



**The humanity of Christ
is our happiness**

Meditation on Christmas

On the cover:

Rest on the Flight into Egypt, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Puškin Museum, Moscow

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by Don Giacomo Tantardini

Fidenza Cathedral, 20 December 2006



Madonna and Child with St Joseph, detail, the apsidal bowl of Fidenza Cathedral (Parma)

First of all thank you for having invited me once again to this stupendous cathedral, not least because this renewed invitation seems to me the occurrence of that “communion of spirit”, as Saint Paul says, that when it happens gratuitously “makes full of joy”.

So Paul writes to the Philippians (*Phil 2, 1-2*). Thank you also because when I entered, the parish priest of the Cathedral received me, and, after genuflecting in front of the tabernacle, led me so simply to the crypt, to let me venerate the body of the martyr, Saint Donnino, over which this Cathedral is built. That very simple fact moved me, because the treasures of a church are two. First the tabernacle where there is Jesus. I still remember my poor mother, when she carried me as a small child into my village church, and pointed: “Jesus is there”; and: “Send a kiss to Jesus”. My poor mother didn’t know that to send a kiss meant to adore. In Latin to adore means to kiss¹. And this sending of a kiss to Jesus now moves and confirms my faith more than books of theology. The second treasure that there is in a church are the bodies of the martyrs. This, for one like me who has had the grace to be born and to become a priest in the diocese of Milan, to go through the seminary in Venegono, is daylight evidence. The finest moment in the episco-

¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, sermon at the Holy Mass in Cologne 21 August 2005.

pate of Saint Ambrose in Milan was when he found the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius – and in fact he had himself buried (go to the Basilica of Saint Ambrose in Milan where bishop Ambrose is buried) between these two martyrs. “*Nequimus esse martyres, sed invenimus martyres* / we have not had the grace of being martyrs but we have found the martyrs”². It was just to say thank you for having given me this opportunity.

² Ambrose, hymn *Grates tibi, Iesu, novas*; Cf. *Ancient Ambrosian Breviary*, in festo sanctorum Gervasii et Protasii martyrum (19 June).



Madonna and Child, Carlo Maratta, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

“The humanity of Christ is our happiness”: the phrase is not mine. It is the phrase with which Saint Thomas Aquinas begins the part of the *Summa Theologica* in which he speaks about Jesus³. He says precisely: “Ad

³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III q. 9 a. 2.



Rest on the Flight into Egypt, detail, Caravaggio, Doria Pamphili Gallery, Rome

hunc finem beatitudinis / To their destiny of happiness, [because this, happiness, is the destiny of mankind: *ad hunc finem beatitudinis*] / *homines reducuntur per humanitatem Christi* / men are brought back through the humanity of Christ". To help experience holy Christmas, to live these days, to live them, as I will try to suggest, in prayer (because the word prayer indicates everything, indicates the position of man towards the Mystery of God, of the

Mystery that, as suggested by the phrase of Giussani that was read earlier, arises in every human experience), I would like to start from a phrase from a Christmas sermon by Saint Anthony of Padua, who is a Doctor of the Church, therefore a saint whom the Church recognizes as sure teacher and who edifies the faith.

Anthony, who also had the mystical experiences of his relationship with the Child Jesus, began the sermon saying: “Christmas: this is Paradise”. This is Paradise. When two thousand years ago in Bethlehem Mary gave birth: this is Paradise. Happiness no longer promised, no longer awaited, no longer hoped for, no longer glimpsed from far away. Happiness made flesh was present. It was visible. When He came out of His mother’s womb, visibly happiness, that is Paradise, the utmost joy (as Dante says: “sì che l’ sommo piacer li si dispiegghi”⁴, so that the utmost joy shows itself to him), the utmost joy had come Himself to mankind: this is Paradise.

⁴Dante, *Paradise* XXXIII, 33.



Creation of Adam, Chartres Cathedral

And thus this phrase of Saint Anthony (like the expression of Saint Thomas Aquinas: “men are brought back again”, back *again*) refers in the first place to the creation of God, to the fact that God’s creation is good. The creation of God is good, the creation of God is very good (cf. *Gen 1, 31*). God was astounded by His creation. God was astounded by the beauty of His creation. “*Pulchritudo eorum, confessio eorum*” says Saint Augustine: “The beauty of the stars is the acknowledgment, the testimony of the Creator”⁵. God himself was astounded by the beauty of His creation and the beauty of His creature at the peak of His creation: the beauty of man and woman. And not only was He astounded by this beauty, but He covered with grace, that is with a beauty still more gratuitous, this beauty. So true is it that, according to the poetic image of *Genesis*, He set Adam and Eve in Paradise, the earthly Paradise, and in the earthly Paradise the relationship with the Creator was immediate. This immediacy of relationship is poetically described by the Bible as the walking of God with Adam and Eve (cf. *Gen 3, 8*). Péguy says: everything there was astonishment, an atmosphere of astonishment, an atmosphere of grace⁶. This is Paradise, this is the destiny of happiness.

⁵ Augustine, *Sermones* 241, 2.

⁶ Cf. Ch. Péguy, *Eva*, Città Armoniosa, Reggio Emilia 1991, p. 13.

But sin intervened, a grievous sin.

Why is it so great, also in the consequences that we all pay, original sin? Saint Augustine says: because it was so easy not to sin⁷. In the earthly Paradise it was so easy not to sin because the presence of the Mystery was so close, was so immediate, because the astonishment at this presence was continuously renewed. It was so easy not to sin. That is why the sin was so grievous. It was so easy not to give in to the tempter. It was so easy to see that happiness did not lie in becoming God (cf. *Gen* 3, 5) but that happiness lay in being with God: this was so easy! Precisely because it was so easy not to sin, the sin was so great. But the heart remained. This is important. Also Saint Augustine, who with such great force, principally following what Ambrose witness of the Tradition had taught him in Milan⁸, emphasizes original sin, states that the image of God, though damaged, remains in mankind⁹. The heart, though mortally hurt – so true is it that we die – the heart, though mortally hurt, remains in expectation of happiness, remains desirous of happiness, the heart remains capable of happiness. “*Capax Dei / capable of happiness*”¹⁰.

⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XIV, 15, 1.

⁸ Cf. Augustine, *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* VI, 21.

⁹ Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate* XIV, 8, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*



God calls Adam and Eve after the sin, Palatine Chapel, Palermo

And this goodness of the creation is also testified to in very human signs. The smile of the child who smiles at daddy and mummy is a sign that God has not abandoned His creation. The coming into the world of a child is so beautiful. Human nature, though wounded by sin, remains a sign of the beauty and the goodness of the Creator. It awaits happiness. It remains expectant of happiness.

And thus the Lord has intervened, has intervened first of all... How beautiful, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, it is to read the passage of the Bible on original sin, to hear the promise, that beautiful promise: “I shall set enmity”, the Lord says to the serpent, the tempter, the devil, “between you and the woman, between your seed”, those who belong to Satan, the devil, “and her seed: she will crush your head” (*Gen 3, 15*). The seed of the woman will crush your head. The woman also (as the image of the Immaculate Madonna in the chapel of the Eucharist in this Cathedral shows) will crush your head.



Annunciation, with the scene of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after the Original Sin, Fra Angelico, Prado Museum, Madrid





Moses drawing water from the rock, Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

The Lord, in order to keep this promise, has given His people the law. And the law is for happiness. This, too, is beautiful: all the commandments of God are for happiness. “Do this to be happy” (cf. *Dt* 6, 3. 18. 24). The Ten Commandments are for happiness. The law indicates the path. And this is the thing that the apostle Paul, above all in his Epistles to the Galatians and Romans brings out most: the law gives knowledge of the path, but the law does not make one walk on the path. And therefore happiness remains remote. The law indicates where happiness is. The law and the prophets have indicated where happiness is: “My good is to be close to God” (*Psal* 72, 28). So says Psalm 72, which is extremely beautiful. It is the psalm that starts from the fact that the evil prosper, from the question posed by the fact that those who *practically* deny God prosper. And the Psalmist is stunned by this prosperity of evil people. And he says: “I did not understand, before You I was like a beast” (*Psal* 72, 22). Then one discovers that “my good is to be close to You” (*Psal* 72, 28), that to be close to You is my happiness. But it is one thing to know it and another to live it. It’s all there, you see, at bottom the mystery of man and the mystery of the Christian response: it is one thing to know where happiness is and another to be happy, and it is one thing to know the road that leads to happiness and another to walk on the road that leads to happiness. And if man is mortally wounded on the wayside – as the image

in the parable of the Good Samaritan documents (cf. *Luke* 10, 25-37) – man alone cannot walk towards happiness, even when he knows that happiness is the Lord, even when he knows that happiness is to be with God, even when he knows. On this, I believe that the experience of Saint Augustine is the lasting paradigm. Augustine knew that happiness was to be with God, Augustine knew that happiness was unity with the Creator. And he says: “I was certain of this”¹¹. And he adds: “this truth won, but the pleasures of the world allured”¹². The pleasures of the world are more alluring even than a certain truth. The pleasures of the world, any type of pleasure of the world. Mankind follows what appeals to it most¹³. The pleasures of the world are more alluring. Again in the *Confessions* he says: “That *true* happiness was unity with God was obvious to me, but my will did not free itself from the images of *partial* pleasures”¹⁴. The obviousness of the truth does not have the force to rid the will of the images – how realistic this observation is! – of worldly pleasures, of partial pleasures, the pleasures that Augustine recognized as partial, not true. And yet the obvious-

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessiones* VIII, 5, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Cf. Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis* XXVI, 4.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessiones* X, 22, 32.



Moses presents the Tables of the Law to the Hebrews, Raphael, loggia of the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican

ness of the truth does not have the force to rid the will of their images. At best, and this is the best of Pharisean morality, Plato says that when we speak of the truth we even forget about women. At best, in that moment, there is forgetfulness. Christianity forgets nothing. The embrace of grace gives the possibility of loving in a chaste way, not forgetting. However the best of Platonic morality is forgetfulness, in that moment, of a certain image of pleasure.

The law is good, it indicates the path. But there is a sea, says Augustine again in an image easy to grasp, there is an infinite sea between the law that points to happiness and happiness. Mankind is unable to cross that sea¹⁵.

¹⁵ Cf. Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis* II, 4.



Madonna and Child, detail, Sandro Botticelli and his workshop,
Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna

Two thousand years ago, then, happiness came: this is Paradise. Happiness has come: no longer promised, no longer indicated as the end of human wayfaring. Happiness has come, Paradise has come. It has come in the flesh so it might be seen, be touched, be embraced. Thus Augustine could say: “I knew that happiness was God, but I did not enjoy You [because one does not enjoy knowledge, one enjoys when one is embraced], but I did not enjoy You until humbly I embraced my humble



God Jesus”¹⁶. This is the experience of happiness on earth: to embrace humbly my humble God Jesus. Not God as remote destiny, but God made child, little child: so Paradise, happiness has come to meet us, so happiness has come close, so it is within reach of the eyes, reach of the heart, reach of the hands, hands that can embrace it. Paradise on earth is Him: “Faithful is God...”. How much I was struck earlier, reciting Vespers, by this phrase that I had put on my ordination card. But things are understood when the Lord makes them understood... “Faithful is God by whom you have been called to the communion *of* His Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1Cor 1, 9). The communion is *with* His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. It is the communion *of* His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. It is Jesus Christ who is the happiness of mankind. It is that man, in his singularity, I would say in his individuality¹⁷: that man. The communion *of* His Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessiones* VII, 18, 24.

¹⁷ Cf. L. Giussani, “*A me pare che non cerchino Cristo* [It seems to me that they are not seeking Christ]”, in *L'attrattiva Gesù* [The Jesus attraction], Bur, Milan 1999, p. 148.



The meeting of Joachim and Anna, Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

There is an anticipation of this Paradise, of this possibility of embrace, this possibility of familiarity with Jesus Christ; with the Paradise that has a name, a face, a flesh: Jesus Christ. This anticipation is the Immaculate Conception. Because sixteen years before (Mary would have been fifteen when she conceived Jesus), when Joachim and Anne, in the most natural way – as everyone of us was conceived – conceived this small creature, this small creature was not stained by original sin. From that moment, from that first moment in which she was conceived she was loved. She was loved. She was beloved. It's

something from another world, in this world, that there be a creature who was *always* loved. Because one must start from there in order to understand Our Lady: a creature who was *always* loved, who never had the wound of extraneity as regards happiness, who was *always* loved by the happiness that is the Lord, who was *always* loved. She was always loved, because she had been preserved, even in that first moment, from sin. Not by her. Because she, too, was redeemed. Mary was redeemed as each one of us is redeemed by the only Redeemer. When Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception he recognized two things: *first*, that she was redeemed, *second*, that she was redeemed in a unique fashion, in a more eminent way, says Vatican Ecumenical Council II¹⁸, she was redeemed beforehand, preserved from original sin¹⁹. She was preserved from the wound of sin, that is she was always loved, by the blood of her Son, that blood that she gave to her Son. In anticipation of the death of her Son, the dogma says. In anticipation of that blood shed on the cross, in anticipation of that blood that was her Son's and that she had given Him in those nine months that she carried Him in her womb.

¹⁸ Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 53; Paul VI, *Creed of the People of God*, 30 June 1968.

¹⁹ Pius IX, Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (Denzinger 2803).



Presentation of Mary in the Temple, detail, Giotto, the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

In anticipation of that blood that was of Jesus and was *from* Mary²⁰. In anticipation of that blood of Jesus she was always loved, was redeemed from the first moment, the first moment of her existence preserved from sin.

Saint Ambrose describes, marvellously according to me, this small creature, this small child called Maria. He describes her as follows: “*Virgo erat Maria / Mary was virgin / corde humilis / and was humble of heart / in prece pauperis spem reponens / and placed all her hope in the prayer of the poor, in the plea of the poor*”²¹. This creature, because of her fullness of grace, the fullness of grace with which she was filled from the first moment of her existence, lived this way. She lived that is as virgin, that is as always being loved. Virginity is that gratuitousness that being loved donates to life. That possibility of gratuitousness, and therefore of possession, that being loved in anticipation donates to human life. She lived as virgin. Of humble heart, because she had been always loved. She had not given herself this always being loved. One cannot give oneself being loved, one can only re-

²⁰ Cf. Liturgy of the hours, feast of Mary Most Holy Mother of God, office of the lessons, second lesson: from the Letters of Saint Athanasius bishop.

²¹ Ambrose, *De virginibus* II, 2; cf. *Ancient Ambrosian Breviary*, in festo Praesentationis Beatae Virginis Mariae (21 November), ad Matutinum, Lectio III.

ceive it. She was of humble heart and so placed all her hope, all the hope of her life in the prayer of the poor, in asking that this love be renewed in every moment, that this fullness of grace be renewed continuously. Because even in Paradise we will always ask, as the Pope said last year in Cologne in wonderful fashion²²: even in Paradise we will always ask. In Paradise we will always ask. Even in the mystery of the Trinity the Son always receives all His being from the Father and, if we may so say, because of infinite superabundance of sweetness He asks it always. So true is it that He says: “The Son of Himself can do nothing” (*John* 5, 19. 30). How much I like, how much that phrase of Jesus repeated twice in John’s Gospel consoles me: “The Son of Himself can do nothing”. His divinity “is not jealous possession” (*Phil* 2, 6): the divinity of the Son of God is a perennial gift: God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, generated, not created, of the same substance as the Father.

²² Cf. Benedict XVI, meeting with the German bishops in Cologne 21 August 2005.



Nativity, Andrea Pisano, pulpit of the Cathedral of Siena

I would now like to suggest what most astounds in the happening of Paradise: “The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin” (*Luke 1, 26-27*). To a virgin: how many times the Gospel repeats it! To a virgin: in heart and body; in body because in heart, but in body! One must accept the doctrine of the faith: that she always remained virgin in heart and body. Because this fullness of grace is the salvation of the flesh. “To a virgin, wife to a man of the name Joseph of the house of David. The virgin was called Mary. Entering her house he said: “Rejoice O full



Christ Child, detail of the Nativity, Andrea Pisano, pulpit of the Cathedral of Siena

of grace [*chàire kecharitomène* / ‘rejoice O full of joy’], the Lord is with you” (*Luke* 1, 27-28).

“*Virgo Verbum concepit* / the Virgin has conceived the Word / *Virgo permansit* / she remained virgin / *Virgo genuit Regem omnium regum* / the Virgin has given birth to the King of all kings”. That is the antiphon that as a boy, when I entered the seminary of Saint Peter Martyr in Seveso, in the first year of high school, we sang at Sunday Vespers in the Basilica where the knife is kept with which that Dominican was killed. The martyrdom of that Dominican was something very disturbing for the Church in the Middle Ages. A martyrdom on Christian soil was an extraordinary happening.

So when Peter from Verona, coming from Como to Milan, was killed in the woods close to Seveso, his martyrdom was a very disturbing thing for the Christendom of those times²³. I was saying that, having entered the seminary in the first year of high school, the Vespers of Our Lady were sung on Sunday in the Basilica and in the Ambrosian liturgy the Vespers of Our Lady finish with this small antiphon: “*Virgo Verbum concepit...*”.

She said *fiat*, here I am. “Here I am, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (*Luke 1, 38*). “Here I am” is a prayer. “Here I am, let it happen, let it come about”: it’s a prayer. Because only God creates, only the *fiat* of God is creator. The *fiat* of Mary, that *fiat* that conceived the only-begotten Son of God, that *fiat* was a prayer. It was not her heroism, it was not her capacity, it was a prayer: “Here I am, let it happen, let it come about”. “Let it come about” is a plea. And so virginally she conceived Him, as virginally she gave birth to Him. How important is the *virginitas in partu* of Mary. How important it is to accept the certainty of the faith that she gave Him birth virginally. Because salvation does not come from suffering! Salvation comes from grace. Salvation comes from grace, it does not come from

²³ Cf. John Paul II, Letter to Cardinal Archbishop Carlo Maria Martini on the 750th anniversary of the martyrdom of Saint Peter of Verona, 25 March 2002.

suffering, salvation comes being loved, it does not come from the pain of mankind, salvation! It comes from the happiness of God, it comes from the fullness of the happiness of God, salvation! Salvation comes from being loved. That she gave Him birth in a painless delivery²⁴, she gave Him birth in a delivery without violence, she gave Him birth virginally, that is in wonder, it is a sign that salvation comes from being loved. The certainty of faith on the virgin birth was synthesized by Pius XII in the *Mystici Corporis* into this expression: “In a marvellous delivery”. While everyone of us came into the world in a painful delivery, that delivery was a marvellous delivery, without pain, violence: because salvation comes from grace. Salvation is not born of sin, salvation is not born of the desert: it blooms in the desert, it makes the desert bloom, but it comes from being loved. Being loved is born of the happiness of God. One is loved out of the superabundance of happiness that is the Trinity, one is loved out of the superabundance of correspondence that is the eternal Love of the Father and of the Son whom we call Holy Spirit. One is loved out of grace. Mary’s delivery,

²⁴ Cf. *Antico Breviario Ambrosiano*, in festo Septem Dolorum Beatae Mariae Virginis (15 September), antiphona ad Laudes: “Maria virgo quos in partu dolores effugerat...”; inno *Dum vitam in ara Golgothae*: “Mater doloris nescia / Gavisita partum viderat”.



Nativity, Federico Barocci, Prado Museum, Madrid

the marvellous delivery of Mary is the physical sign, is the fleshly sign that salvation does not come from us, that salvation does not come out of suffering, that salvation does not come out of pain, that salvation does not come out of the outcry of mankind. Salvation comes by the grace of God, infinite happiness, out of superabundance of happiness, superabundance of grace.



Rest on the Flight into Egypt, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Puškin Museum, Moscow

And so the virginity of Joseph. And so the fact that Mary always remained virgin can be intuited out of experience: not having the experience of Paradise, of Paradise on earth, one cannot intuit that charity, that is Paradise present, is more powerful, is more powerful, *as attraction*, than the even natural attraction of man and woman. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that charity, as attraction, for mankind though wounded by sin, is more powerful, as intensity of attraction and delight, than any natural attraction²⁵. There is no comparison between charity as alluring attraction and the natural attraction of man towards woman. Not having had experience of this, perhaps, they have painted Saint Joseph as an old man, almost as if to defend thereby Our Lady's virginity. Instead it was Paradise present, it was the *more* present that made that relationship virginal, so human: no man has loved his wife as Joseph loved Mary. Because it was a love that was born of happiness, it was not born of a lack, as so often our poor affection is. When it is born of a lack, affection is inevitably marked by an underlying violence. It was born of a fullness of happiness: this was the love of that man, of that poor man by the name of Joseph for the most beautiful of creatures that Mary was. It would have been a *lessening* if their relationship had

²⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II q. 23 a. 2.





Birth of Christ, Anton Raphael Mengs,
Städtisches Museum Brunswick

not been virginal. It would have been a *lessening*. A *lessening* of pleasure. It was humanly impossible not to rejoice fully in Paradise present. And that eliminates none of the humanity. The Christmas Vespers in the Ambrosian liturgy concluded with this antiphon: “*Ioseph conturbatus est de utero virginis* / Joseph was disturbed when he noticed that Mary’s womb swelled because she was pregnant”. One of the things on exegetical level that has strengthened the faith was suggested to me by poor Don Saldarini when he explained, in first year theology, the passage in Matthew’s Gospel that says: “Joseph being righteous wanted to send Mary back in secret” (Mt 1, 19). He wanted to send her back not because he doubted Mary, but because he had become aware that the Mystery was present and at work. Righteousness for the Jews, faced with the Mystery

at work, consists in keeping a distance (cf. *Ex* 3, 5). Joseph never doubted Mary, he did not doubt when he noticed Mary's womb swelling because she was pregnant, he never doubted. Only that, being righteous, he did not want to interfere with the Mystery present, the Mystery of the infinite God who made himself visible, tangible in his wife. So he thought of sending her away in secret. And the angel appears to Joseph and says to him: "Have no fear, Joseph, to take with you Mary your wife because what is born in her comes from the Holy Spirit" (*Mt* 1, 20). One of the most beautiful verses in Saint Ambrose's Christmas hymn says: "*Non ex virili semine / not from man's seed / sed mystico spiramine / but by the breath of grace / Verbum Dei factum est caro / the Word of God became flesh / fructusque ventris floruit / and the fruit of Mary's womb flowered*"²⁶. "It flowered", as Giussani said on 24 December 2004, two months before dying: "In that place [Bethlehem] it flowered"²⁷. Mary's womb flowered, the fruit of her womb flowered.

²⁶ Ambrose, hymn *Veni Redemptor gentium*; cf. *Ancient Ambrosian Breviary*, in *Nativitate Domini*.

²⁷ L. Giussani, *A new Being blossomed in that place*, G. Tantardini, *Memory of encounters*, in *30Days*, no. 3, March 2005, p. 26.



Joseph, detail of the delivery of the rods, Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua



A week ago I suggested to a *30Days* journalist to phone Cardinal Martini in Jerusalem to ask if he could send us a Christmas meditation. Immediately, twenty-four hours later, the next day, Cardinal Martini sent a very fine meditation from Jerusalem. So fine that *La Stampa* of Turin yesterday published the unabridged version with a reference on the front page²⁸. It is very fine indeed this meditation by Cardinal Martini. There is a phrase that sums it all

²⁸ C.M. Martini, *Presepio, un piccolo segno che ci invita a credere* [Crib, a small sign that invites us to believe], in *La Stampa*, 19 December 2006, p. 47; idem, *The simplicity of Christmas*, in *30Days*, no. 11, November 2006, pp. 31-38.



Adoration of the Shepherds, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Prado Museum, Madrid

up. If Christmas is so simple, if it is the simplicity of a child being born, *born in marvellous fashion*, but born of woman like all of us (cf. *Gal 4, 4*), if the Mystery is so human, it must be human, recognizing it must also be simple. The faith cannot be but simple. If it came in such simple way, it cannot have come in order to complicate life for us. If happiness has

come, it cannot be but simple to embrace happiness, it cannot be but simple to be content embracing happiness. Otherwise the law would have been enough to show how to reach happiness, how to go to Paradise (cf. *Mt 19, 17*). Moses was enough for that (cf. *John 1, 17*). It would have been pointless for happiness itself to come if one couldn't then easily, simply embrace it, if then it weren't easy, simple to recognize. "Mestier non era", Dante would say, "parturir Maria"²⁹ (No need was there for Mary to give birth). And in fact it was simple for the

²⁹ Dante, *Purgatory* III, 39.

shepherds to recognize Him. It was simple, having heard the announcement of the angels, to recognize that child. They did not recognize that He was the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity made man. No. They only discovered that they had never felt in life such a beautiful thing and such a human happiness. They recognized that. Before that child, before Joseph and His mother Mary they recognized that such an experience had never befallen them. They recognized that such a correspondence with their heart had never happened.

So I would like to read a passage, that, according to me, is one of Giussani's most beautiful and most dense, in which he says what this humble relationship with the humble Jesus is, this humble embrace with the humble Jesus, this humble embrace with happiness here on earth, this communion with His Son Jesus Christ, this possibility of familiarity with His Son Jesus Christ. Giussani says: "Your relationship with Christ need not be developed, insightful, mature for your personality to be born of it and your personality to know how to create company from it [know how to love. When one is loved gratuitously one can love freely that is gratuitously]. The surprise that gripped John and Andrew is enough [they were the first two, at the beginning of





Adoration of the Child, Gerrit van Honthorst, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

His public life, to encounter Him], who didn't understand anything [who didn't understand anything and yet had understood everything, so true is it that Andrew met his brother Peter and said to him: "We have found the Messiah" (*John 1, 41*). What they were awaiting, they had found, and therefore everything, because what the heart



Adoration of the Magi, detail, Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

awaits is everything, and therefore they had understood everything. The surprise that gripped John and Andrew, who did not understand anything, is enough]; the surprise is enough, the suggestion of devotion is enough, the astonishment is enough. More precisely: it is enough to ask it... ”³⁰. It was the same with the Magi. How grand is the fact that the Magi set out not because of an announcement. The shepherds hasten to Bethlehem because the angels make their announcement, hence they go because of word heard. Whereas the Magi go because of a indication they have caught. “*Sic Magi ab ortu solis / per sideris indicium*”: so goes the hymn *Mysterium Ecclesiae* of the Vespers of Our Lady that I sang as a boy on Sundays in the seminary of Saint Peter Martyr. Because of an indication, an indication in a star. As Cardinal Martini says in the article in *30Days* that I invite you to read. Small indications are enough to believe, so true is it that when John ran to the sepulchre on Easter morning he believed only seeing the shroud folded in a such way as to let him glimpse that the Lord was risen: it was that small indication. The Magi set out because of a small indication, a star, and continued their journey following that star. But at a certain moment they lost sight of the star. And it is

³⁰ L. Giussani, “*Riandare al primo incontro* [Going back to the first encounter]”, in *L'attrattiva Gesù*, op. cit., p. 23.

grand that, no longer seeing, they asked. When one no longer sees the star, one can do no more than ask. We cannot possess grace of ourselves, we cannot possess it. It is not like a knowledge that is possessed. When one can no longer see the grace that precedes one can only ask. They asked, they even asked Herod, they only asked. One follows grace, and when the star of grace is not clear one can only ask. And then – “*videntes stellam Magi gavisii sunt gaudio magno valde*”³¹ (cf. Mt 2, 10) – when they saw it again, like a new beginning, when they saw it again (the words of the liturgy are unable to express this joy for a new beginning, because this joy is still more beautiful, “*gavisii sunt gaudio magno valde*”) they enjoyed a joy, a joy greater still, a joy more beautiful still. Giussani continues: “More precisely asking is enough [because the wonderment makes one ask], that embryonic perception of what He is that makes you ask, whereby you ask, is enough”³². To begin the experience of happiness on earth, to embrace happiness on earth, to embrace, humbly, my humble Jesus, that embryonic perception whereby you ask for Him, that embryonic astonishment, that embryonic sweetness whereby you ask Him, is enough. To begin embracing happiness on earth that is enough.

³¹ *Ancient Ambrosian Breviary*, in Epiphania Domini, ad Vesperas, psallenda II.

³² L. Giussani, “*Riandare al primo incontro* [Going back to the first encounter]”, in *L'attrattiva Gesù*, op. cit., p. 23.



Adoration of the Magi, detail, Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

And so I conclude by suggesting something that is the last thing that the Lord has given to me to intuit as a step on the path that He gives. Because He gives things in His time, in His time! One cannot anticipate anything, one can only give thanks for the things that happen. And the things that happen, while they happen, make clear that thread of gold that is the predilection of

the Lord. Predilection that begins from coming into the world, and from that coming to the life of grace that is baptism, whereby coming into the world also becomes most beautiful. Gratitude towards the father and mother who have brought you into the world, who brought me into the world, is made incomparably simpler, more dear, more close when I realize that it is through them that I was taken to the baptismal font. And after baptism, as my poor mother told me once – or rather, she told my sisters who then told me – after baptism she carried me to the altar of Our Lady in order to offer me to Our Lady. The affection one feels for a mother who has given us life, learning of this gesture, so Christian and so human as to offer to Our Lady the first son she bore, is incomparable.

I mean that when life is brought back to prayer and therefore brought back to the fact that “the Lord watches over me” (*Psal 39, 18*) – because prayer, that embrace that renews itself humbly to the humble Jesus, gives life the serene security of the child that “the Lord watches over me” – and when this “the Lord watches over me” truly embraces our poor person, then one begins to see that the Lord watches over everyone. And then mercy towards all becomes like the last grace, like the last path of grace that the Lord gives. Because I have repeated many times with gratitude till I was moved to tears that “the Lord watches over me”. But it can be like



Madonna and Child, detail, *Adoration of the Magi*, Giovanni Antonio de Sacchis
known as Pordenone, Church of Santa Maria di Campagna, Piacenza

when one is a child, but not a tiny little child, but a child of four, five, six at play and wanting to win (and this is proper to mankind, winning is a natural desire of mankind, and this natural desire will be perfected in Paradise. “Unhappy are those”, says Saint Augustine, “who prefer the constant struggle to victory, for one



Madonna and Child, detail of the Flight into Egypt, Jaime Ferrer, Museu Episcopal, Vic

can only struggle to win”³³). When one is a child of four, five, six one wants to win, but one also wants the others to lose, also wants the others to be beaten. Whereas when one is tiny, when one is tiny one wants only to win. When one is tiny and falls asleep in daddy’s and mummy’s arms one can’t even set oneself the problem of others’ losing, of others’ being beaten. And that is the beginning of that “be merciful as your Father is merciful” (*Luke* 6, 36) “who makes the sun rise on the just and the unjust” (*Mt* 5, 45) and gives life, and in His mercy, even in the last moment, eternal life. Also to the most wicked. “Be merciful as your Father is merciful”. And this arises out of the fact of being so loved, arises out of the fact that “the Lord watches over me”. If He truly watches over the spirit and the body, because the Lord watches over everything, “the Lord watches over me”, then how beautiful it is that He watches over all! How beautiful it is, as Manzoni says in *La Pentecoste*, how beautiful it is that “the Winner be divine mercy to the vanquished”, that there be no one defeated in a bad way, but that all be won by this being so loved, won by this happiness within reach of the eyes, within reach of the heart, within reach of the embrace. That “the Winner be divine mercy to the vanquished”,

³³ Augustine, *De vera religione* 53, 102.

that the Winner be divine prize for the vanquished, Happiness itself, the Winner, He who only wins, who only has won because only He wins over, wins over the heart as supreme pleasure, He only who wins the heart over in complete correspondence, and in Paradise wins it over forever.



The face of Jesus, detail of the Risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

I conclude by reading a passage from Augustine on the beauty of Jesus: “For us therefore who recognize Him, may the Word of God come towards us in every beautiful occasion / *pulcher Deus, Verbum apud Deum,* / beautiful as God, Word with God, / *pulcher in utero virginis,* / beautiful in the womb of the Virgin, where He did not

abandon divinity and took on humanity, beautiful the newly born child; because, even while He was a child who sucked milk and while he was a babe in arms, the skies spoke of Him, the angels praised the small child He was, a star led the Magi to him, He was adored in the manger, food of the meek. Beautiful therefore in heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb of Mary, beautiful held in his parents' arms [by Mary and Joseph], beautiful in the miracles, beautiful also in the scourging. [Yes, even in the scourging because – Augustine says – in the scourging, when He was all disfigured, if you consider why He had become so, why He had let himself be struck by the scourge in that way, if you consider the mercy with which for you, for your love, He let himself be so reduced, He is beautiful also in the scourge. When Mary took Him in her arms dead below the cross (“*vidit suum dulcem Natum morientem desolatum / she saw her sweet child, sweet son, die solitary, solitary on the cross*”³⁴), when she took Him in her arms, there was nothing more beautiful than that son of hers, than that disfigured son of hers. Therefore when the good thief said to Him: “Jesus, remember me when you are in Paradise” (*Luke 23, 42*), he had never encountered in all

³⁴ Iacopone da Todi, *Stabat Mater*; cf. *Chi prega si salva* [Who prays is saved], 30Giorni, Roma 2001, p. 60.

his life anything as beautiful as in that moment, in the moment of death, when he heard said to him: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23, 43)]. Beautiful in the miracles, beautiful in the scourging, beautiful when He invited people to follow Him, beautiful when He did not disdain death, beautiful when He died, beautiful when He rose again / *pulcher in ligno, pulcher in sepulcro, pulcher in coelo* / beautiful on the cross, beautiful also in the sepulchre, beautiful in heaven”³⁵.

Thank you.

³⁵ Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos* 44, 3.

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Trust!
It is the hand of Jesus
that guides everything...

Saint Theresa
of the Child Jesus



Invitation to prayer

The editorial office of *30Giorni* invites all, and in particular the consecrated persons of the cloistered convents and monasteries, to pray for Don Giacomo Tantardini. For some months he has been undergoing treatment for a lung tumour. May the Lord grant us to pray with trust for the miracle of a cure. We ask the priests who appreciate and cherish *30Giorni* to celebrate Holy Mass for this intention. We ask of parents the charity of encouraging their children to pray.



Let us not grow
weary of praying.
Trust works miracles

Saint Theresa
of the Child Jesus

Rome, 7 November 2011

30DAYS in the Church and in the World

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Finished printing in the month of December 2011

Printed by: Arti Grafiche La Moderna - Via di Tor Cervara, 171 Roma

This booklet was published with the contribution of



The humanity of Christ is our happiness

Meditation on Christmas
by Don Giacomo Tantardini