

CHRISTMAS 2011

Ever since Bing Crosby first sang “White Christmas” many years ago, we have wondered every December: will we have a white Christmas this year? Last year we certainly did; in fact, we got about ten inches of snow on Christmas Eve here in Waterloo. This year—very little if any is left from the few flurries that are all we have had so far. But snowy or not, Christmas is always a feast of the greatest joy because it is always about celebrating the wonderful news of the birth of Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man, into our world. I wish all of you and all your loved ones all the joy and grace of this most holy season.

Before Mass began tonight/today, we were all reminded about the new translation of some of the prayers and parts of the Mass that the English-speaking world has been using since the beginning of Advent in late November. This is the result of the Church’s sensible desire that our translation reflects more faithfully and fully the words and meaning of the official Latin text. And so that is why you were encouraged to follow along with the pew cards or in those first 30 pages of the Breaking Bread books in your pews.

The transition so far has gone quite well, though it is very easy to slip into the old wordings that we have used since the 1970’s. That is probably most true with the new response to “the Lord be with you”—that new response, as you have seen, is “and with your spirit” instead of the old “and also with you.” That little dialogue takes place five times in every Mass, and many have said to me things like: “Well, Father, I got three out of five right today!” Sounds kind of like baseball, doesn’t it—where the announcer may say this batter went two for four today (two hits out of four at-bats). I’m glad to say that everyone’s ‘batting averages’ seem to be going up with every additional week we use these new responses!

One of the most meaningful changes for me personally comes in the Creed, the Profession of Faith which we will recite in just a few moments. For years we have been saying “We believe in one God...”, “we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ...” and so on. But the original Latin text says “credo” which means “I believe”, and so that is what we now say. And that is where the new meaning and power come into play. Instead of saying what we believe, as if we are each only part of a larger group all blended together, now we are each declaring what I myself believe—and that makes it a whole lot more personal. It also challenges us much more directly to ask ourselves: do I really, truly and internally believe and accept as true what my lips are saying I believe”?

Consider, for example, what each of us will say we believe about Jesus, he whose human birth we celebrate this holy night/day:

--“I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ.” What does it mean to believe that Jesus is Lord? That has been one of the core beliefs of the Church since her birth at Pentecost, and to proclaim publicly the Lordship of Jesus in those earliest centuries would often lead to death by martyrdom. The Roman emperors often called themselves “lord”—the ultimate authority, the one to whom final allegiance was due. To say instead that Jesus is Lord was revolutionary—and those emperors thought it dangerous to the point of trying to exterminate Christianity altogether.

Obviously the empire failed in its plans and itself crumbled into the dustbins of history centuries ago while the Christian faith continues to grow and spread throughout the world. Do I really believe in “one Lord Jesus Christ”; and if so, do others know that belief by how I conduct myself? Tim Tebow is the quarterback for the NFL Denver Broncos, and he has been in the news a lot lately—not just because he has led his team to some dramatic late-game victories, but also because he is not afraid to publicly state his own belief in the lordship of Jesus Christ. Some commentators don’t like that—some seem to feel

threatened by it, while others make fun of him...as disciples of Jesus have often been ridiculed, especially in our own time. “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ.” Do I? Do I really?

--or consider what else we each say about Jesus: “true God from true God...consubstantial with the Father.” That word ‘consubstantial’ may not be part of your everyday vocabulary; I can tell you it is not part of mine! But it is an important word conveying a critical and central truth of our Catholic Christian faith: that Jesus is not only this cute little baby born of Mary, but is also truly God and of the same divine substance as God the Father. This Son of God, co-eternal with the Father and fully divine as is the Father, “by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” “Incarnate”—in the flesh, our physical, bodily, flesh-and-blood existence. The divine takes on the human without diminishing in the least that divinity. An astonishing and truly incomprehensible mystery! And yet this is precisely what “I believe”, and what you will soon say that you believe as well.

Last weekend I mentioned Fr. Robert Barron, a Chicago priest who has written a superb book on our faith whose title is “Catholicism”. He begins the book by saying that the great and fundamental principle of Catholic Christianity is precisely the Incarnation—that the Word of God that was truly God became flesh in the person of this newborn Jesus and lived among us as St. John tells us in the first chapter of his gospel. No other great religious leader or founder has ever had such things believed or said of them, nor did they ever make such a claim about themselves as Jesus did: not Moses or Mohammed or Buddha or Confucius or anyone else. This is surely not to condemn or marginalize those other founders or those other faiths; indeed, the Church holds them in great respect and gladly acknowledges the wisdom they contain. But we also hold fast to our belief that Jesus alone is truly God who became man at a precise place and time in human history when he was conceived in Mary’s womb and born in Bethlehem nine months later. In the Creed each of us will say: “I believe” these things that go way, way beyond our capacity to fully understand. Do I believe such things? Do I really?

Christmas is truly a wonderful, joy-filled time of the year—we enjoy the time spent with family, relatives and other loved ones, we have fun exchanging gifts and doing all those other traditional things. But Christmas is first and fundamentally about Jesus Christ: the eternal Son of God who became the Son of Mary in order to reconcile us with the Father and reawaken for us the hope of eternal joy. That is what Bethlehem is all about, that is what Calvary and the empty tomb are all about. Back to Fr. Barron for a moment—he concludes his first chapter by saying: “Jesus Christ is Lord. That means that neither Caesar nor any of his descendants is Lord. Jesus Christ, the God-man...he is the one to whom final allegiance is due. Christians are those who submit to this Lordship.”

We will all soon say: “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ...God from God...and...was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man.” It is good to ask ourselves: do I believe this? Do I really??

[during the Creed we will pause and kneel for a moment when we come to the phrase “...by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man” so as to be more conscious of the mystery of the Incarnation that we celebrate tonight/today]

