

ST. LEO THE GREAT ON CHRISTMAS

[POPE ST. LEO THE GREAT (440-461) is generally recognised as the principal Doctor of the mystery of the Incarnation in the Western Church. All know the part he played, through his legates and writings, in the Council of Chalcedon (451). He is also the most ancient of the great Latin Preachers, whose sermons on Church festivals are still extant. To this day, in the lessons of the second nocturn at Matins, the Roman breviary makes use of Leo's eloquence to interpret the meaning and spirit of the various liturgical solemnities, for example, at Christmas and on the feast of the Epiphany.

St. Leo is certainly at his best when commenting on the dogmatic fact of the twofold nature, divine and human, in the one Person of Christ, which sums up the mystery of the Incarnation. True to the Western trend of theological exposition, he does not stop to weave subtle theories into the fabric of dogmatic belief: he simply enumerates truths, but these he follows up with a wonderful wealth of practical conclusions for the everyday life of the faithful. Besides his classic work—the *Tomos* on the Incarnation which he sent to the Fathers of Chalcedon—St. Leo has left ten sermons which he preached in Rome on the feast of Christmas (see Migne, P. L., t. 54, col. 190-254). Each ranks as both a theological and an oratorical masterpiece.

In the hope that the reader might thereby be led to read the complete text, we have in the following pages pieced together into one discourse select passages taken from each of the ten sermons. The Roman numeral given at the end of each paragraph refers to the number of the Christmas sermon as edited in the P.L., the Arabic numeral to the chapter of the same sermon. The divisions and their four titles are, of course, the translator's.]

I. THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS.

Our Saviour, dearly beloved, was born to-day; let us rejoice. There is no room for sadness to-day, for it is the birthday of life; of that life, indeed, which swallows up the fear of death and brings us the promise of eternal joy. No one is shut out from sharing in this joy; all have one common cause of gladness; since our Lord, the destroyer of sin and of death, on finding that none of us was free from guilt, has come to set us all free. Let the just man rejoice

because he draws nearer to the crown; let the sinner exult because he is offered pardon; let the gentile take courage because he is called back to life. I, 1.

Let, indeed, tho' just rejoice in the Lord; let the hearts of the faithful rejoice in God; let the children of men praise His wondrous deeds; because it is particularly in this act of God that our lowly condition realizes how highly it is prized by its Maker. He certainly bestowed much upon our human nature when He created it to His own image; but He gave it much more when He came to restore us, taking unto Himself the 'form of a servant.' For, although all that the Creator expends upon His creatures proceeds from the same paternal love, it is less astonishing that man be raised to the divine, than that God should descend to human level. IV, 2.

Wherefore, on all days and at all times the birth of our Lord and Saviour from the Virgin Mother comes back to the minds of the faithful meditating on things divine. Our mind, lifted up to the acknowledgment of its Maker, whether in groaning or pleading, in rejoicing and praising, or in the offering of the Sacrifice, on nothing more frequently or more confidently directs its spiritual gaze than the fact that the Son of God, born coeternally from the Father, is also born by a human birth. Nevertheless, no other day more than this, either in heaven or upon earth, invites us to honour Christ's birth, when nature herself shines forth with a new light and reminds us of the new splendour of this wonderful mystery. VI, 1.

For to-day the Author of the world issued forth from the virginal womb and He who fashioned all creatures has been made a Son of her whom He created. To-day the Word of God has appeared clothed in the flesh, and that which had never been visible to human eyes, now also becomes tangible to human hands. VI, 1.

Let us, therefore, dearly beloved, rejoice in the Lord and be glad with spiritual gladness; for there has shone upon us the day of new redemption, of ancient desires, of eternal happiness. In the yearly round of festivities, once more is renewed among us the mystery of our redemption, promised from the beginning of the world, fulfilled at last, enduring for all time. It is fitting that with uplifted hearts we should worship this divine mystery; it is meet that that which is accomplished by a great dispensation of God, should be celebrated with great rejoicings by the Church. II, 1.

Thus, commemorating anew that unspeakable condescension of the divine mercy whereby the Maker of men has deigned to become man, we may be found in the nature of Him whom we worship in ours. VIII, 1.

II. THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS.

Now, when the time was come, beloved, which had been set apart for the redemption of mankind, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, entered the lowliness of this world, descending from His heavenly throne, though not withdrawing from His Father's glory, being born in a new order by a new birth. In a new order, because, though invisible in His own being, He became visible in ours; the Incomprehensible willed to be comprehended: abiding before all time, He began a temporal existence; the Lord of creation, overshadowing the majesty of His dignity, put on the form of a slave; the impassible God did not disdain to be a passible man, and the immortal God to be subject to the laws of death. II, 2.

The prince of this world is bound and the spoils of his captives are snatched from him. Our nature, cleansed of its former ills, regains its pristine glory. Death is destroyed by death; birth is restored by a new birth. For, in one and the same act, Christ sets free from slavery the redeemed, secures a higher ancestry for the newly born, and faith in Him changes the sinner into a just man. II, 4.

The Word of God, Itself God, the Son of God who was in the beginning with God, by whom all things were made and without whom was made nothing (John, I, 1-3), becomes man in order to free man from eternal death. He lowered Himself to our humble estate in such a way that His majesty remained undiminished, and without ceasing to be what He was before and putting on what He was not, He united the form of a servant to that form whereby He is equal to the Father (Philip, II, 6), and in so intimate a partnership did He knit both natures together that neither the glory of the Godhead swallowed up the lower nature, nor did the promotion of the lower nature diminish the majesty of the higher. I, 2.

In the form of a servant, which He assumed at the end of time in order to achieve our redemption, Christ is inferior to the Father; but in the form of God, in which He was before all time, He is equal to the Father. In His lowly human estate He was made of a woman, made under the law (Gal., IV, 4); but, as He retains His divine majesty, He is the Word of God by whom all things were made (John, I, 3). Therefore, He who being God by nature, fashioned man, the same, putting on the nature of a servant, is made man; but both are one Person—God as regards the power of Him who puts on a new nature and Man as regards the humility of the nature which He has put on. III, 3.

If you believe this, dearly beloved, you are true Christians, true

Israelites, adopted into the family of the children of God; because all the saints, who preceded our Saviour's time were justified through this faith, and through this mystery have become the body of Christ, X, 7.

III. THE MEMORY OF CHRISTMAS.

Membership with Christ.

Neither sluggish nor carnal should be the joy with which Christians celebrate the day of the Lord's birth. Only then will each of us worthily and earnestly celebrate the day if he remembers of whose body he is a member, to what Head he is joined; otherwise he would form an unfit part of the sacred organism. Consider, dearly beloved, and in the light of the Holy Spirit wisely recall to mind who it is that has taken us up unto Himself and whom we have welcomed into our own nature; for as our Lord by being born has become our own flesh, so we by being reborn have become His body and therefore His members, and we are now the temples of the Holy Ghost. Wherefore the Apostle writes: 'Glorify and bear God in your body' (I Cor., VI, 20). III, 5.

Thus, while we worship our Saviour's birth, we realize that we are celebrating also the beginning of our new life. For the birth of Christ is the origin of the Christian race, and the birthday of the Head is the birthday of the body. Though each of those who are called has his own station in life, though the children of the Church be separated from each other by the passage of years, yet the whole body of the baptized, crucified together with Christ in His Passion, raised up in His Resurrection, and in His Ascension placed with Him at the right hand of the Father, are likewise all born in His birth. Every believer, to whatever part of the world he may belong, breaks away from the path of original sin. He is re-born in Christ; and, by being reborn, becomes a new man. No longer is he the offspring of an earthly father alone, but the seed of the Saviour, who for this purpose became the Son of Man that we may become the children of God. VI, 2.

Let, therefore, Catholic Faith acknowledge in the Lord's humility His glory; let the Church, which is the body of Christ, rejoice in the mysteries of her salvation. For, unless the Word of God had become flesh and dwelt among us, unless the Creator Himself had descended to commune with His own creature and by His birth had brought back man to man's original estate, death would have reigned from Adam even unto the end. He became one of our own race, that we might become partakers of His divine nature. That birth

which took place from the womb of the Virgin, He made available to us in the baptismal font. He gave the water the same power which He gave His Mother. Indeed, 'that power of the Most High and the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost' (Luke, I, 35), which caused Mary to bring forth the Saviour, causes the water to give a new birth to the believer. V, 5.

To you, therefore, dearly beloved, I can address no words more fitting than those of St. Peter: 'a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people' (I Pet. II, 9). You have been built upon the impregnable rock, Christ; you have been grafted into the nature of our Lord and Saviour Himself through His true assumption of our flesh. Remain firm in that faith which you have confessed before many witnesses, and in which you have been reborn through water and the Holy Ghost and in which you have been sealed with the chrism of salvation, the seal of eternal life. IV, 6.

IV. THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS.

Awake, O man, and recognise the dignity of thy nature. Remember that thou art made to the image of God, which was indeed deformed in Adam but has been reformed in Christ. Since, then, although born unto present things we are reborn for future glory, let us not give ourselves up to earthly interests, but rather let us be intent on heavenly ones; and in order that we may the better realise our hope, let us consider what divine grace has bestowed upon our nature in this great mystery of Christ's nativity. VII, 6.

Now, in the treasury house of our Lord's generosity what can we find so fitting for the celebration of the present feast than peace—that peace which was the first message delivered by the Angels on our Lord's birthday? For peace begets the children of God, it is the nurse of love and the mother of unity, the repose of the elect and our home for all eternity; its peculiar task and special benefit is that it joins to God those whom it severs from the world. Whence the Apostle stirs us up to seek for this blessing when he says: 'Being justified by faith, let us have peace with God.' In this short sentence is summed up the effect of nearly all the commandments; because where true peace is, no virtue can be absent. But, what is it to have peace with God except to will what He commands and not to will what He forbids? For, if human friendship is based on equality of mind and of will, and dissimilar characters can never attain to a lasting union, how can he share in the peace of God who is pleased with what displeases God and takes delight in those things by which God is offended? Such cannot be the mind of the children of God nor is this the wisdom of those ennobled by the

grace of adoption. Let the chosen and royal race respond to the dignity of their regeneration. Let them love what their Father loves and in nothing dissent from their Maker. VI. 3.

Let us, then, dearly beloved, render thanks to God the Father, through His Son, in the Holy Ghost, to Him, who on account of His great mercy wherewith He loved us, has had pity on us, and 'when we were dead in sins has quickened us together with Christ' (Eph. II, 5), that in Him we might be a new creature—a new work of His hands. Let us 'put off the old man with his deeds' (Colos. III, 9), and, having obtained a share in the Sonship of Christ, let us renounce the works of the flesh. Recognise, O Christian, thine own dignity, and, 'having been made partaker of the Divine nature' (II Peter I, 4), do not fall back into thy former mean estate by unworthy behaviour. Be mindful of whose Head and of whose body thou art a member; remember that 'delivered from the power of darkness, thou hast been translated into God's light and God's kingdom' (Gal. I, 13). By the Sacrament of Baptism thou wast made the temple of the Holy Ghost; do not by evil deeds drive away so noble a Guest, and subject thyself again to the service of the devil. For thy ransom is the Blood of Christ. He will judge thee in justice who has redeemed thee in mercy, who with the Father and the Holy Ghost reigneth for ever and ever. Amen. I, 3.

ROMANUS RIOS, O.S.B.

JOSEPH CLAYTON, who died on November 18th, was one of the earliest contributors to BLACKFRIARS. Together with Father Bede Jarrett, Father Vincent McNabb, Father Luke Walker and Mr. Stanley Morison, he was a member of the original editorial board that watched over the earliest issues of this Review. His streams of interesting talk and vigorous argument, his own journalistic experience, his enthusiasm and optimism were all a welcome stimulus in those days of our difficult beginnings.

He was received into the Church before the last war, in 1910, and from his background of Anglicanism and Fabian Socialism he brought a knowledge of and belief in our national institutions which were refreshing to his Catholic friends. A man of transparent honesty, outspoken and uncompromising, a champion of the working man, simple and vigorous of utterance, with more than a touch of pugnacity, he has left enduring proof of these qualities in twenty or so published books and scores and scores of newspaper and periodical articles. He was no revolutionary and, in his campaign for social justice—and how pungently militant he could be!—he believed in none but constitutional methods. Selfless and unambitious, *he loved justice and hated iniquity.* God rest his soul.