

Crèche, Light and Mystery¹

*With our faces unveiled, all of us,
reflecting as in a mirror the glory of God,
are being transformed from splendor to splendor.*

- 2 Corinthians 3:18

Christmas and Christmas memories are filled with sweetness, with divinity swaddled in Mary and Joseph's love, with human tenderness enfolding the babe, announcing and celebrating the mystery of God among us. Christmas is very much about the real world in which we live; it is also, and even more, about the world as we would like it to be. Light, joy, peace and loving animals are all part of the picture and the memories.

The plaster of Paris nativity scene here at St. Michael's prompts memories and anchors gladness for many of us. The Three Kings are again featured coming slowly from the church's eastern radiators, moving closer day by day, until their arrival at the crèche on the feast of the Epiphany, January 4. The set was repainted by volunteers in a ceramics class in the 1980s when I was pastor the first time; the \$38 we gave them for paint and supplies was one of the smallest but best-spent

¹ From *100 Days Closer to Christ*, by William C. Graham:
<http://www.litpress.org/Products/4917/100-days-closer-to-christ.aspx>

checks I ever signed. We had and they have the same set at St. Rose Parish in Proctor, Minnesota, where I grew up; there are many just like it across the nation. The simple scene can be misleading, though. Mary and Joseph radiate holiness and serenity; they seem untouched by fear, hunger, or chill. Jesus seems not to be phased by having been delivered in an animal shed and laid in their feeding trough; the scene is not as antiseptic as the birthing places where most of us landed.

The animals in the scene make no rude or smelly noises; they never drop loads that would mess up your shoes or carpets. Karen Sue Smith observes that the Christmas card image of the birth of the Savior “does not describe adequately the world into which Jesus was born. God entered a dark, broken world, rife with squalor, violence and suffering, a world that needs a savior. What generates Christmas light and joy is God’s presence in that world” (“Two Surprise Guests,” *America*, Dec. 24-31, 2007, 26).

God’s grace and God’s presence are forever around us, even when we are oblivious to the transformation to which they call us. Stephen Martin observes that “We forget about grace as we sweep floors and sit in traffic and stagger around a dark room in the middle of the night hunting for lost pacifiers; then we remember, and then we forget again”

("Brother Lawrence and the Chimney Bird," *America*, Dec. 24-31, 2007, 28). The gift of Christmas allows us to see grace, to name it, to claim it, and to let it shape our lives. When we see grace at work, we need to shout it out. Sometimes, at least for me, it takes years for the process of giving and receiving to be unveiled for us as the great grace, which truly is at work.

One of my first Sundays as pastor at St. Michael's back in that distant day, I stood before the presider's chair for the Sunday eucharist and saw in one of the first pews the young son of two parents I had known since high school; the child, then about four or five, stared intently at me. Even when we sat for the first reading, he did not move his eyes, but settled into the pew. As the reader approached the lectern, I looked back at the boy, met his stare, and winked at him. Then, I turned quickly to focus on the lector and the scripture. But I kept an eye on the boy; his eyes opened wide in surprise; he elbowed his father and whispered to him what had happened. The father was patient; he nodded in understanding, and patted the boy lovingly. After Mass, after the crowd had left, father and son were waiting. "You'll never believe what this one told me," the amused but disbelieving dad said. He

related the story of the wink. I looked down at the little guy, but said nothing. His eyes were wide in amazement. Or something.

The boy grew to be a man, faithful Sunday by Sunday at the eucharistic table with his family; we never discussed the Sunday wink. Eventually, he went away to college and later began a successful career in a neighboring state. I went away first to New York and then to Chicago, usually returning there for Mass at midnight on Christmas. One year not so many ago, the young man was back in town for Christmas and with all the family sat in the very same pew where so many years of Sundays they had worshiped together. The service began and, just as he had once done so many years before, the young man stared intently at me. When he was sure that I was retuning his gaze, he cocked his head just a bit, and winked at me. And I laughed out loud.

His father looked at me, looked at his son, and winced at both of us laughing in church. After Mass, waiting once again as he had years earlier, he took us each by an elbow, pulled us close, and said, "Okay, you two, you've got some explaining to do." And so we did.

Really, I felt that I, in imitation of Moses, should have taken off my shoes, for I was standing on holy ground. The kid's wink and laugh and sharp memory were a sacrament of God's good presence, of the

transforming activity of Christ. His good humor highlighted the holy ties that bind us together at this table and in this season; here is what I learned on that Holy Night:

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