

Holy Family's story inspires awe

THE MOST PRIVATE moments of family life surely must be the conception and birth of a child. Private moments, they are sacred moments in which the mystery of creation unfolds in ordinary human life.

That private mystery of creation blooms into the public mystery of salvation in the Gospels for the next two Sundays. The fourth Sunday of Advent tells of the miraculous conception of Jesus in Nazareth (Luke 1:26-38), and Holy Family Sunday records the dedication of that child at the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22-40). These scenes from family life reflect scenes in God's life.

Luke relates the conception of Jesus in a beautiful account of an angel's visit. This lyrical story shows off Luke's writing skill. Just look at the way he zeroes in on the central figure in the first line: from God, to Galilee, to Nazareth, to the house of David, to Joseph, to Mary. You can almost see the angel spiraling from heaven to target this virgin. This picturesque story has inspired countless paintings.

It also inspired one of Catholicism's most popular prayers. The first line of the "Hail Mary" repeats the angel's greeting. Every time we start that prayer we proclaim the mystery of our redemption.

TO CLEAN UP some confusion, this is the story of the virginal conception. Not precisely the virgin birth. Not the Immaculate Conception. This story illustrates our belief that Mary miraculously conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit while she was still a virgin. Although we often use the expression "virgin birth" to mean the same thing, that more precisely refers to a belief that her hymen still never ruptured even as Jesus was being born. Our Church still refers to Mary as "ever-virgin," even though the Scriptures do not assume it. In fact, in the Gospel for the feast of the Holy Family, Luke explains the necessity for dedicating "every firstborn male." The English translation obscures what Luke wrote: "every male child who opens the womb." He would not have used those words if belief in the perpetual virginity of

Mary was current when he wrote the Gospel.

The Immaculate Conception is often confused with the virginal conception. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception teaches that Mary was sinless from the moment of her conception. It describes Mary's conception, celebrated on Dec. 8, exactly nine months before the liturgical celebration of her birth on Sept. 8. The virginal conception of Jesus is celebrated on March 25 on the feast of the Annunciation, exactly nine months before his birthday on Dec. 25. Tradition has given us the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne, but they do not appear in the Bible.

The scene in the temple unveils another grand vision of the Christ child. Simeon and Anna both prophesy about the glorious future of this child. (The short version of this Gospel unfortunately cuts Anna out of the picture; even the lectionary has a glass ceiling.)

THE REASON Mary and Joseph have gone to Jerusalem is for "their purification." Their? Actually, the Old Testament never mentions the need for the purification of the father. This may indicate that Luke didn't know Jewish custom very well.

Simeon's song of praise to God has endured in the Church's liturgy as part of night prayer. Simeon blesses God for seeing the divine promise fulfilled in the miracle of a newborn child. In his old age, Simeon praises his divine Master who dismisses his servant in peace. The Church invites us to put Simeon's prayer on our lips at the end of every day, to praise God for letting us see the miracles of the day, and to express our readiness for a peaceful death.

Simeon's second intervention is not so tranquil. He warns Mary that a sword will pierce her soul. Our devotion to the sorrowful mother comes from this prophesy.

Simeon introduces another expression in our vocabulary: he calls Christ a light for the nations. That title, *Lumen gentium*, became the title of one of the most important documents of Vatican II, the *Constitution on the Church*. The title of the constitution which describes the Church actually uses a title of Christ. If you want to understand the Church, you first must understand Christ.

These scenes from the life of the Holy Family fill us with awe at the mystery of Christmas. □

Father Paul Turner is pastor of St. John Francis Regis Parish, Kansas City.

Fr. Paul Turner



the
Good News
God's word in
everyday living

Daily Scripture Readings

Third Sunday of Advent Sunday, December 15

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11
(Ps) Luke 1:46-50, 53-54
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Monday, December 16

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17a
Psalms 25:4-9
Matthew 21:23-27

Tuesday, December 17

Genesis 49:2, 8-10
Psalms 72:3-4, 7-8, 17
Matthew 1:1-17

Wednesday, December 18

Jeremiah 23:5-8
Psalms 72:1, 12-13, 18-19
Matthew 1:18-24

Thursday, December 19

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25a
Psalms 71:3-6, 16-17
Luke 1:5-25

Friday, December 20

Isaiah 7:10-14
Psalms 24:1-6
Luke 1:26-38

Saturday, December 21

Song of Solomon 2:8-14
Psalms 33:2-3, 11-12
20-21
Luke 1:39-45

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 22

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12,
14a, 16
Psalms 89:2-5, 27, 29
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

