

Week 5: *The Nativity*

Pray

Pray one decade of the Rosary, focusing on the Nativity. Grow with Mary in the late stages of pregnancy. Wonder with Joseph at the miracle of spiritual conception. Travel with the Holy Family long and far; be rejected with them at the inn. Prepare yourself to receive your Savior with empty and open hands. Trust Him to work within you.

Read

- Luke 2:1-20; Mat. 1:1-2:12

Reflect

Prayerfully reflect on *The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (attached), or enter into your own reflection. Ask for the grace to experience the Nativity with new eyes and an open heart. You may find it particularly challenging to avail yourself to new insights from a story you have (most likely) heard so many times. With the shepherds, empty yourself of your possessions. With the Holy Family, travel away from your comforts and from your own knowledge. With Mary, swell in the late stages of pregnancy, focusing only on the reception of your infant Lord. Now, ask for the grace to receive Him anew in this mystery.

Enter into the Scene

1. Imagine Jesus newly born – literally the God of all creation embodied in a downy-skinned, heart-faced infant. Imagine His legs curled up in fetal position and His little feet, puffy and rounded out, so many months away from being ready to walk. Perhaps His arms are flailing because He does not yet have the capacity to control His own limbs. Mary swaddles Him to help Him rest. What is it like to cradle God, made present to the world as an infant? Consider the apparent contradiction Mary and Joseph must feel – Jesus has made Himself willingly dependent upon them, but they are ultimately fully dependent upon Him. Does this seem like a curious way to accomplish the salvation of the world?
2. Take a moment to behold the beautiful spiritual reality of the Nativity. Now, plunge the scene into actual human reality. Consider the dirty stable, the “mess” of birth, the muck of the manger, the noise of animals, and the smell of manure. Next, imagine the shepherds – scruffy, unpolished, and unbathed – crowding in the already cramped quarters. How ordinary – even less than ordinary or well below average – the initial moments of Christ’s human life must have seemed. Have you ever experienced extraordinary works of God that were cloaked in ordinary human experience? Has the humanity of life ever prevented you from noticing or appreciating the divine?

Question

1. When we recite the Nicene Creed at Mass, we bow during these words: “By the power of the Holy Spirit, He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” Why do you think this is? As a point of comparison, the words that follow these in the creed are: “For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered, died, and was buried.” Why do you think that we draw particular reverence to the former and not the latter?
2. The genealogy of Jesus listed in the 1st chapter of Matthew – which could even be thought of as the lineage of salvation history – is drawn through the person of Joseph. To state an obvious point, St. Joseph is not Jesus’s biological father. Why do you think Jesus’s genealogy is presented in this way? What do you think this says about adoption, fostering, and family’s formed by unique circumstances? What does this say about the role/person of St. Joseph? Why do you think Jesus was born into a family?



Reflection: *The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ*

Your Mother remains at peace as hints and rumors of Her pregnancy circle. She has no reason to explain or defend Herself against the questioning looks of others. Her only desire is to please You; Her only purpose is to bear You to and for others. God the Father's plan for provision is not made known to Her, but Her trust is not dependent on circumstance. She reposes Herself within Your love and waits upon the Holy Spirit.

Joseph's initial reaction is both merciful and righteous. Moral law prohibits marriage in this situation; however, the law of charity within his heart prevents him from exposing Mary to shame or punishment. He finds a way to adhere to the law while protecting Your Mother, by planning to divorce Her in secret. By faith Mary remains fully immersed in Your presence, but this does not erase Her feelings of deep sorrow. She sees Joseph's distress and disappointment, and She carries his heavy burden in Her own heart.

I am reminded again of how dissimilar I am to Your Mother; I want to force my desired outcome with explanations of self-defense. But She is content to wait, and She calmly bids me to wait alongside Her. Mary is endlessly and joyfully submissive to You, to Her Heavenly Father, and to the Holy Spirit – Her Spiritual Spouse. Here, I find She is freely submissive to Her earthy spouse too. She waits for the Holy Spirit to guide Joseph and is happy to follow him rather than lead.

It is by Mary's docility and intercession that Joseph is able to hear Your plan spoken through angelic dream. With perfect obedience he accepts Your Mother in marriage and receives You as his foster Son. Without question Joseph believes all that You show him.

The timing of Your birth corresponds directly with the required census. I find myself wanting to intervene again. Why ought Your Mother to travel when She is so far along in Her pregnancy? Could the journey be dangerous for You and Her? But Joseph and Your Mother remain meek to this obligation. They see no dichotomy between God's will and human condition, and they do not do not crave comfort above affliction.

Your parents enter overcrowded Bethlehem. "No room," is their only greeting. I suddenly realize the deeper truth hidden in the innkeeper's refrain. There truly is no room for You here, not among busied and full people, all determined to be and do, all employed by agendas and pride. I take a moment to notice my own heart; I find myself as overfilled and preoccupied as Bethlehem. How I long to be more like the stable, uncontrived and simple, overlooked by others, open and waiting for You.

Your parents remain humble in trust, praising the Father's goodness when they receive their modest accommodations. Perhaps whatever preparations they made for Your arrival had to be left in Nazareth. It is with empty hands and open hearts that they enter the stable of Your birth. You are born into nothing, placing Yourself beneath rather than above.

You are born in perfect humility. The light from the night star unfolds above You, circling You in a halo of warmth and wonder. Though angelic choruses fill the December sky, Bethlehem is not quiet enough to hear. Though a large star rests itself above Your stable, only a few men from the east will focus their eyes to see.

Your mother wraps You in linens, kissing the palms of Your hands and the arches of Your feet before tucking each arm and leg into Your swaddling clothes. For a brief moment, I skip forward and see Your Mother receiving Your crucified body in a similar way. I see Her wrap You in linen grave clothes, binding You in Your humanity then as She does now, swaddling You in a love that You will not untie.

Infant Jesus laid in manger, make me as low and simple as You. Silence my heart that I can hear the angels' hymn; focus my eyes that I may see the light of Your star. Make me as lowly as the shepherds, that I may be your guest.