

# Mass at the Manger

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by Steve Kellmeyer

Entering a Catholic church at this time of year is a beautiful experience. As hymns gently waft down from the choir loft, the wintery light reveals a sanctuary filled with flowers, while Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds stand silently in and near the manger. As the Liturgy of the Word at each succeeding Mass focuses more and more closely on the events of Christmas, it is easy to let ourselves rest in these readings and leave thoughts of the Crucifixion for another time months away. Similarly, when Easter approaches, we concentrate on the Passion, Death, Crucifixion and Resurrection, leaving these images of Christmas joy far behind us. Because the Incarnation and Crucifixion are separated by thirty-three years of history and their feasts are separated by four months in the liturgical calendar year, we often see these two events as separate. However, as the first two chapters of Luke show us, they are intertwined. Indeed, the very structure of the Mass is meant to demonstrate their unity. By studying how the infancy narratives form liturgy, we can learn how Advent and Christmas are meant to form us.

## **The Eucharist Foreshadowed**

Luke opens his Gospel with Zechariah's vision of the angel standing near the altar at the hour of incense (Lk 1:5-10). In just six verses, Luke connects us to the Eucharist in three different ways. First, Zechariah's division, Abijah, was the eighth of

the 24 groups of Levitical priests (1 Chron 24:7-19). Why is this important? Because Jesus, the first Apostle and our High Priest (Heb 3:1), rose one day after the seventh (sabbath) day, that is, He rose on Sunday, the eighth day. Zechariah's priesthood is thus symbolically linked to the Resurrection. Second, the angel appeared silently to Zechariah near the altar, the place of sacrifice, a reminder of the Crucifixion. Third, the angel appears at the hour of incense. The Jews burned incense for two reasons, one of which they realized, and a second which they did not. They knew the smoke of incense represented the prayers of all the faithful, rising up to God as a pleasing aroma before Him. This is why the whole people prayed outside the temple at the hour the priest offered incense – the actions of the priest within were actively linked to the actions of the people outside.

What they did not realize was that the thurimer in which the incense burned is itself a symbol of God taking on flesh. The thurimer which contains the burning coal represents Jesus' human nature, the burning coals inside represent Jesus' divine nature, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). Thus, the thurimer combines within itself the Incarnation and the Crucifixion, for it represents both God taking on flesh and that flesh being consumed on the Cross as a sacrifice to God. When Christians use the censor we are reminded that all of our prayers rise to God only through Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). Just as the prayers and the incense were united at the Temple, so the incense-filled thurimer reminds us of God Incarnate, Christ and His mediation, God come to dwell among us in answer to the prayers of His People.

God continues tying Christmas to Easter through the signs of the manger and swaddling clothes. The sign of the manger, mentioned three times in eight verses, is important because a manger is a feeding trough for animals. Through this sign, God tells us that His flesh is given for our consumption (see John 6:53-58). The sign of swaddling clothes, mentioned twice in five verses by Luke (Lk 1:7,12) and once in Wisdom 7:4 is interesting for two reasons. First, Wisdom, a book written by King Solomon, tells us even kings are swaddled. Second, an infant in swaddling clothes cannot move hand or foot – he is completely helpless. In the same way, the liturgy swaddles the sacraments. Within the liturgy of the Mass, God voluntarily appears before us in a deliberately helpless state in the Eucharist. We can profane Him or worship Him through our participation in the liturgy and our love for His presence – it is our choice.

### **The Mass Foreshadowed**

With the liturgy foreshadowed, God provides details of how it is to be celebrated. His messengers, the angels, announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds, inviting them to celebrate the birth of the Savior. Both Saul and David were called shepherds (2 Sam 5:2, Ezek 34:23-24) because they led people as a shepherd leads his flock. Likewise, since Jesus Christ is priest, prophet and king, our baptism makes us priest, prophet, and king (1 Peter 2:9). That is, we are kings because the grace of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist enables us to lead others to Jesus Christ - we act as shepherds. Thus, the appearance of Jesus to the shepherds at the Incarnation prefigures the royal kingship God bestowed on us through His Resurrection. Indeed, Jesus Himself confirmed our kingship by greeting the first women he saw after the

Resurrection with the royal greeting “Chairoo!” which means “Hail!” – the same greeting the angel used to greet Mary at the Incarnation (Lk 1:28). The summoning of the shepherds to the manger foreshadows the royal transformation accomplished in us when we are baptized and go to dine at the Mass, the Lamb's Feast. When we read Luke 2:8-14 together with Heb 1:6, we suddenly become aware of the myriads of angels present at Mass, kneeling at the consecration with us.

The angels begin the song of praise perfected when God the Father speaks to His Son at His baptism and Transfiguration, a song continued by the people who are with Him as He enters Jerusalem. In this sense, those who stood with Him at the gates of Jerusalem took on the role of the angels at His birth. Similarly, we who participate in praising Him during the Mass act in concert with both the angels at His birth and the jubilant crowds at His triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

The angels sing glory and praise to God in Luke 2:14, then the shepherds approach the manger, worship and go out into the world, proclaiming what has happened (Luke 2:17-20). We often forget that Luke 2:14 is the basis for the Gloria that is sung in Mass. If we study the Mass, we see it follows exactly the same order of events: we sing the Gloria, the Eucharist is consecrated, and we all go forward to worship, to take and eat. Faithfully following the example the shepherds and of Mary, we receive the Eucharist, meditate, pray and ponder on Him as Mary did, then go out into the world, making Him known. The shepherds foreshadow the apostles after the Resurrection (John 20:21). Indeed, the very word "Mass" comes from the Latin "ite misse," which means "You are sent." The Mass is intended to remind us of both the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

The centrality of the Incarnation to the Mass and the life of the Church explains a unique liturgical action. Every Sunday during the recitation of the Nicene Creed, the whole congregation bows while praying the lines: "By the power of the Holy Spirit, He was born of the Virgin Mary and became man." However, on two days of the year, the Feast of the Annunciation and Christmas Day, the whole congregation kneels during those two lines instead of simply bowing. We kneel on those two days because we remind ourselves of the moment God took on flesh at the Annunciation and the moment God's enfleshment became known to the whole world, Christmas Day.

It is worthwhile noting that Christmas, unlike most other feasts of the year, has three different Masses: midnight, dawn, and the Mass of the day. The midnight Mass signifies both the Father's eternal begetting of His Son, which is hidden from the eyes of man, and his birth into the world during the night and in the midst of the darkness of our sin. The dawn Mass signifies the spiritual rebirth we receive from Him through the sacraments, as Christ rises "as the day-star in our hearts." The Mass in the day signifies God becoming fully visible to us through taking on human flesh, and reminds us that the Father's eternal begetting of the Son is done in His own full light and majesty. Thus, the three Masses, each with their own readings from Scripture, teach us of the triple "birth" of Christ: in Eternity, in Time, and in the Soul. In terms of covenant, the midnight Mass can be seen as the covenant with Adam after the Fall, the promise of the Saviour made by God in Genesis 3:15, the dawn Mass is the covenant with Abraham, and the Mass of the day is that of Christ.

## **Foundation for the *Liturgy of the Hours***

Liturgy is the very work of God Himself; every aspect of liturgy in some way presents the sacrifice of the Cross to us. While the liturgy of the Mass, which makes fully present Jesus' single sacrifice to every generation, is the most powerful work of the Church, the *Liturgy of the Hours* extends the power of the Mass throughout the whole day. Sadly, though many Catholics know that the Hail Mary directly quotes Luke 1:28 and 1:42, and that the Angelus, prayed every day at 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m., is simply a summary of Luke 1:28-38, few realize the importance of the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79), the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32). Praying the Liturgy of the Hours involves praying through many different Psalms and Scripture readings on a rotating schedule, but these three prayers are the only three Scripture passages which are prayed every day without fail. The Benedictus is the unchanging center of Morning Prayer, the Magnificat is the unchanging center of Evening Prayer, and the Nunc Dimittis the unchanging center of Night Prayer. All consecrated men and women are required to pray Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Night Prayer daily.

Each prayer is perfectly suited for the time of the day assigned. In the Benedictus, Zechariah's words bless God, in the Magnificat, Mary's very being blesses God (verses 46, 68). While the Benedictus proclaims salvation open to the Hebrews, the Magnificat speaks not only of the salvation of the Hebrews, but of the whole of humanity (verses 50, 70-73). The Benedictus shows a father blessing his son, the Magnificat shows Mary pronouncing blessings on herself (verses 48, 76-78). The Magnificat is at once more universal and much more personal than the Benedictus, it is directed at both Mary specifically and the whole of humanity in a way that the

Benedictus is not. The Benedictus is the morning prayer because it reminds us of the morning of God's covenant, it surveys the whole Old Testament, while the Magnificat's evening prayer tells us of the full scope of salvation, brought to us through the womb of the Virgin.

Together, morning prayer, with the Benedictus at its center, and evening prayer, with the Magnificat at its center, are called the "hinge prayers", the prayers upon which all other prayers of the *Liturgy of the Hours* depend. The Nunc Dimittis, on the other hand, is prayed every night immediately before bed. Like Mary, Simeon proclaims the salvation that is made available to all peoples everywhere. Further, his canticle unites the themes found in both Mary's and Zechariah's canticles, for he proclaims Jesus to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people, Israel."

When we study Luke's infancy narrative, we see the missions God prepares us to fill. Advent, properly used, equips us to act as the shepherds did, to sing out the canticles of praise sung by Zechariah, Mary and Simeon, to meditate with Mary on the mysteries of Resurrection and the mission we are given, a mission which knocks on our door the second day of Christmas, with the December 26th feast of St. Stephen, the first martyr. If we live out the Mass with the shepherds in mind, and learn to pray the *Liturgy of the Hours* with Zechariah, Mary and Simeon, we will have gone a long way towards beginning to do what God asks of us.