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Laid in a Manger

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NOTES and COMMENT

Laid in a Manger

"The ox knoweth its owner, and the ass his master's crib."

Many years ago a Child was born in Bethlehem of Juda. The place of His birth was a cave which ordinarily served as a stable for animals. His Mother wrapped Him well in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the nearby inn. What the animals did for shelter and feed-box that memorable night, the Gospel story does not say. But Christian artists in succeeding ages filled out the picture for us. On their canvasses, the blue-veiled Mother bending radiantly over her little Son in the manger holds the central place. But the animals are there too. Standing at the side, they look in upon Mother and Child from doorway or window. Dispossessed, they yet seem content to be so, for they know (or at least their artist-creators knew) that the Child to Whom they have yielded place is the Son of God.

It is a queer quirk of our modern artists that they seem to wish to vindicate the rights of the animals. In their creations, the Child is evicted from the center of the scene, and the animals are led back to their "rightful" place. For the artists who today paint the pictures for our greeting cards or deftly adorn our shop-windows, the most appropriate decoration for the Christmas season seems to be, now, not Christ, from Whom the holiday takes its name, but animals—a reindeer, or a carabao, a bowlegged duck or a likeable little puppy-dog. What was once only a decorative border has become the picture's focal center. And the reason is, of course, because so many

moderns have ceased to believe really, that the Child is the Son of God.

And even for those who have not as yet ceased to believe, the Child somehow does not mean all that He should. A Catholic father, some years ago, was explaining to his little boy, who had, by passing his seventh birthday, suddenly become a little man, that the stories the child had been told about Santa Claus were really only fairy stories. There was no such person. The presents the boy received on Christmas morning were not from snowbound storehouses somewhere in the North Pole, but from Mother and Dad. When the father had finished his explanation, the boy looked up, a trace of disappointment in his eyes, and asked: "And now Dad, what about that Jesus story?"

It was only a youngster, it is true, who asked that question, and he is not to be blamed for his inability to distinguish between fact and fairy tale. But what of his parents? Had they perhaps failed to make the Christ-Child real enough, and meaningful enough to their little son?

Customs may have grown up among even the best of our Catholic families which, instead of helping to celebrate the Birth of Christ, distract from Him. At Christmas time we can be so happy as to forget the real reason for our happiness. We can become so absorbed in red and green-wrapped gifts that we forget the One Gift which matters, God's gift of His Son to the world. Christmas trees and colored lights, stuffed-stockings and candy-boxes, "quesos, mantecas, turones y miel" can pile up so high in front of our Christmas crib that we cannot see past them to the little Child who alone lends them meaning.

Chesterton once said: "Some people are thankful at Christmas time for what they get in their stocking. I'm thankful I have a foot to put in my stocking." In his humorous way he pointed the lesson which all of us would do well to recall as Christmas Day approaches: that we should not be distracted by lesser blessings from that one essential blessing, Mary's Son and God's. He should hold the central place in our celebrations, as He must hold the central place in our hearts. And we should pray that all those who now do not believe may some day in the not-too-distant future unite their voices to ours when in the Credo of the Christmas Mass we say: I believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son

of God, born of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God. . . . Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate through the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made Man.

For as Robert Browning wrote:

That Jesus Christ is God
Solves all things in this world and out of it!

JOSEPH J. KAVANAGH

Impressions of Japanese Catholicity

With the upsurge in conversions after the war, it should not be forgotten that the Japanese Church is still in its Bethlehem. But one-fifth of one percent of the nation is Catholic and there remains yet so much to do. Therefore, it was most gratifying for this writer to find on the seventh floor of one of the Mitsukoshi department stores in Tokyo a Catholic chapel which, it was stated, was having a good effect, although something more pretentious in ornamentation and decoration might have been wished for in so public and so central a show-case of the Faith.

In one chapel a young man served Mass so devoutly and perfectly that he attracted attention. He was a student in a local university, who had converted his professor and the professor's whole family. In that chapel there were flat cushions, each about a yard square, in a pile to be taken by the Japanese who came to Mass, while there were kneelers in a corner for the Europeans. The Japanese removed their shoes on entering and took a cushion to an empty spot on the floor. There they squatted and knelt and prayed, often completely bowed to the floor in most profound adoration. Surely, such faith will bring the Gift of Faith to those who still sit in the shadow of darkness, mumbling their prayers before the pagan gods.

The rate of conversions has decreased, it seems, recently. Many begin instructions, but not all finish. Vestiges of a feudal mentality can cause complications. For example, if a person asks