

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
St. Anthony of Padua Church, Effingham, Illinois
25 December 2008

The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord
Mass During the Day

Each year this Gospel seems to us an odd one to proclaim on Christmas. Where are the oxen and sheep? Where the shepherds? Where, even, are Mary, Joseph and the Child?

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

We know John the Baptist to be the last of the prophets who "came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him" (John 1:7). Who, then, is this light?

John prepared the way for Jesus Christ, "the true light, which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9), through whom we have received "grace and truth" (John 1:16).

The True Light, Jesus Christ, is also the Word who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The Father has spoken to us through his Son, the Word, the Light, who now sits "at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3).

It was not enough for us to hear the voice of God; it was not enough for him to speak to us in partial and various ways. In the birth of Jesus Christ, no longer will we simply hear his

voice; now we can see him and touch him. Now - because of the mystery of Christmas - the Word, the Reason and eternal Meaning behind all of creation - "has made himself tangible to our senses and our intelligence. Now we can touch him and contemplate him (cf. I John 1:1)."¹ It is him whom we come today to adore.

Today, the glory of the Son, who is "far superior to the angels," is hidden in human flesh (Hebrews 1:4).

In the child Jesus, the defenselessness of God is apparent. God comes without weapons, because he does not wish to conquer from outside but desires to win and transform us from within. If anything can conquer man's vainglory, his violence, his greed, it is the vulnerability of the child. God assumed this vulnerability to conquer us and lead us to himself.²

Can there be anything more vulnerable or defenseless than a newborn child? Yet it is precisely this that the Son of God becomes for us to manifest the depth of his great love.

As we consider this Word made Flesh, this True Light, let us direct our eyes heavenward - for just a moment - and look upon the statue of our heavenly patron, Saint Anthony of Padua. He holds in his arms the Christ Child. How could he hold the "newborn King of the Jews" if he lived some twelve hundred years after the mysterious birth in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:2)?

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Wednesday General Audience, 19 December 2008.

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Images of Hope: Meditations on Major Feasts*. John Rock and Graham Harrison, trans. (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2006), 12.

The story is told to us that one day Saint Anthony was staying in the home a man named Tiso. He was given "a room in an isolated part of the property so that he might be undisturbed in his study and contemplation."³ Anthony's holiness was already well known and Tiso wanted to be certain to take care of his blessed guest. To do so, he frequently passed by the room in which the Saint was staying. At one point he peered through the window and saw

a most beautiful and joyous baby appear in the arms of Blessed Anthony. The Saint hugged him and kissed him, gazing into his face with ceaseless affection. The man was awestruck at the beauty of that baby. He wondered where such a beautiful child came from.⁴

The baby, of course, was Jesus, the Christ Child. This must surely have been the most profound experience of Anthony's life. We know the joy of kissing a human baby, but to kiss God himself?

Why would the Child appear to Saint Anthony? The reason is found in the Gospel proclaimed today. Saint Anthony is known as the Evangelic Doctor, the Doctor of the Gospels, because of his deep knowledge of and love for the Scriptures, and of the Gospels especially. Through his prayerful reading of the holy Gospels that night, the Word truly became flesh and was held in Anthony's hands.

³ *The Book of St. Anthony's Miracles*, 22. Virgilio Gamboso, ed. (Padua, Italy: Edizione Messagero Padova, 2004), 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

If we look again to the statue above us, we see that the Christ Child holds his hand out toward us. It is an invitation for us to take his hand and to allow him to grasp our hand, as any child does. It is this hand that "has won victory for him, his holy arm" (Psalm 98:1); it his hand that will guide us (cf. Isaiah 11:6).

But why was Saint Anthony given the grace to hold the Child in his arms? The answer is given us in what he holds in his other arm: lilies. The lily in Christian art represents purity, which is why Saint Joseph - who also holds the Child - holds a lily. The Child for whom we have all awaited and prayed (cf. I Samuel 1:27) comes to those who are "clean of heart" (Matthew 5:8).

The Roman poet Virgil has given us a well-known phrase: *omnia vincit amor*, "love conquers all;" but whereas we end his phrase there, he went on to say, *et nos cedamus amori*, "let us, too, yield to love."⁵

As we gaze upon the Christ Child we see God himself, God who "is love" (I John 4:16). When a child reaches out to grasp our fingers, who pulls their hand away? None of us do. We let the baby grasp our fingers and play with them. How could we do differently when it is God who reaches out to us?

⁵ Virgil, *Bucolics* X, 69. Quoted in Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 4.

When the newborn Son of God reaches out to grasp our hand, will we pull away, or will we let him take us by the hand and lead us along the paths of purity, holiness and grace?

As we approach today the manger of Bethlehem, let this holy infant take your hand; let yourself this day be conquered by love! Amen! A merry Christmas to you all!