

Sharing Divinity: A Look at the Christmas Collect at the Mass during the Day

Paul Turner

Come Christmas morning, a priest may feel fatigue as he enters the sacristy to prepare for mass. He has spent himself on Christmas Eve, welcoming one of the year's largest congregations to his parish church. He has prepared homilies and talked through the ceremonies with ministers and musicians. He may have stayed up quite late for a mass that began at midnight. He's feeling human.

In the preceding weeks, like every other Christian, he has sent greeting cards, shopped for gifts, stood in lines, contributed to traffic, decorated his home, attended concerts, updated social media, and eaten too much of the wrong food at parties. He misses beloved friends and members of his family who have died since last Christmas. He may feel in his tired bones the loneliness that disquiets some celibates especially at holidays. He has dealt with inclement weather - and inclement parishioners, many of whom, on the morning of December 25, are sleeping in.

But not the priest.

He is up, grateful for the blessings of the season, dressing formally, and heading to the church where, even before the doors open, he knows the congregation will be small.

Perhaps without realizing it, he imitates the very mystery he celebrates. As the Word of God emptied himself to become one of us on Christmas Day, so the priest sacrifices himself that morning to become one with the body of Christ - in the people and in the eucharist. On the solemnity of the incarnation (God becoming human), he touches divinization (a human becoming like God).

The collect at the Christmas Mass during the Day captures this meaning with succinct precision. It shimmers like a gem within the church's long history of recorded prayer.

O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature
and still more wonderfully restored it,
grant, we pray,
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Christmas Collect

Origins

The earliest record of this prayer dates to the late sixth century, and because of its themes, some scholars hold that the original author was one of the church's most eloquent preachers of Christmas homilies: Saint Leo the Great (+461).

How did this collect come to be?

We can thank the Manichees. Their black and white worldview separated spirit from matter, light from dark, and good from evil. Manichees found the material world so reprehensible that the incarnation of God made no sense to them. If matter were evil, why would God become human?

These sharp distinctions attracted many followers, including the late fourth-century north African scholar, Augustine. After nine years within the Manichean sect, however, Augustine met Ambrose in Milan and underwent one of the most famous conversions in Christian history. "*Sero te amavi*," he lamented of his sinful past to God: "Late have I loved you." He returned to north Africa where he became a priest and then the bishop of Hippo.

Augustine died in 430 while Vandals were wreaking havoc in Hippo and gaining strength throughout north Africa. When Carthage toppled in 439, some of the remaining Manichees fled to Italy for refuge. Leo became Bishop of Rome the following year. The visitors found asylum but sowed seeds of their sect. Competition between Manichees and Christians divided the city. Leo confronted the theological disputes festering in Rome.

Matter is good, the pope argued. The incarnation is one proof of this maxim.

Usage

On December 25 each year now, the collect at Mass during the Day summarizes this teaching. Our earliest record of it lists this collect first among the prayers for December 25 in the late sixth- or early seventh-century Verona Sacramentary, compiled back when the church observed the birth of the Lord on the same day with Basil, John, Victorinus, Eugene, Felicity and Anastasia. Needless to say, those other saints eventually yielded this space on the liturgical calendar.

However, in the Roman Missal that flourished after the Council of Trent, a different collect replaced this one for half a millennium. If you're curious, you can still find it in today's missal, now moved over to December 30. The group preparing the post-Vatican II missal pushed it back a few days to retain it for posterity and to make room for the Verona's important collect, restoring it to the position it once held in the earliest Christian liturgical books.

Our missal contains four different sets of prayers for Christmas masses to match the lectionary's sets of readings: At the Vigil Mass, At the Mass during the Night, At the Mass at Dawn, and At the Mass during the Day. These come from a variety of sources and now inhabit the same book.

Christmas Collect

The several masses suggest that the community - not just the priest - is participating in more than one celebration. Like Advent itself, the Vigil Mass anticipates the coming of the birth of Christ. Even though a Catholic's participation at mass on the evening of December 24 fulfills the canonical obligation for the holyday, the prayers and readings still anticipate the birth of Christ. They presume that the community will come back the next day to celebrate the full mystery of Christmas. Very few, if any, will, of course.

The Mass during the Night is the one commonly called "Midnight Mass" - even though the liturgical books do not use that term. It is the classic celebration of the birth of Christ. It originated during a period when no mass on Christmas Eve counted for Christmas Day, so the earliest that one could celebrate Christmas was midnight, an hour that the imagination easily associates with the birth of Christ. Even though this mass may be celebrated earlier than midnight on December 24, it still charms the parish's most faithful members and most infrequent visitors.

The Mass at Dawn recalls the visit of the shepherds to reward those who rise early on the 25th. The Mass during the Day more reflectively looks back over the commemorated events of the previous twelve hours. The celebrant of that mass offers the Verona's Christmas collect.

Relevance

The collect At the Mass during the Day begins with the premise that God "wonderfully created the dignity of human nature." This is pure anti-Manicheanism. There's nothing shameful about being human. God created humanity knowingly, wonderfully, and with great dignity. Matter is not evil; God made it good.

Now, you may have rightly observed that the Manichees no longer pose much of a theological threat. You may also be thinking that the heresy today is quite different. Our problem is not that many people regard matter as unholy, but that they regard matter as *too* holy. The excesses of Christmas consumerism illustrate the point. People spend on themselves and lavish unnecessary gifts on others as questionable signs of intense love. We buy unhealthy foods and drinks as gifts for others, and consume similar products in celebration. To our society, matter is not evil; matter is a false god.

The charitable Saint Nicholas has morphed into Santa Claus. Secular society has coopted this jolly elf, who now presents a paragon of the season's commercialism and sets the bar for excess: abandoning concerns about personal weight, tendering a low response rate to mail, overworking blue collar employees, indulging in caloric cookies, and endorsing rapid world travel. Manichees falter in Santa's wake.

Yet here is where the Christmas collect shows its brilliantly everlasting pertinence: The goodness of matter is a premise, not a goal. Yes, God thought so much of human nature that Christ "humbled himself to share in our humanity." But our goal is not to glory in being human. Far from it. The collect prays for something else: "that we may share in the divinity of Christ." That will happen not

Christmas Collect

by indulging in more matter, but by accomplishing new goals with it. Through the best of our humanity, we touch the divinity of Christ.

Indeed, Christmas can educe the best from our humanity. This is not only a season of receiving; it is a season of giving. Many people, moved by the humble conditions of Jesus' birth, contribute to organizations that improve the lives of those who suffer the indignities of poverty and homelessness, including immigrants and refugees who flee from danger at home to seek consolation in a foreign land. The dignity of human nature is on full display in the charity that defines the best of Christmas. The goodness of matter is the premise that prepares us for greater things to come.

Theosis

Priests and deacons will recognize this collect for another reason. It comes from the same source that gives us the prayer recited at daily mass during the preparation of the gifts when water is mixed with wine: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

Because we clergy recite that prayer so often, we may not give it much thought. Yet its meaning is profound. The adding of water to wine probably has a practical antecedent - the wine of earlier generations needed thinning to make it potable. We no longer mix these liquids at table. At mass, though, we add water to imitate the previous practice, but only a little so that the properties of the wine remain unharmed.

The prayer that accompanies this admixture compares water and wine with humanity and divinity. As the water is completely taken into the wine, assuming its very properties, so we pray that we humans may be completely taken into the divinity of Christ, assuming his very properties. That will happen exquisitely when we receive communion, as we become one with Christ. But we pray that it may happen even more mystically at the end of our days, that we may become like Christ.

We offer this prayer quietly, as if the mystery it proclaims is too great to be announced day by day, as if its purpose is to keep the minister's head in the sacred rite and all that it promises.

This is a bold prayer of divinization or theosis. We make this request at mass every day. But it has a central place in our intentions on Christmas Day. It is one thing to stand in awe at the incarnation, that God became one of us. It is quite something else to stand in awe of divinization - that we may become one with Christ. Yet that is our prayer.

The collect At the Mass during the Day takes seconds to recite, yet it abounds in heady concepts. As if that were not enough, it appears in the same mass when the readings conclude with the Prologue of John's Gospel. The few people coming to church on Christmas Day and hoping to hear about angels, shepherds or at least a smiling, contemplative mother may be disappointed to hear one of the most theologically dense gospels of the year. But after the hard

Christmas Collect

work leading up to Christmas, John's gospel aims our thoughts to joys on high. The collect does the same.

Come Christmas morning, in his fatigue, a priest may find himself numbered among those who find the collect for Christmas too obscure, his unfocused mind blurring the prayer's history and meaning. But if he gathers himself in the silence that follows his command, "Let us pray," he may find that his tiredness on Christmas morning perfectly prepares him for a surprisingly audacious prayer. As weary humanity awoke one day to the birth of a Savior, so the priest awakes the same day to pray for his people's and his own rebirth: a share in the divinity of Christ.

Paul Turner is pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and director of the Office of Divine Worship for the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph.

*"Sharing Divinity: A Look at the Christmas Collect at the Mass During the Day." *The Priest Magazine* 75:12 (December 2019):41-44.*