

Light incarnate

A baby contains the mystery of the universe, consecrating all the day-to-day things that sustain us, while every Mass holds and celebrates the divinity of a million galaxies

In J.D. Salinger's book *Franny and Zooey* there is a scene in which Franny, a 20-year-old theology student, has just come home from college a nervous wreck. Her concerned mother, Bessie, brings her a cup of chicken soup. Franny, unhappy and impatient, pushes the soup away.

Franny's brother Zooey is indignant. "I'll tell you one thing, Franny," he says, "if it's religious life you're studying, you ought to know that you are missing out on every single religious action that's going on in this house. You don't have enough sense to drink a cup of consecrated chicken soup, which is the only kind of chicken soup that Mom ever brings to anybody."

Zooey saw the kitchen as the church, his mother as a kind of priest, the soup as blessed, the welcome for Franny as God's greeting. Is he right? For the Christian, anything and everything we give in love is consecrated. Since the first Christmas, there is no longer any unconsecrated bread at the family table, no unconsecrated affection between true friends. Since Christmas there is nothing too big or too small in our blessed and broken humanity to be revealed every Sunday as Real Presence.

One day the celebrated violinist Yehudi Menuhin was walking down the corridor of a music academy and came across a young Irish student having his lunch. Not recognising the soda bread sandwich, he asked Liam what he was eating. "Bread, sir," the wee lad replied. "Me ma sent it."

The great man smiled and was moved to reflect on an Irish mother pouring her love into the dough she was kneading for her beloved son, away from home for the first time. He imagined her baking it, posting it overseas, and homesick Liam slicing it, buttering it – and eating it with great gusto.

Menuhin's imagination was sublimely sacramental and incarnational, yet inspired by something so commonplace – the bread of life wrapped in brown paper, tied with a piece of string and posted in Connemara! In this very ordinary, everyday moment, the musician recognised the love hidden like yeast in the dough, the bread behind the bread, the horizon behind the horizon, the mystery of the whole world in the body of a baby, the unity of everything in God.

Christmas calls us to be God's spies as we penetrate the disguises all around us; to be water-diviners who detect the liquid of life beneath the desert of our days; persistent beachcombers who discover the glimmer of

God's gold along the leaden shores of our lives. Without a vibrant sense of incarnate Presence, the human and divine will drift away from each other, and, as W.B. Yeats warned us, all evidence of Incarnation will be erased from the earth.

In an Advent reflection, Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), saint and mystic, reminds us of that same evidence of God in our own physical bodies too: "We awaken in Christ's body as Christ awakens our bodies. And everything that is hurt, everything that is shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged, is in him transformed, recognised as whole, as lovely, and radiant in his light."

The startling news of Christmas is that Christ is not primarily in the heavens, in the

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Scriptures, in the doctrines of the Church, not primarily even in the Eucharist itself. For those who believe that our amazing God became common perishable flesh, Christ is primarily in our own experience, in the ordinariness of our lives and in the silence of our solitude.

In "Praying", Mary Oliver catches a whisper of the Word that hides in silence:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones: just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate; this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Incarnation is about that other voice – in the silence of the spheres as well as the silence of our souls. Like another Christmas, every Mass, with its fragments of bread and wine, catches and holds a million galaxies and celebrates their divinity on a table. The small crib, the small Host tell the same astonishing story. The mystery of Being itself, the source of life, is named and celebrated as God incarnate in the wonder of Christmas and Eucharist.

"Christmas", John Paul II wrote, "signifies the taking up into unity with God not only human nature but, in a sense, everything that is flesh ... the Incarnation then has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension ... Even when the Eucharist is celebrated on the small table of a country church it is always celebrated on the altar of the world."

Orbiting the Moon on Christmas Eve 1968, the crew of *Apollo 8* read the opening chapters of Genesis to a worldwide audience of millions, signing off with "Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you on the good Earth".

When negotiating the first human steps on the Moon, Buzz Aldrin brought a blessed wafer with him. "I ate the tiny Host," he wrote, "and swallowed the wine." One small sip for a human: one giant cosmic celebration for humanity. At this first Christmas Communion in the silence of space we hear, "You, beloved Sister Moon, are my consecrated Body too."

After Christmas, nothing is "merely" natural or ordinary any more. All is now graced. Every human breath is an inspiration of the Holy Spirit; every heartbeat reverberates throughout eternity. We are afraid to believe this astonishing revelation of the divine potential everywhere lest our lives be utterly transformed by it. It is much safer to leave Christmas to the children – and to keep Jesus always a baby.

Every Sunday, the Eucharist repeatedly guarantees what the first Christmas and the first Easter revealed – that every real relationship on earth is sacred; that no bitter tear or heartfelt wish is ever wasted; that no sin is ever left unredeemed; that nothing is lost; that everything, in the end, is harvest.

On the night before Christmas, the theologian Karl Rahner hears God whispering to us: "When you celebrate tomorrow say to me, 'You are here. You have come. You have come into everything that exists, into everything that we are'. Say only that one thing. That is enough. It is Christmas. Light the candles. They have more right to exist than all the darkness. It is the Christmas that lasts forever."

And then, in that silent moment, the serious wonder of it strikes us: it is we ourselves, lit from within by the radiance of God, who are called to be those candles of hope, shining incarnate light on a world and a Church lost too often in the dark.

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