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A Strange & Splendid Christmas

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Distinctly Catholic

I had anticipated a typical Christmas this year. Make my Christmas cards and get them sent. Drive to Connecticut with my niece, a friend, and the three dogs. Get the tree and decorate it on Christmas Eve. Midnight Mass. Dinner with friends and family. Restful (apart from the drive), focused on the liturgy not the gift giving, days filled with traditions, and the mental associations they recall.

It was not to be. As I mentioned last week, my border collie, Clementine, was at the vet last week, as she was having trouble with her hind legs. They kept her overnight and then sent her home with anti-inflammatory and pain meds. She was good Friday afternoon but Saturday, she was unable to hold up her hind legs again. Back to the vet we went and they explained she probably had a disk problem which required an MRI and surgery. She had the surgery on her back Saturday night. Her daddy, me, could not stop crying until the doctor called at 11:30 that night to say she had come through the surgery and has an 85% shot at a full recovery. She is coming home later today and will need to be crated for two weeks, going out three times a day to pee and poop. The biggest challenge that looms ? keeping her two brothers, Bernie and Ambrose, from getting her too excited. Also, on a day like this morning, when it is sleeting and the dogs hate to go outside, I am not looking forward to getting them out the back door, running in and taking her out of the crate, out the front door, doing her business, and back into the house and into the crate, before the boys get let back in from the backyard. But, we will figure it out.

Needless to say, the trip to Connecticut got scrapped. The flu symptoms I had last week were better but I was not entirely asymptomatic, so the last thing I wanted to do was go to a packed Midnight Mass and infect lots of people. And I had to re-arrange the house, get out the crate, bring a mattress downstairs to put next to it on the floor, etc. But, through it all, I knew that Christmas itself would not get lost. I

recognized this when a dear friend called and invited me to join his family for Christmas dinner. "No one should be alone for Christmas," he said. I did stop by, although I could not stay for dinner. And, it was splendid to be in the company of people, even if only for an hour or so, wonderful to exchange stories and share some time. My disorientation followed me into my friend's home, as I realized I made one of his sons retell me some of his own story which he had told me last year when we met. But, it touched my heart to see my friend's grandchildren bask in the assembled love, to hear the parents and grandparents tell of the little ones' opening their gifts, to smell some of the smells of Christmas, the roasting pork, the cheese board, the warm, scented tea. My friend was right, no one should spend all of Christmas alone.

Of course, the whole point of Christmas is that we are not alone, isn't it? I wrote Monday about the important inculturation of Christmas, but the event that is being inculturated, and the doctrines that event reveal, go beyond culture. It is the God-Man who entered history to transcend history whose birth we commemorate, a thing that is still very incredible, literally, hard to believe. Why would God so love the world that He would do such a thing? Why would He love us so much? How great is that love? These are the great questions are not answerable, and so we do not ask them, we simply rejoice that it is so and accept that He did so love us and does so love us that the Incarnation, the breaking of light into the darkness, has occurred. We do not question it, we celebrate it, and we celebrate it with songs and symbols and traditions so rich that they reach into every culture and class, to young and old, to one and to all.

There was some controversy this year when the Holy Father published a book about the infancy narratives, in which he noted that there might not have been animals in the manger when Jesus was born. Indeed, such particulars are never to be known for sure, but I think there must have been animals. My three beasts demonstrate more of the unconditional love that broke into the world in Bethlehem of Judea two thousand years ago than most of the two-legged animals I know. If the Devil has special snares for the well-intentioned, cannot God have a special roles in the divine economy for the ox and the ass and the border collie and the black lab and the St. Bernard? Does He not come to redeem all of creation?

The centerpiece of Christmas managed to survive the turmoil of my week. I missed Midnight Mass but went the next morning. I attended Mass at the Dominican House of Studies here in Washington. The music was glorious, the liturgy beautiful, and when the incense at the gospels brought on a coughing spell, a very kind friar went and got me a cup of water. Of course, the Mass, like all Masses, commemorates the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. We go from the announcement of his birth to the proclamation of his death within an hour. As the hymn "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," has it, "Christ was born for this." It was good, too, to hear the great opening of the Gospel of John proclaimed ? and at the DHS the Gospel was sung ? and to reflect on the cosmic aspect of this apparently lowly event in a manger so long ago. The cosmic significance of the coming of Christ, and the deep roots it has taken in our culture, was further confirmed when I made my way to the animal hospital yesterday after Mass, to visit my little girl, and the tech said, "We had a Christmas miracle today. She is already starting to move her hind legs." I do not know if this young man is devout, but even he referred Clementine's moving her hind legs to the event in Bethlehem.

We are not alone. We are never alone anymore. The light has come into the darkness. Mine was a strange but very blessed Christmas Day, but as I like to remind people, Christmas started yesterday and we have twelve days of it. I hope each and everyone of you will find the blessings of the season and that the abundant grace of the holiday will be yours.

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