

Insights in Liturgy

The Word Incarnate

By **FATHER BENEDICT EHMANN**

Of the ancient idol-gods it was said: "They have mouths but speak not" (Ps. 115: 5). But Israel's God did speak. Again and again His people heard His word. "Thus says the Lord your God." That word came to Abraham, and a people was born. It came to Moses, and a nation was lifted up into God's covenant. It came to David, and a dynasty was confirmed for the messianic promise. It came to the

prophets, and a despairing people was re-created in hope.

Always it was a word of power, creating, liberating, enlivening, enlightening, encouraging. This word, God assured them, "is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us,

and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deut. 30: 11-14).

With the resonance of all this ancient history of God's word, the writer of the **Letter to the Hebrews** begins his priceless document:

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His Nature, upholding the universe by His word of power" (1: 1-2).

This Son, whom the Father sends, is the one whom St. John calls "the Word". "He was in the beginning with God," and "all things were made through Him" (Jn 1: 2-3). This one Word was in all the words God spoke during the Old Covenant, to patriarchs, kings and prophets. To some of them, like Jeremiah, it was "as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones" (20:9); to others, like Ezechiel who ate the scroll at God's order, "it was in my mouth as sweet as honey" (3:3).

But now, "in these last days," "in the fulness of time,"

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1: 14).

From all eternity, "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1: 18), He is the Father's Word, the perfect expression of His infinite Being. "The image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature" (Heb 1: 3). Then at the appointed time, He takes flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and becomes one of His own creation. He who had manifested Himself in sundry indirect ways through messengers and prophets, now manifests Himself in person. He who is the total, perfect Utterance of the Father, now diminishes Himself to a speechless Baby. Ages before, at the Exodus, "while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, this all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed" (Wis 18: 14-15). Now, on the silent, holy night of His Nativity, He leaps again from His throne, not in the majesty of Egypt and Sinai, but in the digginess and puniness of a Baby in swaddling clothes. This time He will stay with us — forever. That "en-

fleshment" will never be dissolved, undone.

More than this what can even God do? And why this unimagined, unexpected, all-but-incredible "emptying" of Himself? To say it was to save us from sin and hell is only half the answer. But another answer is the supplement to this one. Its great teacher is Duns Scotus. He taught that the Word would have become flesh, even without human sin to atone for. He regarded the Incarnation as the summit of the Father's creative work. In this divine plan, all creation was destined to come to a head and be united as one body in the Father's Word-made-flesh.

St. Paul's Ephesians comes to mind as the classic witness to this. It deserves repeated telling: "God chose us in Jesus before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fulness of time, to gather all things to a head in Him, things in heaven and things on earth" (1: 4, 5, 9, 10).


The Incarnation continues. The Word-made-flesh dwells not only among us but in us. "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). By His light we are made light. In His Word we are eloquent in giving glory to the Father and encouraging counsel to one another. In His love we are transported into the em-

brace of the Blessed Trinity. For we have the promise: "If a man loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make

Our home with him" (Jn 14:23).

This is closer to St. Paul's Greek idiom than the word "unite" in the Revised Version.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. **Albert Shamon**

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 1:18-24. (R1) Is. 7:10-14. (R2) Rom. 1:1-7.

Before Christmas the days are hectic for most people. We get so busy with the sheer work of celebrating Christmas we miss the peace of Christmas, the meaning of it all. And that is a pity.

The Church asks us on the last Sunday of Advent to pause awhile and reflect on how God became one of us. Reflecting on that mystery should bring real peace, real joy, real Christmas blessings to us. Let us try to put the busyness aside and take time to think about how God became one of us.

Matthew's gospel starts: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about." Then he tells the story from Joseph's point of view — to connect Jesus with David and all the kings of Judah. Matthew says that Joseph found Mary with child. Sometimes the impression is given that Joseph is horrified by his discovery, that he sees himself betrayed by Mary, that there was nothing left for him to do but to put her away quietly.

I'd rather like to think it was not that way. Joseph had the most profound respect for Mary — in fact, he must have agreed to a virginal marriage. To find her with child after this must have been a great mystery to him. Knowing Mary, knowing the Old Testament history of miraculous conceptions (Sara, Hannah), Joseph must have surmised some divine intervention. I like to think that was why he decided to divorce her.

Joseph, you must remember, was a very holy man. He was a devout Jew whose whole life had been lived in the awe and reverence of God. He knew his Bible history. He knew the story of the covenant on Mt. Sinai — how Moses forbade the people under penalty of death to touch the mountain, out of reverence for God who was to visit it. He knew how in King David's time one who had touched the Ark of the Covenant died on the spot. He knew that only a priest, once a year, could enter the Holy of Holies.

And could he not then have guessed that God had visited His people in a

special way, that Mary had become a true Ark of the Covenant and a true Holy of Holies? I like to think that he did, and that out of deepest reverence for God, he was ready to bow out of the picture. God had somehow claimed Mary for his own, and Joseph was willing to renounce his claim, to put her away quietly out of reverence and deference to God.

Yet God needed Joseph. He needed him to enable His Son to be born within a family. He needed him to prevent the disgrace that would have come upon an unwed mother. He needed him to provide and protect both Mary and her Child. And so the angel said to Joseph, "Son of David, have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is true that she has conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will have a Son and you are to exercise a father's rights by naming Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins."

It was the beginning of a new age of intimacy with God. Joseph could still cherish and live with his wife. He did not have to back away from her. He did not have to keep his distance, as his ancestors did from the mountain of God, the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy of Holies. **God is now accessible to man, man can come to God!**

God wants man to come to Him now; and we come to Him by being what He came the first time to teach us to be — namely, caring, sharing, giving and forgiving. He will come the second time to judge what we have become, what we have made of ourselves. His first coming really happened, so will His second.

Therefore, so live now, so come to Christ now, that first coming will not have been in vain and His second coming will not be a time of wrath.

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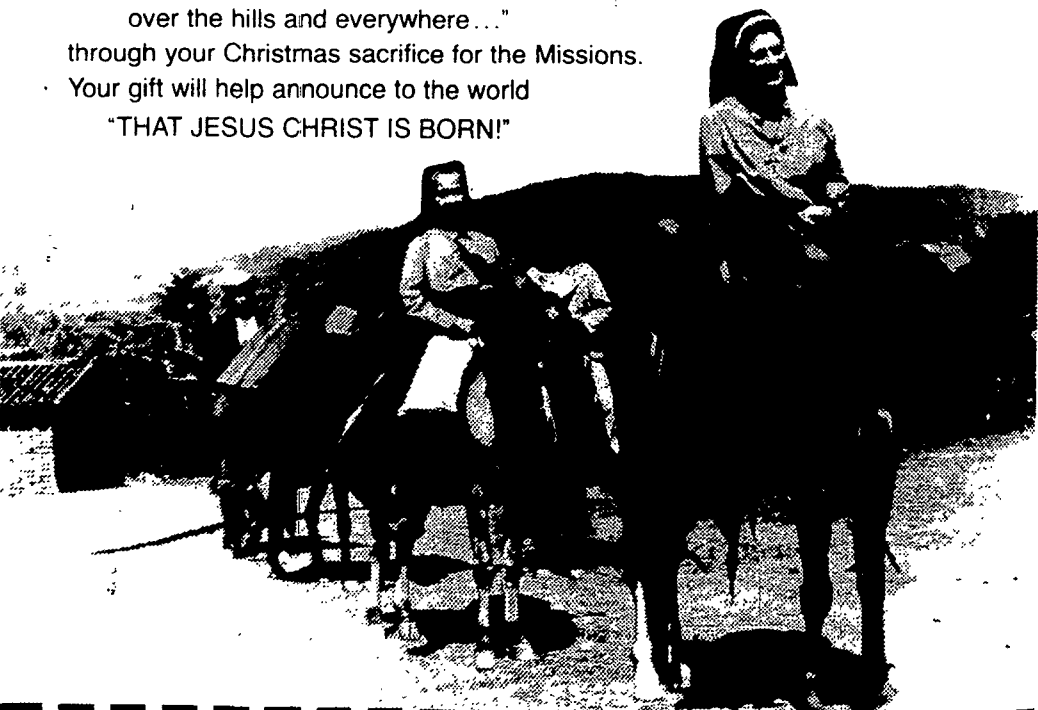
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