



CHRISTMAS 2014

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In the mystery of Christmas, God asks man to receive him. He calls at the door of our home, our world, our daily tasks: he wants to enter, find a place where we are, our things, our thoughts, our affections; he does precisely what every human who comes into the world does, every guest (expected or unexpected) who shows up at our doorstep. Man always asks the other man to make room for him, to give him time: without this, he cannot live. And the miracle of Christmas is this: if God makes himself man, it is because he needs man to take care of him. This, as paradoxical as it seems and contrary to any natural or philosophical idea about God, is nevertheless understandable. Perhaps what is more difficult to understand is that this welcoming defines man's salvation. Man is saved the moment he cares for God. Receiving the God-made-man,

man receives himself, he welcomes himself in the most authentic and radical way, and is able to love himself at last.

Yes, because the problem is that man does not love himself at all and does not take care of himself at all. When we read in the Gospel of Luke, “because there was no room for them [for us] in the inn,” or in the Gospel of John, “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him,” it is really about man himself that the Gospel is speaking. This is what Christmas primarily, fundamentally brings to light: we discover that in our lives and dwellings, in our minds and hearts, there is no place for ourselves, for what we truly are, for that incessant dynamism that is man, for his infinite potential for love. Everything is already scheduled, the agenda is already full, a bit like our calendars at the beginning of the new year.

And of what is this man made, who bids enter and find lodging within us? I believe it is the Word of God, if we read between the lines, that gives us many elements to reconstruct his countenance and understand his nature.

The first element is **time**. He is a man made of time, who needs time. He needs almost a year to learn how to walk, and more than a year to learn to talk, and then more years to learn to read, write, work.... Jesus spends thirty years in Nazareth growing in years, wisdom, and grace. Many days, months, years, which are not consistently the same, but are steps that succeed each other and are consequences of each other. Time does not repeat itself, it continues, as we say, “inexorably”; yet, not: it evolves in a beneficial manner, salvifically. I ask myself if we still have that same sense of time, of existence, of its “unfolding,” which is actually a making way, or on the contrary, if we are attached to the moment, to many moments, each identical to the other, without progression, without direction, one piled upon or imprinted on the other. We are in a hurry to see results, to possess tangible goods which in reality are only ephemeral images, made of the same stuff as dreams. The God who becomes man asks us to welcome man in his temporalities, who grows and matures slowly.

The God who enters our life is also the man that contains **inner** spaces and landscapes. The birth of Jesus is surrounded by a series of experiences that happen in solitude and interiority. The gospels speak of angels, that is to say messages that envelope Mary in her awaiting, Joseph in his questioning, the shepherds in their nocturnal vigil. And we are told that all these people discovered a different reality, hidden from the eyes of the world, but that generates life, light, and new hope. “They were filled with joy and Spirit,” in the words of the Gospel of Luke. Joy and Spirit spring from within, like a fountain that issues from the depths of the rock. Man is made of this rock: in him there is something very solid, very resistant. But is there room for this solitude in our world, which we now sometimes qualify as “fluid”? Do we want to be solid? Do we really want to resist the winds and currents that beckon, distract, and tempt us? Are we not afraid to be anchored down, when everything seems to let itself be carried away by a sweet drifting? Yet faith is being steadfast, faithfulness is remaining steadfast, peace is being steadfast, not in the sense of being inert or like the peace of a cemetery, but a wanting to profoundly root ourselves in something that is true: constant and trustworthy despite everything. It is the Word, the *Logos* from which we come, but which “the world did not know.” Many words, too many senses, many paradises attract us.

And lastly, this man that bids us receive him and recognize him is made of **flesh**: the Word became flesh. This is what the Gospel of John tells us. It does not say: he became man, but rather, he became flesh, even knowing that in a certain way flesh suggests corruption, vulnerability, fragility. Flesh is subjected to cold and heat, hunger and thirst, tiredness and sleep. Flesh has desires and passions. Flesh undergoes shock, trembling, and bleeding. But it also receives caresses and embraces, it receives warmth from fire and enjoys ocean breezes, it is anointed with perfumed oils and covered in linens. Flesh is not a reality to be considered only from a medical point of view or erotic passion. Flesh am I: my feelings, my reactions to the world in which I live, my earthly condition from which we try to protect ourselves or gnostically flee. Therefore, we speak of post-human or post-mortal man or society, following the ideal of the man-machine whose parts can be replaced or transformed. Perhaps we don't realize that this worldview is subtly overpowering our minds, daily drawing us further away from the body of flesh of which we are made and which contains and cares for our truest self. Because it is the body that is the true subject of the spiritual life and there is nothing better than the mystery of the Incarnation to remind us of that and cause us to meditate on it. Let us not disdain the body; let us not be gnostic, or else along with the body we will also lose the spirit. The body of Jesus is placed in our hands for us to welcome and, with him, also welcome our own bodies with their history, wounds, emotions, and weaknesses. Bodies that ask us to care for them, not only by going to doctors, but also by deeply listening to them, living and savoring to its marrow the reality of our being in the world.

For this did God come into the world, for us to learn to be in him, in truth and grace, without evading but also without chains: free as only men who have learned to be genuinely human can be.