

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Eve
December 24, 2019

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us Redemption comes to us preeminently through the Blood of Christ's Cross but is a mystery at work throughout His entire life. (517). *Everything* Jesus did is for our saving benefit. And that saving begins in the first moment of the Incarnation. At the Annunciation, nine months before His birth. Jesus became a priest. That is when He began making sacrifice for His people. And by virtue of becoming one of us and with us, Our Lord began to enjoy the Beatific Vision accorded the saints of God. That is what happened when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." No one sees God more perfectly than this tiny Baby in the manger. Why? Because His human soul is united to the Divine Word Who *is* the Beatific Vision.

In one of our beloved Christmas hymns we sing "the silent Word is pleading." But if you had visited Bethlehem with the shepherds, the Word was not silent. The Divine Word was *baby babble!* The Word was made flesh means *infant* flesh. "*In-fans*" is Latin and means "**not speaking.**" One of the messages of Christmas is that no stage of human life is unworthy of Christ's presence: not the Virgin's womb, nor the swaddling clothes, nor the cattle-feeding trough for a bed. Pope St Leo the Great tells us the Magi found a little newborn baby, *in need of the help of others.* The Word of God was speechless. But there is no indication the sight of this tiny child at Bethlehem disappointed the Wise Men.

This would be a characteristic of the Incarnate Life of Christ: the Word Incarnate does His work of redemption in *silence* as well as words, in suffering as well as acting. So one of the messages of Christmas is the principal actor at Bethlehem had a non-speaking role.

This aspect of the Nativity may escape our fondness for the grand gesture and for noise. But the Church Fathers often talk of "The Word abridged" and "The shortened Logos." They found St Paul referring to the Lord's coming this way: "He will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness because a short work will the Lord make upon the earth." (*Romans 9:28*)

The world's art museums are full of paintings of the Nativity and of the Madonna and Child. When you view them, does it ever occur to you a woman could not

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possibly deliver a baby so large? These paintings are often undeniably beautiful and devotional, but a newborn infant is not often portrayed. The great Renaissance painters give us a chubby well-fed toddler who looks as if he's just come back from the gym! Appealing to Byzantine art is no help, for there we get the Babe of Bethlehem looking very much like a tiny adult. Occasionally a painter gets it right and gives us a real new born child: blotchy and slightly misshapen and shivering from exiting the warmth of his mother's birth canal, and now having to do it all on his own! Fortunately, Holy Scripture, unlike Hollywood movies, pulls the curtain and gives this mother and child a little privacy

St Thomas, fully accepting a real infant birth, told us of Jesus "He is said to be emptied or shortened, not because anything has been taken away from the plenitude or magnitude of His divinity, but because He has assumed our smallness and littleness."

God's final approach to mankind for the purpose of redemption took a quiet way of simplicity and humbleness. It is a way we would not have thought the best path for God to follow in the purpose of rescuing us from our sins. And it didn't begin well. After the angelic outburst, the shepherds paid their respects to the family and went back to their sheep. But God is God and we are not, and *it happened His way*. Here, in this stable, was the One invincible power of the universe: the love of God. All else will fail. But "love never faileth."

God has come, and *this is way our marvelous God has come*.