



A LETTER FROM THE ABBEY

Christmas, 1996

The History of Christmas -- Christmas in History

Church historians like to shock their audience by explaining that for its first two and a half centuries, Christians did not celebrate the birth of Christ. It is true. The beginnings of the feast of December 25, go back to the first half of the 300's, and we know little about what kind of celebration for Jesus' birth, if any, was customary in their early times. But the importance of Christmas has been growing ever since. It might be interesting to recall the Christmas of some special years. You, the reader, might be inspired also to recall your own Christmases that were out of the ordinary

a) The Birth of Western Poetry



ADORATION OF THE MAGI

ink drawing after Flemish tapestry
by Magda Marton

**MERRY CHRISTMAS!
A HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

The medieval Latin hymn is the immediate forerunner of all lyric poetry in Western languages. But this form of literature is incorrectly called "medieval," for it is much earlier and its first appearance coincides with the spread of the celebration of Christmas. The earliest known poems in short rhythmic lines (five iambic feet) with occasional rhymes have been authored by Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, the man who baptized St. Augustine. He wrote in this form the earliest Christmas poem that has survived. Today it is still widely used, but mostly in Advent. The poetic form is named after its author "Ambrosian." Ambrose's Christmas song rings out with joy into powerful opening lines. Some readers may enjoy the Latin form:

**"Veni redemptor gentium,
ostende partum Virginis.
Miretur omne saeculum,
talis decet partus Deum!"**

In English:

***"Redeemer of the nations, come,
make us behold the Virgin's Son.
Let come and marvel all the earth,
only God can have such a birth!"***

The primeval expression of Christmas joy in this Ambrosian hymn is rightly regarded as the cradle of lyric poetry for all major Western idioms, including English.

b) Crowning at Christmas

Eventually, "the nations" -- if you mean by this all the barbarians of the early Middle Ages -- have responded to this Christmas invitation, committed themselves to Christ, and made their union formal at a Christmas celebration in the year of 800. That Christmas was epoch making. After long and painful negotiations, Pope Leo III received in Rome Charlemagne, the king of all the Frankish tribes, and crowned him emperor of a newly conceived "Roman Empire": the Holy Roman Empire was born in the West on that day. A new power structure for the civilized world came about, reaching out in the name of Christ in all directions to gather all the nations.

c) History Repeats Itself

200 years and eight days later, on the Octave of Christmas, January 1, 1001, at the threshold of the second millennium, this scene was repeated with an interesting second theme added. In imitation of Charlemagne, but for the sake of protecting a new Christian nation against the successors of Charlemagne, St. Stephen became the first Christian king in Hungary when he was crowned with a crown received from Pope Sylvester II. By this gesture he declared both that he was joining the community of Christian nations and that his young nation was not to be subjected to the Empire, which by then had begun to act as a German "Reich."

d) Christmas of the Hearts

Two medieval Christmas feasts should be mentioned in addition. Both resounded more in the intimacy of the heart than in the splendor of public life. They became major sources of medieval mysticism.

The first was the Christmas night at which St. Bernard of Clairvaux had his childhood vision. It happened about 900 years ago, around the year 1096. Still a child, Bernard fell asleep while waiting with his parents for the beginning of the midnight mass. As he was convinced for the rest of his life, he was transported in a dream to the very moment of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. "This explains," his friend and first biographer, William of St. Thierry wrote, "why his preaching about the mystery of Christmas was so specially abundant with insight and enthusiasm."

A second visionary Christmas was celebrated by St. Francis of Assisi in Greccio, Italy, in 1223. Francis wanted to celebrate in a new way, as he said, "the feast of feasts, the day on which God became a small child, clinging to a human breast." By marvelous insight, he organized in nature the scene of Bethlehem: in a cave, out in the woods, he set up a manger with an ox and an ass and, leading out there in procession a crowd simple folks, he held a mass, sharing with them his vision of the nativity. They all took part in the very setting in which God shared our poverty. *Let come and marvel, all the earth!* -- the first Christmas hymn by Ambrose took on a new meaning as, by this first experiment, the custom of creating nativity scenes was launched into history, and a new style of announcing the Christmas story began to spread all over the world.

e) Christmas and Suffering

I feel there is some need to say a word about the negative experiences of Christmas in which poetry, splendor and ecstatic vision are replaced by meeting head on the misery of our human condition in the naked cruelty of some physical or mental suffering. I cannot help recalling each year the night of Christmas of 1944 in my home town with houses burning and bombs exploding and people --- my family among them -- running for shelter in the night. Many other people had such experiences.

In that same year Pope Pius XII seized the opportunity to deliver an unforgettable Christmas message: "The goodness and kindness of God our Saviour appeared among us. For the sixth time now since the beginning of this terrible war the sacred liturgy of Christmas utters these words breathing peace and tranquillity, to greet the coming of God our Saviour among us. Hearts sunk in the darkness of affliction and discouragement are bathed in the great

torrent of light and joy that descends upon them. Heads bent in sorrow are lifted up in gladness, for Christmas is the feast of man's dignity. "Over ruins of cities, collapsed churches, silenced bells and mourning millions, the Pope spoke of a dawn of hope for a new world in which "healthy democracy" should be built on a new recognition of human dignity.

f) Christmas Means Caring

So much care and help are organized during Christmas because at this time we realize how vulnerable we are in our need to be loved. On the birthday of Jesus, we all face up to the weakness of the human condition. None of us feels hesitant to recognize that we are dependent for our well-being on the good will, love and acceptance of others. *Being human always means being in need, and transcending the human condition always means responding to a need.*

Each year our Christmas says in a new way what the biblical word of Isaiah meant: IMMANU-El will be experienced as "God is with us" only as long as we keep on being with each other.

News About the Community

Entrance Developed

The construction of a new parking lot at the foot of the hill with a concrete staircase leading to the church accomplished several objectives. We made 30 new parking places for worshippers and guests and opened the facade of the church to the view of all who turn in on Cistercian Road. The new lights increase security and safety and offer the same view at night. The entrance design is not complete. We are waiting for a fitting design for a sign indicating CISTERCIAN and two smaller signs directing to Abbey and School.

Solemn Profession

On December 29, 1996, Br. Paul McCormick will take his solemn vows in the Abbey Church. By the constitutions of the Abbey, solemn vows must be preceded by novitiate and at least three years in simple (temporary) vows. Br. Paul began his novitiate by taking the habit on January 1, 1992. On January 1, 1997, in a ceremony beginning at 4 PM Bishop Grahmann will ordain him a deacon.

Visitors Expected

Frs. Gilbert Hardy and Moses Nagy are expected to be back for a brief visit. Both received invitations and tickets to weddings of friends, slated for the first days of January. Fr. Gilbert is presently teacher of philosophy and is head of the seminary college for the junior monks in Zirc. Fr. Moses teaches French and theology in the Cistercian school of Székesfehérvár in Hungary and is assistant pastor at the adjacent Cistercian church.

Visitation Expected

Fr. Polycarp Zakar, the abbot of Zirc and president of our Congregation, is expected to make his canonical visitation in Our Lady of Dallas in the second half of February. The rules of the Order require that each monastery must undergo canonical visitation every three years.

Theology and Spirituality

This fall a book on spirituality, That They May Have Life, written by Fr. Julius Lelóczy was published in Hungary. The book consists of a series of meditations broadcast by the weekly Hungarian program of Vatican Radio.

For the first time, the school year of CPS started with a faculty retreat of one day, following upon the retreat of the monastery. Two themes were presented and discussed: 1) School in the Service of God (texts by St. Benedict and St. Bernard); 2) Meditative Attention and Learning (text by Simone Weil).

Fr. Roch, as member of editorial board of the theological journal COMMUNIO participated at a workshop in Washington, D.C., in preparation of a retreat for members of the COMMUNIO movement on June 26-29. He was put in charge of the first day, dealing with

the topic of Redemption. The retreat is planned for young committed Catholics, preparing for the turn of the millennium as described in the Pope's encyclical "Tertio Millennio."

In preparation of the 900th anniversary of the foundation of the Cistercian Order, a series of conferences is planned at the May session of the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Abbot Denis will present a paper in this series on the Use of the Bible by the First Founders of Cîteaux.

News About the New Library

In a sequence of meetings the Cistercian Capital Campaign and Building Committee has formulated the basic outline of the new Library Project:

a) The location of the Library was finalized between the Middle School and the Abbey, adjacent to the Science Center.

b) The old power house will be transformed into an Art Center, allowing both an expansion of our art facilities and more room for the athletic department in the Gymnasium.

c) Full payment of the land purchased from UD will be part of the Capital Campaign.

d) A sculpture garden between the Science Center and the new Library will be set up to provide space for art works including Fr. Damian's sculptures. The lobby of the new facility and the Art Center will be used exhibiting paintings and reliefs.

For the last stretch of the Capital Campaign an anonymous challenge has been received: every new donation above any amount donated last year (Sep. 1995-June 1996) will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$ 200,000.

For more on this contact the Director of Development, Jan Pritchett: 972-438-4956

CHRISTMAS WISH

MERRY CHRISTMAS!
HAVE A HAPPY HOLIDAY!

Dwell with Christ in that eternal homeland
in both your thought and yearning.
Turn away from no service of love for Christ
in this troubled pilgrimage.

Ascend to the Father
by following the Lord Christ heavenward
to become free, whole and alive in meditation.
Return to your brother
by following Christ earthward
to be torn and divided into a thousand pieces,
to become all things to all men in good works.

Disdain nothing that comes from Christ,
value nothing which is not for Christ;

Thirst for one thing, have but one concern
where Christ is one;
serve the many brothers
in whom Christ lives manifold.

Isaac of Stella, 12th-century Cistercian Author

CISTERCIAN ABBEY
OUR LADY OF DALLAS

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