

To become a child in relation to God is the condition for entering the Kingdom. For this, we must humble ourselves and become little. Even more to *become children of God* we must be *born from above* or *born of God*. Only when Christ is formed in us will the mystery of Christ be fulfilled in us. Christmas is the mystery of this "marvelous exchange." (#526)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

remain with us. It is a mystery! But it is not a separate mystery, distinct and independent of the paschal mystery. Christmas is the beginning of the paschal mystery and draws its true meaning from Easter. The Gospel infancy narratives are more than stories about the birth of a child. They are "infused with a post-resurrection insight into his divinity." ¹ The infancy writings "are anticipations

The present lectionary retains the fifth century custom of reading Hebrews 1:1-6 and the gospel of John 1:1-18. These readings do not relate the expected Christmas story but they concentrate on Jesus being the incarnate Word in our midst. This is key to understanding Christmas. "In the incarnation Jesus definitively and irrevocably took on our humanity; the destiny of the believers on earth is

CHRISTMAS BEYOND CHILDREN

Next to the yearly celebration of the Easter triduum the Church holds sacred the commemoration of Christ's birth and first manifestations. The Christmas season celebrates the appearance of God among us, the beginning of our salvation in Christ. Regardless of tendencies to focus on the child Jesus at Christmas and despite societal trends to center Christmas celebrations around childish sentimentality, this season is not primarily a celebration of Jesus' birth. Christmas has a deeper meaning: Jesus inaugurated the reign of God in our midst! To focus the season fundamentally on the birth of the Christ child is to stifle the ancient messianic longings and our deepest Advent longings for the fullness of God's reign which *is* but is *not yet*. Christmas is not a feast about a child primarily for children. It is the feast of the child "destined for the rise and fall of many" (Luke 2:34), the redemption of Israel.

Christmas is more than an event. Jesus was born in Bethlehem once and for all time but Christ is still with us and will

of the acceptance and rejection that Jesus would meet unto death. Therefore, Christmas is as integral to an adult understanding of faith as is Easter" (*Lectionary for Masses with Children* (LMC) #44).

The dominant image of the Christmas season is clearly the crèche or manger scene which has as its origins liturgical plays performed in abbeys and cathedrals. The image of the crèche or manger has visually evoked a type of historicism that can fragment the reality and mystery that is Christmas. While the mystery of redemption is always alive and present in our midst, historicism tends to isolate and decompose it into individual commemorations of past events, not a present reality. ² This often finds expression in dramatic reenactments that are limiting and often do not take us beyond pretending that we are in Bethlehem.

The focus on the crèche image was slow to find its way into the church's official liturgical celebration. In the development of the Masses for the celebration of Christmas, the first to develop was the Mass for the day itself.

now to share in his divinity." ³ However, our tendency in liturgical preparation is to replace the Prologue of John with the Bethlehem story. This can be both symptomatic and reinforcing of an understanding of Christmas as being one moment in time rather than an ongoing reality.

This reduction of the Christmas reality to merely a story about the *Babe of Bethlehem* has led to interpreting Christmas as a feast for children. Stories about children are usually for children but this child image is *Emmanuel*, *God with us*, Jesus himself, the servant of all, the one who washes feet, the one who waits on sinners, the one who sets off to seek the lost and carry them back, the one who suffered, died and rose from the dead. This is the image of the child into which we are formed by the grace of the incarnation. This is the image of the child *to which the kingdom of heaven belongs*. ⁴

This is not to say that Christmas should not be celebrated with children. The thrust simply should not be that it is a celebration primarily **for** children. "Christmas should not be present-

ed as a birthday party for Jesus, nor should secular notions of Santa Claus be introduced into the Christmas liturgy" (LMC #52). The proclamation of the Advent-Christmas scriptures voicing the ancient Messianic hope, announcing God's bursting forth into humanity, and the dawning of a new people belong to "young hearers" (LMC #54) as well as to the adults. "Children's openness to the power of stories make them ready listeners" (LMC #48). The prophetic imagery coupled with the gospels, proclaimed well can stir a much needed religious imagination in our children. This can be accomplished in the liturgical setting of children's liturgy of the word planned and celebrated well. Homilists both at children's liturgy of the word and in the Sunday assembly need to take Christmas beyond the stable of Bethlehem to a way of life.

There is also a need for good family catechesis supporting the celebrations during the Advent-Christmas cycle. "Catechesis should include breaking open the symbols and the Word of Advent and Christmas so that the faithful can more fully appreciate their biblical, ecclesial, and liturgical meaning in their lives."⁵ Afternoon sessions of Christmas storytelling can be effective catechesis for families with children. Families need to be provided with prayer services such as the blessing of the Advent wreath, the placing of the Nativity scene in the home, the blessing of the Christmas Tree and the blessing of the home on Epiphany. *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers (USCC)* is an excellent resource not only for the variety of prayer services but also

because it follows the ritual patterns, prayers, gestures and symbols that express the liturgical life of the Church. Through the use of this resource in the household, the faithful are led to a deeper participation in Sunday.⁶

The Christmas pageants and plays that invade our liturgy at Christmas Eve Masses have more of a place and would be more effective and less distracting in a catechetical setting. "Mass is not an historical reenactment of the events of salvation history and care should be taken not to give the impression that the liturgy of the word is a play. ...Care should be taken especially at Christmas... not to stage the various liturgies as plays..." (LMC #52). In a catechetical session, pageants and reenactments well planned, rich in scripture, clothed in prayer and celebrated in song could raise pageants above the performance level and thus foster understanding and receptivity to the workings of the Holy Spirit. These catechetical sessions, pageants, reenactments, storytelling no matter how effective or well attended should never be a replacement for the liturgy of the Church nor should they be attached to the liturgy of the Church.

In our liturgical planning of the Advent-Christmas cycle there is no need to "add to" the liturgy of the Church. It is in the liturgy of the Church celebrated well, in the prayers, symbols, proclamations, songs and gestures that we discover the mystery of Incarnation and are transformed into the *likeness of the risen Christ*.⁷ It is in the liturgy that *earth is united to heaven*⁸ and the "marvelous exchange"⁹ of God bursting forth into humanity and

humanity being transformed into God's image is made real. It is in the liturgy that the gathered people of God stand and proclaim our waiting in *joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ*.¹⁰

Sr. Sandra DeMasi, SSJ
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Notes:

¹ Raymond Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984), 2.

² For a more in depth discussion on "historicism" see Robert Taft, "Historicism Revisited" in *Beyond East and West Problems in Liturgical Understandings* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1984), 15-30.

³ Kevin Irwin, *Sunday Worship* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1983), 40.

⁴ See "Unless You Become Like a Little Child" in Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children* (New York: Orbis, 1994), 61-88.

⁵ Linda Gaupin, "Advent and Christmas: A Time to Celebrate Liturgy and Life" in *AIM* (Fall, 1993):10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-10. See for more information on the relationship between liturgy and catechesis and suggestions on how catechesis can support liturgy specifically during Advent and Christmas.

⁷ Preface for "Holy Eucharist II, Sacramentary (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1985), 469.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, #526. This divine and human exchange in the incarnation of the word is expressed in the preface for "Christmas II" in *Sacramentary*, 383.

¹⁰ From the embolism, "Deliver us", *Sacramentary*, 562.

Other Sources Consulted:

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Mick, Lawrence. *Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publication, 1995.