



# Mount Saviour Chronicle

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*"And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."*

*(St. Luke 2:7)*

Dear Friends of Mount Saviour:

I am obliged to start our Christmas message with a word of thanks to our friends who, in the critical days of last May, rallied to help the community in their prayers for my recovery. To such a manifestation of charity, one can rightly apply the words of our Lord: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God." (John 11:4). Indeed the Father is glorified whenever people serve Christ in a sick person.

The sickness, with its incapacity to do anything for such a long while, offered a wonderful opportunity to *think*, to see one's life in the light of God's loving care and providence. Of particular interest in this retrospection, was the comparison of Christmas at Maria Laach and at Mount Saviour.

A distinguishing characteristic of my life is that I am a monk of two worlds; the old world of Europe and the new world of the United States. Benedictine monasticism in Europe is a traditional institution, in the United States it is free from any of the old burdens and looks forward to a new day. The life founded at Mount Saviour has all the marks of a new beginning, and this is especially evident in the different way in which Christmas is celebrated.

To appreciate Christmas at Maria Laach, one has to know a little about the general background of this great monastery. A Benedictine abbey is, in



Giotto

virtue of its stability, firmly rooted in the soil into which it has been planted. Maria Laach is situated in the Rhineland, in that part of Germany which shows more than any other part of the country the influence of Roman civilization. The city of Cologne, the old "Colonia Agrippina", considered herself to be the German Rome. Her cathedral was, therefore, dedicated to Saint Peter. At Aix la-Chapelle, Charlemagne built the famous octagon in imitation of San Vitale in Ravenna. Rome stands for universality, for the union of the nations under the discipline of the "Pax Romana", the "Roman peace." Rome molds the world of antiquity into the unity

of one, all-embracing empire. Abbot Ildephonse considered it the specific mission of Maria Laach as an abbey in the Rhineland to cultivate the spirit of Rome as the spirit of paternal authority, of order, of community service to counteract the individualism so ingrained in the German character and so prevalent in modern times since the days of the Renaissance. The liturgy of Christmas still shows certain traces of the spirit that built the Holy Roman Empire in the middle ages. I remember vividly how our novicemaster, Father Albert Hammenstede, pointed out to us that the antiphons of the First Vespers of Christmas were composed for the occasion of the coronation of Charlemagne as the first emperor of the west, which took place in Saint Peter's basilica in Rome on the eve of Christmas in the year 800. And indeed the words of the antiphons, "the King of peace is magnified; the whole world longs to behold his face", or the other one, "the King of peace is magnified above all the kings of the whole earth", receive a new light if they are not only related to the new-born King in the city of David, but also to his political vicar on earth, the new-head of the Christian nations.

The celebration of Christmas in the majestic abbey church of Maria Laach brought something of the splendor of the Holy Roman Empire right into the 20th century. It is difficult to convey to the reader the atmosphere of solemnity and majesty which filled the abbey at this great feast. The mind had been prepared by the celebration of Advent, by the solemn singing of the "O" Antiphons at Vespers on the days preceding the feast, and by the impressive announcement of the Nativity of Christ at the hour of Prime on December 23rd. In the holy night, the bells in the many towers of the church were rung individually at different intervals for about half an hour before the beginning of the Night Office, until they finally all joined their voices into one mighty chorus. I remember the feeling of awe that came over me when I entered the church at night and was greeted by the flood of light radiating from the large dome of the baldachino, a gift of Emperor William II. All its arches dissolved into glittering lines of light. The choir itself was decorated richly with garlands of fir branches and laid out with deep red carpets. Into this radiant setting the "cantores", the chanters, gravely entered in their copes of white and gold, intoning the Invitatory, "Christ is born to us. Come let us adore him." My first Christmas was an overwhelming experience. I remember having written home a description to convey the impact of mystery and majesty which the melodies had on me as well as the texts of the Lessons from the prophet Isaias. My novicemaster was very pleased with what I had written; it evidently reflected the atmosphere of glory

of this unique celebration. However, the spirit which inspired this remarkable display was not at all one of romantic nostalgia for the past splendor of the Holy Roman Empire. It was rather the spirit emanating from the very texts the Roman Church uses in her Christmas liturgy; the spirit of faith with which the Church sees the mystery of the Nativity as a present spiritual reality not as an historical reminiscence. The historical circumstances which accompanied the actual event of the birth of Christ 2000 years ago, and which are recorded in the Gospels, may be represented to the imagination by the cribs in our churches and our homes. But the community of monks gathered around the altar in the basilica of Maria Laach represented the Church which actually enters, in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, into the mystery of the Incarnation as into the mystery of the birth of the Christian people. In the spirit of faith, the Church sees in the human historical event of the birth of the child at Bethlehem, the Advent, the coming of the Son of God into his kingdom. She takes the step from the human to the divine. "A child is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called the Messenger of the great Counsel." (Is. 9:6). The babe in the crib is the King of God's kingdom, and this is the reason why the Church surrounds his coming with all the splendor at her disposal.

How different is Christmas at Mount Saviour. The hills of the Southern Tier resemble those of the Eifel at Maria Laach, but Elmira is not an American Rome, and from our hill no romanesque basilica greets the visitor. Our chapel is an octagon, like that of Charlemagne's Aix la-Chapelle, but very much a country edition of that venerable structure. There is no baldachino over the main altar to be brilliantly illuminated. Although in former years, I allowed my romantic nature to indulge in dozens of candles, these caused such heat and lack of oxygen in the chapel that we had to cut down on their number. Now I see them dwindle from year to year. At Maria Laach, the material burden of preparation was distributed among many experienced workers. Above all, there were the Brothers to carry the burden of manual labor in the kitchen, the bakery, the laundry, in decorating the church and the sanctuary. The Fathers, or choir monks, could give themselves in all leisure and recollection to the liturgical celebration. At Mount Saviour, the community is small, the members are unseasoned, there are not enough of them for the many jobs, and the manual labor has to be carried by the very people who then celebrate the liturgy in choir. The individual is not carried along by a magnificent apparatus which, in itself, would be sufficient to arouse his enthusiasm.

Small in number, young in age, poor as far as external means are concerned—why should such a setting be only a drawback for the celebration of Christmas. Is it not ideal for a new Christmas in a new world? The lack of that support which external grandeur can give, helps us to realize that his Nativity is part of our Lord's humiliation; is, in fact, the beginning of his taking upon himself the burden of our sins. The first moment of Christ's earthly existence is also the beginning of his sufferings. There was no room for him in the inn. He was born in a cave "among the beasts." (St. Mark 1:13), wrapped by his mother in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. (St. Luke 2:7). This event must have a special significance because it is exactly this the angel makes known to the shepherds as a sign by which to recognize the Saviour: "In the same country there were shepherds awake in the fields keeping night-watches over their flocks. And all at once an angel of the Lord came and stood by them, and the glory of the Lord shone about them so that they were overcome with fear. But the angel said to them: Do not be afraid; behold, the news I bring you is news of great rejoicing for the whole people. This day, in the city of David, a Saviour is born to you; who is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the sign by which you are to know him; you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:12).

Faithful to the inspired word, Christian art has kept this "sign" in the representation of the Nativity scene for centuries. In the ikons of the Eastern Church, it is still "canonical." In the west, it has been traditional until the beginning of the Renaissance. To my knowledge, Giotto was the last who painted it in his great fresco of the Nativity in the Scrovegni Chapel at Padua, a section of which we have reproduced on the front page. His genius gave a classical expression to the true meaning of this "sign." Later artists cared less and less about the scriptural fidelity of their representations, and gave more and more room to the display of their artistic talent and to the merely aesthetical beauty of their paintings. As a result, many very beautiful pieces of art were created, but much of the original meaning as intended by Holy Scripture was lost. *Man* took over. The Nativity scene became more and more a glorification of the beauty of womanhood in the Mother, and of the charm of innocent childhood in the infant. Not that one would want to exclude human beauty from the Incarnation, but the faithful who admires the lovely Madonna and the sweet child is not confronted directly and specifically with the "sign" that the shepherds recognized when they went in haste to Bethlehem. The child with the swaddling clothes wrapped around him tight so that

he is unable to move, characterizes Christ as the "Son of obedience." (cf. 1st Ep. St. Peter 1:14), who "in coming into this world says: Sacrifice and oblation thou wouldst not, but a body thou has fitted to me; in holocausts and sin-offerings you have had no pleasure. Then said I: Behold, I come to do your will." (Hebrews 10:7).

Why is it so vital that the faithful should understand this "sign"? Because "it is in this *will* that we have been sacrificed through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Hebrews 10:10). That the *obedience* of the new-born child ended in the *offering* of his body is alluded to in the second part of the "sign." "His mother laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7). The "inn" is man's world, "the world (which) knew Him not." (John 1:10), the world which crucified him "outside the gate." (Hebrews 13:12). At that time, he was, again with the assistance of his mother, wrapped in burial clothes and laid in a tomb. We ask once more: Why is it important that the faithful, who receives the child in the crib, becomes aware of the meaning of this "sign"?—Because if he does not become aware of it, he will not be disposed to follow the invitation St. Paul adds to the statement I have quoted above: "Let us too go out to him away from the camp, bearing the ignominy he bore. For here we have no permanent city, but we seek for the city that is to come." (Hebrews 13:13-14).

It is simply this way: The lovelier the mother and the child become, the less we realize that Christmas is the beginning of the Lord's *humiliation*, the first stop on the way of the cross; the less we feel moved to leave man's world to enter into that obedience to God's will, which leads him through death into the fullness of the spirit. As long as everything in and around the crib is so lovely and nice, we don't realize how far away we are from the "city that is to come." Everybody likes loveliness. Everybody delights in the innocence of an infant. Nobody has to have a change of heart to appreciate the charm of a beautiful mother and a darling child. But the question is: Did Christ enter this world to present mankind with human charm? Did God become man that man should feel better about his being man? Is the Incarnation the last glorification of human nature? If that were the case, then the Word has become flesh that flesh may be more and more flesh. In reality, the Word became flesh that we should see *his* glory and not our glory. (John 1).

Christmas is not the lovely end of all *man's* ways, but is a new beginning. We are invited with the shepherds to leave the beasts on the fields, and to go over to Bethlehem that we may see the "sign": a little worm of a human being, all bundled up, lying

in a manger, who is actually the Son of God and the Saviour and the joy of all people; because he shows at the very moment of his entering into this world that he is come *not* to be ministered to, but to minister; *not* to sacrifice the life of others for the realization of his royal claims, but to lay down his life for his friends, even to die for his enemies. To recognize *this "sign"* and to believe it, one really has to bend *low, very low*. I am afraid that as long as one only delights in the lovely child, one does not bend low enough to kiss the *hem* of Christ's garment. One may still belong to those who want to make Christ their king because he gave them bread to eat, but there was no salvation in this enthusiasm: "knowing them that they meant to come and carry him off so as to make a king of him, Jesus once again withdrew unto the hillside all alone." (John 6:15). But when the centurion, who stood by the Cross, seeing that Jesus cried out and gave up the ghost said: "Truly this man was the Son of God." (cf. Mark 15:39), then in the darkness of his death, Christ's glory was seen, and the centurion had found the "city that is to come."

Now we understand why the setting of Mount Saviour is an ideal one to celebrate a new Christmas in a new world. At Maria Laach, my eyes were opened to see the *glory* of the Divine King, who, on Christmas, celebrates his solemn entry into the city. Everything in the glorious celebration of the holy night cried, in the words of Isaias: "Arise, be enlightened O, Jerusalem; for thy light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you; for behold, darkness shall cover the earth and mist the people, but the Lord shall arise upon you and his glory shall be seen. You shall no more have the sun for your light by day; neither shall the brightness of the moon enlighten you. But the Lord shall be unto you for an everlasting light and your God for your glory." (Is. 60:1-2, 19). Christmas at Mount Saviour has given me the light to understand the "sign", which the shepherds were shown by the angels. Here, where no external grandeur carries us, we are better disposed to bend low and to recognize the little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger as the "sign" of the King of glory. There is no danger that our joy at Christmas might only be the effect of the beauty and the splendor which we see around us. The spirit which fills our feast must have its source in the "sign" of Bethlehem as far as it lives in the depth of our own hearts. We must allow our heavenly Father to wrap around us the bonds of his holy will. We have to become "sons of obedience" through the instrumentality of our Mother, the Church and of the community to which we belong; they take the place of Mary in our lives. The "manger" is prepared for us as monks through the

vow of stability. At times the enclosure may look to us like a tomb, and the bonds of obedience will always appear to be fetters in the eyes of our nature. But when we make the decisive step into faith, the unshakable faith in God's love for us, then we see what looks to us like chains are really the bonds of man with which the Father draws us into the freedom of the spirit; and that what looks like a tomb prepared for the dead is really the haven of peace from which our flesh rises in God's glory.

It is true in our days children are not wrapped in swaddling clothes as tight as they used to be when the child Jesus was born to us. But nobody will deny that a deep and practical understanding of the "sign" of Bethlehem is more needed now than it ever was before. Catholicism in these United States is far removed from the splendor and grandeur of the Holy Roman Empire. But this in itself is not a guarantee that American Catholics celebrate a *new* Christmas in their new world. There are other burdens besides those of the feudal tradition which may form a much greater obstacle to break through into the newness of Christ. Everyone today enjoys a little "dig" at the Victorian age, and we think we are far superior to it. But are we aware how much its spirit still holds sway among the "church-going people" today? The way Christmas is being celebrated by most of them is a clear indication of this. Everything about their Christmas is so lovely, so nice, so moving that it doesn't turn anybody upside down. So many people get wrapped up in so many things that they are in danger of losing their identity. To celebrate a new Christmas in the "sign" of Bethlehem and to get "wrapped up" in the one thing necessary, the "Will in which we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Hebrew 10:10), this would be the real liberation.

For the celebration of the new Christmas, neither feudal nor Victorian, let us allow our heavenly Father to wrap us up in the bonds of his love and to put us into the manger. It may be a family, an office, a duty, a sickbed; whatever it is, trust that it is the place from which we are destined to rise into the newness, the peace, the liberty, the joy of Christ.

In the joy of the Nativity of our Lord, the community of Mount Saviour joins me in wishing you his grace and peace.

F. Dominicus Wignm, O.S.B.