

Fr. John, Christmas homily. 2021

We celebrate three Christmas Masses here at Holy Spirit. In recent years, the vigil Mass has taken on a life of its own and has replaced the midnight Mass as the most popular. It's a family Mass and we like to include the children, and with the earlier setting it is less likely they will fall asleep. Each of these three Masses covers a different part of the Christmas story. The Gospel reading from Matthew for the vigil Mass speaks kind of generally of the time leading up to Bethlehem. We omitted the long genealogy (as we didn't want the kids to doze off).

The Gospel reading for the Mass at midnight is from St. Luke and it speaks of the actual birth of Jesus. And finally, the morning Mass on Christmas day takes a different approach altogether. The Gospel is not about the birth of Jesus at all, but is really a theological piece written by the Apostle John. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"

All that we know about the birth of Jesus comes from the two Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Both of the stories are quite dense with information, but lack a lot of details that might have made them even more interesting. And so I thought I would do something different this year. I want to fill in some of the gaps to hopefully make it more inspiring yet.

A few weeks ago, I spoke about a book given to me by a parishioner. It's called *The Mystical City of God* and was written by a Spanish nun, Mary of Ágreda many years ago. And the claim is that it was dictated to her by the Blessed Mother herself, so it was kind of an autobiography of the Mother of God. This, incidentally, was a favorite book of a local holy man, blessed Fr. Solanus Casey (there is a statue of him back there in the corner of the Sanctuary.)

This is called a *private revelation*. There have been many private revelations down through the years but they do not carry the same weight as the Bible. Nevertheless, the Church has been influenced by some of them and there are many details in this book which, again, kind of fill in the gaps of the story. You do not have to accept these writings as the truth, but some private revelations are valid and can indeed help us grow in our understanding of the faith.

And so I would like to tell you the story of the birth of Jesus as told by herself, the Mother, in her "alleged" book. So here are some basic details.

The Blessed Mother, being conceived without sin, was blessed in ways beyond our wildest imaginings. At an early age, she was given up by her parents, Joachim and Ann, and was sent to the Temple of Jerusalem where she lived a life something like a nun. She was modest, humble, and holy, having a **very** close relationship with the Trinity. She was the most favored daughter of the Father, who became the spouse of the Holy Spirit, so that she could be the mother to the Son.

She had a deep prayer life and ultimately was visited by the angel Gabriel who asked the big question, "*Will you consent to be the mother of the Messiah?*" And the answer was, "*Yes, be it done unto me according to the will of God.*" A very important detail. She agreed to play a part of *the greatest story ever told*. For better or for worse. In good times and in bad. She was 15 years old at that time she made her vow.

Joseph was 33 years old and was something like Mary in that he had chosen to lead a celibate life. But because of God's plans, and in His Perfect Will, it was decided that Mary had to be married. There was something like a lottery among several good men in Jerusalem as to who might be her spouse. And Joseph won.

Now Joseph was a little out of the loop. He might have been a good holy man, but he did not have the same connection with the heaven that Mary did. We remember his concerns about Mary's pregnancy and the decision to divorce her quietly. It was only then that the angel intervened in his life, in a dream, and told him to *be not afraid to take Mary into his home. She would bear a son, by the Holy Spirit, and they were to name him ... Jesus.*

Now according to the book, when they got the news that they had to travel from their home in Nazareth down to Bethlehem, Joseph had to scramble to find transportation. Nazareth was small and there weren't too many donkeys to go around. And so, the one that was chosen, while it might not have been the most *famous* donkey of all time, (that would probably be "Donkey" in the Shrek movies), it was indeed the most *privileged* donkey in history because it carried the Mother of God, along with her baby, in utero, on their five day journey down to Bethlehem. And it was there that it was, along with a few other humble beasts, able to witness the birth of the Savior. Now, for an animal, it doesn't get any better than that.

Mary reports that the birth of Jesus took place in the 5199th year since the creation of the earth. It was at this time of the year, near the winter solstice, and it was cold. It was about four in the afternoon on a Saturday, and it was beginning to get dark when Mary and Joseph eventually arrived in a crowded and bustling Bethlehem.

Now here's a little detail from the book that I personally find kind of challenging. We know from the Gospel that there was no room for them at the inn, but Mary says that they were denied lodging at 50 separate locations. I'm sure they didn't have too many hotels in little Bethlehem, but it was also Joseph's hometown and so I presume they knocked on the doors of his relatives, only to be rejected by them as well. It's a little hard to imagine, considering the condition of his young wife. So in their desperation, the Holy Family ended up in the lowly cattle shed. In addition to a donkey, there was also an ox there. And maybe a few sheep nearby, and they did provide some warmth for the newborn babe.

Joseph was naturally stressed, but Mary was not. She had company. She had friends in high places. Mary could actually see a multitude of the heavenly host. Many angels were assigned to guard over her, at every moment, as they had been throughout her whole life.

And so the attitudes of Joseph and Mary regarding these stressful circumstances would have necessarily been a bit different. When the big moment came, Joseph was in a corner by himself, deep in prayer. He was tired, to be sure, and he hovered near sleep. Mary gave birth to her child, near midnight, on an early Sunday morning (and so we missed the actual day by only one day this year). She gave birth to Jesus without pain, kneeling in the manger. And she had two helpers – Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels. They received the baby into their hands and then, in turn, handed the child to his mother.

You know, I love our little manger scene over there. The beautiful wood carved statues were imported from Europe some years back, but I felt that the setting looked a little bit too sterile, and so I played around with it a little bit this year to make it look more authentic, like what was described in the book. It was a cattle shed. It was dark, and cold, and smelly, and there were bull droppings on the floor that Joseph shoveled up to make it more presentable for the infant King of the Universe, and his queen mother.

Isn't it incredible that this king was born in such a humble setting? Did Joseph feel humiliated? He must have felt as if he had failed in his duty as the official protector of his spouse and child.

But, what about Mary? No, she was not troubled. She understood the will of God better than anyone. And she encouraged Joseph in coming to that same understanding that for the Son of God to be born in a hotel would not make for very interesting Christmas cards in years to come. (And it wouldn't make for a very dramatic setting for movies like *The Chosen Christmas Special* that we showed here, just a few weeks ago.)

But God the Father was not thinking of Christmas cards or movie sets when He willed His only begotten Son to be born in a stable. No, He wanted His Son to be "the suffering servant". The one described by the prophet Isaiah as the one who would be *despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.* And his sufferings and sorrows began early, in His mothers womb, as He, too, endured the bumpy ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And then to be born into the cold of the stable, and wrapped with swaddling clothes, the clothing of newborn lambs.

Yes, it was all part of God's perfect plan that Jesus should suffer throughout His life up until He breathed His last breath on the cross. He did this to show us how much He loved us. After all, *no greater love hath man than to lay down his life for his friends.* Oh, but His suffering was also meant to give value to our sufferings when they happen. So when they do happen, as they surely will, we can always say that we can suffer in solidarity with Jesus who suffered and died for us. And we can offer up our sufferings, in the same way He did, for the salvation of mankind. So there are many lessons to be learned from this grand eternal play produced and directed by God the Father, for our benefit.

I hope all of these extra little details of the Christmas story will add to your faith and help you to better understand the great mystery of the perfect will of God our Father, in allowing us to participate in this *Greatest Story Ever Told.*

~Fr. John