Opinion
Spirituality



Actors perform in a Nativity scene Dec. 21 in Slovenia's Postojna cave. (CNS/Reuters/Borut Zivulovic)



by Michael Sean Winters

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It is Christmas, that most quintessentially Catholic of holidays. The Pilgrims and Puritans who founded the English-speaking colonies, and would become culturally dominant in the religious sphere of the new republic, banned the celebration of Christmas precisely because it was so Catholic. What they denounced as syncretism we view as inculturation, and, as I noted on Monday, inculturation seems to me to be a necessary consequence of the Incarnation we celebrate on this great feast.

Over at The Catholic Thing, Robert Royal has a post about translating Advent prayers in the breviary. Unlike Royal, I cannot pray the Office in Latin, at least not meaningfully. His concern is that some of the English renditions of the prayers are too "horizontal" and insufficiently "vertical."

And, he writes, "The Latin tends to speak concretely about sin, redemption, and mercy in a strikingly vertical way, much needed, in my view, at a time when much of our lives — even our religious worship — is markedly horizontal. That's very evident, especially in Advent. If any time of year reminds us that God 'comes down,' metaphorically speaking, to become one of us while remaining the eternal second person of the Trinity, it's now."

Royal provides the several contrasts to make his point. Here is the first:

If you read Morning Prayer today, the first Prayer/Intercession is this:
Christ is coming, the day is near:
In our Eucharist today let us look forward with hope and joy.
— Father of light, we praise you!
Now, there's nothing wrong with this prayer. It emphasizes positive feelings, a contemporary approach to the Faith — joy, hope, light, etc.

But if you read the Latin, there's quite a different emphasis:

Christ Lord, who came to save sinners,
Defend us from every opposition of temptation.
— Come, Lord Jesus.
[*Christe Domine, qui peccatores salvare venisti,/ nos ab omni tentationum*

adversitate defende.]

I give a painfully literal translation, which you wouldn't use for daily prayer. But it's not difficult to see the main difference; this version reminds us why Christ came into the world: not to cheer us up (so to speak), but to rescue sinners (all of us) and to help us avoid sinful enticements.

I am sympathetic to Royal's concern and note that while Royal has been sharply critical of Pope Francis in many ways, on this point, he and Francis are on the same page. This is how the pope began his address to the Roman Curia yesterday:

> Christmas is the feast of faith in the Son of God who became man in order to restore us to our filial dignity, lost through sin and disobedience. Christmas is the feast of faith in hearts that become a manger to receive him and souls that allow God to make a shoot of hope, charity and faith sprout from the stump of their poverty.

And, although I know it is an instance of *delectatio morosa* which I must confess, I like the fact that the pope's talk about the devil and sin makes some of my liberal friends nervous.

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The debate about "vertical" versus "horizontal" prayers is akin to the debate between a high Christology and a low one. But one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Catholic intellectual life is our preference for "both/and" over "either/or" framings of solutions to our human conundrums. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's "great et, et" shows us that there is a potentially false choice at work in setting up the "vertical" versus the "horizontal."

At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This is, then, the great feast of inculturation, of God himself taking on human qualities, being born into human history, in a real place and time, to a real family with particular mores and a specific language, with real blood running through his veins. But it is God who becomes flesh. It is our faith in the God who transcends everything human that becomes inculturated. There is an obvious tension here. Sometimes, we may emphasize the transcendence of God and at other times his

immanence. We will, with H. Richard Niebuhr, view Christ as against culture or above it, as of culture or transcending it, depending on the times and circumstances of our transient experience, even while, all the time, God's absolute transcendence is mysteriously unmitigated by its various cultural expressions. Indeed, Niebuhr's entire career was fixated on these competing claims of divine transcendence and historical relativism.

We discern these different perspectives in the readings at Christmas. If you go to midnight Mass, you hear Luke's very realistic and human account of the circumstances of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem. If you go on Christmas morning, the Gospel reading is from the prologue of John's Gospel, with its sweeping metaphysical claims. Both are Christian Gospels and, so, normative for our lives and our theology. You can't dispense with one or the other. The tension between the two perspectives must become for us a fruitful tension not a crippling one.

In Royal's essay, he points to the easiest way in which we can allow ourselves to become crippled. "You can find a rather literal version in English if you look," he writes. "But it's reasonable to worry that people exposed solely to the vaguer English version are being encouraged to think and act mostly in the terms of our affluent, comfortable world." That is the touchstone I use for whether or not I am really believing or just faking it: Does my encounter with the Lord disturb my comfortable, affluent world? The reverse is true: The Gospel is good news for the poor because it brings them a comfort the world does not provide them.

Royal continues: "Meanwhile, Christians and other believers are being martyred and persecuted around the globe; there are wars and rumors of wars; poverty, loneliness, neglect, violence, hardness of heart, narcissism. It's all woven into the fabric of the fallen human condition. We still need a strong God to set us free."

To one and all, may the babe born in Bethlehem who is also the eternal Word of God born before all ages, bring you the joys of this happy feast, and manifest himself to you as that strong, inculturated, transcendent, even absconding God for whom the world still waits as did the shepherds two thousand years ago.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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