

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Day  
December 25, 2020

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A beautiful part of the Christmas account is there were only two people present when the Son of God was born in Bethlehem. Without the Blessed Virgin Mary there would be no birth. Without Saint Joseph there would be no protection for the young mother and child. It was a very minimum requirement for the Birth of God Incarnate. So humble, so quiet! I said last night: there was no ticker tape parade! No wonder our medieval ancestors rejoiced that the Nativity was “below the devil’s radar.” The Creator knew how to sneak into His creation.

By tradition, there were also animals present. In most every crèche collection you can spend as much money on the many animals as on the central figures. The animals are only implied, because they are not mentioned in the Nativity account. The implication is because of the manger, a feeding trough for cattle. The manger is mentioned three times in sixteen verses. Why three times? When it is declared: “Unto *us* a child is born this day,” the “us” is for the benefit of modern city folk. People at the time of Christ’s Incarnation would know all about mangers.

The great prophet Isaiah had foretold the presence of the ox and donkey. He probably could not see as far ahead as Bethlehem. But he did say: “The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know; my people does not understand.” (*Isaiah 1:3*) So there it is. On Christmas, the Holy Family of God consisted of two faithful people and two members of the lower created order, representing their kind as once they did in Noah’s Ark. On Good Friday the family of God was smaller still: only Our Lady and St John. But Almighty God knows how to work the numbers! The subsequent history of His Church is testimony to that fact.

After all these years we still wonder at the birth of God Incarnate in such circumstances, even though the telling of it is so familiar. We marvel at the unspeakable love which prompted Almighty God to enter His creation to save us from our sins. Saint Paul, seldom at a loss for words, tried to put into words how and why God could dispossess Himself of His Heavenly power, wisdom, and glory, and become a baby. All the Apostle could say was, God “*emptied* Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” (*Philippians 2:7*)

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For here was majesty beyond words or thought, the splendor of The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, completely dependent upon the mercy of His creatures. Mary and Joseph provided swaddling clothes, mother's milk, and protection. Perhaps the animals provided some body heat to warm the tiny shed where the Christ Child lay. Later, Mary and Joseph taught God to walk and say His prayers. Much later still God would accept help carrying His own Cross, and accept water offered His dry lips by a blaspheming Roman execution squad.

But back to the wonder of Christmas Day! After noticing the Holy Family, we realize the manger setting. It is a sign this birth is just like any other birth. Here is a body come from us and a soul come from God. The cattle also bear testimony. They are not merely a sign of the humility and poverty of the Holy Family. Nor are they included to jack up the price of your crèche collection! The cattle give us a comfortable sense of *earthiness*. With the two poor displaced persons, they are representatives of the poorer relations of the human family. Without them being present there is no party. "For unto *us* a Child is born." God did not deceive. Although fully God, this Child is truly man. It was a miraculous birth, but it was a lowly human birth, a birth connected to all of us, and therefore *for us* in a special intimate way.

Catholic theology is not ashamed of the paradox. When we trace the history of God-made-man, our very terms of reference are paradoxical. Guided by the Holy Ghost, the Church has the correct instinct that her theology is safe when her opponents accuse us of believing contradictory things. The gospel proclaims Mary a blessed Virgin, and it also says her Son was born in a cattle shed.

God did not desire to come close by! It isn't His new plan to help us fight against sin, the world, and the devil. He had been doing that all along! The great good news of the manger scene is that Almighty God *has become one of us*, part of us, *and therefore we in Him*. You and I know this is where we belong, because we have been born into the family of grace.