

## Christmas is a bulletin from the human side

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The *New York Times* recently asked an author of a book on imaginary gardens to review a new book that was actually old hat in its debunking the idea that the Garden of Eden and its alleged inhabitants, Adam and Eve, ever really existed.

That flatfooted reduction of the first power couple and their idyllic garden to inventions, like the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus, to beguile children and the gullible masses, is one of the misunderstandings of the myth of Eden that causes us to miss the spiritual and psychological meaning of this account of our origins.

The other misinterpretation of Eden goes back to the Desert Fathers, who bet that Original Sin's principal effect was to turn on the pilot light of sinful concupiscence in human beings. St. Augustine turned up the heat considerably with his remorseful polemics about the subversive and sinful character of human sexuality, allowing sex only if it donned a wedding garment that green-lighted it for the procreation of children. Blessed John Paul II seldom looked happy and seemed at least mildly obsessed with the inferior character of sexual relations, proposing that abstaining from them was the virtuous choice even for married couples.

Aside from wondering how men got to be called Saint or Blessed with such "are-you-crazy?" ideas about human nature, we may meditate on this season as a Bulletin from the Human Side, bearing glad tidings as well as an understanding of the real effects of Original Sin and a deepened sense of the meaning of Jesus' being born and suffering and dying as a man.

The Christmas Bulletin, for example, tells us that God did not disdain human flesh but took on and lived not abstracted from, but drinking deep of the chalice of human experience that we pass along to each other every day. God did not become a man to find out how bad it was but to celebrate how good it could be when we loved each other.

The real effect of Original Sin was not a sudden ambivalent awareness of our sexual natures but an understanding that sometimes takes the better part of a lifetime to accept; that is, what it means to live in the grip of time that is the mother of all sorrow. The meaning of Myth, such as that of Eden and Adam and Eve's fall, is never historical but always and only psychological and spiritual.

Our inheritance from our first parents is life in the human condition. That is perhaps best understood in the English title, *Man's Fate*, of Andre Malraux's book *La Condition Humaine*. The Myth of Eden is the story of our beginnings, of living outside of the Eternal, our longings for which may well be expressed in our longing for transcendence in intimate relations with another, and finding that we do not, like canny athletic coaches, manage the clock but that the clock manages us.

"Where there is time," the great mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote, "there is sorrow." That is the tragic sense of our limitations rather than the mistaken notion of our excesses that lies at the heart of the Mystery of the Incarnation.

We may well better understand God's becoming man not to pay some ransom for our sins, small as most of them may well turn out to be, but to experience our sorrows as they really are. Jesus experienced everything we do, not excluding sexual feelings, to reveal himself as one of us who bears with us the everyday garden variety sadness, such as the ending of a happy day, to the deepest of sorrows in the losses of those we love and times and places we inhabited happily, to the great letting go that is inescapable for every man and woman.

Christmas is not a Bulletin about angels on high but about people down here where Jesus joins us, not in the trivialization of Original Sin as a revelation of our erotic failings, but in being with us in time in recognition of our eternal longings and our time-bound limitations. That is the meaning of the Pauline description of Jesus' not thinking that the Godhead was something to be clung to, but choosing to empty himself by taking on our lives and our sufferings, thereby making them, in Campbell's phrase, "transparent to transcendence," allowing us to see into the fathomless depths of our human condition every day.

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