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CHRISTMAS

DAY MASS

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, December 25th, 2023)

Et Verbum caro factum est.
And the Word was made flesh.
(*Jn 1:14*)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

AT THE END of the Christmas Matins, after the chant of the long “Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” ceased, we went on a procession to lay the Child Jesus down into the crib. The Midnight Mass gospel, taken from St. Luke, reminded us of the context of this birth: the census, the lack of room at the inn, the arrival of a few shepherds invited by the angels. We were with them at the crib.

During the Mass at Dawn, we contemplated grace operating in the hearts. Thus Christ’s light has shone forth in the souls of the shepherds, who left the holy stable glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. As for Mary, she kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.^a

a. Lk 2:19-20

The Day Mass now devotes itself to contemplating the eternal generation of the Word in the bosom of the Father. The prologue of the Gospel according to St. John evokes in a few very familiar words this mystery at the core of the Holy Trinity:

In the beginning was the Word:
and the Word was with God: and the Word was God.

a. *Jn* 1:1-2 He was in the beginning with God.^a

A few lines below, the same text, which doesn't evoke the birth of Jesus, sums up the mystery of the Incarnation in a dazzlingly simple shortcut: "And the Word was made flesh."^b

b. *Jn* 1:14

If we consider all the texts of these three Masses, we have to acknowledge that the eternal birth of the Word in the bosom of the Father, the Incarnation in Bethlehem, or again the birth in the souls of the faithful, are abundantly mentioned.

At the heart of the Christmas mystery is the second person of the Trinity with His two natures: the divine nature, begotten from all eternity, and the human nature, born from the Virgin Mary in the time: two natures for one person.

c. *Jn* 14:10 Jesus will bear witness to the eternal generation: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."^c In the ever-present moment of eternity, the Word of God, "heir of all things, by Whom also [the Father] made the world, being the brightness of His glory and the figure of His substance,"^d remains forever begotten by the Father.

d. *Hb* 1:2-3

As to the human nature, it was lifted up into Heaven at the end of the Lord's earthly life, on the day of His Ascension. The acts performed by this nature were the work of the person, not of the nature. Today, the human nature of the Word of God is staying near God. Nonetheless, its presence has not entirely vanished. The Lord wanted to remain among us in His Eucharistic and sacramental presence, leaving to us His body and blood, His soul and His divinity, under the species of bread and wine.

Eight hundred years ago, when St. Francis enacted the first living crib in Greccio, the manger remained empty. A small altar was overhanging it, where a priest celebrated Mass. The message was clear. The Child was not in the crib. He had to be sought elsewhere. In the crib, there could be but a wax child, but an evocation of the true Child, born so many centuries before. It was on the altar that He was truly present. Bethlehem really becomes for us what its name signifies, "the house of bread."

There becomes incarnate He who makes himself a living bread for mankind. The Eucharist gives us to encounter Him. By the Incarnation mystery, and through the Paschal mystery, we enter into communion, through Christ's humanity, with the person of the Word of God. His divine life then gives us life.

In Bethlehem Christ, the living bread, makes Himself a life-giving bread. A few ounces of bread, a few drops of wine, the words of a priest... and the Lord is present before us, in our hearts. "Come, let us adore Him," as the angels and shepherds invite us to do. This invitation is but an echo of that addressed by the Father to the powers of heaven:

And again, when He bringeth in the first Begotten into the world, He saith: "And let all the angels of God adore Him."^a

a. Hb 1:6

The first act of adoration paid to the Word of God in His human nature was doubtlessly that of His Mother in the moment of the Annunciation, united to that of the angel Gabriel. They were ahead of that of Elizabeth just by a few days, when she told Mary:

Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?^b

b. Lk 1:42-43

But what shall we say of the very first smile the Virgin gave to her child in the holy stable? St. Joseph probably kept the secret of it, but who might find words to tell of such a moment?

By His incarnation, Christ restores between God and man the communion that had been shattered by sin. The abyss of hatred is filled by an infinitely greater abyss of love. God made Himself man so that man could become God.

Under the figure of a child who offers his own life, God makes Himself more destitute than the most destitute of men, thus inviting every man to the gift of his own life. Thus will the Lord invite Nicodemus the Pharisee, who will come and meet Him during the night, to take the path of the crib, the path of being born again from water and Spirit in Christ:

Because the light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than the light: for their works were evil. [...] But he

a. Jn 3:19-21

that doth truth cometh to the light, that his works may be made manifest: because they are done in God.^a

Let us therefore during these holy days allow the life-giving splendour of the Word of God to shine forth upon us. Let us welcome the true peace coming from Heaven, and which the world expects of us. We shall not exhaust the mystery of this birth. Let us allow ourselves to be exhausted in its adoration. Let us learn of Mary, the Virgin of the smile, to make of our lives a smile for God, an endless adoration of His mystery.

Christus natus est nobis. Venite adoremus.
Christ is born for us. Come, let us adore.

Have a holy and merry Christmas.
Amen, Alleluia.

