

“WHAT MORE SUBLIME TEACHING CAN WE FIND THAN THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION?” CC 1854 Mary Damian Locket SHCJ

I HAD just finished reading and reflecting on the experiences of **risk** which had been shared with us in the last issue of **Source** when the editor asked me to contribute an article for this issue.

I'm neither a scripture scholar nor a theologian; I don't write easily and, anyway, I have too many other pressing things to do; so why me? She must be scraping the bottom of the barrel, I thought. And my immediate response was a regretful refusal. However, Judith's request set me thinking and I began to reflect on what the mystery of the incarnation might have meant to Cornelia and on how this has influenced my own life. And in spite of my misgivings I am struggling to put these random thoughts on paper.

A mystery, according to the dictionary, is something hidden, obscure, which has not been explained, and so, presumably, has to be searched for or revealed. It seems to me that the search for, or the revelation, of the mystery of the incarnation is, for each of us, a very gradual process, continuing through life as we mature, learning to “walk with him step by step” (CC 37).

My memories of Christmas in early childhood are mainly of the tree and presents rather than the crib and the Christ Child. It was when I went to St Leonards at the age of 12 that I was introduced to the “sweet Holy Child”. Cornelia's statue of the Child Jesus with arms outstretched as on the cross held pride of place to the right of the sanctuary. During my teen-age years I learned (sometimes through devotions and practices we would now consider sentimental) to know and love “the strong young Christ” and to realise that he was “mine my gift” and “I his by debt”, and that somehow I wanted to follow him from the crib to the cross. Little did I know then that 50 years on I would still be looking for ever new depths of meaning in that phrase.

I count among the blessings of my life several SHCJ who have helped me to appreciate that the infancy narratives contain the whole gospel message; indeed “each is the essential gospel story in miniature”. “The appreciation of these narratives among ordinary Christians may in part reflect sentimentality, but, on a much deeper level this appreciation,” as Raymond Brown writes in his preface to the **Birth of the Messiah**, “reflects a true instinct recognising in the infancy narratives the essence of the Good News, namely that God has made himself present to us in the life of his Messiah who walked on this earth”. And we find ourselves asking, like T S Eliot's Magi, “Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?”

The crib and the cross are both signs of our corporate and personal salvation but they are only signs. Salvation is “letting the Spirit of Christ be the Spirit of Christ in us and through us”. And as we struggle through life to do this we learn like Cornelia that “Crosses and upsets prove to us how little Christ-like we are, and how quickly the thermometer of supposed heroism falls to zero

when put to the test” (CC 17:15); and like her we have to pray often, “O God, help me to live, not I but Jesus in me, in his spirit of sacrifice and suffering with only God in view” (CC 21:80).

Cornelia also warned us that “the knowledge of perfection and the practice of it are immensely far apart” (D 64:63). I believe that the Enneagram system (a journey of self-discovery and conversion) can help to bring them a little closer together and, moreover, that it fits in very well with our incarnational charism. When I first discovered the system I was attracted by Sister Helen Kelly's theory that the nine defense systems are God-given; that when Adam and Eve - the first generation - sinned they tried to cover their nakedness and protect their vulnerability with fig leaves. Knowing this would be inadequate protection “God made clothes out of skins for the man and his wife and they put them on” (Gen 3:21). Hence each of the nine personality types can be described in terms of animal skins, gifts of God, and conversion takes place as we gradually shed our skin - not to replace it with another animal skin (as is suggested in some books) but to be “clothed in Christ Jesus”. “Christ then is to live, no longer I, but Jesus” (CC 47:7).

Very recently I was introduced to St Irenaeus, one of the greatest theologians of the early church whose doctrine of the fall is even more relevant to us:

In his view the fall was essentially a matter of wrong growing up. St Irenaeus believed.. that Adam was created as a young child. The reason why he was forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge was simply that he had to grow up first, and that takes time. Unfortunately Adam was impatient; in trying to anticipate his adulthood, by seizing that fruit before the time was ripe, he thwarted the process of true maturing. The result is that man can now only grow up properly by a painful dismantling of his false grownupness. To this end, **the son of God ‘came to be child with us’**, so that we could be led back to childhood and then grow up again, this time in a true way, till we come to the full stature of Christ himself (cf Eph 4:13)

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Finally, it seems to me that Cornelia's earliest statement of the spirit of the Society seen within the context of the paschal mystery says it all:

As the Society of the Holy Child Jesus is spiritually founded on the virtues of poverty, suffering and obedience, which our most Blessed Redeemer came down from heaven to practise in the grotto of Bethlehem and thence through His whole life unto Calvary, so ought all to begin again with the most sweet and holy and loving Child Jesus - a humbled God - walking with Him step by step in the ways of the child, .. so that they may finally be united to our crucified Lord. (FT 12)

She also reminds us that “God alone, with our own co-operation, can make us what we ought to be” (D 68:24); but it takes time - a life's time.