The Christmas Crèche: Culture Reflects Faith

Recreating the scene of Christ's birth is one of the most enduring customs of Christmas. Originating in the middle ages, the Christmas crèche became part of popular culture and flourished in the Catholic countries in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in Naples, the Provence (France), and southern Germany and Austria. This form of popular religious art, expressed in a myriad of styles and forms, has been rediscovered in our own day.

Nativity sets reveal a variety of interpretations of the Christmas event. Some are little monuments to artistic creativity with a simple statement of beauty. Others take the visitor to distant countries and relate the story of Christ's birth with new accents and insights. Most of the scenes speak about human life as much as they speak of religion and God. There are allusions to life's ordinariness and mystery, and, at times, references to the world's suffering and indifference. Sometimes the story crests in a symbol pregnant with meaning, and at other times it ends with a question mark. In all the representations, the wonder of the Incarnation - "God-with-us" - is ever present.

For the 2009 Christmas season nativity sets from the collection of the University of Dayton's Marian Library - International Marian Research Institute are on exhibit at several venues (cf. http://library.udayton.edu/manger). This year's exhibit features works from the 2008 gift of nearly 1,600 nativities from the Australian collector, Elizabeth von Mullekom.

Blessing of the Christmas Manger

Last year (December 14, 2008), Pope Benedict addressed young people in Rome who came with figures of the Christ Child to be placed in nativity scenes in their homes: "Standing before the crèche, we are able to feel the joy of Christianity, as we contemplate in the new-born Jesus the face of God who out of love made himself close to us."

The pope then invited them to join him in the following prayer:

God, our Father, you so loved us even to the point of sending us your only Son Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, to save us and bring us to you. We ask that you bless these images of Jesus, who will soon come among us, as a sign of your presence and of your love in our homes. Good Father, bless us as well, and our parents, our families, and our friends. Open our hearts so that we might know how to receive Jesus with joy, doing always what he asks, and seeing him in all those who are in need of our love. We ask you this in the name of Jesus, your beloved Son, who came to bring peace to the world. He lives and reigns with you forever and ever. Amen.

"A Blessing for the Christmas Manger or Nativity Scene" can be found in the Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2007).
The final document from the 2008 Synod of Bishops, devoted to “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” has not yet appeared, but it is certain that some reference will be made to the ancient practice of lectio divina. Pope Benedict described this practice as “the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer bringing about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart.” The practice, the pope states, can bring to the Church a “new spiritual springtime.”

Several participants at the recent synod referred to this practice. Carl Anderson (head of the Knights of Columbus) spoke of the power of God’s Word to touch “the lives of ordinary people through solid piety, authentic devotion and attentiveness to the living Word that is not locked in a remote past, enchained by scientific methods, presented in linguistic stranglehold or covered with archaeological inconsistencies.” For most people, he continued, who do not have the luxury, privilege and time to delve into Scripture studies, their only encounter with the Word of God might be through the liturgy or popular devotions. Anderson related his personal experience: “When I have attended countless gatherings of the Knights of Columbus throughout Canada or the United States, one of the things that impresses me is the seriousness and openness of the knights and their wives to praying the rosary, the chaplet of Divine Mercy, celebrating the sacraments and reflecting prayerfully on the Word of God. The question I have heard over and over again from them and many others is: ‘What is this Word asking me to do today?’”

Other speakers acknowledged that the “academy” has frequently discounted, discredited and downplayed piety and devotions in the Church, and failed to see these activities as opportunities to propose the Word of God as a life-giving guide.

A final proposition of the synod refers to a new paradigm for understanding the Word of God, namely, lectio divina, as illustrated in the Virgin Mary’s and the saints’ prayerful pondering of the Word of God and its meaning for their daily living. The Virgin Mary’s life illustrates how the Church is to receive and respond to God’s Word. In this paradigm, the Church is identified with Mary listening and receiving God’s word (virgo audiens).

In the monastic tradition, lectio divina consisted of four stages: reading of the Scripture (lectio), reflecting (meditatio), responding (oratio), and resting (contemplatio). The four stages could be considered successively or as present throughout. The practice is readily adaptable. It can form part of traditional spiritual exercises, such as the rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours. It can be used privately or in groups, for sharing in families or small Christian communities. It can serve as preparation for the Sunday Eucharist or for any feast or season.
Circulars of the Superior General of the Marianists:

Key to Marianist Spirituality? “The Spirit of Mary”

Fr. Manuel J Cortés, SM, was elected Superior General of the Society of Mary in 2006. The Superior General traditionally communicates to all Marianists through instructional letters, known as circulars. Fr. Cortés devoted his first two letters to Marian devotion – a topic central to Marianist identity, and always considered at the meetings of representatives of the Society (known as General Chapters).

Among the recurring questions are how Marianists can be faithful to the Marian devotion bequeathed to them by Blessed William Joseph Chaminade while entering into the currents of renewal of Marian devotion – biblical, liturgical, ecumenical – coming from Vatican II. How can that an authentic Marian devotion be formulated and expressed today and communicated to future generations? Fr. Cortés’ two letters both have as title “The Spirit of the Society Is the Spirit of Mary,” the concluding phrase of the Rule of the Society of Mary. The first letter (2007) deals with the place of Christ in Marian devotion, and the second (2008) with the role of Mary in the Church.

“In Christ with Mary” (2007), a recurring phrase of Marianist spirituality, “To Jesus through Mary,” is considered. The traditional devotion of Marianists, known as “filial piety,” was to reproduce the love which Jesus bore for his own mother. This approach may have presented Marian devotion as having two goals – Jesus and Mary. For that reason, a new phrase is suggested, “In Christ with Mary,” to indicate that Christ is the beginning and the goal of Marian devotion. The “Mariological turn” which occurred at Vatican II insisted on the centrality of Christ and his Word. Authentic Marian devotion is founded in Christ, “the way, the truth, and the life,” and must remain within the context of Christ’s mission in the world. For Chaminade, Christ was “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,” who, through his identification with us in the Incarnation, transformed humanity.

This transformation ushers in a new consciousness. Sharing in Christ’s divine nature produces “a loving awareness of God present” in the world, the Church, the sacraments, and ourselves. This new consciousness involves an identification with Christ and his mission. Here we see the Virgin Mary as the one most closely united, in body and soul, with her son – a union especially evident at the Annunciation, Cana, and Calvary. Mary’s love and devotion was directed to the person of Christ and also to his message to reveal God’s love for the world.

For the Marianist, Marian devotion means accepting Mary in one’s life “so that the Spirit, in whose action she cooperates with a mother’s love, may form us more fully to the image of her Son.” Through this filial surrender to Mary who is in Jesus, the heart is expanded to embrace Christ’s saving mission of revealing the Father to the world.

“In Mission with Mary,” Fr. Cortés’ second letter, the Church is identified as the community of “faith, charity, and union with Christ,” and it is Mary who personifies these elements. She is the embodiment of “union with Christ,” and so the Church, the Spouse of Christ, has the qualities of Mary imprinted on its character and mission. The Marianist charism involves unconditional love and commitment to the Church, the Body of Christ, in which the maternal presence and action of Mary “take flesh.”

Marianist spirituality seeks to make evident within the Church some distinctive Marian traits. John’s Gospel notes that, at the wedding feast of Cana, whereas the disciples of Jesus were invited, the Mother of Jesus was simply there – suggesting an ongoing presence, one related to Christ. Mary’s was an attentive presence, mindful of the newly wedded couple, and an anticipative presence sensitive to their needs. Lastly, it was a faith-filled presence. (Here, Chaminade noted the contrast between Mary’s faith-filled presence and the faith-less-ness caused by religious indifference.)

Marian devotion can never be separated from the mission of Christ proclaimed in the Church. It is an integral part of Christian worship and life, and cannot be a pious “add-on.” It is based on the conviction that Christ wished to associate others, especially his mother, with himself in the work of redemption.

continued on page 7

Studying Mary contains the working papers for the latest document from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (2005). The Anglican-Catholic dialogue, especially in the 1981 Windsor Statement, reached agreement on many areas related to the Virgin Mary, but the Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950, because of their manner of definition and the absence of biblical warranty, remained a stumbling block. Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ was intended to consider the Marian doctrines. The papers in this volume, written by the participants in this dialogue, contribute to a deeper understanding of the ecumenical document and, at the same time, stand as fine contributions to Marian studies.

A significant breakthrough in Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ was proposing the Pauline concepts of divine foreknowledge, predetermination, and glorification (Rom. 8:30; Col. 1:27; and Eph. 2:8-10) as the scriptural “warranty” for the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption. This Pauline eschatological perspective views the Marian dogmas as seen within “the economy of grace from its fulfillment in Christ ‘back’ into history, rather than ‘forward’ from its beginning in fallen creation towards the future in Christ.” In this eschatological perspective, Mary embodied the “elect-Israel” — of whom Paul speaks — who are “called according to God’s purpose.” This pattern of hope and grace already anticipated in Mary will be fulfilled in the new creation in Christ when all the redeemed will participate in the full glory of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18).

Included in this book is the redactional history of the Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ text, that is, the calendar or the log which outlines the development of the various parts of the document. The eschatological interpretation of the Marian dogmas (found in Section C: 52-62) was not in the document’s first draft. It appears in the group’s meetings at Paris (2001) and Chevtogne (2002). It may have been prompted by Jean-Marie Tillard’s reference to the “seeds of the resurrection” already present in the Church, and John Muddiman’s plea that Mary be seen “less as a peculiarity and more as a paradigm,” less as “someone cordoned off from the legacy of the past, and more as someone who sums up and mediates the best of the legacy.” (The eschatological interpretation is similar to the explanation of the Immaculate Conception given by Duns Scotus which is frequently seen as the turning point in the doctrine’s development.)

The splendid essays in Studying Mary provide information for a deeper understanding of Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (already on the Vatican website under the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity). By relating the Marian dogmas to fundamental truths of the Christian faith, Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ responds well to the approach advocated by ARCIC: “to go behind opposed or entrenched positions to make possible a new reception by a fresh recourse to Scripture and Tradition.”

Nathan Mitchell, the noted liturgist whose writings are featured in *Worship*, here presents a well-researched work describing how the rosary became the distinctive and enduring image of Catholic life and devotion in post-Tridentine Catholicism. The elements which today compose the rosary began centuries earlier, but it was especially after Trent that the rosary became so significant to Catholic life and devotion.

The visualization of the mysteries of the rosary was a factor in its development. Before printing, woodcuts illustrating the mysteries assisted members of the rosary confraternities during prayer; Dürer, Cesari, and others produced engravings of the rosary’s scriptural scenes (*Rosenkranzbilder*). A new stage was reached with Caravaggio’s *Madonna del Rosario* (1610). His painting shrank the distance between the biblical scene and daily life. The street people and the poor, with their rough features, were included. In contrast to the aloofness of Mannerist art, the figures in Caravaggio were bold and striking, images with which the common person could identify.

Another factor contributing to the process of visualization was the Ignatian method of meditation promoted by Jesuit writers. The person in prayer was urged to become part of the Gospel scene. Sor Maria de Agreda’s lengthy meditations on the Gospel scenes and her reconstruction of imaginary conversations contributed to a sense of immediacy of the Gospel events.

The Council of Trent and its liturgy had no interest in providing for “domestic devotion and family piety.” The rosary took up the slack. In Protestant England, where Catholics were prohibited from the full practice of their faith, the rosary assumed “quasi-sacramental character.” In England and the United States, the rosary became a distinguishing characteristic of Catholics, a “wedge between public act and private cult.” Its simple materiality helped to focus prayer; it was a bond uniting diverse groups, and could be a reminder of family events in the past (First Communion, wedding).

Mitchell brings together the views of many contemporary writers on Catholic kitsch. The rosary has always been the devotion of the poor and destitute, and the art which accompanied it was frequently sweet and sentimental, void of larger dimensions or application, and frequently disdained by more aesthetic or contemplative types. Yet, to paraphrase Cardinal Newman, kitsch will always be part of a large “people’s religion” — despite any efforts to the contrary.

Mitchell acknowledges values in the rosary — its adaptability to varied circumstances, its very “materiality” making available a method of prayer, but throughout the material is presented with clinical objectivity. Puzzling are the words in the title referring to the rosary and Marian devotion as the “reinvention of Catholicism.” Whether “reinvention of Catholicism” indicates a recovery of elements fundamental to Catholic prayer and worship, including the Marian presence, or whether it meant they were innovations in Catholic life is not clear. But it is a good discussion, with an abundant bibliography, of the many factors, especially the art, which contributed to the development of the rosary during the last five centuries.

*Emile Neubert, S.M.*

*Mary and the Priestly Ministry.*

Trans. by Thomas A. Stanley, S.M.


This is the first English translation of *Marie et Notre Sacerdoce*, a work of Fr. Emile Neubert, S.M, (d. 1968), known as the author of the most influential vest-pocket handbook of Marian devotion in the twentieth century — *My Ideal: Jesus, Son of Mary*. First published in 1933, *My Ideal* was translated into more than thirty languages. St. Maximilian Kolbe, the martyr of Auschwitz, provided the Polish translation which was published by his City of the Immaculate. Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary, also made reference to *My Ideal* in the Legion’s handbook.

Of his more than a hundred works, Fr. Neubert regarded this work on Mary and the priesthood, along with *My Ideal* and *Our Life of Union with Mary*, as his most significant works. First published in 1952, this work is a spiritual classic with a timeless appeal. It speaks of a Marian devotion which is not only professed but lived, of the virtues of humility and patience, of “practical” faith, obedience, patience, and
the need of meditation to acquire "spiritual composure." At the same time, it is a Christ-centered book, always directed to Christ and the Gospel in company with the Virgin Mary. For Fr. Neubert, "devotion to Mary means winning souls to Christ, and winning souls means promoting devotion to Mary."

Fr. Neubert was rector of the Marianist International Seminary in Fribourg, Switzerland, for twenty-seven years, as well as Novice Master in the United States. As Fr. Tom Stanley, the translator of this work, recalls, Fr. Neubert's words to the newly ordained were "Votre chain est fait: Ou devenir un saint, ou être un pharisien." In everyday English that means, 'Your goose is cooked. Now you've either got to be a saint or you will be a hypocrite.' [This work is available from the Marian Library or from the Franciscans of the Immaculate (marymediatrix.com)].


The author is a Catholic layman, retired professor of literature at the Northern University of Kentucky, who, by his own admission, is not a "professional Mariologist." He offers his book not for specialists, but for Catholics, Protestants, especially Evangelicals, and anyone curious about Catholic teachings on Mary. Prof. McNally well knows the objections to Marian devotion brought especially by Evangelicals, namely, that such devotion detracts from Christ, that prayer to Mary and the saints is not biblically sanctioned, that the bible does not support the virginity of Mary. His response is found throughout the work in clear and inviting explanations of Marian doctrines and practices of devotion. Occasionally he draws on his own experience: "What family or household flourishes without a mother?" He notes how the rosary produces a sense of peace and serenity in troubled individuals.

The book neatly "packages" much information on the historical development of Marian devotion, a tribute both to the author's organizational skill and to the Library of the Athenaeum of Ohio to which he acknowledges his indebtedness.

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**Marian Update**

*Changes at the Marian Library-IMRI*

After more than twenty years as the director of the International Marian Research Institute, Fr. Johann G. Roten will become Director of Research and Special Projects. Replacing him will be Fr. François Rossier who will serve as executive director of the Marian Library-International Marian Research Institute (ML-IMRI). Fr. Thompson will continue serving as director of the Marian Library.

The consolidation was made to promote a more unified approach to the mission of both the Marian Library and the International Marian Research Institute. Fr. Rossier will work at strengthening the ties with the University of Dayton, the Marianum in Rome, and the Marianists.

Fr. Rossier was born in Fribourg, Switzerland, made profession of vows as a Marianist in 1984 and was ordained in 1991. He obtained the Licentiate in Theology from the Gregorianum and the doctorate from the University of Fribourg. His doctoral dissertation was on a topic germane to Marian devotion: *L'intercession entre les hommes dans la Bible hébraïque: l'intercession entre les hommes aux origines de l'intercession auprès de Dieu* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1996). His five-year appointment was confirmed by Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski, prefect for the Congregation of Catholic Education, on October 10, 2009. The installation ceremony will occur on January 25, 2010.
CD with the Pope Singing a Marian Song.  

A CD of Marian Prayers and Hymns, released on November 30 (Geffen Records-Pauline Fathers), includes Pope Benedict’s singing the Alma Redemptoris Mater. The pope frequently refers to the power of music. In impromptu remarks after a concert this summer at Castel Gandolfo, he said, although languages separate us, people of all tongues can understand the language of music because it “touches our hearts . . . . This is a guarantee that the goodness and beauty of God’s creation have not been destroyed, and it reminds us that we are called to and capable of working together for what is good and beautiful.”

Holy Love Ministries

On November 11, 2009, Bishop Richard G. Lennon of the Diocese of Cleveland issued a decree on the Holy Love Ministries and the alleged apparitions to Maureen Sweeney Kyle. At the request of the Holy See, and after a review of the theological content of the apparitions and locutions, and consultation of an expert in this matter (c.747, 2), the bishop declared that the alleged apparitions to Maureen Sweeney Kyle are not supernatural in character and admonished the faithful of the Diocese of Cleveland to cease gathering for any religious, liturgical, spiritual, or devotional purpose at the Holy Love Ministries.

Baptist-Catholic Dialogue

The American Baptist-Roman Catholic conversations which occurred between 1995 and 2001, were discontinued by a decision of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. However, the international Catholic-Baptist Dialogue, with the Vatican’s Pontifical Commission for Promotion of Christian Unity and the Baptist World Alliance, continues. A recent meeting was devoted to “Mary in the Communion of the Church.” Papers included “Mary in the Light of Scripture and the Early Church” by Dr. Krzystof Mielcarek, “Mary in the Light of Ongoing Tradition” by Sr. Sara Butler, and “Contemporary Issues in Inculturation and Spirituality” by Peter Casarella.

Evangelicals and the Virgin Mary

For the last fifteen years, Fr. John Neuhaus has brought together Evangelicals and Catholics who, after study, discussion, and prayer, have issued statements on mission, salvation, and holiness. The November, 2009, issue of First Things, includes this group’s statement on the Virgin Mary: “Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life – A Statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” The accord notes that “there is a place for biblically precise, theologically robust love and honor of Mary among Evangelicals, not one that claims her as mediatrix or coredemptrix but one that sees her as the figure the Bible presents her to be: the handmaiden of the Lord, divinely chosen to give birth to the Messiah, who stood loyally by Jesus at the cross . . . Mary’s aim was to exalt her Son and to point others to him. We do not detract from Christ by showing reverence to his mother.”

"Marianist Spirituality," continued from page 3

Marianist spirituality requires more than an intellectual acceptance; it is a lifelong assimilation into our lives of God’s word, after the example of the Virgin Mary. Fr. Cortés concludes his two letters with a little poem, accompanied by a drawing, given to him by a Marianist Brother in France, explaining how Mary leads us into the mystery of Christ:

Mary says to me,
If, in this difficult world,
you wish to follow the way of Jesus,
come with me,
and I will lead you to him.
He will take you to the Father and
to all your brothers and sisters, and
even to the “Promised Land”
where you will delight in the joy of loving and being loved.
Is this what you want?
You also could be a path that
others follow.
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