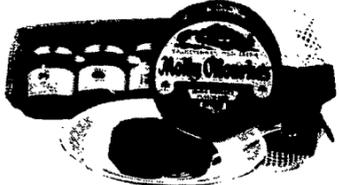


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Columnists

A Christmas present for Christ

By Father Albert Shamon
Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 1:26-38; (R1) 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16; (R2) Romans 16:25-27.

Sunday's Gospel narrates how Mary became mother of the Son of God — namely, by responding to the word of God delivered by the Angel Gabriel.

For Mary to say "yes" to Gabriel demanded a faith never before seen or since equaled on earth.

Moses said "yes" to God, but reluctantly and only after having witnessed many of the great deeds of God. He saw a bush that was burning, but not being consumed. Still, Moses wavered in assenting to God's desire that he lead His people out of Egypt. He saw the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea and the rain of manna from heaven, yet he still doubted God.

Gideon demanded that God perform signs and wonders on a sheep's fleece before Gideon would rescue Israel from the Midianites. Even after having seen fire come down from heaven, the prophet Elijah prayed for death because of the fruitless opposition of Queen Jezebel.

But this was not so with Mary. No sign was given her regarding her conception but the response of her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth knew man. Mary did not, nor would she. Still, she believed the impossible — that a virginal womb could conceive. Hence Elizabeth's greeting: "Blest is she who trusted that the Lord's word to her would be fulfilled" (Luke 1:45).

Nor was this the greatest test of Mary's faith. She was initiated into a radical new faith. The saints of the Old Testament saw the great deeds of God. But Mary was asked to believe in the little deeds of God.

Pride caused the first Adam to sin, so the second Adam (Christ) would empty Himself, would come as a servant, a hidden God. The frightful consequences of sin were suffering and death, so the second Adam would come as a suffering Messiah.

All but a remnant of God's people expected the Messiah to be a reincarnation of David — a political Messiah, a warrior-king who would crush Rome. The servant role of Jesus, His humility and meekness, scandalized the Jews. As for suffering, not even Peter, who witnessed

A Word for Sunday

Jesus' great words and deeds, could accept this role.

Yet Mary, the teenager from Nazareth, bowed her head and accepted a hidden God. She accepted her Son's suffering role as revealed by the prophet Simeon. She accepted every other revelation about her Son, who seemed so ordinary. And when He hung on a cross, she was there — accepting!

That was why, when a woman praised Mary for being the flesh-and-blood mother of Jesus, He responded: "Oh no, she is more to be blessed, because she, more than any other creature in the world, heard the word of God and kept it!"

The mysteries of the rosary are mysteries precisely because they canonize ordinariness. The majority of people are ordinary. President Abraham Lincoln said: "God must love the ordinary people, because He made so many of them." The mysteries of the rosary tell about ordinary people and ordinary events that saved the world and led to high sanctity among those people.

On the eve of the Feast of the Annunciation (May 24, 1985), Our Lady is reported to have said to the seers of Medjugorje: "Today I want to invite you to confession. Even if you have been to confession recently . . . I invite you to be reconciled to the Lord."

She specifically designated the sacrament of reconciliation. Reconciliation means accepting once again our Lord's will, which we refused in sin.

Our Lady invites us to accept God's plan, as she did at the Annunciation. Her fiat was her reconciliation. Accepting His will makes possible our reconciliation.

What better Christmas present can we bring Christ than to be reconciled to Him through confession?

Pursuing the magnificent star

By Cindy Bassett

By the time I reached Jerusalem, the magnificent star had appeared in the night sky. That night, it seemed to shine more brightly than ever before, as if it reflected my growing belief in the new kingdom. King Herod's building projects created a strong impression on visitors to Jerusalem, but this star would always overshadow his power.

Once at the palace, I found King Herod in the meeting room, surrounded by the most influential of Jerusalem's Hebrew leaders. As I entered the room, I could sense Herod's growing concern about the star.

"I want no one causing trouble for me with the Roman government by claiming that a new ruler is coming," he proclaimed, pausing as if to challenge the Hebrews to contradict him.

Benjamin, a lawyer, spoke first. "As you know, King Herod, we have always given you and the Roman authorities our support, and our religion strictly forbids us to trust in astrology to interpret history. But, in this case, the words of our own prophets seem to coincide with the astrologers' claims about this star. Something of great importance is about to happen."

King Herod's face showed his anxiety as he turned to the priest Matthias. "What words of the prophets?" he asked.

"Isaiah wrote more than 700 years ago that 'the people who walk in darkness shall see a great light — a light that will shine on those who live in the shadow of death,'" Matthias said. "I think this great star could be the light foretold by Isaiah."

As the meeting ended, King Herod struck to the heart of the matter. "I hardly think that life here in Jerusalem is an existence in 'the shadow of death.'"

The king finally noticed me standing in the entryway, and his thoughts quickly shifted to my mission in Bethlehem. "Claudius, much has occurred since your departure a few days ago. But first tell me of your findings from the census records."

"There was nothing of any consequence," I said, lying. "In checking the lists that have been compiled so far, I found no connection to the House of David. Perhaps you are too worried about this star."

The Bible Corner

King Herod searched my face suspiciously, and I kept my eyes lowered for fear that they might reveal my deceit. "What has happened in my absence?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I have received a report that three Persian kings have arrived in Judea," the king replied. "They, too, have seen this star in their own country and are following it to the source."

"The source?" I asked, my heart quickening.

"I have requested a secret meeting with them tomorrow," King Herod said. "We will learn why they seek this star so diligently!"

The three kings who stood before King Herod the next day were certainly no threat to him. When they spoke of their reasons for following the star, it was with a great sense of humility. They saw this phenomenon as something far greater than themselves.

"We first saw the star two years ago," they said. "We are certain that it indicates the birth of a king, and we have come so that we may worship him."

"Yes, it is good that you seek this new king," Herod said craftily. "And when you have found him, return to me and tell where he is, so that I, too, can go and pay him homage."

The three kings, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, had traveled a great distance, so Herod invited them to stay as his guests at the palace that night. The next morning, as they prepared to leave, King Herod instructed me: "Claudius, follow closely behind these three kings. This whole thing has gone far enough, and I am going to put a stop to it once and for all!"

I was happy to do what Herod ordered, because it would put me one step closer to finding the new kingdom.

To be continued . . .
Scripture reference: Isaiah 9:2, Matthew 2:1-10.

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