

CHRISTMAS 2011

CHRISTMAS IS SIMPLE

Priests hear a lot of confessions during Advent. It is always a good experience for me because I can see God's love changing people's hearts before my eyes. This year I gave almost everyone the same penance – which was, try to give a little more to the poor than you were planning on doing this Christmas. I gave this regardless of their sins, so don't try to figure out what someone may have confessed. But an interesting thing happened this Advent which I don't remember ever happening before. I got an anonymous letter from one of the penitents who shared with me what he or she actually did to fulfill the penance. They found an ad the next day in the paper for milk goats. They read the ad which asked "who would want a goat for Christmas?" The answer in the paper was "countless people struggling to survive in the Third World would." The person read on and learned that goats and perhaps other farm animals could provide nutrition for very poor families who might otherwise starve somewhere on our planet. They went to the website and found a great deal: you can get a milk goat and two chickens for a hundred bucks and this gift could provide a lot of food in a day for someone.

I thought that this gift was perfectly in tune with the Christmas story [that we just heard read and] that we all know so well. As we think of that scene in Bethlehem, there surely were some goats nearby. It is true that sheep get the marquee billing in the Nativity narrative. But could goats be far from the stable – or maybe even in the stable? After all, goats, along with sheep, calves, and heifers [inside joke] were prime objects for Jewish ritual sacrifices in Jesus' time (as we know from the Scriptures).

But what about the chickens! I was especially intrigued by the chickens. I have from time to time had fresh eggs from folks who keep chickens on the farm. Today there are even people who are pushing to have chickens in the city so that they can have that freshness. A friend of one of my sister's has a flock in Illinois and she even named some of them after the deceased mothers of her friends. There is one particularly bossy hen named Eloise – after my Mom. So I wondered if chickens could also have been in or near the stable on that first Christmas. I did a little research and, of course, it is entirely possible because Jesus mentions chickens or roosters several times (as when the cock's crow made St. Peter remember his denial or when the Lord said he wanted to gather the people of Jerusalem to himself like a hen gathers her chicks). By the way, we have a chicken in our crèche here at St. Paul's.

The point is that this penitent entered completely into the spirit of Christmas by giving a goat and two chickens. Christmas was simple. God became a part of the humanity he had created by becoming one of us. And he came among us, not as royalty but in poverty – like the people somewhere in the world who will receive the blessing of that goat and chickens. Although that birth was anything but pretty, it has become a romance that has stirred the hearts of believers and sometimes non-believers for 80 to 100 generations now. And part of our vocation as Christians is to enter into that Christmas simplicity by getting close to those who, like the baby Jesus and his family, suffer from want. We are called to reverse in small ways the scandal that there was no room in the Inn. At Christmas, we commit ourselves to a closer relationship with Mary, the pregnant Blessed Virgin, as she is described in this poem written by St.

John of the Cross: "The Virgin, heavy/with the Word of God/Comes along the road. /If only you will shelter her!"

How can we shelter her and her divine Son? We know the ways, and they are all simple. I read other articles in the paper recently which describe how some Good Samaritans in various cities across our country (including Columbus) are paying off layaway balances at K-marts and other stores for poor families who are behind in their payments and who might not have Christmas because they can't keep up with their accounts. These folks have been dubbed "layaway angels." One woman, who paid off several accounts, said she did this because she remembered in her childhood that her own Mom could not keep up her payments on layaway at K-mart and so their family had no Christmas for several years. Another simple way to get close to the wonder and the mystery of Bethlehem is our parish's very successful Jesse Tree project which makes Christmas possible for hundreds of families in the neighborhood of our sister parish, Holy Rosary/St. John. This Advent, the tags on the tree flew off at the usual head-spinning pace. I am told that this year, your generosity has set new records for giving gifts and gift cards and for volunteering. And, finally, we now know that a goat and two chickens can also get us close to the Christmas story.

At the end of this Christmas Mass (as at the end of every Mass), the deacon or priest will say: Go in peace, glorifying the Lord with your life." Many scholars believe that, after the consecration itself, these are the most important words of the Liturgy because they remind us that the Mass must be lived. Our religion by no means ends here. We are called to travel to Bethlehem every day and every night, if necessary, to reverse with little works of love that scandal that there was no room in the Inn. I am convinced we are also called, as part of our Christian pilgrimage, to push our political leaders to reverse the scandal in our country of economic policies that are making a few richer and richer and the many poorer and poorer. But whether it is political action on behalf of justice or small acts of charity, the work of the disciples never ends because we are Christ and that dismissal of the Mass constantly rings in our ears.

In our youth ministry center, those who are finished with high school and are going off to college sometimes leave their hand-print on the wall with a saying. One young man recently wrote: "No one looks back on their lives and remembers the nights they got plenty of sleep." I googled this quote and it is not clear who first wrote it or exactly what it means. It probably can mean different things to different folks. But I take it to mean that we are called to be tireless in living for others – as Jesus taught us. There is no better reason to be sleepless than in serving the needy who literally are the Christ of Bethlehem and the Christ of Calvary – that same Christ who, there is no doubt in my mind, drank goat's milk and at times ate chickens' eggs.

Merry Christmas!