in their hearts for Him. As author Caryl Houselander wrote *Bethlehem is the inscape of Calvary, just as the snowflake is the inscape of the universe*.

In its own subliminal way Hollywood has also recognized the relationship of Bethlehem and Calvary. Because of the box office success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, Hollywood released *The Nativity Story* in November. The movie is a testament to the fact that Hollywood recognizes religious subjects as a part of mainstream entertainment.

A LINGERING ECHO

Pope Benedict also believes that Jesus' life and sacrifice on the cross serve as a great model for His followers. He referred to His many saints, such as Therese of Lisieux, Saint Don Bosco, Edith Stein, Paul, St. Thomas Aquinas, who all learned from Jesus how to be human.

The Pope also reminds Christians that salvation has no legalistic formula where one only has to obey some rules. Salvation has been entrusted to free will, which has been rendered vulnerable to the individual fragility of human freedom. The promise of Jesus is not a warm and fuzzy comfort that might appeal to 21st century Americans but a two-edged sword that brings division, persecution, and even martyrdom.

While Jesus' message has nothing to do with banality and comfort, it does bring an inner peace that eases the human burden. This is a peace that cannot be negotiated at a table. It is a *peace of soul* that emanates from the model of Christ but not without physical or moral struggle. *Without Me you can do nothing*, means that we cannot bear the burdens of life and death, pain and suffering without bowing our knee to Him and asking for His love, protection and assistance. Like Bishop Sheen, Pope Benedict recognizes that this uneasiness in the soul of man is at the heart of the culture war.

The Pope is also disheartened that today's Christmas celebrations have nearly stripped His salvific message from Christmas and reduced it to a secular festival *like a rocket that thrusts the first stage away from itself as it reaches a higher altitude*. Pope Benedict chastises America for its addiction to an unbridled consumerism and its secular pursuit of sentimentality.

But the situation is not hopeless. The Pope senses a *lingering echo* of what once struck a religious nerve when people learned and fully realized what the birth of Christ meant to them and mankind. That echo has since turned into a loud voice, opposing the destruction of the real meaning of Christmas. There can be no turning back.



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ISAIAH 9:6

"For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given...and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, God the Might, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace."

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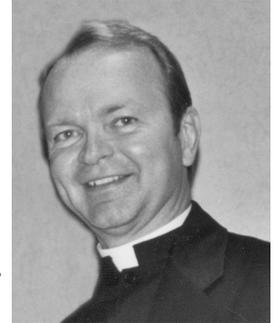
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Christmas Blessings

Dear CMF Friend,

A few months ago I had the privilege of leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and was able to celebrate Mass in many of the places where Our Blessed Lord lived and performed his wondrous deeds. What an awe-inspiring and humbling experience for a priest! At each of the sacred places I especially remembered you and the devoted members of the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation.



In particular, a visit to the little town of Bethlehem is an unforgettable experience. It was August, but we sang traditional Christmas carols as we celebrated the Mass of the Nativity in the church built over the cave where our Savior was born. The songs told of peace, the message of the Christmas angels: Peace to God's people on earth.

But the very land of Our Lord's birth is now where the descendants of Christ's first followers have become a very tiny, oppressed minority in their own homeland.

So, this Christmas I urge you to remember the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation with a generous gift so that it may continue its enduring apostolate for Faith, Family, Freedom.

Since 1958 the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation has been bringing the Christmas message of peace and hope to our persecuted brothers and sisters. Let us not forget them now. Thankfully, many nations now enjoy freedom for the first time in several generations, through the prayers, sacrifice, efforts of caring, praying people like yourselves.

At this blessed season of *Christmas*, be assured that I and the other CMF Council Members will offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for you and your intentions during *Christmas* week.

May the newborn Savior bless you for assisting His work!

Kevin E. Rettig

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