



Little Village, Center Of Christian Faith

Christmas Day this year will dawn over Bethlehem which is still quite the same little village it was nearly twenty centuries ago.

Electric wires crisscross the narrow streets. A few television antennas poke their thin fingers above the roofs. A church marks the spot where Christian faith had its origin.

Time has taken little toll in Bethlehem or its surrounding area.

Shepherds still tend their flocks in nearby fields as they did on that first, silent, holy night.

Visitors to Bethlehem can't help but wonder why God chose a place like this in which to be born. The fact remains, however, that here in this dim and out-of-the-way hamlet the eternal God stepped into our world.

A decree from Rome, however, triggered a chain of events which makes Bethlehem a name known around the world today.

Caesar Augustus, like most great administrators, had a passion for statistics. He wanted to know how many people owed him allegiance, how much property they owned, how much he could tax them to pay his armies to conquer even more people.

His census decree for Israel required everyone to register in his own native village.

Probably only Joseph was affected by the decree. Women didn't count for much according to Roman law, especially if they were poor peasant women.

Mary had her own sense of values and she wanted to go with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register. The ninety mile trek took about four days but the rainy season must have made the roads a hazardous slippery path of mud.

As the road nears Bethlehem it winds up a hill where travelers can see both Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph saw the two cities — the capital with its gleaming Temple and pinnacle of gold.

Herod's palace with its turrets and the bare rock where one day a cross would climax the story that was now beginning. And in front of them, the village of Bethlehem was strung out like a bean on a narrow road along a hillside.

Joseph certainly had relatives or friends in Bethlehem. The frequently told tale that he knocked at many doors only to be turned away is hardly likely. People in Bethlehem were not monsters and there could always be room for two more guests somewhere in the village.

The riddle has a better answer.

Even today in that area, homes are still one room structures. Kitchen, parlor, bed room — even kennel for the dog and goat and a few chickens — are all under one roof. This was hardly the place for a young mother to have her first child. So Joseph looked for privacy at the inn, but there was "no room" there either.

Inns in those days were really camp sites for caravans that plied the highways of antiquity. Jeremiah the prophet who lived centuries before the Christian era mentioned there was an inn near Bethlehem. It was probably just a fenced-in area where the camels and horses were herded together for the night while the men slept on platforms running along the sides of the fence. A few slieves with a canvas wall and roof were usually for rent on these platforms but all were occupied by the time Mary and Joseph arrived.

So Joseph guided his young bride to one of the numerous limestone caves which dot the hills of Judea. As a native of that area, he knew here at least there would be privacy — "and it came to pass while they were there, that the days for her to be delivered were fulfilled. And she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger."

A cave becomes the palace for divinity and a crib becomes the throne of God!

In Palestine, flocks of sheep and goats are kept outdoors

all year round. When the cold rains of winter lashed at them, shepherds and beasts found shelter in similar caves or under protecting ledges of rock. These men who lived with the animals were treated like outcasts by devout Israelites. There was little chance for men like this to observe the precise regulations of city Jews — even their observance of more fundamental laws was suspect.

To these men who were least in the kingdom of men, angels came with the first message about the kingdom of God — "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you who is Christ the Lord."

So the shepherds "went with haste and they found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in the manger... and the shepherds returned glorifying God for all that they had heard and seen, even as it was spoken to them."

Christians have always cherished this sacred grotto where the shepherds knelt in adoration.

The Roman Emperor Hadrian dedicated a pagan temple at the site in the year 135 to keep Christians away from the place. His temple only served to authenticate the spot for another emperor two centuries later who wanted to build a great church at the cave where Christ was born. Constantine, first Christian emperor, erected a superb structure about the year 325 which still stands with faded remnants of its original splendor.

His architects enlarged the cave and lined it with marble, a pious decision we may regret today, but despite this attempt to gild the grotto there is still clear evidence of the poverty and humility in which the Saviour was born.

Whether we kneel there or before the crib in our parish church, the message of angels still echoes across the centuries as it did over the fields near Bethlehem. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will."

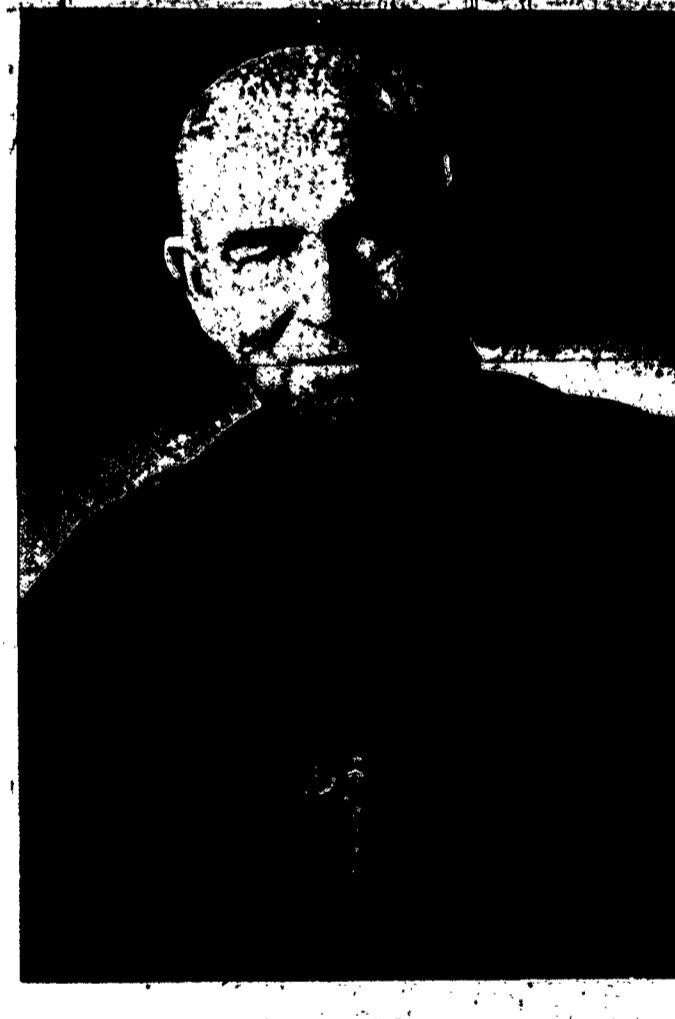
—Father Henry Atwell

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Triduum of Welcome to Christ Child



My Dear Friends,

May I extend to all our readers my best wishes for a Merry Christmas.

Everyone of us has an excellent opportunity of sanctifying our welcome to the Infant Jesus by attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion on Sunday, Monday and Christmas Day. Here we have a triduum of welcome to the Christ Child and at the same time an opportunity for asking Him for that "peace on earth and good will to men" which was sung by the angels over Bethlehem.

May I ask all of you to join me on Sunday evening over the Rosary for Peace. This prayer which we offer night after night to the Mother of God seems most appropriate at this holy season. As the world is today, it is a critical season as well.

Please, join me in this Christmas prayer for peace with justice and freedom on Sunday evening at seven o'clock over station WSAY.

May the Infant Jesus bless all of you, your families and your homes, and give you a Merry Christmas.

Your devoted shepherd in Christ,

+ James E. Keenan

Christmas Masses On Radio, Television

Solemn Midnight Masses of Christmas Eve will be broadcast and telecast by national networks and local stations as follows:

Pontifical Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City will be telecast by WROC-TV, Channel 8.

Solemn Mass will be telecast from the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, by WOKR-TV, Channel 13 Bishop Fulton J. Sheen will celebrate the Mass and preach.

Solemn Mass at Holy Rosary Church, Rochester, will be broadcast by radio station WHAM. Monsignor Charles F. Shay, pastor, will be celebrant and preach. Rev. James Cosgrove, curate, will give the commentary.

Solemn Mass at St. Mary's Church, Auburn, will be broadcast by radio station WMBO. Monsignor James D. Cuffney, pastor, will celebrate the Mass and preach.

Solemn Mass will be broadcast from St. Patrick's Church, Elmira, by radio station WELM. Celebrant will be Rev. John Hayes; Rev. Cassian Kirk, O.F.M., deacon, and Rev. John Curran, S.J., subdeacon. Rev. Patrick Hunt, S.A., will preach and Mr. Robert Sullivan will be commentator. The parish children's choir, directed by Mercy Sister Mary Bellarmine, will sing.

Pontifical Mass at St. Anselm's Abbey, Washington, will be broadcast by radio station WROC.

Other programs with a religious theme are also scheduled on Christmas Day by most radio and television stations. Local listings should be consulted for exact times.



'Every Hope' for Ailing Pontiff

Pope John was a wan Pontiff when King Mwambutsa of Burundi, Africa, visited the Vatican this week. Rumors persisted the Pope has stomach cancer. Vatican officials said "alarmist news" about his health is "completely unfounded." Cesidio Lolli of the Osservatore Romano staff said, "There is every reason to hope that the Pope does not have cancer." (RNS Photo)

Orange Blossom Diamond Rings. Terms. William S. Thorn Jeweler, 318 Main St. East.—Adv.

English In Liturgy? As Soon As Possible

Philadelphia — (NC) — Archbishop John J. Krol of Philadelphia told a press conference here that his archdiocese will take full advantage of new norms on the vernacular in the liturgy.

Use of the native language in at least portions of the Mass is virtually certain, said the Archbishop who was one of the five undersecretaries of the council.

The prelate said of his own See that "we shall have portions of the Mass in the vernacular as soon as we can get approval and as much in the vernacular as is permitted."

FOR THE CEMETERY... Monuments and Markers for Evergreen Blankets, Wreaths and Sprays and all Holiday decorations now ready to see our indoor display. You will appreciate our no-agent plan. TROTT BROS., 1126 MT. LAKE AVE. Free parking — Baker 5-9494. — Adv.