

The theology of the Lord's Nativity conveyed by the Christmas Carols

Here we are, by the grace of our loving and merciful God, getting ready to celebrate once again the great Feast of our salvation, the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Every time this Feast day comes around, we cannot help but re-live happy memories of our childhood in connection to this joyous and festive season. And it seems that the older we get, the more sentimental we are. Whether we share those memories with our family members or friends or choose to descend within ourselves and travel alone the memory lane, this mental exercise is explained by the intensity with which we anticipated and then experienced Christmas in our innocent childhood, and also by the mystery that surrounds this great, unique and hard to fathom act of God's intervention for our salvation. Ever since the angels sang the first Christmas Carol {"*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men*" (Luke 2:14)} on the holy night of our Lord's Birth, Christians have followed their example, proclaiming from generation to generation, for over two thousand years, God's rich mercy, divine compassion and infinite love for mankind. Who among us doesn't remember teaming up with other children and going caroling from house to house, courageously contending with the deep snow and cold of the night? Although we did it for the treats or the money offered by every householder, nobody (not even our parents) told us that we were in fact repeating what the angels had done on the night Jesus was born: we were announcing to the world the fulfillment of God's promise to give His only-begotten Son for the salvation of the humankind. We were the angels of our time who brought great joy to the shepherds, homemakers, farmers, workers, teachers, priests, etc. of our communities. This is why we should encourage our children and grandchildren to continue this wonderful tradition of announcing and praising the coming of our Savior in our midst.

Let us now examine the content of some of the Christmas carols, passed down from generation to generation, and understand that they are not meaningless songs created at the spur of the moment, but rather thoughtful messages full of theological and doctrinal meaning, as most of all originate in Europe, where the Christian message was preached by the Apostles of the Incarnate Son of God.

Some of these carols start by establishing the setting (the backdrop) in which the Nativity of Christ took place: "*Silent night, holy night / All is calm, all is bright*" (Silent Night), "*O little town of Bethlehem / How still we see thee lie / Above the deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by*" (O Little Town of Bethlehem), "*It came upon the midnight clear / That glorious song of old / From angels bending near the earth / To touch their harps of gold*" (It came upon the midnight clear). Oh, how beautiful and truthful words! Even though His coming was announced centuries before, by the prophets of the Old Testament, the Birth of our Lord and Savior takes place in the silence and calmness of the night, unnoticed by the world that was busy with its continuous wandering in the "*darkness and the shadow of death*" (Mathew 4:16). The image of the angels who are "*bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold*" speaks of the role of the angels who are God's messengers to the world. Besides the Nativity of Christ, they are also present at the most important moments in the history of our salvation: the Annunciation, the Lord's Passion and Resurrection, the Ascension into heaven, etc.

The silence of the night is interrupted by the choir of the angels who bring the **good tidings** to the whole world. Christ is announced as the new-born **King** and **the Son of God**. According to His human nature He descends from the line of David the King: "*Hark! The herald angels sing / Glory to the new-born King!*" (Hark the herald angels sing), "*Glad tidings of great joy I bring / To you and all mankind*" (While shepherds watched their flocks), "*From God our heav'nly Father / A blessed angel*

came / And unto certain shepherds / Brought **tidings** of the same / O **tidings of comfort and joy**" (God rest You merry Gentlemen), "To you, in David's town, this day is born of **David's line** / The Saviour who is Christ the Lord" (While shepherds watched their flocks).

As foretold by the Old Testament prophets, Christ is **born of the Virgin Mary**. His divinity is "**veiled in flesh**" and His name is **Emmanuel** as indicated by the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation: "Christ, by highest heav'n adored / Christ the everlasting Lord / Late in time behold Him come / **Offspring of the Virgin's** womb / **Veiled in flesh** the God-head see / Hail **th'Incarnate Deity** / Pleased as Man with man to dwell / **Jesus, our Emmanuel**" (Hark! The herald angels sing), "Silent night, holy night! / All is calm, all is bright / 'Round yon **Virgin Mother and Child**" (Silent night).

The Child born in Bethlehem is the **Son of God**; He is the **Saviour of the world** and the **Incarnate Word of God**: "Silent night, holy night / **Son of God**, loves pure light" (Silent Night), "God rest you merry gentlemen / Let nothing you dismay / Remember: **Christ our Savior** / Was born on Christmas Day /...How that in Bethlehem was born / **The Son of God** by name" (God rest you merry gentlemen), "Yea, Lord, we greet Thee / Born this happy morning / Jesus to Thee be glory giv'n / **Word of the Father** / **Now in flesh appearing**" (O come, all ye faithful).

Some of the Christmas carols mention the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, offered by the **three Wise Men**, which represent the Three ministries of Christ: king, God and a Man who is to suffer and die: "Then enter'd in **there wise men** three / Full rev'rently upon their knee / And offer'd there in His presence / Their **gold** and **myrrh** and **frankincense**" (The first Noel), "Born a Babe on Bethlehem's plain / **Gold we bring to crown Him again** / **King** forever, ceasing never / Over us all **to reign** / **Frankincense** to offer have I / Incense owns a **Deity nigh** / Prayer and praising, all men raising / Worship Him, **God on high** / **Myrrh** is mine, its bitter perfume / Breathes a life of gathering gloom / **Sorr'wing, sighing, bleeding, dying** / **Sealed in the stone-cold tomb**" (We three kings of Orient are).

Messiah came to bring **peace** to every soul and **reconciliation** between God and His masterpiece, man: "**Peace on earth** and mercy mild / **God and sinners reconciled**" (Hark! The herald angels sing). He liberated us from the **the fear of death** and brought **salvation** to the whole world: "**Now ye need not fear the grave**, Peace! Peace! / **Jesus Christ was born to save**" (Good Christian men rejoice); "Jesus Christ was born for this: **He hath ope'd the heav'nly door** / and man is blessed ever more" (Good Christian men rejoice).

The holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church see the birth of Christ as the Feast of **our own spiritual birth** and the **re-creation** of man. This idea is expressed by one of the Christmas carols in these beautiful words: "Mild he lays His glory by / Born that **man may never die** / Born to raise the sons of earth / **Born to give them second birth**" (Hark! The herald angels sing).

There are no better words to conclude our attempt to explore the rich theological content of the Christmas carols than the ones we find in "O little town of Bethlehem," which is not only a Christmas carol but also a prayer:

"O Holy Child of Bethlehem / Descend to us we pray / Cast out sin, and enter in / Be born in us today / We hear the Christmas angels / The great glad tidings tell: / O come to us, abide in us, our Lord Emmanuel."

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