

The Catholic Spirit of Christmas

To arrive at the Catholic spirit of Christmas, one must first move patiently and prayerfully through Advent, meditating on the great wonder that will come to pass. Today, the reality of the Incarnation has been all but smothered with artificiality. We live in a world that by-passes this holy preparation; that substitutes cosmetic trappings and romantic tinsel for the great truth -- at once stark and sublime -- of the Christmas story. Charles Dickens's character, Scrooge, called England's thoroughly material celebration of Christmas, "Humbug!" And later, George Bernard Shaw dismissed the Joyful Season as a "conspiracy of shopkeepers." They were both unedifying, but terribly accurate, in their appraisal of the commercial travesty it had become in many quarters.

For the Catholic, all history revolves around that event which is central in liturgy as it is in life. Christmas is the birthday of an era, the inauguration of a culture, the beginning of a creed, the fountainhead of man's hope. The Catholic spirit of Christmas clings to the central character -- a little boy who was God -- born in an unlovely hovel where cattle sheltered against the weather; born of a mother who was a virgin. He came at a time when she was traveling. Her first guests were rough, uncouth shepherds, as wild as the wilderness itself, tousle-haired and tangle-bearded. His Mother knew inconvenience and hunger, en-

dured failure, dejection, derision. Yet, she was joyfully aware that Her Child is God; that His Incarnation is real; that God is with us, not merely as a stranger on a perfunctory state visit, but as a sharer of our nature and our lot.

Hence, the Catholic spirit of Christmas, to its last fiber, is dyed in divinity. Our Christmas begins at the stable, takes note of the characters in the drama, and closes with the quiet realization that God has come to redeem His people. How meaningless is the occasion without the central figure -- the Christ Child! He is the imperishable beauty of the face of Christmas.

This tremendous spiritual truth underlies the origin, meaning, and purpose of all our Christmas customs and our rejoicing. It is a holiday only because it is first a holy day -- the day on which Christ, the Son of God, became Man. And this Catholic spirit remains today what it was originally -- the happy recollection of the coming of the Saviour. And it is only by recalling the birth of Our Lord that we take renewed courage to sing: "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will!"