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Editorial V3.1

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

To Our Readers,

Christmas, one of the great feasts of the Christian calendar, has been shaped and inculturated in innumerable ways through the centuries. What does it celebrate, and how does it do that? This issue of The Yale ISM Review takes up these questions and provides insights and some surprising answers—in music, art, literature, and liturgy.

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~ Rita Ferrone, Editor

November 1st, 2016
In This Issue

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

We are pleased to present the Fall 2016 issue of The Yale ISM Review. Published by the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, the Review is an open-access online publication serving practitioners in the fields of sacred music, worship, and the related arts. You are invited to join us for stimulating discussions, enriched by contributions from Yale faculty and others who are leaders in their fields.

This issue of the Review is organized around the theme of Christmas. The first section begins with an essay by Markus Rathey, who explores the riches of Bach’s musical-theological synthesis in his Christmas Oratorio. Felicity Harley-McGowan and Andrew McGowan trace the origins of the liturgical feast of Christmas and discuss the development of the iconography of Christ’s birth in ancient Christian art. The visual feature that follows gives us a closer look at some of the splendid mosaics of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo that are discussed in their essay. Finally, Wendy Farley’s lyrical reflection on the meaning of the Incarnation weaves together current events, scripture, and hymns to make a powerful statement about what is at stake in our observance of Christmas today.

Our second section is devoted to how we keep the feast. It opens with an essay by Nicholas Denysenko discussing the relationship between Orthodox liturgical hymns and popular carols. Christmas is a celebration of “joy and light,” linking home and church observances. Susan Roll picks up on a darker theme, raising the challenge of how we can celebrate Christmas today in a violent world; she draws our attention to the earliest extant Christmas sermon, which takes as its text Matthew’s terrifying account of the Massacre of the Innocents. Bruce Gordon dispels the myth of Calvin as the Reformation figure who rejected Christmas on religious grounds, and explains what actually happened. And Oana Marian takes us on a personal and literary journey that reaches its destination at a Christmas hearth.

In “One Final Note” Guy Irwin invites us to consider the relationship of Christmas to the Crucifixion—a connection too often overlooked or forgotten. He writes: “From the grotto to the hill, from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross, from swaddling cloths to a seamless garment, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem: Jesus and Mary move through Jesus’s life with the inexorability and gravity of a liturgical procession. And we move with them, from Christmas to Easter, every year.”
On the Cover

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

Music and Divine Encounter in Bach’s Christmas Oratorio

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

I.

Christmas and music seem to belong together. Corelli’s *Christmas Concerto*, Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio*, and the Christmas sections from Handel’s *Messiah* are an integral part of the public and private soundscapes between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Eve. They belong to the feast like roasted chestnuts and peppermint sticks. The soothing sound of the Baroque pastoral and the festive splendor of concerto-movements from the first half of the eighteenth century seem to capture the Christmas spirit and are often appreciated even without a deeper knowledge of classical music. What is more, Christmas is probably the only Christian feast that has developed its own unmistakable musical idiom: triple meter, simple texture, slow harmonic rhythm, organ points—these are not only the ingredients for a musical pastoral but they likewise characterize a wide array of popular Christmas songs, from “In dulci jubilo” to “Silent Night.”

Even in a society like ours, where communal singing has lost most of its former significance, Christmas carols still count among the best-known songs with religious texts. This phenomenon is due in part to cultural conventions; but throughout history, Christmas has also inspired musical imagination more than any other Christian feast. Paintings of the Nativity in the Renaissance and the Baroque frequently feature angels with instruments (often string instruments such as viola da gambas or violins), and the shepherds are often depicted bringing their flutes and reed instruments to the manger to play their simple tunes for the newborn Christ.[1]

When Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) composed his *Christmas Oratorio* for the Christmas season 1734/35, he tackled a very ambitious project. The liturgy in his Leipzig churches did not provide a place to perform a piece of more than two hours in length. Bach therefore decided to split the oratorio into six separate parts, each of them to be performed before the sermon in morning services of one of the two major churches in Leipzig.[2] The first three parts were performed on the first, second, and third days of Christmas (Dec. 25–27), Part IV on New Year’s Day, Part V on the Sunday after New Year’s, and the last part on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1735. The text for the oratorio features the familiar Christmas narrative from Lk. 2, the story of the Three Wise Men from Mt. 2, as well as free poetry and hymns.

II.

With this composition Bach not only tapped into a long history of music for the celebration of the birth of Christ, he also created a celebration of music itself and of music as a mode of human and divine encounter. Music as a theme features prominently in the second part of the oratorio, performed on December 26, 1734 in the St. Thomas Church. The scriptural basis for the second part is the encounter of the shepherds with the angels on the fields before Bethlehem (Lk. 2:8–14), culminating in the angelic song “Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe” (May honor be to God on high).[3] The festive setting of the praise of the angels is the climax of Part II, only followed by a short recitativo for bass and a final chorale stanza.
Already in the opening movement for Part II, however, Bach celebrates the encounter between the angels and the shepherds, albeit without words, only with the use of music. An instrumental sinfonia depicts the bucolic scene in the fields close to Bethlehem. Bach plays with a common stereotype of shepherds’ music, the pastorale: lilting motives in triple meter over a simple, often static, bass. However, the opening sinfonia is more than just a musical genre painting, it describes an encounter. Bach uses the string instruments of the orchestra (here doubled by the flutes) to depict the arrival of the angels. His listeners would have been familiar with paintings that associated the sound of the strings with the divine messengers. The shepherds, on the other hand, are represented by the nasal sound of the oboes—again a typical feature in Baroque iconography. At the beginning of his sinfonia, Bach juxtaposes these two sonic groups: the strings begin, then they are interrupted by the oboes, then the strings take the lead again, and so forth. Each group also has its unique musical ideas. The angels play an elegantly flowing siciliano motive, while the shepherds interject with a simpler, more rustic theme. Gradually, however, the oboes adopt musical ideas from the strings, and in the final moments of the sinfonia, the strings and oboes play the same motive. In the last two measures, the strings even drop out and the oboes of the shepherds play the angelic motive all by themselves. Symbolically speaking, the angels serve as a model for the music of the shepherds. Bach’s skillful juxtaposition and assimilation of musical ideas and musical topoi correlates with Martin Luther’s interpretation of the angelic choir in Lk. 2. In his Hauspostille the Reformer states that through the birth of Christ, humans become co-citizens with the angels: “But he is not only our Lord, but he is also the Lord of the angels; and together with the angels we are members of the Lord’s domestic community. While we had been servants of the devil before, now the Child has honored us by elevating us to the citizenry of the angels. They are now our best friends. . . .” A theological treatise from 1746 formulates this synthesis thus: “In Christo und durch Christum stimmen himmel und erde, Gott, Engel und menschen wieder zusammen.” (In Christ and through Christ heaven and earth, God, angel, and men sound together). Bach’s sinfonia enacts this synthesis musically by leading the two musical choirs, which are distinct in motive and color, to a sonic synthesis.

Bach envisions the angels and the shepherds as two “choirs,” two musical ensembles, which engage in a dialogue. This idea also shapes the following movements of Part II of the oratorio. After the announcement of Jesus’s birth, the text of the following recitative even calls the shepherds a “choir”: “What God has pledged to Abraham, he now lets be shown to the chorus of shepherds as fulfilled” (no. 14).

The angel then urges the shepherds to go to the manger and to see “the miracle” that has taken place. But again, the shepherds do not only appear as passive bystanders but the angel also encourages them to sing a lullaby for the newborn Child: “Then sing for him by his cradle—in a sweet tone and with united choir—this lullaby” (no. 18).

While the biblical narrative expects the angels to sing their angelic Gloria, nowhere do we read in the Gospel of Luke that the shepherds made music as well. However, for Bach and his anonymous librettist there is no question but that the encounter would have a musical component. If the angels are singing, the shepherds have to be imagined as following their example by singing, as well.

The lullaby that follows is a beautiful alto aria, which meditates on the intimate relationship between the believer and Jesus: “Sleep, my most beloved, enjoy your rest . . . refresh your breast, feel the delight” (no. 19). The music of the alto aria is soothing, with a lilting rhythm. It fits the stereotype of a lullaby.
The shepherds encounter the message of Jesus’s birth in music and their first response is music. The encounter between the human and divine spheres takes place in sound. The theological synthesis is also musical synthesis. Harmony between God and man is represented by musical harmony.

III.

After the alto lullaby, the Evangelist announces the arrival of the heavenly hosts, and the angels sing their “May honor be to God on high,” the angelic Gloria. Bach divides the text of the heavenly chorus into three sections: the praise of God on high, the peace on earth, and the great pleasure to humankind. As he had already done in the opening sinfonia, Bach establishes a juxtaposition between the divine sphere in the first section and the human sphere in the second section; in the third section, he leads these two spheres to a synthesis by combining musical ideas from the first two sections. Bach essentially follows the same pattern he had already used in the opening sinfonia, now applied to a setting of the central biblical text.

The angelic Gloria is followed by a small recitative, sung by the bass voice, which connects the praise of the angels with the human response. The focus is no longer only on the shepherds; it is wider. It is the call to all mankind to join the choir of angels: “Quite right, you angels: shout and sing. . . . Arise then! We will join with you in song.” The text for the recitative finally spells out what the music had already represented several times, the combination of heavenly and human forces in the musical praise of God.

The second part of the oratorio (like the other parts as well), ends with a setting of a common congregational hymn. Even though the hymn was here to be sung by the choir, hymn settings like this commonly represented the voice of the congregation in Bach’s oratorios. This is the case here as well. In the hymn setting the singers join the angels and praise the newborn Son of God: “We sing to you, amid your host, with all our power . . . that you, O long-desired guest, have now presented yourself” (no. 23). The hymn setting is accompanied by the instruments, and we hear again the musical motives from the opening sinfonia, as well as the intricate juxtaposition of strings (now playing together with the voices) and the nasal sound of the oboes.

IV.

Traces of a similar view of music can also be found in other movements of the oratorio, albeit not as concentrated as in Part II. Already the opening movement of the oratorio begins with the praise of God through music: “Shout, exult, arise, praise the days [of Christmas]. . . . Break forth into song, full of shouting and rejoicing” (no. 1). But again, even before the voices of the singers enter, Bach has already displayed the different voices of the orchestra in fanfares of praise: first the drums, then the flutes, followed by the oboes and the trumpets. When the singers finally enter in measure 33, their “Shout, exult, arise” almost feels redundant, because that is exactly what the instruments have already done for quite a while. The opening chorus is a celebration of music as a means of expressing the joy that will later be announced by the angels in the Gloria. The same is true for the opening movement of the third part of the oratorio: “Ruler of heaven, give heed to our babble, let our feeble songs praise you” (no. 24). Music—here the songs and psalms sung in the honor of God—serves as a celebration of the birth of Jesus. Even though the text does not mention it directly, the divine praise from the human chorus is again modeled on the praise sung by the angels. The students of the St. Thomas School who sang the work in 1734/35 would have been familiar with this idea. The laws for the school (Schulordnung), recently revised in 1733, described the musical duties of the pupils by comparing them to a choir of angels: “When they are singing, they shall diligently remember the nature and the duties of the holy
angels; this shall teach them that the singing of sacred songs is a glorious duty and how they should behave honorably while singing these songs."[9]

For Bach and his contemporaries, Christmas music was not only a way to set a sentimental mood, not only the celebration of a “Silent Night” or the sonic memory of jingling bells. It was a means of encounter with God. Earthly music was a reflection of heavenly music; the voices of the human choir emulated the angelic voices. The goal was a sonic and spiritual harmony between heaven and earth.[10]

Music was part of how God revealed himself in the Christmas narrative, and it was at the same time a human answer: praise for the coming of Christ but also the expression of love and affection in the lullaby sung for the baby in the manger, “Sleep, my most beloved. . . . Feel the delight.”

Markus Rathey is Professor of Music History at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and the Yale School of Music. He is a leading Bach scholar and currently president of the American Bach Society. His major study of Bach’s Christmas Oratorio was published by Oxford University Press in 2016. The book analyzes Bach’s masterwork from a musical, cultural, and theological perspective and sheds new light on Bach’s own compositional process. His other recent book, Bach’s Major Vocal Works, published by Yale University Press, includes a chapter on the Christmas Oratorio that explores the theological and liturgical contexts of the oratorio.

FOOTNOTES


[2] Some of the parts were also repeated during the Vespers services; for the liturgical context see Markus Rathey, Johann Sebastian Bach’s Christmas Oratorio: Music, Theology, Culture (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 120–125.


[6] For the original text see Rathey, Bach’s Christmas Oratorio, 206.


[8] For the function of the lullaby and the emotional understanding of Christmas in Bach’s time see the


[10] The idea of heavenly harmony and its sonic realization in earthly music was quite common in Baroque music theory as well as in theology; for a recent study of these concepts see Joyce I. Irvin, *Foretastes of Heaven in Lutheran Church Music Tradition: Johann Mattheson and Christoph Raupach on Music in Time and Eternity*, (Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield), 2015.

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The Magi and the Manger: Imaging Christmas in Ancient Art and Ritual

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is familiar, both from the biblical narratives and from iconography that has become ubiquitous in church decoration and widely circulated on Christmas cards: a mother and father adoring their new-born child, an ox and an ass leaning over the child, a star hovering above this scene, angels, shepherds with their sheep in a field, and luxuriously clad “wise” men or kings approaching the child with gifts.

All these elements are included by the Venetian artist Jacopo Tintoretto in a painting which started in his workshop in the late 1550s, and for much of its life hung above the altar of a church in Northern Italy (Fig. 1). In addition, Tintoretto imagines other figures at the scene. With Mary and Joseph at the manger, he includes a second pair of human figures, perhaps the parents of the Virgin: Anna and Joachim. The artist also inserts less traditional animals in the foreground: a chicken and a rabbit, and a dog curled at the foot of the manger.

Yet the rich details of the scene that Tintoretto depicts, many of which are now well known in popular renditions, were not present in the first depictions of the Nativity. Even the elements derived directly from the gospel narratives of Matthew and Luke were slow to appear in visual renderings. Between those early scriptural accounts and the formation of even a basic manger scene lie some centuries during which Christian devotion and depiction developed.

So too a ritual observance of Christmas in the liturgical life of the Church does not belong to the
earliest years of the Christian movement, but took until the fourth century to appear clearly. The emergence of Christmas as we know it, nativity scene and festivity and all, required its own long historic Advent wait.

Infancy Narratives

The Gospel that is usually considered oldest, that of Mark, has no reference to the birth of Jesus. Luke’s and Matthew’s Gospels, both making use of Mark’s version, add stories of the birth of Jesus that have points of contact but also differ significantly in the details. While the familiar shepherds, angel choirs, and the manger come from Luke, Matthew provides the Magi and the guiding star. Matthew’s angelic messenger visits Joseph. Luke’s more famously comes to Mary. What is perhaps the last-written of the canonical Gospels, that of John, has a more abstract or conceptual Incarnation account, wherein the eternal Word becomes flesh.

By the time we can point to material evidence in early Christian art, both narratives were well known, but the features that caught the attention and interest of artisans and their sponsors were not drawn evenly from across this set of stories.

Beginnings: Third Century

There is no surviving evidence to suggest that Christians used art to express the central tenets of their faith before around 200 CE. During the third century, however, they did begin to experiment with visual images, decorating their tombs, churches, as well as household objects and personal items, with pictorial decoration. Stories from the Old and New Testaments served as important sources of inspiration in this process.

Christians selected particular subjects for illustration with evident care; and it may be surprising to us that, judging from the third-century images that survive, they were not initially very interested in Luke’s manger scene. They were more inclined to Matthew’s account, with its visit of the Magi. These mysterious Gentiles to whom Christ was revealed were frequently portrayed in art by the middle of the third century, and according to a standard iconographic pattern: following the unusual star, they were shown bearing their gifts and moving in rhythmic procession towards Mary, who is shown seated and ready to receive the exotic visitors, with the child on her lap.

The earliest surviving versions of the scene are found in funerary settings, on the walls of Roman catacombs or on marble sarcophagi. In one of the oldest Christian cemeteries, the Catacomb of Priscilla, a very early depiction is found prominently displayed above an arch, with the procession cleverly following the curve of the architectural feature (Fig. 2). Dating from the late third or early fourth century, the painting attests that the Magi were now understood to be three in number; although Matthew had not counted them, three gifts for the Child are mentioned: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Magi dominate this scene, their importance stressed not only by the fact that they occupy the larger part of a composition as a whole but in that they are its central axis: the viewer’s eye is drawn upward, directly to the leading figures in the procession, who occupy the space at the apex of the arch. The emphasis is on their movement—the active seeking of God in his incarnate Son.
A marble sarcophagus fragment excavated from the cemetery of Saint Agnes in Rome gives even greater solemnity and prominence to the procession with the addition of three camels and the star, to which the first Magus dramatically points (Fig. 3). They approach the seated Virgin while Jesus, depicted as a small child, leans forward and stretches out his hands to grasp the first of the three gifts.
Fig. 3. Adoration of the Magi. Fragment from a Roman sarcophagus, fourth century. From the cemetery of Saint Agnes, Rome. Vatican Museums, Museo Pio Cristiano, inv. 31459.

In such scenes, the viewer is not just witness to the solemn act of seeking and discovery, but a participant. The ancient Christian may have recognized in these gift-bearers the posture and gestures given in Roman art to figures who offer or exchange gifts. In depictions of ancient Greek and Roman gift-giving practices, the act and choice of gift were important in furnishing information about both giver and recipient; and the postures adopted in Roman imperial ceremony for the worship of an Emperor or other ruler seem to provide a pictorial model for the representation of the Magi.[1] Identifying with or recognizing such an outward act of homage, the viewer could enter into the Nativity story through the wise visitors, worshipping God manifest on earth in the Child.

The Magi’s gift-giving recalled the presentation of tributes and gifts by kings from distant shores in Psalm 72:10, and by the third century, Tertullian (Against Marcion 3.13) writes “The East considers the Magi almost as Kings.” By the sixth century the Magi had been given the names Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar.[2] They are so named in a sixth-century mosaic from Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy, where they are depicted as sumptuously dressed Eastern figures leading a long procession of female martyrs towards Mary and Jesus. The influence of imperial iconography is striking. Against a shimmering gold background, the enthroned Mother and Child now occupy more space than the Magi, and are the pictorial focus. Mary, luxuriously robed and majestically seated on a gem-studded throne, with flowering plants at her feet, is portrayed as the Mother of God. Depicted in strict frontality, and flanked by her court of four angelic attendants, she ceremoniously presents the child, both to the Magi and the viewer, as God incarnate (Fig. 4).[3]
This shift in focus onto the Christ child had begun in the fourth century when the Lukan crib or manger was represented for the first time. The child was shown lying alone in the manger, without parents or human visitors, accompanied only by the ox and ass. A marble relief, carved in the late fourth or early fifth century, illustrates this vision (Fig. 5). With attention resting exclusively on Jesus, who is now placed at the centre of the composition, the iconography highlights the birth of God’s Son in human form on earth, surrounded by nature.

The ceremonial scene lavishly illustrated in mosaic in Ravenna for a congregation to witness and celebrate combines the two narratives and two iconographic traditions, a product of both artistic and ritual developments in the celebration of the birth.

The Feast of Christmas

The liturgical celebration of the Incarnation—the feast of Christmas—first comes into view in the fourth century.[4] The Nativity is initially celebrated on two different dates, December 25 (in the Western Mediterranean) and January 6th (in the East).

Interest in the date of Jesus’s birth is however much older than the feast itself. Even around 200 CE, the Carthaginian writer Tertullian and his Alexandrian contemporary Clement both attest to calendrical speculations about the same two dates that would appear as those Nativity feasts somewhat later.

Tertullian is one early source that links Jesus’s death at Passover with the date of March 25th; this would of course later become the Feast of the Annunciation, a commemoration of Jesus’s conception. Yet Tertullian and other Christian writers of this period are suspicious of celebrating anyone’s birthday. Scholars such as Louis Duchesne in the nineteenth century and Thomas Talley in the twentieth argued that such alignment of days was viewed as providential in Jewish and early Christian thought; Jesus’s conception and his death could have been expected to take place on the same day.[5]
Jesus’s death was of course being commemorated from a very early point, along with his Resurrection, as Christians continued and adapted celebration of the feast of Passover. Second in order of significance and clarity for the Christians after this Pascha was not Christmas or other dates related to Jesus’s life, but holidays commemorating the martyrs—“other Christs” whose experiences of suffering and triumph echoed the Paschal feast. These anniversaries of death were the real “birthdays” of those heroes, but they would in time be joined by observance of a more literal birthday.

The first explicit evidence for a Christmas observance associates it, surprisingly, with those martyr feasts. The Philocalian Calendar of 354 leads off its list of those festivals with the feast of the Nativity. The Christmas observance on December 25 was clearly established by this point, and may have been around earlier in the third century, kept in western regions such as Italy and in Roman Africa. The January 6 date was being observed at a similar point in Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt.

Since the Middle Ages there has been speculation about the proximity of the two early Christmas dates to pre-Christian solstice festivals. The Roman Saturnalia were just a few days before December 25th, and the Emperor Aurelian instituted a feast of Sol Invictus (the unconquered Sun) on that same day. Yet the evidence of those earlier calculations makes these hypotheses less convincing. It is nevertheless clear that Christian preachers, and artists, made use of the proximity of the solstice as a source of reflection about the Nativity and Incarnation, a cosmic dawn in the darkness of sin.

Different local churches may have focused on either the Lukan or Matthean accounts, or both, in their liturgies and preaching of Christmas—on either date—to begin with, but evidence is limited. The early popularity of the Magi in art and the absence of the manger need not mean that the Matthew story was typically preferred to Luke’s at the earliest point for liturgical reading. It could merely reflect the theological and iconographic suitability of a visual language that evoked both stories, as well as John’s less historical account. So in Rome, where the Magi are depicted in the great stational Church of Santa Maria Maggiore (Fig. 6) without the Lukan shepherds, the biblical texts for Christmas seem nevertheless to have favored John and Luke.[6]
When in the later fourth century efforts were made to harmonize the two different dates, December 25 and January 6, the liturgical use of the narratives changed. The solution that became widely accepted is the one familiar even now: the Western date was typically accepted as the Nativity feast as such; the later Eastern date became associated with the visit of the Magi, as Epiphany, and also celebrated other manifestations of Jesus’s glory, such as his baptism.

After this, evidence for the use of readings at the Christmas liturgy becomes clearer, with the Luke and John texts typically preferred at Christmas, and Matthew reserved for the Epiphany. With this removal of the Magi by a few days, the way was also clearer for the more developed iconography of the manger scene that we know. In this new vision of the Nativity, the viewer could concentrate on the birth of the Son of God in human form, on earth; and as confidence in the representation of this vision increased, a more detailed image emerged, one more firmly rooted in the gospel narrative, of which Tintoretto was to be an inheritor.
**Felicity Harley-McGowan** is a specialist in early-Christian and medieval art. Her work centers on the origins and development of Christian iconography within the visual culture of Roman late antiquity, and extends to the “survival” of the Classical tradition from late antiquity through to the Italian Renaissance. Before coming to Yale, she was the Gerry Higgins Lecturer in Medieval Art History at the University of Melbourne, where she taught across the fields of Roman, Byzantine, medieval and Renaissance art history, as well as art theory and historiography. She is currently preparing a monograph on the earliest images of crucifixion and co-editing (with Henry Maguire) a volume on the life and scholarship of Ernst Kitzinger.

**Andrew McGowan** is Dean of Berkeley Divinity School. An Anglican priest and historian, his scholarly work focuses on the life of early Christian communities, and on aspects of contemporary Anglicanism. Professor McGowan’s project of re-describing early eucharistic practice in relation to ancient food and meals is found in Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals (Oxford, 1999). His most recent book, Ancient Christian Worship (Baker Academic, 2014) seeks to describe discursive and ritual practice in the ancient Church, including use of music and speech, as well as sacramental ritual, and to acknowledge the diversity of early Christian belief and practice. He is currently working on how early Christian and other ancient Mediterranean groups used, changed, and created notions of sacrifice. Also editor of the Journal of Anglican Studies, he blogs at Saint Ronan Street Diary (abmcg.blogspot.com) and is on Twitter as @BerkeleyDean and @Praxeas.

FOOTNOTES


[3] On the symbolism of the three Magi in this pictorial context, Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 169-171. The names may be a later addition to the mosaic.


Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016
Adoration of the Magi. Details from the mosaic decoration of the nave (north side), Church of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. Photos: Arthur Urbano, with kind permission. Sixth century.

Arthur P. Urbano, Jr. teaches at Providence College and publishes in the area of Early Christianity and Patristics. His research interests focus on the Christian reception and transformation of classical culture in late antiquity, particularly in the areas of philosophy, literature, and art.
Who is Jesus for a small village in Mozambique, the people of Ferguson, a busy pastor, a child awed by candles and music? Christianity is a mosaic through which people are formed by its root wisdom: that the infinite and unknowable ground of creation united itself with humanity in the body of Jesus of Nazareth. As we enter into the joy of Advent, we are invited to contemplate again the beauty of this mystery.

The people of Israel understood divine power to be intimately related to history. But history is pretty ugly, especially for a small conquered nation like Israel. To say that YHWH is the lord of history is to perceive that behind the ravages of time stands an unconquerable vision of justice and compassion. It is through this lens that the basic ideas of the Incarnation began to unfold.

In history, might is right. The most ruthless ruler gains power, and stronger armies overwhelm weaker ones. Israel saw its dreams and kings defeated. But they had a name for something that testified on their behalf; a name for justice that was not undone even as the poor were left to hunger for food and dignity, a compassion that testified on behalf of orphans and aliens. The prophets acknowledged the external devastation of war and the internal devastation of expediency and yet they prophesied hope. To trample the poor and then conduct holy rites is to God an abomination, but even this word is hopeful because it recognizes that things do not have to be this way. Injustice does not express who Israel really is. God calls Israel back to its true identity in ever-renewed invitations to participate in the divine compassion.

Seek justice

Rescue the oppressed

Defend the orphan

Plead for the widow. . . .

Zion will be redeemed by justice. (Isaiah 1:17, 27)

Isaiah witnessed the suffering of the socially vulnerable and the disasters of war and yet reminds Israel of a promise: however far we stray from the divine goodness, it will relentlessly call us back.

The prophets do not foretell but unveil. They reveal God’s anguish in the face of injustice. The degradation of other human beings that seems casual to us is unbearable to God. The purpose of prophecy is “to conquer callousness, to change the inner [human] as well as to revolutionize history.”[1] This vision arises from “fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos.”[2] The prophetic unveiling speaks the truth about social evil and hypocrisy, especially when these wear the cloak of religion. The prophets unmask our self-deceptions. But the prophets also unveil the deeper intention of divine goodness: that our injustices will always be held in the divine compassion. Israel’s faith is rooted in depictions of God’s unceasing labor on behalf of humanity. The divine Mother leads Israel and refuses to give it up: “Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness and bands of love...

How can I give you up, Ephraim? . . . My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger. . . for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

(Hosea 11:3–4, 8–9).

The Hebrew prophets lay out the pattern that is picked up in the Christian writings, even as they mingle with the wisdom of Gentiles and become “a new song.”

Something beautiful happened; and even without understanding it, we joyously celebrate it every year as the sky grows dark and the nights long. In some mysterious way, the infinite divine is caught in a human body, invisible light made visible. The gospels record how Jesus was remembered by different communities in different parts of the Roman Empire—a story too precious to be contained by one narrative. The story of Incarnation describes an upside-down world, and even now it is difficult to bear its intensity. In the parables, everyone acts crazy: a father rewards the son whose whoring and gambling loses half of his wealth; an outsider helps someone left for dead by the side of the road when religious leaders turn away. A crazy woman is one of Jesus’s close companions and the disciple chosen by him to first preach the gospel of Resurrection. We are called to recognize Christ in the faces of the hungry, sick, and imprisoned. This is a world that did not make sense two thousand years ago, and it does not make sense now. And yet these are the stories told to reveal who God is.

Perhaps the most shocking element of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the story that we are celebrating right now: the story of his birth. Because it is so tangled up with songs blared from store loudspeakers bidding us to rock around the Christmas tree, we may overlook that this is the heart of the doctrine of the Incarnation. In this story, the Most High, who laid the foundation of the earth and shut in the sea with doors (Job 38–41), appears as a tiny baby. The “breath of the power of God” (Wisdom 7:25) enters our world through the body of an unwed peasant girl to lie in animals’ straw in a barn at the outskirts of a tiny village in an occupied territory. Herod’s act of terror immediately forces his family to flee their precarious shelter. These are the root symbols of what God-with-us looks like.

To make clear the contrast between the kind of power embodied in Jesus Christ and that of Rome, the early Christians transposed the language of the cult of the emperor and applied it to Christ. His kingdom is a paradoxical counterpoint to Caesar’s empire: beggars, peasants, married and unmarried women, unemployed, day laborers, and tax collectors are its dignitaries. The king is a wanderer whose tattered robes bring healing. He is praised not by court poets and sycophants but by shepherds and angels.

This counter-narrative is not obviously attractive. Watching the news, we see that people prefer leaders who are capable of enforcing their will. It is not obvious why the Christian path would be attractive, since its deity apparently lacked either the desire or the ability to free people from persecution or suffering. But those who were illuminated by this path became intoxicated by the counter-narrative of radical love and compassion that extended fellowship not according to kin or ethnic ties but to humanity itself. Christians no longer believed that social standing or even death itself defined who they were. In these quixotic communities, someone whom society perceived as a slave or an abused wife might be a leader. Christians could be fearless of death as they attended plague victims, brought help to prisoners in Roman mines or faced Rome’s most cruel tortures.

In the modern period, Christians emphasize belief as the primary act of piety. But early Christians understood the significance of the Incarnation differently: allegiance must either be to the gospel of
Jesus Christ or to the gospel of Caesar. We have a sense of the meaning of this choice for the gospel of Incarnation in the prison diary of Perpetua, a young Roman mother who was arrested in 203. A witness to her death describes her going into the stadium with milk dripping from her breasts but with a “shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone’s stare by her own intense gaze.” After she is first stripped and then gored, she is reported to have said to her fellow Christians: “You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through.”[5] Perpetua’s witness is not simply to a belief that she will go to heaven or that Jesus is lord but to the meaning of the Incarnation: stand fast and love one another. Allegiance to this gospel, even in extremis, was for Perpetua and her fellow prisoners the primary content of faith. Enchanted by this gospel, it was impossible to stomach the cruelty of the Empire’s practices or the emptiness of its theology. Perpetua saw herself so clearly in the gospel that it became impossible to betray herself.

The Incarnation invites us, like Israel and Perpetua, to recognize who we really are. American slaves who sang about having “shoes in that kingdom” were not only consoling themselves with a fantasy of a better future. They sang out their true names.[6] When Jesus asks his disciples “Who do you say I am?” he is also asking “Who do you say you are?” Early Christians said Jesus was the Messiah, Compassion, Light. The Savior awakened sleepers who walked in the darkness of self-forgetfulness. Jesus was the emissary of a God whose name was not Caesar but Love. The desire to cleave to the gospel of Jesus Christ and its vision of absolute love made it impossible to accept the gospel of Caesar. It is a love that requires a sacrifice—not of a dove or goat but of one’s very personhood.

That God is love has become a banal slogan. In the musical version of Oliver Twist, it was painted in gray letters on the wall of the miserable orphanage. But, in the Second Letter of Peter, it makes us “participants in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The First Letter of John contrasts this gospel with idolatry. “Those who say ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. . . . Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:19, 21). It concludes: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). Anything less than love is idolatry and death.

In this season, we are invited to enter into this joy, but it is difficult to free ourselves from the idols of consumerism, hostility, or callousness. Christians may have little difficulty either ignoring the anguished cries of black America, indulging in demeaning depictions of Hispanic or Muslim neighbors, or remaining implacably indifferent to poverty and hunger. But this is the idolatry of imperial religion and is antithetical to the revelation of the Incarnation.

Yet, in our carols we will again sing out Christianity’s tender and wise theology of Incarnation. We are invited to recognize the contrast between royal indifference and solidarity. “Once in royal David’s city,” with the poor oppressed and lowly lived on earth our Savior holy.[7] Not emperors but mothers exemplify the intimacy between Logos and the world: “In the bleak mid-winter,” seraphim thronged the air, but his mother only . . . worshipped the Beloved with a kiss.[8] This Beloved offers a vision of universalized compassion: “Peace on earth and mercy mild.”[9] In the joy of Christmas hope, we refuse the sorrows bred by callousness and indifference: “No more let sins and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground.”[10] We can follow a different way: “There’s a star in the east on Christmas morn. Rise up shepherd and follow.”[11] Though “no ear can hear his coming,” when we open our hearts to him, the “the dear Christ enters in.”[12] In this poetry of celebration, Christological creeds and doctrines live in us as intimacy between God and the oppressed, as tenderness between mother and child, as a new way to be in the world because this compassionate love “is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.”[13]
We may not be called to Perpetua’s sacrifice. But even amidst the obfuscating and exhausting temptations of today’s Imperial powers, perhaps we will rekindle the joy of this crazy, off-kilter vision. The divine in us gives us eyes to see the divine in others and in that seeing, Christ is continually “born in us”—and, through us, reborn to the world.

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FOOTNOTES

[8] Christina Rossetti, “In the Bleak Mid-winter”

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A Meeting of Domestic and Liturgical Rites: Joy and Light in Orthodox Christmas

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

How do Eastern Orthodox[1] Christians observe Christmas? What does it mean for Orthodox people? One method for developing a substantial response to this question is to examine the entire liturgical context of the Christmas season in Orthodoxy and present a theological synthesis. This response might be quite satisfactory and beautiful. The liturgies of Christmas offer a formidable liturgical theology to the attentive observer.

Orthodoxy’s investment of gravitas and solemnity in Christmas is manifest by a handful of outstanding liturgical features: a forty-day fasting season precedes Christmas, preparing the faithful to hear the news of the Incarnation of God’s Son. An intense, strict fast is observed on Christmas Eve, accentuating the need for awareness, focus, and energy to meet the newborn King. The liturgical cycle of Christmas is full and rich. The proclamation of the Word on the two Sundays before Christmas reintroduces various holy men and women of God to the people, and is elaborated by the hymns. The Sunday before Christmas features the reading of Matthew’s genealogy, which proclaims Christ as the fulfillment of God’s appointment of holy ones to represent God in and to the world.

But the true liturgical riches arrive with Christmas Eve: the Royal Hours offer an office of scripture, hymns, and psalmody, inaugurating the celebration of Jesus’s birth for those who want to hear the Word. The Vespers with the Liturgy of St. Basil appointed for Christmas Eve continues the festal observance, disclosing Jesus as God’s only Son who is also the perfect image of the Father, sent into the world to reform the distorted image of God in each person. The hymns include short refrains, enabling the people to sing along. As the day of Christmas Eve concludes, the faithful are permitted a modest Lenten meal before returning to church for the Vigil service, which customarily consists of Great Compline followed by Matins. Finally, on Christmas morning, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. As with all major church holidays, Orthodox musicians have composed special settings for hymns particular to the Christmas feast.

Thus, a glance at the liturgical ordo for Christmas leaves one with the impression of a great solemnity complete with preparation, saturated with the Word of God, and decorated with musical masterpieces.

In reality, Orthodox pastors confront the same challenges experienced by Western Christians at Christmas. Pastoral appeals for quiet observance, fasting, almsgiving, and an increase in liturgical participation are frustrated by overindulgence in holiday parties and consumerism. The hangovers of rich food and wine cloud minds and rob the faithful of the sharp awareness and attention directed towards the Lord, who is coming. For the faithful Christian who makes an effort, the stress of calculating vacation time and creating a suitable budget for gifts is distracting and can produce anxiety. A stark reality for many Orthodox people in the West is managing family obligations for Christmas. For example, a given family—especially one hosting guests—might be able to attend two liturgies at most, one on Christmas Eve and another on Christmas morning. Or a family might be able to participate in only one Orthodox Christmas liturgy, which brings us from the ideal liturgical theology of Christmas offered by the liturgical cycle to the realities of contemporary popular participation.
As in the West, Orthodoxy boasts a joyful domestic observance of the feast that coheres with the height of the liturgical theology of Christmas. These domestic traditions are marked by regional accents, and for this essay I will refer to examples from the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition, which are highlighted by the Christmas Eve dinner and the tradition of caroling. Joy and light permeate both the liturgical and domestic observances of Christmas, and I will reflect on the relationship between the ideal liturgical theology of Christmas and that held by the people in their popular traditions.

Orthodox Christmas: Christology and Exhortation in a Cosmic Celebration

The hymns appointed for Orthodox Christmas reflect Greek patristic Christology and honor a cosmic celebration of Jesus's birth. The first hymn appointed for Vespers on Christmas Eve identifies Christ as the “Image of the Father” whose birth ends the separation of humanity from communion with God:[2]

Come, let us greatly rejoice in the Lord as we tell of this present mystery. The middle wall of partition has been destroyed; the flaming sword turns back, the cherubim withdraw from the tree of life, and I partake of the delight of Paradise from which I was cast out through disobedience. For the express Image of the Father, the Imprint of His eternity, takes the form of a servant, and without undergoing change He comes forth from a Mother who knew not wedlock. . . . Unto Him let us cry aloud: God born of a virgin, have mercy upon us.

The hymn opening Vespers exhorts the people to be joyful: God is in their midst, and God has restored the communion lost through sin by taking on the form of a servant. The hymn blends the elements of exhortation, wonder, and paradox: the true God becomes a servant, and true to the Greek Christological tradition, God relinquishes none of God’s divine nature but assumes the human condition in need of divine mercy. The hymns appointed for the feast tend to return to the Christology of late antique Christianity, referring to the revelation of a Christ who is “Light of Light, Brightness of the Father.”[3] This act of God requires an appropriate response from the faithful, and in addition to joy, the Christian community is obliged to offer God a gift:[4]

What shall we offer Thee, O Christ, who for our sakes hast appeared on earth as man? Every creature made by Thee offers Thee thanks. The angels offer Thee a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger; and we offer Thee a virgin Mother. O pre-eternal God, have mercy on us.

The genius of this particular hymn lies in the layers it creates for gift-giving. The hymn identifies Christ as the gift given for humanity (“who for our sakes” has appeared). But the opening verse challenges the liturgical participants to consider their responses to God’s gift of Christ, with the expectation that our response will be to offer our own gift. What, then, are the faithful to offer in exchange for Christ? The hymn offers examples from the gospel narratives of Christmas, referring to creation’s accommodations for Christ. The possibilities for practical reflection are almost inexhaustible here. One could certainly begin with the implications of offering God a “virgin mother,” an opportunity to reflect on Mary’s humility, suffering, and service through participating in God’s plan to dwell among us in Christ. Parishes can use this hymn as a tool for reflection for the ordinary person in the pew who is concerned about fulfilling obligations by assembling a gift list for family and friends. Christian faithful are called to participate in a gift-exchange with God, one which is regularly practiced in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Even tepid participation in the Christmas liturgy can awaken the spiritual senses in such a way that the season inspires the faithful to think about how the gift that they offer to God in thanksgiving for Christ might permeate the gifts that they offer one another with Christmas carols and egg nog in front of the
The theological possibilities that I have presented above should be challenged by reality: what happens if there are few present to hear the exhortations of this hymn? How can the invitation to share in the life of God and respond by becoming a giver of gifts reach those for whom Christmas is primarily a domestic celebration? Having established that this is a reality for Orthodox Christianity, I will conclude this essay by pointing to examples of the “people’s faith”—festal traditions that have emerged alongside the liturgical and that offer pastors some relief by demonstrating that the inner message of Christmas is reaching the people who are at home.

Many Orthodox and Greco-Catholic Ukrainians, Slovaks, and Carpatho-Rusyns continue to observe the domestic traditions of the holy supper (“свята вечера”), which would presumably take place before the Vigil of Christmas Eve. The holy supper originated as an agrarian feast of the winter solstice, where families would mark the winter solstice with a feast and perform domestic rituals including religious rites seeking protection from evil spirits and fierce beasts that might threaten the security of the family’s home. After the Christianization of this region, the domestic ritual took on a Christian note, and the evening ritual became a solemn meal honoring the birth of the Savior. The details of the meal constitute a paradox, since Christmas Eve is a strict fast. The foods prepared for the meal adhere to the fundamental fasting rules, but there is often an abundance of food, including fish and dumplings. The environment is festive, more the inauguration of the celebration that reaches its peak on Christmas Day itself.

The Ukrainian tradition literally has hundreds of carols, and dozens of variations on each of them. My presentation does not do justice to the wealth and depth of this tradition, but I offer examples from popular carols to show how the domestic tradition echoes the liturgical by expressing the theology of the feast through vivid imagination.

One of the most popular carols sung by the people, often by memory, is titled “Бог предвічний” (“The Pre-eternal God”). This carol is quite short, so we can present a translation of the entire text:

The pre-eternal God is born!
Today he has come from heaven, to save and comfort his people, and is glad! (repeated)
He is born in Bethlehem!
The Messiah, our Christ and our God for us all, is born for us! (repeated)
Let us sing: glory to God!
Give honor to the Son of God and our Savior, give him worship! (repeated)

This simple carol has traditional characteristics of a folk song, with the catchy refrains. The brevity of the text suggests simplicity, evident in the exhortations to sing and render glory to the Son of God. The text draws from the attributes of God iterated in numerous liturgical texts by describing God as “before eternity” (предвічний). Including this sophisticated word in a simple carol is to invite ordinary people to wonder at the mystery of the Incarnation. In other words, quotidian forms of poetry, verse, and song find new ways of communicating the inner message of Christmas to people in domestic settings.

Another popular carol from the Ukrainian tradition, “На йорданській річці” (“At the River Jordan”), imagines Mary, the Mother of God, bathing Jesus in the Jordan before placing him in the manger. The carol reprises episodes from the Gospel narratives, retelling them in folk motifs. After Mary bathes
Jesus in the Jordan, she wraps him in silk and places him in a manger near gray oxen, who come and breathe on him. Jesus is then placed on an altar, where three angels are flying nearby, with all of the Cherubim singing. Then, the Three Kings come, and they name Jesus, anoint him with myrrh, and give him flowers.

The imagery of the carol is remarkable. Creation stands in wonder at the birth of Jesus, and we all are reminded that this is the God whom the angels and Cherubim praise in song. The carol has strong Eucharistic overtones (with the altar references) while also prefiguring Jesus’s death and burial. These themes are neither original nor particularly remarkable, as the Nativity narratives themselves echo the primary story of Jesus’s Pascha, but it is the retelling of the story through simple folk motifs and actions without losing the sophistication of the Christmas message itself that is remarkable. The carols impart the same Christology and soteriology expressed by the liturgical hymns, with a different use of images.

Conclusion

Orthodox Christians face the same challenges as the rest of the Christian world with Christmas. The social and domestic demands of the season can drain people of energy, and the reality is that many people will not experience the riches offered through engaging in the complete liturgical cycle. Christmas observance has a strong domestic dimension in the East, and while the forms of that observance differ from their liturgical counterparts, the two are not at odds with one another. Both the liturgical and domestic observances of Christmas express joy and wonder that the God who was before the ages would come and dwell among us, call upon all of creation to come and worship him, and offer God a gift in response to the most precious pearl. The power of the domestic tradition of Christmas should be a source of joy for pastors, because the people have found their own way of honoring the only Son of God that reflects the richness of the liturgical tradition.

[At press time, a rendering of “Бог предвічний” was available on YouTube [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video_id) and a rendering of “На йорданській річці” was available on YouTube [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video_id).]

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**FOOTNOTES**

[1] The liturgical and musical practices which I discuss here as “Orthodox” are relevant both to Christians of the Eastern Orthodox Church and to Catholics of the Byzantine Rite.

The first of the two offices constituting the Christmas Vigil is Great Compline, which is appointed for after dinner. In practice, many families eat the holy supper after the service.


An anecdote about the popularity of this carol: in the Ukrainian parish tradition of my youth, it became customary to sing this carol at some time near the very beginning of the Liturgy, once the people had assembled, even though carols are customarily sung afterwards.

Based on the text accompanying the musical setting by Kyrylo Stetsenko in Antolohia, ed. Zavitnevych, 354.

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Christmas in Fear, or Looking over One’s Shoulder at the Crèche

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

Scanning recent news sources, anyone preparing for the upcoming celebration of Christmas might wonder how exactly we can manage to celebrate wholeheartedly in a global climate of terrorist attacks, massive migrations of traumatized war victims and economic refugees, and generalized fear for the future. Commentators, syndicated columnists and political cartoonists in recent times have highlighted the sharp dichotomy between what, for Christians, is above all a season of light in the darkness and a growing sense of apprehension that the darkness is in fact gaining on us.

Admittedly other periods of history have known serious gaps between the hoped-for “comfort and joy” of Christmas and prevailing conditions. Yet one only need recall depictions of soldiers in the trenches of World War I, managing to mark Christmas by temporarily replacing hostilities with fraternization, to appreciate the resilience of Christians determined to celebrate Christmas. Their act was extraordinary, but the impulse behind it is not unique. In wartime, following natural disasters, or in times of crisis, families pull together a makeshift Christmas with fewer places at the dinner table, and celebrate as best they can—often “for the sake of the children.”

In the mid-fourth century, a huddle of Christians in North Africa faced an even more immediate threat: that of targeted persecution, torture and execution by their own government, for the crime of being Christian (more specifically, the wrong type of Christian). The earliest Christmas sermon we possess was preached, not in times of peace and safety, but in a fearful situation.

The Bishop’s Sermon on Christmas

In 1922, the Benedictine monk André Wilmart published a critical edition and commentary on a homily attributed to the mid-fourth-century Bishop Optatus of Milevis in Numidia, North Africa. The manuscript exists in two editions, and while the version preserved in a homily collection at Fleury-su-Loire, dating from the first half of the eighth century, carries the attribution to Optatus of Milevis, a Carolingian-era copy preserved in the old ducal library at Wolfenbuttel does not. The only other extant manuscript authored by Optatus was a historical account and rebuttal of the Donatists and specifically of Parmenianus, successor to Donatus as Bishop of Carthage, dated 364–375 for the first six books. A seventh was written a decade later. Wilmart’s argument for Optatus’s authorship of this sermon rests not only upon the attribution in the Fleury manuscript, but upon on the occurrence of a dozen similar expressions, some stylistic markers, a few identical mistakes in the Latin, and the overall energetic and simple (if a bit long-winded) approach, also present in Optatus’s anti-Donatist work.

This sermon represents the earliest liturgical evidence for a feast of the Nativity of the Lord on December 25, and may constitute the earliest credible textual witness to a Nativity feast in the West, aside from possibly spurious additions to the text of the Chronograph of Philocalus of 354. These additions were thought to constitute the earliest notation of a Nativity feast on that date in a Western calendar, using source material dated by many twentieth-century scholars from the year 336. This alone makes this sermon text significant for tracing the historical origins of the Nativity feast: it may be the earliest reliable extant witness.
What makes this particular sermon interesting for our purposes, however, was its real subject: not the Nativity account in the second chapter of Luke, nor any of the associated Christmas pericopes apart from the coming of the Magi. For Christmas, Optatus takes the massacre of the Holy Innocents, Matthew 2:16–18, as his primary text.[4] That scripture text, plus some specific references in the sermon itself, indicate that this sermon was most likely preached in the years 361–363 during the persecutions of Christians under the emperor Julian, traditionally known as “Julian the Apostate.”

Officially, Christians in the then-overstretched and increasingly fragmented Roman Empire had enjoyed civil protection from persecution since Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313, and in fact the Christian religion was in the midst of a massive surge in popularity. But Julian attributed the cause of the incipient breakdown of the grandeur and strength of Rome to a failure to honor and appease the ancient gods of Rome. In fact, already the first generation of Christians had been persecuted out of fear that tolerating a sub-group of residents who refused to sacrifice to the gods would result in calamity for the population as a whole when the gods took their revenge. Julian seems to have been convinced that nothing short of bringing back that old-time religion would stabilize the Empire and put it to rights with the heavenly powers.

Julian, however, did not persecute all Christians. His animus was against Nicene Christians—those who taught the pre-existence of Christ in a Trinitarian Godhead. In North Africa, which in matters of both church and state lay close to Rome, this meant expanding the already yawning gap between Nicene and Donatist Christians, a chasm that had resulted from the contested election of Donatus as Bishop of Carthage and the unseating of Caecilian. Donatists were, in many regions, the predominant Christian faction and considered themselves the pure remnant that had remained faithful during the last widespread persecutions under Diocletian in the first decade of the fourth century. They thought themselves the heirs of the early martyrs, and they fought hard to extend their influence, even through violent bands of roving gangs known as Circumcellions who terrorized the local populations.

Julian’s strategy was to split the Christians even further by favoring the Donatists, releasing some of their adherents from prison and revoking some of the restrictions imposed on them by the emperors Constantine and Constantius some years before. This disconcerting reversal of their preferred identity as the self-righteous martyr-elite did not sit at all well with them.

So Optatus’s frightened community in Milevis was under intense threat from two sides. And on the feast of the Nativity he attempted, through his preaching, to support and strengthen his people by placing the events that terrified them into the context of their faith.

The brief introductory paragraph on the mystery of Christ’s Nativity is followed by an extensive section on the story of “insane” Herod’s murderous persecution of the innocent children: If “secular powers” (a clear reference to the Romans) hate us, they first hated the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. From the beginning of time innocence has suffered for the sake of truth, and the just ones will surely be saved. In the same way the Church, once persecuted, will enter into glory, and this is the hope of all Christians. Like the Magi, Christians present their gifts to God: the gold of their steadfast faith, the frankincense of their holiness of life and charity, and the myrrh of their suffering. Our faith is the gold tried in the fire. Let us hope therefore in the Lord, and we will be liberated from the devil and escorted by the angels.

Optatus, a local bishop caught in a firestorm of terror in a newly aggressive anti-Christian climate in Roman Africa, brought his own distinguished, though not brilliant, oratorical and theological skills to bear on the desperate pastoral needs of his people. He could not promise them physical safety, but in a
carefully worked-out exhortation to courage, he set their fear of sudden attack into a solid scriptural framework and promised them peace, if only in the life to come.

A Stubborn Hope

So what of us? Preaching that all will be well in the next life will most likely not find ready acceptance among many contemporary Christians, who are only too likely to dismiss such ideas as “pie in the sky.” Indeed, popular culture fosters a certain degree of cynicism as a realistic attitude fully justified by the facts. And, to make matters worse, not only the news but also our entertainment is saturated with dread: We’ve seen all too many crime shows and apocalyptic movies that vividly illustrate the many things we fear. Hope does not come easily to us. Yet the Christmas we have, despite the pockmarks of cheap glitz, commercial exploitation, and plain greed, does embody a certain hope. It makes promises we cannot keep yet cannot abandon: promises of peace on earth in spite of organized terror, and of good will to all persons even as the social and economic gaps grow wider.

Christians drape lights on the trees, bake the cookies, attend the children’s pageants and flock to Midnight Mass even when we might not have thought of church all year. Our hopes, perhaps our hope against hope, lie under the surface of our seasonal customs and pervade our dogged resolution to honor the mysteries we cannot explain. We do not let the bullies win—be they fourth century Circumcellions or twenty-first century terrorists. And we celebrate Christmas with the best we have at hand.

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FOOTNOTES

Wilmart specifies this as Manuscript nr. 131 in the municipal library of Orléans, pp 78–87.

MS. 4096, folio 8 verso to 12 recto. This had been published in a 1918 edition of sermons of Saint Augustine by D. Morin.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents dates only from the sixth century.

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PDF: christmas-in-fear_roll
The Grinch that Didn’t Steal Christmas: A Reformation Story

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

It is easy to believe that the John Calvin of legend sought to excise anything men and women might associate with joy and celebration. Even his contemporaries imagined his supposedly theocratic Geneva to be a gloomy haven for killjoys, and at one point it was widely rumored that the French reformer had personally abolished Sunday, banishing divine rest from the week. The accusation of hostility to church festivals dogged him most of his years as a reformer but was not true. Certainly, the Reformation witnessed the scrubbing of the Christian calendar through the removal of saints’ days and various traditional feasts, but Christmas remained central to the life of the new churches.

Reformed Protestants of the sixteenth century continued to celebrate Christmas and Easter, marking the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, along with Pentecost and Ascension. For the sixteenth-century Reformers, it was one thing to remove the superstitious veneration of saints but entirely another to follow through the year the life of Christ as told in the gospels. Calvin sought to reclaim Christmas as a celebration of Christ’s Nativity, a defining moment for Christians, without making the festival binding on the faithful. At the same time, his intention was to purge the holiday of the excesses of public exuberance traditionally associated with both the feast and what he viewed as the “abomination” of the Mass. It was a difficult balancing act and one not followed by his first spiritual descendants in the English-speaking world.

The hostility of later Puritans and Presbyterians to Christmas as a pagan and popish innovation, occasionally called “foolstide” in England, was anticipated by Calvin, who sought to persuade his contemporaries not to make the issue of religious holidays a matter of conscience. In seventeenth-century England, the twelve days of Christmas were traditionally celebrated with feasting, dancing, and general revelry, drawing the sustained ire of Puritans. One disapproving figure reflected that the youth were “so addicted to their toys and Christmas sports that they will not be weaned from them.” The Puritans sought to turn Christmas into a fast day, with an act of Parliament in 1643 declaring that it should be observed “with the more solemn humiliation because it may call to remembrance our sins, and the sins of our forefathers who have turned this Feast, pretending the memory of Christ, into an extreme forgetfulness of him, by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights.” Two years later, the Directory of Public Worship was unequivocal that feasts such as Christmas had no warrant in scripture. The attack on Christmas in England was sustained, fierce, hugely divisive, and ultimately a failure. The festival was restored under Charles II in 1660 to much public acclaim.

North of the Scottish border, when Christmas was abolished by Parliament in 1640 it was declared that “The kirke within this kingdome is now purged of all superstitious observatione of dayes.” The legacy lasted almost four hundred years, and Christmas was not restored as a public holiday in Scotland until 1958, remaining to this day very much in the shadow of Hogmanay (New Year). Across the Atlantic, the Puritans of New England demonstrated their contempt for Christmas festivities by ensuring that the day was filled with godly labor.

Such hostility to Christmas among later Calvinists obscures our understanding of the Frenchman’s own
thoughtful and subtle perspective. While Calvin would never have approved of the excesses and worldliness of the Christmas celebrations so despised by Puritans and Presbyterians, he remained profoundly attached to the marking of Christ’s Nativity in the life of the church, and he was not alone.

The Reformation largely embraced Christmas. In Huldrych Zwingli’s Zurich, the first Reformed church, we find that following the abolition of saints’ days the new church continued to observe Christmas, the Circumcision of Christ, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. For each of these occasions, selected passages from the Bible were read to the assembled faithful. At Christmas, not surprisingly, the reading was the second chapter of the gospel of Luke together with the second chapter (v. 11f) of Titus. At Easter the Resurrection story from Mark 16 was read alongside Colossians 3 and Psalm 113. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday were marked at the morning service with the passages relating the washing of the feet. In the afternoon ministers preached on the first part of the Passion story. On Good Friday sermons were to treat the remaining portion of the Passion narrative. Crucially, on both the Thursday and the Friday of Holy Week the Lord’s Supper was to be celebrated. The most sacred days of the Christian year were marked by scripture, preaching, and the sacrament of the table. To underscore the departure from Catholic practices, the celebration of Christmas was held on the nearest Sunday, aligning the feast with the most holy seventh day of the week, of which Calvin says in his commentary on Genesis 2:3, “That is a sacred rest, which withdraws men from the impediments of the world that it may dedicate them entirely to God.”

Calvin’s attachment to Christmas ran deeper than mere preservation of tradition. For the Frenchman, Christmas and Easter formed the two most holy days of the year, and he set aside his regular practice of preaching through the books of the Bible, known as lectio continua, to hold sermons on the Nativity and the Passion of Christ. Some of Calvin’s most moving words from the pulpit flowed from his preaching at Christmas. Speaking on the Nativity of Christ, Calvin drew his audience to consider the transformative joy of festival, declaring that it was a time for celebration in this world in preparation for the next. “Cursed then are all enjoyments, all honors, all things desirable, until we feel that God received us in mercy. Being thus reconciled with him we can enjoy ourselves, not merely with an earthly joy, but especially with that joy that is promised to us in the Holy Spirit, in order that we may seek it in him.”

The question of feast days and whether they were appropriate for Christians was important for Calvin because it spoke to the freedom of faithful men and women. Calvin briefly addressed the subject of Christmas on a few occasions, seeking to reclaim the festival, as his sermon declared, as a time of joy. The two most significant references come from the 1550s, a particularly fraught time for the Reformer as he faced a range of opponents, including those on the ruling council of Geneva. In 1553, Reformation Europe had been rocked by the trial and execution in Geneva of Michael Servetus, who was condemned as a heretic, wrongly in the eyes of Calvin’s many critics. Hostility between the Reformed and Lutheran churches over the Lord’s Supper reached a high water mark, while Calvin battled with the church in Bern, a powerful city that sought to establish its control over its client Geneva.

It was to the Reformer in Bern, Johannes Haller, that Calvin wrote a letter defending himself against those who claimed he was responsible for the abrogation of holy days. Calvin was clearly deeply sensitive to the accusations, arguing not only that it was the work of zealous officials in Geneva, but also that the magistrates had acted without his knowledge or consent. His own position on Christmas, he continued, was more tempered. “Besides, the abolition of feast days here,” he wrote,

has given grievous offense to some of your people [in Bern] and it is likely enough that much unpleasant talk has been circulating among you. I am pretty certain, also, that I get the credit of
being the author of the whole matter, both among the malevolent and the ignorant. But as I can solemnly testify that it was accomplished without my knowledge and without my desire, so I resolved from the first rather to weaken malice by silence, than be over-solicitous about my defense. Before I even entered the city, there were no festivals but the Lord’s Day. Those celebrated by you [in Bern] were approved by the same public decree by which Farel and I were expelled; and it was rather extorted by the tumultuous violence of the ungodly, than decreed according to the order of law. Since my recall, I have pursued the moderate course of keeping Christ’s birth-day as you are wont to do.

What did Calvin mean by “moderate” course? For him, religious holidays fell into the category of external matters, or adiaphora, as he pointed out to the magistrates of Bern in 1555. “Respecting ceremonies,” he wrote, “because they are things indifferent, the churches have a certain latitude of diversity. And when one has well weighed the matter, it may be sometimes considered useful not to have too rigid a uniformity respecting them, in order to show that faith and Christianity do not consist in that.” Whether a church chose to mark Christmas was to be left to its own judgment. Calvin was personally in favor, but he did not want the festival made a litmus test for faithfulness. That standard was found alone in obedience to the Word, which any true festival should proclaim and celebrate.

Calvin the pastor was well aware of the problems caused by the abolition of ceremonies to which the people were attached, and his conclusion was that churches and communities should be left to determine for themselves the number of holidays to be celebrated and to do so in a manner most congenial to peace and concord. To this end, he even proposed a practical way of dealing with Christmas and other occasions. “The most feasible means,” he writes, “that could be devised for that purpose seemed to be to keep the holy day in the morning, and open the shops in the afternoon.” (1555)

Calvin’s expansive attitude towards Christmas was shared by his close colleague and friend Heinrich Bullinger, who when drafting the Second Helvetic Confession in 1566, two years after Calvin’s death, declared:

Moreover, if the churches do religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord’s Nativity, Circumcision, Passion, Resurrection, and of his Ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, according to Christian liberty, we do very well approve of it. But as for festival days, ordained for men or saints departed, we cannot allow of them.

Like Calvin, Bullinger saw the celebration of Christmas and other festivals as a matter of Christian liberty—as among those matters left to the church to decide according to its faithful interpretation of the Word of God and for the good of the particular community.

Particularly in the transatlantic worlds of Puritanism and Presbyterianism Christmas formed the center of an ideological battle between competing visions of true religion. The principles concerning the freedom of the Christian that marked the attitude of Calvin and other figures of the Reformation were lost in the cacophony of arguments of a later, bitter age. Calvin’s name might be readily associated with hostility to Christmas, but that would be news to him.
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The Christmas Hearth

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

In 2001, while on a junior term abroad in Cork to study Anglo-Irish poetry, I learned that the actor Stephen Rea had recorded Derek Mahon’s recently published poem, “The Hudson Letter,” for broadcast on RTÉ Radio; and this is how I ended up spending the better part of that Christmas evening alone in the kitchen of an Irish stranger’s home, cozied up with a plate of warm food, a tumbler of whisky, and a radio.

My condition was not unlike that of the poet; I was an American student adrift among strangers in Ireland, listening to a (Northern) Irish poet writing from New York, a “resident alien on this shore.” The poem, in its eighteen parts, is a long letter home, though where or what exactly home is for either poem or poet, it is hard to say: one section is a reconciliatory letter to his adult daughter ("too busy growing up myself, I failed to watch you grow"—that was my father, too) and one to his son (“let me, Polonius of the twilight zone/ offer you some belated, functional succor”); another letter, to Fay Wray; homages to Ovid, Auden and Yeats; in some sections, the poet imagines others’ letters, assuming the voice of a young immigrant woman, Bridget Moore, writing home to Ireland from New York in 1895; finally, a devotional letter to his friend Patricia King, to whom the entire sequence is dedicated—it is a letter to the beloved, in the most Petrarchan sense:

I too sing, although she whom I admire
finds little to her taste in what I write.
I praise not only her clear skin and fine eyes
but also her frank speech and distinguished air;
so dumbstruck am I on her visiting days
I can find no words to speak of my desire
Yet, when she leaves me, my composure flees.
No one I know can hold a candle to her
and when the world dims, as it does tonight,
I see the house she goes to blaze with light.

The italics of the last ten lines in this section, called “Domnei,” are the poet’s; for the reader, they may serve as a marker, suggesting a long exhalation and a hushed gasp on the final line, which is how I have read this section every time. In 2001 I read it, longing to identify with the object of that male devotion; now when I read it, I’m the speaker, and the passage evokes my love’s clear skin and fine eyes, my fleeing composure, in the early days of our courtship. Long exhalation and hushed gasp—that’s how
Stephen Rea read it, too, as I huddled closer to the radio.

What did they think of me, my hosts? This stowaway in the kitchen. To my benefit, they didn’t seem to think too much about me at all—they simply let me be, Romanian-American flotsam that I was, and carried on with their Christmas family merrymaking. To be clear, they weren’t utter strangers; the muffled cheer on the other side of the kitchen door belonged to the immediate and extended family of a man named Gus, one of “the lads” I’d met (though, not one I knew very well) a few months back, when I arrived to study at University College Cork. The “lads,” five or six bachelors in their thirties, were regulars at The Thirsty Scholar (sadly, since renamed), above which another exchange student, Georgia, and I had briefly shared a room.

Hard-scrabble episodes, under the pressure of advancing decades, often become the stories we most love to tell (though, only if the scrabble eventually softens). Our room, which was split directly in half by a visible crack running uninterrupted up one wall, across the ceiling, and down the other wall, sagged on one side, and there was nothing but the filthy bloom of a balled-up bedsheet in the center of the mattress straddling the crack that surely ran across the floor, as well. However unappealing, it was free and temporary—a formula the impecunious know well. And, mercifully, pubs in Ireland close early; the crescendo of the bass below us broke by midnight, so we slept in our clothes, on layers of our clothes, under Georgia’s single, unzipped sleeping bag. (It was less than a month after 9/11, and the sleeping bag I’d asked to have sent from the United States was lost in transit.) Coming and going between the Thirsty and the college—I don’t remember if or where we bathed—in the three weeks before we found more permanent, separate arrangements, Georgia and I grew friendly with the lads, who in some way represented our reward for not ensconcing ourselves among our own. Here we were, among real Irish people, and—in a sentimental spirit that tempted me more than Georgia—in a pub during daylight hours. Wasn’t this the Irish writing life? The poet’s life? I hadn’t yet read Eavan Boland’s Object Lessons: “I know now,” she writes, “that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self-reflective individualism. Both states were necessary—that much the culture conceded—but they were oil and water and could not be mixed.”

My main trouble was that, while Georgia, an extroverted Australian (therefore, kin to the Irish not just in temperament, but likely also in DNA), kept pace easily with Irish banter and pints, I had no idea how to be among them. On the one hand, I had yet to learn that it was possible, indeed a good idea, to anchor new human relationships in curiosity and lightheartedness, rather than expecting the depths of life’s meaning to flower instantly, obviously, and perpetually, like a store-bought African violet. On the other hand, public drinking culture had never appealed to me (or, I didn’t appeal to it), and even Ireland wasn’t going to change that. I hoped desperately that there was some redeeming value in my painful and constant impulse to retreat into creative solitude (more accurately, solitariness)—painful, because I often lacked the will to assert my self-reflective individualism. This was at a time when, while not fully closeted, I wasn’t exactly out, either; I suspect I was having trouble just being, anyway.

What I still recall of Christmases of my late teens and early twenties: too much rich food and an accumulating nausea over the wasted paper, gift boxes, bows, ribbons, and the yardage of cellophane packaging. Also: one year, my mother cloaked herself for two weeks, including Christmas, inside an impenetrable shield of silence, composed so masterfully, that only I could hear it. At dinnertime with others, as if by sorcery, the shield dissolved; when company left, the shield went up again. She had learned, I know now, about a relationship I’d had with another woman. The silence had hurt, but the charade, the insistence on cheer, at the expense of grief, or joy—whatever real emotion could have
been—distorted some part of my spirit. “Young poets are like children,” writes Eavan Boland. “They assume the dangers to themselves are those their elders identified; they internalize the menace without analyzing it.” Boland’s point here is about poets, but I have trouble getting past the blunt force of what she’s saying about children, and by children, I suppose I mean anyone with living parents. I don’t recall the specific reason for why I had booked my return flight back to the United States after Christmas—maybe I already knew about the airing of “The Hudson Letter” (this being before podcasts)—it’s easy to imagine that the unknown held more appeal than the risk of another such charade.

This might have been my first Christmas away from my immediate family, but it wasn’t the first (or last) spent in the bosom of strangers. My first Christmas in the United States was in 1988, six months after my parents split up. My second-grade public school teacher had found an apartment for my mother and me and had kept a key for herself, sometimes coming by when we weren’t home to stock the fridge and cupboards or to leave new school clothes on my bed. On that Christmas Eve, Mary took us out to dinner, while her husband lugged a tree up to our third-floor apartment, decorated it, and left it lit for our arrival. This I remember: Mary didn’t accompany us upstairs—she understood so well the privacy required for the completion of a gift, and how charity, if self-conscious, debases the receiver—and we stood transfixed and silent, the blinking tree filling the apartment with the smell and glow of home. No longer strangers, we continued to celebrate all holidays with Mary’s family for the next twenty-five years. It’s worth saying that she made the world beyond my world more hospitable. When she learned that one of her fourth graders was getting teased at school for being shabbily dressed, she arranged to get new clothes to his grandmother, so that he would not know his teacher had bought them. When a friend’s husband lost his job, Mary solicited her help in the garden, and the money she paid this friend carried her and her husband through that dry season.

In the final section of “The Hudson Letter,” having compiled the individual voices of the previous seventeen sections, Derek Mahon assumes a more prophetic, collective voice—humanity’s letter home from a noisy, irreverent modernity. Or maybe it’s a prayer to a powerful spirit, “be it Byzantium or the sphere/ all centre, no circumference,” when he pleads:

\[
\begin{align*}
I’d say make all safe and harmonious in the end \\
\text{did I not know the voyage is never done} \\
\text{for, even as we speak, somewhere a plane} \\
\text{gains altitude in the moon’s exilic glare} \\
\text{or a car slips into gear in a silent lane . . .} \\
\text{I think of the homeless, no rm. at the inn;} \\
\text{far off, the gaseous planet where they spin,} \\
\text{the starlit towers of Nineveh and Babylon,} \\
\text{the secret voice of nightingale and dolphin,}
\end{align*}
\]
fish crowding the Verrazano Bridge; and see,

even in the icy heart of February,

crocus and primrose. When does the thaw begin?

We have been too long in the cold.—Take us in; take us in!

I’d been living in the Lake District, in the northwest of England, for four months when Mary’s cancer went from bad to worse; she died in the beginning of December, an hour before I touched down in New York on my way to see her.

When I returned, grief-stricken, to England a week later, several families in the little Cumbrian village that I didn’t yet know well enough to call home took turns in an unannounced vigil over my broken heart. I spent an entire day with a family I’d met once before at church, not long after I’d first arrived in England. The holidays had called from disparate ends of Scotland three out of four of their children, their babies, and a kindly nonagenarian who had once been stationed in Uganda with her husband, before the reign of Idi Amin. They were the grandparents of the Highland children. Invited for breakfast, I stayed on for lunch and dinner, unable to sever myself from the warmth of their bonds with each other. On Christmas Day I visited for a while with another family, then had dinner with the childless atheists (a designation they’d approve of), including a married lesbian couple that lived in the village. The kindest, most generous thing they all did, which Gus’s family had also done, was to give space to my alienation, space which had the grace-given capacity to contain and transform my alienation into . . . I don’t know what. I simply felt taken in.

That Irish family’s particulars have receded: after fifteen years, I might recognize Gus, but I no longer know the rest of their names or faces. (I can’t recall if there were children, if they were playing games or watching television in the other room. Was there, maybe, a small, black terrier?) But they made something like a hearth in me. Through the invitation, they built up the fire, then drew the flames in toward the heat’s center, letting the peat and wood burn low, glowing, throughout the night.

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Can We Still See Calvary from Bethlehem?

By Nicole Benevenia | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

It may come as a surprise to some that thoughts on Calvary would form the endnote to a collection of reflections on Jesus’s birth, but it shouldn’t. The two are inextricably linked. The story of God’s incarnation in human form in Jesus is at the very heart of Christian teaching, and Jesus’s birth and death are the two moments in which that Incarnation is most poignantly expressed.

Both in iconography and Christian folklore, it was in medieval Europe that the conventions of depiction and description of the nativity and crucifixion of Jesus became stylized and standardized. Medieval writers and artists illustrated both the birth and death of Christ with great vividness. Every detail that could be found in the gospels was teased out and harmonized into a single expanded script by devotional writers. Gaps and missing details in the story were filled by pious imagination, each writer adding his own gloss to the versions of earlier authors. By the time of Ludolph of Saxony (ca. 1295–1378), there was a treasury of lore and information about these events; his *Vita Christi* (1374) filled four volumes of text in its nineteenth-century printed form, much of it focused on Jesus’s passion and death.

The same phenomenon can be observed in the visual art of the period: Passion cycles were a tremendously popular and very important form of religious art from Giotto onward. Laid out like a storyboard, medieval altarpiece panels and devotional paintings telling the Passion story shaped forms of piety, such as the Stations of the Cross, that still have power and have influenced the devotion of centuries of Christians. Nativity pictures, too, especially pictures of the adoration of the Holy Child by the shepherds and Magi, helped cement in the Christian imagination a sense of Jesus as God in human form.

These immensely popular images proliferated—so much so that they are a commonplace in museums and libraries and churches today. Each of us can probably bring one or more of them easily to mind. Pictures of the Nativity enabled the artists to use their imaginations: the settings vary from simple stables to grottos to the ruins of ancient buildings. The number of people and animals varies too. But the constant is Mary, after the Christ child the most central figure: serene, contemplative, quietly joyful. Joseph is often on the sidelines.

In contrast to the expressive variety of the Nativity pictures, the conventional depiction of the Crucifixion is fairly simple: the cross squarely in the center, dividing the scene; Jesus’s arms stretched out, head tilted to his right, knees slightly bent, hair and loincloth either hanging limply or stirred by the breeze. Both in painting and in sculpture, John and Mary have first place at the foot of the cross. Here too, artists worked in smooth grooves of devotional and pious custom: the grief-stricken Mary’s red and blue dress is repeated in countless versions; John’s curly hair and mournful gaze have been depicted hundreds of times in hundreds of ways.

What brings these two images, Nativity and Crucifixion, together? The sense that to some degree they make the same point: God’s redemptive love shown in humility and self-giving. Ludolph of Saxony made this explicit by seeing in the Nativity the real starting point of the Passion story. This isn’t universal, to be sure; for most others, it was Jesus’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane that starts the Passion story; for others, the judgment before Pilate. Some even go back as to include the Last Supper and Jesus’s
long farewell speech. But Ludolph, and those influenced by him, take the longer view, and look all the way back to the beginning, and claim the Nativity itself as the start of the Passion story.

In a world such as ours, which separates so strongly and defensively the joy of living from the fear of dying, to claim that Jesus was one who—quintessentially—was born in order to die, can seem shocking and morbid to moderns. Surely no one could see in the infant in the manger a child-sacrifice as of old? Surely God had brought us out of that terrible mindset and into a new paradigm of life and death and life to come? But the child of Bethlehem, the center of the story and the picture, framed and encompassed by the wood of the manger, was from his birth the very Son whose life would both end and be fulfilled on a wooden cross on Calvary—from the grotto to the windswept hill in a single short lifetime.

And there it is. Mary, giving birth in pain, in the discomfort and uncertainly of a stable, far from home and her kinfolk, represents the unlikely fact that God’s work of salvation would be completed through humble people in humble places. The grieving Mary at the cross, about to lose her son, and still, by our standards, relatively young—most likely not past fifty—is every mother who outlives a child. Her grief on Calvary, like her joy at Bethlehem, is part of an ancient human story that touches every woman who bears or loses a child, indeed every parent.

Some medieval writers, including Ludolph, make it very explicit: the Passion of Christ begins with his human birth, in pain and blood; or in his circumcision in the flesh, where a drop of blood shed becomes a foreshadowing and the first of the wounds to come. We modern folk can take this into our own context and discover its parallels now—seeing in this story an unexpected, maybe even unwanted, birth in an inconvenient place; a flight as refugees from their homeland to an inhospitable neighboring country; and the challenges of being different in a traditional society. All of these disadvantaged the infant Jesus and his small family, just as millions suffer today.

Martin Luther, though not inclined to draw the line from the manger to the cross as directly as Ludolph, nonetheless used the Nativity story just over a century later to emphasize the completeness of Jesus’s coming in the flesh. No theologian but Luther has ever used in such a colorful way Jesus’s soiled diapers as a sign of God’s complete self-giving in the Incarnation—an earthy touch we can still appreciate. Luther drank deeply at the well of late-medieval Passion piety, and described both the Nativity and the Passion with vivid detail in his sermons for the seasons of Christmas and Lent in word pictures that still have the capacity to surprise and engage the reader’s emotions.

Can we still see Calvary from Bethlehem? Keeping the end of the story in mind can enrich our appreciation of the whole life of Jesus as a witness to divine solidarity with humankind in the Incarnation. Jesus’s humanity comes into especially high relief in these two life events in which he is not even a fully active participant: in entering life he is helpless; in leaving it he is often passive. Exegesis and homiletics have moved us away from the wonder of Jesus’s birth and death and more deeply into Jesus’s words and teachings, but there is something fundamental and elemental about an Incarnation that gathers the whole Jesus event—both birth and death—into one supreme expression of divine and human love.

To link these two stories together is also to lift up Mary’s role as witness and participant, and as a symbol of love and loss. It was not lost on the devotional tradition that Mary was, from the moment of the Annunciation, a powerful and essential part of Jesus’s story. When the Nativity and Crucifixion are lifted up as a pair, Mary’s role becomes even more important: she is the only person besides Jesus who
was present at both. Her life thus frames her son’s, in joy and in grief. Mary is not only Jesus’s human parent, but also the first witness to God’s remarkable work in the world through his miraculous birth.

From the grotto to the hill, from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross, from swaddling cloths to a seamless garment, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem: Jesus and Mary move through Jesus’s life with the inexorability and gravity of a liturgical procession. And we move with them, from Christmas to Easter, every year.

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