Opinion
Spirituality



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Christmas is the time when the church celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. It's difficult enough to focus on the true "reason for the season" when the creeping commercialization of the holiday overshadows the solemnity of the feast day. But it's nearly impossible to find the time and mental energy to reflect on the Incarnation's fullest meaning. For this reason, even when we do pause long enough to recall the birth of Christ, we can still stop short of the significance of God's becoming human for the rest of creation.

In his encyclical letter "*Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home*," Pope Francis warns us against anthropocentrism. Generally speaking, anthropocentrism is the mistaken view that humanity stands alone at the center of creation and everything else that exists does so for our benefit or use. Not only has this human-centered worldview affected our treatment of nonhuman creation, the result of which is seen in worldwide ecological crises, I believe it has also narrowed our vision of the meaning of Christmas.

If we look to the readings for Christmas Mass during the day, we hear proclaimed the prologue from John's Gospel. It famously contains the passage summarizing the Incarnation, stating that, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). What is easily missed about this line is the significance of what the Gospel announces when it states that the Eternal Word became "flesh" or *sarx* in the original Greek. Importantly, John's Gospel does not say that the Word merely became "human" (*anthropos*), but that God's Word became something more fundamental, something more expansive.

Sarx — "flesh" — means earthly materiality, creatureliness, corporeality that includes but is not limited to human creatures. Elsewhere in scripture, the term is used more generally and its deliberate usage in John's prologue should give us pause if we are inclined to think it pertains to humanity alone. No one contests that the Word became *sarx* as the fully human person Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, the question remains, as the late Australian theologian Fr. Denis Edwards put it: "What relationship is there between the wider natural world, the world of galaxies and stars, mountains and seas, bacteria, plants and animals, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?"

The answer to this question is contained in the fuller theological meaning of Christmas.

God entered the world as one like us, fully human in all things but sin, and precisely as fully human, Jesus Christ was part of a complex and interrelated cosmic web of creation. The Word's entrance into creation is good news not only for humans, but also for all creatures and all creation that, as St. Paul expresses in his Letter to the Romans, is longing for that day of salvation that involves nonhuman creation as much as it does humanity (Romans: 8:19-23).

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As St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, professor emerita of theology at Fordham University, explains in her book *Ask The Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, "We evolved relationally; we exist symbiotically; our existence depends on interaction with the rest of the natural world. … The flesh that the Word of God became as a human being is part of the vast body of the cosmos." God's entrance into creation as *Emmanuel* — "God with us" — is the greatest sign of divine love for all of God's creatures, humans included, which are interrelated and interdependent in this evolutionary world.

The technical theological term for this emphasis on the significance of Christmas for all creation is known as "deep incarnation," a description first coined by the Danish theologian Neils Henrik Gregersen in a 2001 article. Gregersen explains that, "the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or 'deep' incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence and the system of nature." Everything in the created world, those things visible and invisible, known and yet-to-be-discovered, is implicated in God's decision to become *flesh*; all of God's creatures are touched by and benefit from God's gift of love and life in the Incarnation.

Lest some cynics take this expansive Christmas good news as a kind of "new age" or "pagan" theology, quick to dismiss this incarnational message with an ignorant "bah humbug," they should first listen to Pope John Paul II. In his 1986 encyclical letter, *Dominum et vivificantem*, John Paul points to the Letter to the Colossians and reiterates the truth of "deep incarnation" for the universal church.

> *The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of*

> *everything that is "flesh": the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The "first-born of all creation," becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of man, which is also "flesh" and in this reality with all "flesh," with the whole of creation.*

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Centuries earlier, St. Francis of Assisi recognized the significance of the Incarnation for nonhuman creatures, suggesting that women and men should go out of their way to care for both poor humans and all animals. In an early Franciscan text known as "The Assisi Compilation," which contains testimony of those friars who knew St. Francis personally, there is a striking recollection of how the saint from Assisi would often extol people — especially civil leaders — to share food with nonhuman animals on Christmas because the birth of Christ impacted them too. The passage concludes with the following statement:

> *For blessed Francis held the Nativity of the Lord in greater reverence than any other of the Lord's solemnities. For although the Lord may have accomplished our salvation in his other solemnities, nevertheless, once He was born to us, as blessed Francis would say, it was certain that we would be saved. On that day he wanted every Christian to rejoice in the Lord and, for love of Him who gave Himself to us, wished everyone to be cheerfully generous not only to the poor but also to the animals and birds.*

It can be easy to romanticize or dismiss the insights of Edwards, Johnson, Gregersen, John Paul, or even Francis of Assisi, but we are challenged by the Gospel and our own Christian faith to seriously reflect on the broadly inclusive meaning of Christmas.

Indeed, God so loved the world that God chose to enter into it as part of it. In doing so, God became part of the very fabric of creation of which we too are a part. But so is every other aspect of creation. This Christmas, especially as we gather in the midst of a global climate crisis, may we recognize the cosmic significance of the Word becoming flesh, humbly recalling our place as fellow members of God's family of creation and working to respect, preserve, and protect our creaturely sisters and brothers in Christ.

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