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### The Nativity Scene in the "Lives of Mary" in the Apocrypha (II-IX Cent.), the Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin" (VII-XI Cent.), Medieval Women Mystics (XII-XIV Cent.), and Medieval "lives" of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph (X-XV Cent.)

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# THE NATIVITY SCENE IN THE "LIVES OF MARY"

in the Apocrypha (II.-IX. Cent.)  
the Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin" (VII.-XI. Cent.)  
Medieval Women Mystics (XII.-XIV. Cent.) and  
Medieval "Lives" of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph (X.-XV. Cent.)

*Deyanira Flores, S.T.D.\**

## INTRODUCTION

The Most-High, the Incomprehensible,  
The Eternal and Almighty  
Has just been born.  
Is it possible?  
The Eternal is one day old, the Word is silent,  
The Almighty has become an infant.  
Let us acknowledge,  
Adore, praise . . .  
Our God reduced to infancy . . .<sup>1</sup>

Thus sings St. Louis M. de Montfort (†1716) in one of his "Noel Hymns," and thus have sung Christians for generations since the miracle of Christmas first took place. In fact, the Incarnation, the greatest Mystery of our Christian faith after the

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<sup>1</sup> St. Louis de Montfort, Hymn 57, "Noel of Angels" 1, in *God Alone II: The Hymns of St. Louis Marie de Montfort* (Bay Shore, NY: Montfort Publications, 2005), 312.

Blessed Trinity, is strikingly synthesized and concretized in the God-Child lying in the manger.

... Is it you there, our dear Master,  
Our God, our Creator?...<sup>2</sup>

Is it You there, Oh my Lord and my God, a tiny defenseless baby, in a stable? Nursed by a Virgin Mother? Looked after by a humble carpenter? Surrounded by beasts, cold, and poverty?

Christianity is indeed daring when it proclaims a God that becomes a child and dies like a criminal on a cross! How can this be possible? And yet, the Nativity scene and Calvary, towards which it tends and which it already foreshadows, have conquered the hearts and captured the minds of innumerable people. In the face of all the arguments that have been brought up against it, faith arises victorious, discovering in the Child and the Crucified One the infinite love, mercy, and power of the Incarnate God and the Risen Lord!

From the simple beauty of the Christmas Crèche—the joy and catechetical tool of Christian homes and parishes for centuries—saints, mystics, theologians, exegetes, and Christians of all walks of life have drunk abundantly as from a most pure and inexhaustible spring. Meditated over and over again in the Rosary by millions of devout Christians, the Nativity scene has brought consolation and strength to many troubled hearts and tepid apostles; it has become the foundational charisma of many religious congregations; it has inspired the brush and pen of countless artists, poets, writers, composers, and film-makers.

The theme of our Mariological Society of America Program this year is "Telling Mary's Story: The *Life of Mary* through the Ages." In this paper, we shall focus on one of the most ineffable moments of the Virgin Mary's life: the Nativity of her Divine Son.

In order to see how this theme has been treated, we have analyzed the works of thirty-one authors within a time period

<sup>2</sup> Idem., Hymn 66, "Noel of School Children 6," in *God Alone II*, 332.

that goes from the second century to the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> We have subdivided these authors into four categories: the Apocrypha (I.-IX. cent.), the Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin" (VII.-XI. cent.), Medieval Women Mystics (XII.-XIV. cent.), and Medieval "Lives" of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph (X.-XV. cent.). Our main point of interest is the way in which they describe the Nativity scene itself and its three protagonists: the Child, the Virgin Mother, and St. Joseph. We shall also examine the events leading to the Nativity (the Census, the trip to Bethlehem, and the preparations prior to the birth), the events which took place at Jesus' birth (the swaddling of the Baby and the visit of the shepherds), and the personages that intervened therein. Reference shall also be made to the scriptural foundations and the way in which Christians are called to take part in the Nativity of the Lord.

In a theme like the Nativity, it is impossible to be exhaustive. Not only the quantity of authors, but the number of manuscripts and translations that exist of many of these works makes it often impossible to determine who was the first to say something. Thus, expressions such as "all," "first," or "none" must be understood as referring only to the authors included in this paper.

Interest in the entire life of Jesus and Mary is obvious. Be it out of love or curiosity, Christians have longed to know more about and to be present at the different events of their life. From the theological, spiritual, moral, and exegetical points of view, the New Testament accounts of the Nativity of Christ offer a profound doctrine that over two thousand years of meditation and study have not been able to exhaust. But from the point of view of actual facts, the information they give is scant.

From the beginning of Christianity, there has been a tendency "to fill in" those blanks, be it with information taken from tradition (some of which may be historically correct, like the names of Our Lady's parents), from theological, spiritual, or

<sup>3</sup> For practical reasons, a complete list of these authors, their works, dates, bibliographical information, and the way we shall cite them throughout this paper is given in an Appendix at the end.

moral considerations drawn from Christian doctrine itself, or from the author's imagination, pious or otherwise, shaped in part by his personality, likings, time period, and culture. The desires to defend or attack a specific doctrine have also come into play.

Confronted with the task of writing a "life" of Mary, with such scant information at hand, the writer is left with two options: Follow to the letter the New Testament, or, even though following the Gospels, have recourse to other sources. Among those who follow the second option, it is very important to distinguish profound reflections, pious inventions, or even possible private revelations in the case of some Saints, from changes, distortions of the truth, or plain lies. Most Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin," the visions of saintly Women Mystics, and some Medieval "Lives" of Christ, Mary, and Joseph are a good example of the first group; heretical Apocrypha and some "Lives of Christ" demonstrate the second.

This threefold approach is also apparent in literature and music; we offer an example of the latter. The texts that George Frederick Handel (†1759) used for his *Messiah* are entirely taken from Sacred Scripture alone. Johann Sebastian Bach (†1750), for his *Christmas Oratorio*, used a combination of a few scriptural texts with choruses and arias, written by a librettist, which meditate in theological fashion on the theme at hand. Hector Berlioz (†1869), in his *Infancy of Christ*, based himself almost entirely on apocryphal material of low content and no historical or theological value.

The purpose of our paper will be to see how the Nativity of Christ has been dealt with in this kind of literature, having the events and personages as the framework within which is placed our main concern: the presentation of the three protagonists.

## I. SACRED SCRIPTURE

### A. The Nativity Scene in the New Testament

The Nativity scene is based on the Gospels of St. Matthew (1, 24-25; 2, 1-18) and St. Luke (2, 1-20). It has three protagonists: the God-Child, the Virgin Mother, and St. Joseph.

### **1. The God-Child**

"Unto us a Child is born" (Is.9, 6) . . . , and "emptying out" (Phil.2, 7) his majesty, God has taken on himself not merely the earthly body of mortal men but even the weakness and insignificance of children . . . See the great God made a tiny child, a little child to be worshipped: an amazing mystery . . . What incomparable sweetness and loving kindness, that I should see the God who made me (Sir.24, 12) himself made a child for my sake; that the God of all majesty (Ps.28, 3) and glory should become not only like me in true bodily form but show himself even wretched and, as it were, devoid of all strength in the weakness of his infancy. Truly you are the Child-God, my Champion and my God . . .<sup>4</sup>

With these words, Blessed Gueric of Igny (†1157) expresses very well the Mystery of "the child that is born to us and the son that is given to us" (Is.9, 6). In fact, Christ was born for us and not for Himself "as a compassionate child," seeking "our profit, and not His gain," having as His sole purpose "to promote our welfare by His own lessening, to glorify us by His humiliation. Emptying Himself He filled us, for He transfused all the fullness of His divinity into man, without confusing the two."<sup>5</sup>

Being the Son of God, Jesus Christ became Man in Mary's virginal womb and was born for Mary, the Church, and each one of us, all of whom are called to become His "spiritual mother."<sup>6</sup> The Mystery of the Incarnation at Nazareth and the Divine Birth in Bethlehem continues to repeat itself every day in the Church and in the souls of believers.<sup>7</sup>

### **2. The Virgin Mother**

Mother of fair love, may everything praise you  
For having given us this Infant-God,

<sup>4</sup> Bl. Gueric of Igny, *Sermon 6, The First Sermon for Christmas* 1, 2, 4, in Gueric of Igny, *Liturgical Sermons*, Vol. I; introduction and trans. Monks of Saint Bernard Abbey (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1971), 37, 38, 39, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, *Sermon 8, The Third for Christmas* 1, in *Liturgical Sermons*, 1:47, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Idem, *Sermon 7, The Second for Christmas*, in *Liturgical Sermons*, 1:42-46.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Idem., *Sermon 8, The Third Sermon for Christmas*, 5, in *Liturgical Sermons*, 1:52-53: "... Yes, you too are mothers of the Child who has been born for you and in you ... Keep watch, then, holy mother, keep watch in your care for the new-born child until Christ be formed in you (Gal. 4,19) who was born for you ... "

For having given birth to the light,  
 Humanity to the true God, life to our Father ...<sup>8</sup>

... Blessed is your womb, pure and faithful Virgin,  
 For having contained immensity,  
 For having nourished, for having borne  
 Eternal Wisdom!<sup>9</sup>

The Child at Bethlehem is inseparable from the Virgin Mother who gave Him birth. Without Mary, there is no Jesus! The Mystery of the Incarnation is indissolubly united to the Mystery of the Divine Maternity of the woman chosen by God from all eternity to become the Mother of His incarnate Son (cf. Gal. 4, 4-5). Mary's mission within God's Salvific Plan is unique: Conceive in her womb of the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Savior of the World.

The Gospels are clear in insisting on both Mary's Virginité and Maternity. Her Virginité is explicitly affirmed eight times (cf. Mt. 1, 18, twice; 1, 20.22-23; Lk. 1, 27, twice; 1, 34.35), and implicitly several times, for example, by the careful use of the Greek verbs *gennavw* (beget) (Mt. 1, 16.20; 2, 1.4; Lk. 1, 35; Lk. 1, 13.57 [referred to Elizabeth]) and *tivktw* (give birth to) (Mt. 1, 21.23.25; 2, 2; Lk. 1, 31; 2, 7 [referred to Mary]; Lk. 1, 57; 2, 6 [referred to both]) when referring them to Mary.<sup>10</sup> Her maternity is likewise affirmed (cf. Mt. 1, 16.18.20.21.25; 2, 1; Lk. 1, 31.42.43; 2, 5.6.7.12.16.21.27.41.43; 11, 27), and She is called Jesus' "*mother*" twenty-six times (Mt. 1, 18; 2, 11.13.14.20.21; 12, 46; Mk. 3, 31.32; 6, 3; Lk. 2, 33.34.48.51; 8, 19.20; Jn. 2, 1.3.5.12; 6, 42; 19, 25 twice; 19, 26 twice; Acts 1, 14) (for a total of forty-four times). As Tradition untiringly repeats, Christ's Mystery is admirably synthesized by His Virgin Mother: With her Virginité, She proclaims that He is true God; truly giving birth to Him and wrapping Him in swaddling clothes, She demonstrates that He became true Man.

<sup>8</sup> St. Louis de Montfort, Hymn 60, "Noel of Kings" 12, in *God Alone II*, 320.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, Hymn 63, "Noel of Children of Mary" 9, in *God Alone II*, 326.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. V. Cernuda A., "El paralelismo de 'genno' y 'tikto' en Lc. 1-2," *Biblica* 55 (1974): 260-264; idem, "La dialéctica 'genno-tikto' en Mt. 1-2," *Biblica* 55 (1974): 408-417.

Being the Mother of God means that between *the humble Virgin of Nazareth* and the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity—and indeed *the entire Blessed Trinity*—was established forever a unique relationship of ineffable love and intimacy. No human person will ever be so close to God, penetrate the Divine Mysteries so deeply, and cooperate so actively in His Economy of Salvation as Mary. Our human words are utterly incapable of expressing this Mystery. It is hidden and at the same time manifest in the Virgin kneeling before the manger and adoring her newborn Son.

### **3. St. Joseph**

Great saint, you alone God found  
To be the worthy spouse  
Of his admirable Mother . . .  
The Eternal Father chose you  
To nourish his Son on earth,  
In fact, to be His vicar.  
You have carried in your arms  
The Child holding all things in His hand;  
By a most special vocation  
You have been the nurturer  
Of your own Father.  
Who would have seen Him caress you,  
Smile at you, embrace you  
With extraordinary love! . . . <sup>11</sup>

We must never forget that, together with the Divine Child and the Virgin Mother, there is a third protagonist of the Nativity scene: St. Joseph. He, too, was chosen by God for a unique mission: to act in the capacity of foster-father of the Son of the eternal Father, and in the capacity of virgin spouse of the Immaculate Spouse of the Holy Spirit. After the Blessed Virgin, he is the first witness of the Mystery of the Incarnation and the person closest to Jesus. Together with her, he is the sole witness of the virgin birth of the Savior of the world, and the only one who shared with her thirty years of indescribable intimacy

<sup>11</sup> St. Louis de Montfort, Hymn 122 "In Honor of Joseph, Spouse of Mary" 2, 3, 4, in *God Alone II*, 505-506.



with the Word in the joyous simplicity of the home of Nazareth. Called by God to be "the custodian of the beginnings of the Mystery of the Redemption,"<sup>12</sup> he spent his whole life in the most loving and faithful service of Jesus and Mary. His importance in the Economy of Salvation and within the Communion of Saints is truly great.

St. Matthew's account of the Nativity is told from the point of view of St. Joseph (cf. Mt. 2). St. Luke mentions him at almost all the episodes of Christ's infancy narrated by him: Annunciation (cf. 1, 27), birth (cf. 2, 4-7), visit of the Shepherds (cf. 2, 16), Presentation in the Temple (cf. 2, 22.27.33-34.39), Jesus' Teaching at the Temple (cf. 2, 41-46.48-50), and life at Nazareth (cf. 2, 51). He is called Jesus' "father" six times (cf. Mt. 13, 55; Lk. 2, 33.48; 3, 23; 4, 22; Jn. 6, 42), and together with Mary he is called Jesus' "parent" three times (cf. Lk. 2, 27.41.43). Scripture could not be clearer in stressing his importance. The Crèche reminds us of this great truth: At Mary's side is always St. Joseph, humbly adoring and serving with her the God-Child.

## **B. Old Testament Prophecies of the Nativity**

Christ is the center of everything and everything converges in Him. The Old Testament prepares the New, and its prophecies and figures are fulfilled in Christ. That is why the New Testament and Tradition often quote Old Testament texts in relation to Him.

In their accounts of the Nativity scene, both Evangelists either quote explicitly or have in mind several Old Testament passages. For example: *The Davidic descent of the Messiah* (cf. 2Sam. 7, 11-16; Ps. 89, 27-38; Is. 9, 6-7; 11, 1; Jer. 23, 5/Mt. 1, 6.16-18; Lk. 1, 27.32-33.69; 2, 4; Jn. 7, 42; Acts 13, 22-23); *the joyful Daughter of Zion who receives in her womb the Savior and King* (Zeph. 3, 14-17; cf. Joel 2, 21.23.27; Zech. 2, 14-17/Lk. 1, 28.30-33); *the parallel between Mary and the Ark of the Covenant* (Ex. 40, 34-35/Lk. 1, 35); *the birth of the Emmanuel*

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Solemnity of St. Joseph, Husband of Mary (March 19), *Collect*. Concerning St. Joseph's Cooperation in the Work of Redemption, cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris custos* (August 15, 1989), nos. 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 14, 15, 16, 19, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32.

*of the Virgin* (Is.7, 14; cf. Is.9, 6-7; 66, 7-8/Mt.1, 22-23; Lk.1, 27.31.34-35); *the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem* (Mic.5, 2/Mt.2, 1.4-6; Lk.2, 4.6-7.11; Jn.7, 42); *the star* (Num.24, 17/Mt.2, 2.7.9-10); *Christ as Light* (Gen.1, 3; Is.9, 1-2; 60, 1-3.19-20; Mal.4, 2/Mt.4, 12-16; Lk.1, 78-79; Jn.1, 4-5.7-9; 8, 12; Eph.5, 14; 1Jn.2, 8; Rev.21, 23-25; 22, 5).

As we shall see, the Apocrypha also make use of Old Testament texts—interpreted in their own way—as their foundation for some of the things they say.

### **C. The Use of Sacred Scripture in the Texts Examined**

In the texts we examined, Sacred Scripture is basically used in three ways:

1. *Having it as the main foundation, directly quoting passages from it, but omitting, changing, or adding details which in themselves are not contrary to doctrine*, either copied from a previous author or made-up to reinforce a point they want to make. In varying degrees, the Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin," the Women Mystics, and the Medieval "Lives" of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph combine faithfulness to the Gospel, information taken from the Apocrypha (deemed by the author as not being contrary to doctrine or adjusting it to be more orthodox), and reflections of a theological, moral or spiritual tenor usually taken from Scripture itself or Tradition. The Women Mystics also add elements from their own mystical visions.

Among the details from the Gospel that more authors follow are: The Divinity of Christ; the Virginity of Mary; the fact that Joseph is of the house of David, that he is not the biological father of Jesus, and that he obeys the imperial decree calling for the enrollment; the birth in Bethlehem of Judea or its surroundings, in the days of King Herod; the arrival of the shepherds, to whom the birth was announced by angels as they watched over their flocks by night; and the coming of the Magi, guided by a star, with gifts.

2. *Following it very little, adding details not present in the Gospels that can go from minor things to major ones which can be ridiculous, distasteful, offensive, or heretical; or contradicting it by giving wrong or heretical information.*

The Apocryphal writing known as the *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.) introduced details not found in the Gospels, which were then taken up by many subsequent authors. Some are innocuous; some, like the presence of the midwives, repeated for a long period of time, finally came more or less into disuse; others are wholly unacceptable, among which the presentation of St. Joseph as an old widower with children, which unfortunately exercised great influence in popular devotion and art, has been difficult to eliminate.

Other authors who introduced details not found in Scripture that have had a big following are: Pseudo-Matthew (VI. cent.), the *Book of the Infancy of the Savior* (IX. cent.), Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. cent.), St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373), and Ludolph of Saxony (†1378).

3. *Transposing to the Nativity scene events or sayings found elsewhere in Scripture.* This is typical of the Apocrypha. Here are some examples:

- The Hebrew midwives in Egypt protected the Hebrew children from being killed (cf. Ex. 1, 15-21), and Joseph goes in search of "a Hebrew midwife" for Mary;<sup>13</sup>
- Jesus invites His disciples to "come and see" where He stays (Jn. 1, 39; cf. Jn. 1, 46), and Joseph reveals Mary's identity to the midwife and asks her to "come and see";<sup>14</sup>
- The cloud that "covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord that filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40, 34), and the cloud that overshadows the cave where the Child is born, and the bright light that shines inside the cave;<sup>15</sup>
- The "glory of the Lord" that shines around the shepherds (Lk. 2, 9), and the light that surrounds Mary when she gives birth to Christ;<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 1, p. 64; *Arabic* II, 2, p. 104; IV, 2, p. 105; *Armenian* VIII, 9, p. 141; *Arundel/Hereford* 68, Santos Otero, p. 263-264.

<sup>14</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 1, p. 64; *Armenian* VIII, 9, p. 141; *Arundel/Hereford* 68, Santos Otero, p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p. 64; *Armenian* VIII, 11; IX, 2, p. 141; IX, 4, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p. 64; *Arabic*, III, 1, p. 105; *Arundel/Hereford* 65; 69, Erbetta, 73, p. 210; 74, p. 211; *Ludolph* IX, p. 158.

- “Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Ex. 40, 35), and the midwives did not dare to enter the cave because of the light they saw until Mary bid them come in;<sup>17</sup>
- “Night clear as day” (cf. Ps. 139, 12), and the great light that shone when Christ was born “at midnight”;<sup>18</sup>
- Mary wrapped her Son “in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger” (Lk. 2, 7), and Joseph or Eve do the same thing;<sup>19</sup>
- Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Christ’s dead body in a linen shroud, “and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had ever yet been laid” (Lk. 23, 53), and Mary wrapped the Child in clean linen clothes which no one had ever used before;<sup>20</sup>
- Elizabeth and Eve present at Christ’s birth;<sup>21</sup>
- The “ox that knows its owner and the ass its master’s crib” (Is. 1, 3), and the ox and ass that adore the Child lying in the manger;<sup>22</sup>
- “When he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’” (Heb. 1, 6), and entire hosts of angels come down from heaven to worship the Child lying in the manger;<sup>23</sup>
- The angel Gabriel greets Mary saying: “Hail, full of grace” (Lk. 1, 28), and the Magi greet her with the same words;<sup>24</sup>
- Elizabeth wonders “why is this granted to her, that the mother of her Lord should come to her” (Lk. 1, 43), and the

<sup>17</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p. 93; *Arundel/Hereford* 69, Erbetta, p. 210.

<sup>18</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p. 156; cf. *Arundel/Hereford* 65, Erbetta, p. 210.

<sup>19</sup> *Armenian* IX, 3, p. 142 (Eve); *Arundel/Hereford* 75, Erbetta, p. 211 (Joseph).

<sup>20</sup> *St. Bridget*, VII, 25, 9, p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> *Armenian*, VIII, 9- IX, 4, p. 141-142 (Eve); *St. Maximus* 34, p. 209-210 (Elizabeth); *Ps.-Epiphanius*, XII, p. 74; 76 (Elizabeth).

<sup>22</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p. 93; *Arundel/Hereford* 86, Erbetta, p. 212; *Voragine* p. 50; *Ludolph* IX, p. 153; *Celestin* fol. 30v, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p. 93; *Armenian* VIII, 11, p. 141; IX, 4, p. 142; *Arundel/Hereford* 73, Erbetta, p. 210; *Roswitha* 89, 1074 D; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p. 38; *Ludolph* IX, p. 154; 161; 162; *Meron* 6, f. 20v-21r, p. 520.

<sup>24</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 91, Erbetta, p. 213.

midwife asks the same thing when she witnesses the virgin birth;<sup>25</sup>

- Echoes from Mary's Magnificat and the Canticles of Zechariah and Simeon are put in the mouths of the midwife, Eve, Joseph, Simeon (Joseph's "son"), and the woman cured from palsy when they witness the virgin birth;<sup>26</sup>
- Of the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn. 4, 39) and the midwife it is said that "many believed because of their preaching";<sup>27</sup>
- Jesus proclaims blessed those who believe without having seen (Jn. 20, 29), and Simeon, Joseph's "son," considers himself "blessed for having heard about the virgin birth and having believed in it";<sup>28</sup>
- When Salome is told by the midwife that a Virgin has brought forth, she does not believe it, and answers in a way similar to St. Thomas (cf. Jn. 20, 25);<sup>29</sup>
- The man who touched the Ark of the Covenant was punished (cf. 2Sam. 6, 3-7), and Salome is punished for her unbelief with a withered or burnt hand;<sup>30</sup>
- Mary "kept all these things pondering them in her heart" (Lk. 2, 19.52), and Joseph's "son" does the same thing.<sup>31</sup>

## II. BEFORE AND AFTER THE NATIVITY

### A. The Events Narrated

Many of the authors we studied build upon the events narrated by the Gospels offering more details that range from probable to seriously misleading or incorrect. Some of them might serve as a narrative framework to help the imagination picture the scene more vividly, but for the most part we

<sup>25</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 70, Erbetta, p.210.

<sup>26</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p.64; 20, 2; 4, p.65; *Arabic* IV, 2, p.105; *Armenian* IX, 1-2, p.141; IX, 6, p.142.

<sup>27</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.94.

<sup>28</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 75, Erbetta, p.211.

<sup>29</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 3, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93; *Armenian* IX, 4, p.142; *Arundel/Hereford* 77, cf. Erbetta, p.211; *Roswitha* 89, 1075 A-B.

<sup>30</sup> *Protogospel* 20, 1, p.65; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93-94; *Armenian* IX, 5-7, p.142; *Arundel/Hereford* 78-79, cf. Erbetta, p.211; *Roswitha* 89, 1075 B-C; *Voragine*, p.48.

<sup>31</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 70, Erbetta, p.210; cf. *Celestin*, fol.34, p.35-36 (Mary and Joseph).

consider them unnecessary, "distracting factors" to say the least. The events more frequently mentioned are:

### 1. *The Census and the Trip to Bethlehem*

All the authors agree that St. Joseph belonged to the Davidic lineage (cf. Lk. 2, 4), and a few add that Mary did, too.<sup>32</sup> Some say that Joseph was from Bethlehem, but had gone to Nazareth for working reasons;<sup>33</sup> others, that both Mary and Joseph had left Bethlehem to live in Nazareth.<sup>34</sup>

The reason why St. Joseph went up from Galilee to Bethlehem was the decree issued by the Emperor Caesar Augustus, calling for the entire world to be enrolled, each in his own city (cf. Lk. 2, 1-4). Many authors follow St. Luke on this point.<sup>35</sup> Some specify Joseph's desire to obey this decree;<sup>36</sup> others say that Mary, also, wanted to obey, and present them both as an example of obedience to us.<sup>37</sup> For most of them, only Joseph had to go. A few offer possible reasons for taking Mary with him: Divine Providence, which took them to Bethlehem so that the prophecies concerning Christ's birth might be fulfilled;<sup>38</sup> in order for Joseph to take personal care of Mary, "the treasure entrusted to him";<sup>39</sup> so that Joseph might not miss the joy of contemplating the Nativity of the Lord.<sup>40</sup>

As Origen (†253) had done,<sup>41</sup> a few authors see in the census a deeper meaning: It prefigures our being "enrolled in

<sup>32</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.92; *Arundel/Hereford* 60, Erbetta, p.209; *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Ludolph* IX, p.143; 167; *Celestin* fol.28v, p.31.

<sup>33</sup> *Maximus* 32, p.208.

<sup>34</sup> *Metaphrastes* 11, p.988.

<sup>35</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 1-2, p.63; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.92-93; *J. Carpenter*, VII, 1-2, p.192; *Arabic* II, 1, p.104; *Armenian* VIII, 1, p.140; *Arundel/Hereford* 59-60, Erbetta, p.209; 216; *Radbert*, X, 2, p.258; *St. Maximus* 32-33, p.208-209; *Epiphantius* XII, p.71-72; *Metaphrastes*, 11; 12; 22, p.987-988; 996; *Roswitha* 87-88, 1074 A; *Valenciennes* 433, p.260; *Voragine*, p.47; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31; *Ludolph* IX, p.139-144; *Celestin* fol.28, p.31; *Meron* 6, f.18r-v, p.518.

<sup>36</sup> *Metaphrastes* 11, p.987; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31; cf. *Protogospel* 17, 1, p.63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.143-144; *Celestin* fol.28, p.31.

<sup>38</sup> *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *St. Bridget*, VII, 25, 9, p.206; *Metaphrastes* 11, p.987-988; *Gerson* VII, p.73; *Celestin* fol.28, p.31.

<sup>39</sup> *Voragine*, p.47; *Celestin* fol.28, p.31; *Meron* 6, f.18r-v, p.518.

<sup>40</sup> *Meron* 6, f.18r-v, p.518.

<sup>41</sup> Origen, *In Lucam Homilia* XI, 6; *Sources Chrétiennes* 87 (Paris, 1962), p.194-196.

heaven";<sup>42</sup> Christ is the true King and Prince of Peace;<sup>43</sup> He gives us an example of humility and obedience;<sup>44</sup> in His poverty, He lacked an inn in which to stay;<sup>45</sup> people were so busy with the census that the wonders of God could not be told to them;<sup>46</sup> God chose to be born in a poor, unknown city like Bethlehem;<sup>47</sup> we should pay Him the tribute of our faith, justice, words, and works, and in order to do so, we should go with Joseph along the road of virtues, moving from "the way of the world" ("Galilee") to the "confession and praise of God" ("Judea").<sup>48</sup>

Some authors mention the distance that Joseph and Mary had to travel,<sup>49</sup> and the preparations lovingly undertaken by them.<sup>50</sup> Thanks to the Emperor Octavian, they were enjoying a time of universal peace.<sup>51</sup>

The details given about the trip to Bethlehem do not always coincide. The *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.), for example, introduced the idea, followed by some Apocrypha and Byzantine "Lives" of Mary, that Joseph traveled with his "sons" (or "family").<sup>52</sup> Later writers who defend St. Joseph's virginity eliminate this idea. According to Arundel (X. cent.) and Hereford (X. cent.), Joseph went ahead in search of a convenient place in Bethlehem, leaving Mary with his "son" Simeon.<sup>53</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor (†662) says the opposite thing: Having been charged

<sup>42</sup> *St. Maximus* 32, p.208.

<sup>43</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.140-141; cf. 159; 160.

<sup>44</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.143.

<sup>45</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.139-140; 143; 144; 153; *Celestin* fol.28v, p.31.

<sup>46</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 22, 5, p.204.

<sup>47</sup> *St. Maximus* 32, p.208; cf. *Ludolph* IX, p.152.

<sup>48</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.140; 144.

<sup>49</sup> *Armenian* VIII, 2, p.140; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31; *Ludolph* IX, p.144; *Meron* 6, f.18v-19r, p.518.

<sup>50</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 5; 18-19, p.203; 204; 22, 3, p.204; 25, 9, p.206; *Radbert*, X, 2, p.258; *Eximientis, Vita Christi*, book III, cf. Herrán, p.461.

<sup>51</sup> *Voragine*, p.47; 48; *Hackeborn* I, V, 10, p.19; *Ludolph* IX, p.140-141; 160; 163; *Gerson*, VII, p.73.

<sup>52</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 1-2, p.63; 18, 1, p.64; *Arabic* II, 1, p.104; *Armenian* VIII, 1, p.140; VIII, 7, p.141; *Arundel/Hereford* 60; 64; 65, *Erbetta*, p.209; 210; *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Epiphanius* XII, 71-72.

<sup>53</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 62-64, *Erbetta*, p.209.

by the angel to serve Mary, Joseph sent his sons and other kinsfolk ahead, while he came slowly with Mary.<sup>54</sup> Many believe that they also took with them some kind of beast of burden.<sup>55</sup>

There is also disagreement as to the place where the Child was born. Many just say that the birth took place "in Bethlehem."<sup>56</sup> For others, it took place "on the road to Bethlehem," in the outskirts, or near the city door,<sup>57</sup> or even "in Joseph's house."<sup>58</sup>

In some writings, it is Mary who announces when the time for her delivery has come.<sup>59</sup> In Pseudo-Matthew (VI. cent.), it is an angel who gives the word and orders Mary to get off the donkey and enter the cave.<sup>60</sup> In the Apocrypha, after Mary is settled inside the cave, Joseph and/or his "sons" go in search of a midwife.<sup>61</sup> In the Women Mystics and Medieval "Lives," in accordance with the Gospel, Mary and Joseph prepare themselves alone for the birth of the Child.<sup>62</sup> Jesus was supposedly born at "midnight," usually on Sunday (or Saturday), with several reasons given for this idea.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Epiphanius* XII, p.72.

<sup>55</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 2; 3, p.63; 64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93; *Armenian* VIII, 1; 2; 5, p.140; *Arundel* 64, Erbetta, p.209; *Epiphanius* XII, p.72; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 B; C; *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.199; *Voragine*, 49-50; *Ps.-Bonaventure*, VII, p.31; *St. Bridget*, VII, 21, 2-3, p.202; *Ludolph* IX, p.145.

<sup>56</sup> *Isaiah* XI, 6-11, Cothenet, p.78; *Armenian* VIII, 5, p.140; *Arundel/Hereford* 62-63, Erbetta, p.209; *Radbert*, X, 2, p.258; *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Metaphrastes* 15; 16; 22, p.990-991; 996; *Wace* fol.88, p.50; *Valenciennes* 433-434, p.260-261; *Voragine*, p.47; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31; *St. Bridget* VII, 1, 6, p.160; 21, 1, p.202; 25, 9, p.206; *Ludolph* IX, p.156; 167; 171-173; XI, 196; 198; 200; 205; *Gerson* VII, p.73; *Celestin* fol.28, p.31.

<sup>57</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 3; 18, 1, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; *J. Carpenter* VII, 3, p.192 (on the way back from Bethlehem); *Epiphanius* XII, p.72-73; *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.198-199; *Hackeborn* I, V, 10, p.19 ("on the mountain of Bethlehem").

<sup>58</sup> *Isaiah* XI, 6-11, Cothenet, p.78; *Valenciennes* 434, p.261.

<sup>59</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 3, p.64; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; *Armenian* VIII, 5, p.140.

<sup>60</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93.

<sup>61</sup> *Protogospel* 18, 1, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; *Armenian* VIII, 5, p.140; VIII, 7; 9-10, p.141; *Arundel/Hereford* 67-69, Erbetta, p.210.

<sup>62</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31-35; *St. Bridget* VII, 21 (all); 22 (all), p.202-204; *Gerson* VII, p.74-75; *Celestin* fol.28v, p.31-32; *Meron* 6, f.20v-21r, p.520; cf. *Isaiah* XI, 6-14, Cothenet, p.78; 79.

<sup>63</sup> *St. Maximus* 45, p.218; *Metaphrastes* 13, p.989; *Voragine*, p.47; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.32; *Ludolph* IX, p.146; *Eximenis*, Book III, cf. Herrán, p.461; *Gerson* VII, p.74; *Celestin* fol.28v, p.32; *Meron* 6, p.519.



## 2. The Vision of the Two Peoples

The *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.) introduced the idea,<sup>64</sup> followed by several authors,<sup>65</sup> that Mary had a vision of two peoples on her way to Bethlehem: one weeping and lamenting, which represents the Jewish people, and the other rejoicing and exulting, which stands for the Gentiles.

## 3. The Cave

Most authors say that Jesus was born in a cave or cavern,<sup>66</sup> an information also given by St. Justin Martyr (†165).<sup>67</sup> Others mention the stable or both.<sup>68</sup> Arundel and Hereford (IX. cent.) elaborate on how Joseph went ahead in search of a suitable place.<sup>69</sup> The cave is variously described as excavated in the rock,<sup>70</sup> always dark,<sup>71</sup> a public shed or shelter from the weather,<sup>72</sup> a place where animals were left by those who came to the market,<sup>73</sup> a meeting place, situated "by the tomb of Rachel,"<sup>74</sup> or even located on the same spot where King David was born and anointed.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 2, p.63.

<sup>65</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.92-93; *Arundel/Hereford* 61, cf. Erbetta, p.209; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 B; 216; *Voragine*, p.47. In *Armenian* VIII, 3-4, p.140, Mary has a vision of *two armies*, which is explained to her and Joseph by an angel.

<sup>66</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2-3, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; III, 1, p.105; *Armenian* VIII, 6; 9; 11, p.141; IX, 3; 5, p.141-142; *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 C; 1075 A; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.32; *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 3, p.202; *Ludolph* IX, p.146.

<sup>67</sup> St. Justin, *Dialogue* 78,5, in Daniel Ruiz Bueno, *Padres Apologetas Griegos*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos 116 (Madrid, 1979), p.442; cf. Origen, *Against Celsus* I, 51, in Daniel Ruiz Bueno, *Contra Celso*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos 271 (Madrid, 1967), p.85.

<sup>68</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 63, Erbetta, p.209; 68, Otero, p.264; 69; 70, Erbetta, p.210; cf. p.216; *Epiphanius* XII, 74; *Ludolph* IX, p.145; 147; 152; 161-162; 163; XI, 204-205; 217; 218; *Celestin*, fol.28v, p.31; fol.40, p.37-38.

<sup>69</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 62-63, Erbetta, p.209; also *Armenian* VIII, 5-7, p.140-141.

<sup>70</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.145.

<sup>71</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93.

<sup>72</sup> *Voragine*, p.47; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.32; *Ludolph* IX, p.145.

<sup>73</sup> *Celestin* fol.28v, p.31.

<sup>74</sup> *J. Carpenter* VII, 3, p.192.

<sup>75</sup> *Meron* 6, p.519; cf. Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, 52: PL 198, 1540 A.

Francis of Eximinis (XIV.-XV. cent.) alone says that Mary and Joseph were "conspicuous" among a "motley crowd,"<sup>76</sup> and Epiphanius Monk (VIII.-IX. cent.) ventures that Mary gave birth in a farm owned by Salome, her maternal cousin!<sup>77</sup> Pseudo-Matthew (VI. cent.) is the champion in trying to conciliate everything: Mary stayed three days in a cave, three in a stable, and three in Bethlehem.<sup>78</sup>

The Apocrypha are silent about the fact that Mary gave birth and placed her Son in a manger "*because there was no place for them in the inn*" (Lk. 2, 7). This information is taken up by the Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin* and some Medieval authors.<sup>79</sup> Their poverty and the universal rejection they suffered are sometimes underlined.<sup>80</sup> Ludolph of Saxony (XV. cent.) and Philippe Van Meron (XV. cent.) invite us to have compassion on Mary's fatigue because of the journey, but at the same time affirm that she did not feel the weight of the baby, "because that Light could be of no weight to her."<sup>81</sup>

#### 4. The Light

Another theme, inspired in Sacred Scripture, is that of the light. The *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.) mentions that Joseph and the old Hebrew woman saw a cloud overshadowing the cave (an echo of Ex. 40, 34), which disappeared and gave way to a great light.<sup>82</sup>

In the Arabic Infancy Gospel (VI. cent.), when Joseph and the old woman come in, they find the cave "filled with lights more beautiful than gleaming of lamps and candles and more splendid than the light of day."<sup>83</sup>

Several authors mention that the cave was always very dark, but when Mary went in, and for as long as she was inside, it

<sup>76</sup> *Eximenis, Vita Christi*, book III, cf. Herrán, p. 461.

<sup>77</sup> *Epiphanius XII*, p. 72-73.

<sup>78</sup> *Ps.-Matthew 14*, p. 94; 15, Santos Otero, p. 212.

<sup>79</sup> *St. Maximus 33*, p. 209; *Metaphrastes 12*, p. 988; *Voragine*, p. 47; *Ps.-Bonaventure VII*, p. 31; *Ludolph IX*, p. 145; 147; 153; *Celestin fol. 28v*, p. 31.

<sup>80</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure VII*, p. 31-32; *Ludolph IX*, p. 145.

<sup>81</sup> *Ludolph IX*, p. 145; 144; *Meron 6*, f. 19r-v, p. 519.

<sup>82</sup> *Protogospel 19*, 2, p. 64; *Armenian VIII*, 11; *IX*, 2, p. 141; *IX*, 4, p. 142.

<sup>83</sup> *Arabic III*, 1, p. 105.

became as clear as midday.<sup>84</sup> They also speak of a great light that shone around Mary when she gave birth to Jesus.<sup>85</sup> This light was so intense, that the midwives were afraid of going into the site.<sup>86</sup>

The birth itself is also described using the image of the light. Joseph and/or the midwife saw a great light that "gradually shrank and took the shape of a child."<sup>87</sup> St. Gertrude the Great of Helfta (†1302) says that Mary gave birth to her Son "like a ray of light."<sup>88</sup> The Child Himself is like a sun (cf. Mal. 4, 2), from whose eyes go forth flashes of light like lightening,<sup>89</sup> or rays that fill the whole world.<sup>90</sup> St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373) affirms that when Mary gave birth to her Son, such a great and ineffable light went forth from Him that the sun and the light from the lighted candle that Joseph had brought in were annihilated by it.<sup>91</sup> She also relates this glow to the great neatness of the newborn Child.<sup>92</sup>

Some authors explain the spiritual meaning of this light: It announces the Light that is coming into the world;<sup>93</sup> Christ was born on the same night when God said: "Let there be light" (Gen. 1, 3),<sup>94</sup> David had predicted that that night "would be clear as day" (cf. Ps. 139, 12);<sup>95</sup> Mary gave birth at midnight because Christ brings light to all those who are in darkness (cf. Mt. 4, 15-16), eliminates the night of sin, and brings the light of truth to those in plunged in error;<sup>96</sup> Christ's doctrine illumines

<sup>84</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p. 93; *Arundel/Hereford* 65; 69, *Erbetta*, p. 210; 216; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 C.

<sup>85</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 73; 74, *Erbetta*, p. 210-211; *Roswitha* 89, 1075 A; *Hackeborn* I, V, 7, p. 14; *Ludolph* IX, p. 155; *Eximenis*, book III, cf. Herrán, p. 461; *Celestin*, fol. 30-30v, p. 33; *Meron* 6, p. 519; f. 20v-21r, p. 520.

<sup>86</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 69, *Erbetta*, p. 210.

<sup>87</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p. 64; *Arundel/Hereford* 74, *Erbetta*, p. 211; 216.

<sup>88</sup> *St. Gertrude* II, 6, 2, p. 117.

<sup>89</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 73, *Erbetta*, p. 210.

<sup>90</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 7, p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 3, p. 202; 21, 8-9, p. 203.

<sup>92</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 11, p. 203; also in *Arundel/Hereford* 74, *Erbetta*, p. 211; 216.

<sup>93</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p. 146; 155; XI, 192-193; *Celestin*, fol. 30v, p. 33.

<sup>94</sup> *Meron* 6, p. 519; cf. *Ludolph* IX, p. 146.

<sup>95</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p. 156; *Celestin*, fol. 30-30v, p. 33.

<sup>96</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p. 146; 155; *Celestin*, fol. 30v, p. 33.

the whole world;<sup>97</sup> the Magi came from the East because Light comes to souls from the East.<sup>98</sup>

### **5. Nature's Catalepsy**

Supernatural phenomena are also mentioned in relation to the birth. The *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.) is the first one to mention Nature's catalepsy. According to it, while Joseph was on his way to find "the Hebrew midwife," he suddenly saw everything stop still: nature, animals, and people stood motionless for some time, and then suddenly everything went back on its course.<sup>99</sup> In Arundel and Hereford (IX. cent.), it is the midwife who relates to Joseph and his "son" Simeon how, when she went into the cave to help Mary, she saw everything silent, motionless, amazed at Christ's birth, and Mary herself motionless like a rock.<sup>100</sup>

### **6. Wrapping the Child in Swaddling Clothes**

Following Luke 2, 7, many authors state that Mary wrapped Christ in swaddling clothes.<sup>101</sup> A couple of them make a parallel with the entombing of Jesus.<sup>102</sup> In the *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.), this scene comes in a strange form; it does not take place when Christ was born, but later, when Mary heard that Herod wanted to kill the babies, and, becoming afraid, she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.<sup>103</sup> Also, instead of Mary, Eve and Joseph are said to swathe the Child.<sup>104</sup>

Most Women Mystics agree that these swaddling clothes were the "whitest," "of pure white linen."<sup>105</sup> Ludolph of Saxony (†1378), on the contrary, describes them often as "vile, pitiful

<sup>97</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 7, p. 15.

<sup>98</sup> *Ludolph*, XI, p. 192-192.

<sup>99</sup> *Protogospel* 18, 2, p. 64; also *Armenian* VIII, 8, p. 141.

<sup>100</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 72, Erbetta, p. 210; 216.

<sup>101</sup> *Epist. Apostles* III-XIV, p. 80; *St. Maximus* 33, p. 209; *Metaphrastes* 12, p. 988; *Roswitha* 89, 1074 D; *Shönaui* I, 58, p. 81; *St. Bridget, Four Prayers*, I, 13, p. 222; *Celestin*, fol. 28v, p. 32; cf. *Arabic* III, 1, p. 105.

<sup>102</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 8, p. 16-17; *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 5, p. 203; cf. note 778, p. 306.

<sup>103</sup> *Protogospel* 22, 1, p. 66.

<sup>104</sup> *Armenian* IX, 3, p. 142 (Eve); In *Arundel/Hereford* 75, Erbetta, p. 211 (Joseph).

<sup>105</sup> *Shönaui*, I, 58, p. 81; *St. Gertrude* II, 16, 5, p. 142.

and old."<sup>106</sup> Mechthilde of Magdeburg (†1282/94) brings in an original idea: Mary wrapped Jesus in a coarse donkey blanket from Joseph's saddle!<sup>107</sup> Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. cent.) and Ludolph of Saxony (†1378) praise the care with which Mary regularly swathed Jesus.<sup>108</sup>

St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373) attaches great importance to this theme, describing three things: how Mary prepared beforehand "two linen and two woolen cloths," very clean, which nobody had used before, and brought them with her to Bethlehem; how she arranged them carefully before the time of her delivery arrived, and how, after giving birth and cutting the Child's umbilical cord, she swathed Him with them.<sup>109</sup>

The themes of the swaddling clothes and the adoration of the Magi often come together: Simeon Metaphrastes (ca. 1000) is sure that only God could have moved the Magi to adore a child "in swaddling clothes."<sup>110</sup> Following a similar line, Ludolph the Carthusian (†1378) expresses his admiration at the Magi who, through divine revelation, believed that a child wrapped in miserable swaddling clothes, assisted by a poor mother, in an abject hovel, without family, was King and God, and they adored Him.<sup>111</sup>

Miracles are also related to the swaddling clothes: Salome is healed when she touches the Child's swaddling clothes;<sup>112</sup> Mary gave a swaddling-band to the Magi in gratitude for their gifts, which they took back to their country and kept with great respect, because of the miracles it performed.<sup>113</sup>

Many authors interpret the swaddling clothes as a sign of Christ's humility and poverty, assumed in order to save us.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>106</sup> *Ludolph IX*, p. 146; 152; 161; XI, 204.

<sup>107</sup> *Magdeburg V*, 23, p. 199.

<sup>108</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure X*, p. 54-55; *Ludolph XI*, p. 217-218.

<sup>109</sup> *St. Bridget VII*, 21, 5, p. 203; 21, 17-19, p. 203-204; 22, 3, p. 204; 25, 9, p. 206; cf. *Meron*, 6, p. 520: since the Child was wrapped in poor swaddling clothes and it was cold, St. Joseph took off his stockings to protect Him.

<sup>110</sup> *Metaphrastes 15*; 17, p. 991; 993.

<sup>111</sup> *Ludolph XI*, p. 204-205; cf. *Celestin fol. 40*, p. 37-38.

<sup>112</sup> *Arundel/Hereford 79*, cf. *Erbetta*, p. 211; *Roswitha 90*, 1075 B-C.

<sup>113</sup> *Arabic VIII*, p. 105-106.

<sup>114</sup> *St. Maximus 33*, p. 209; *Metaphrastes*, 17, p. 992-993; *Ubertine I*, 11, f. 36r, p. 518; *Ludolph IX*, p. 149; 150; 157; 161; 176; XI, 204-205; 217; *Celestin fol. 40*, p. 37; *Meron 6*, p. 520.

St. Maximus the Confessor (†662) gives them as an example of Mary's "hard life."<sup>115</sup> To St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn (†1299), the Child Himself explains that they signify His total surrender to us.<sup>116</sup> St. Gertrude of Helfta (†1302) longed to be wrapped in them together with Jesus. She was given to understand that purity of heart and works of charity were indispensable in order to obtain her wish.<sup>117</sup>

### **7. The Visit of the Shepherds**

The authors who mention the visit of the shepherds tend to follow more closely the New Testament.<sup>118</sup> Some authors add new details.<sup>119</sup> For example, they give different reasons why the shepherds were able to come at night to see the Child,<sup>120</sup> or include kinsfolk and even Elizabeth among those who wonder at the shepherd's words.<sup>121</sup> Ludolph of Saxony (†1378) explains in catechetical form every point made by St. Luke.<sup>122</sup> Some works like the Arabic Infancy Gospel (VI. cent.) change the story more.<sup>123</sup> Arundel and Hereford (IX. cent.) offer the longest description of this scene, giving Joseph a prominent role.<sup>124</sup> Gifts brought by the shepherds are also mentioned.<sup>125</sup>

From Origen (†253) onwards,<sup>126</sup> authors have sought the spiritual meaning of the shepherds' visit. It is common to emphasize that the news about the Savior's birth was given to

<sup>115</sup> *St. Maximus* 57-58, p.227-228; cf. *Ludolph* IX, p.150.

<sup>116</sup> *Hackeborn* I,V,8, p.16.

<sup>117</sup> *St. Gertrude* II, 16, 5, p.142.

<sup>118</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.94; *Armenian* X, 1-2, p.142-143; *St. Maximus* 34; 36, p.210; 211; *Metaphrastes* 12, p.988; *Roswitha* 90, 1075 C; *Valenciennes* 435-436; 439, p.261; 262; *Magdeburg* V,23, p.200; *Hackeborn* I,V,10, p.19; *Voragine*, p.50; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.38; IX, 47; *St. Bridget* VII, 23, 1-3, p.205; *Ludolph* IX, p.154-165; *Gerson* VII, p.76-77; *Celestin* fol.30v; 32; 34-34v, p.33-34; 35-36.

<sup>119</sup> *Magdeburg* V,23, p.200; *Voragine*, p.50; *St. Bridget* VII, 23, 1-3, p.205.

<sup>120</sup> *Hackeborn* I,V, 10, p.19; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.38; *Ludolph* IX, p.163.

<sup>121</sup> *St. Maximus* 34, p.210; *Epiphanius* XII, 74; 76.

<sup>122</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.155-165.

<sup>123</sup> *Arabic* IV, 1, p.105.

<sup>124</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 82-85, *Erbetta*, p.211-212; 216-217.

<sup>125</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 85, *Erbetta*, p.212; cf. *Gerson* VII, p.76-77; *Celestin* fol.34v, p.36.

<sup>126</sup> Origen, *In Lucam Homilia* XII, 1-2: *Sources Chrétiennes* 87, p.189-200.

shepherds who were poor, vigilant and hard-working, and not to the rich; to simple people and not to the Jewish teachers of the Law or the great philosophers; or that the shepherds represent the Church's hierarchy.<sup>127</sup>

The Apocrypha never quote Luke 2, 19.51, but the Byzantine "Lives of Mary" and Medieval authors do.<sup>128</sup> Ludolph of Saxony (†1378) develops this theme extensively, presenting Mary as teacher of the Apostles.<sup>129</sup> In fact, as Tradition often affirms, she had meditated upon all the things that had to do with her Son in order to transmit them later. John Gerson (†1429) and the anonymous Celestin (XV. cent.) present both Mary and Joseph "keeping everything in their heart."<sup>130</sup>

### **B. The Personages That Intervene**

The Gospels mention the three Protagonists, the Shepherds, the Magi and Herod. The Apocrypha and its followers do two things: 1. Introduce into the Christmas story new figures that are for the most part highly distracting, and often usurp the roles of the true Protagonists, or are contrary to important truths like St. Joseph's virginity; and/or 2. Change the Gospel narrative by either minimizing the role and importance of Mary and Joseph, or maximizing, with new made-up stories, the role of the Shepherds and in particular of the Magi, concerning whom not only the adoration of the Child, but even more their journey to Jerusalem, their encounter with Herod, and their return to their country are favorite topics in many of the writings examined. These apocryphal personages are:

<sup>127</sup> *St. Maximus* 34; 36, p.210; 211; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.36-37; *Ludolph* IX, p.149; 155; *Celestin* fol.32, p.34; for *Ludolph* IX, p.157-158; 168, the shepherds represent not only the Church's hierarchy, but also parents in charge of a family and even each person, called "to tend" his own good actions and thoughts.

<sup>128</sup> *St. Maximus* 35; 62; 63, p.210-211; 231; 232; *Metaphrastes* 13; 18; 19; 25, p.989; 993; 994; 998; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.38; *Ubertine*, I, 11, f.36r, p.518; *St. Bridget, Four Prayers*, I, 14, p.222; *Celestin* 32v, p.34.

<sup>129</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.165-167 ("excellent disciple of the Holy Spirit"); cf. XII, 234; XV, 312-313.

<sup>130</sup> *Gerson* VII, p.76; *Celestin* fol.34, p.35-36; cf. *Ludolph*, XII, p.234; *Eximenis* c.68 (f.46), p.463.

### 1. The "Sons" of Joseph, in Particular "Simeon"

Starting with the *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.), several texts say that Joseph went up to Bethlehem in the company of Mary and his family, specifically his "sons" (and "daughters").<sup>131</sup>

In Arundel and Hereford (IX. cent.), a great importance is given to one such "son," called Simeon or Simon, who actually becomes the protagonist of the story together with a midwife. In fact, even though Joseph is present, Simeon usurps his role; it is Simeon who accompanies Mary on the way to Bethlehem and who, at Joseph's request, takes care of her when they arrive at the cave and warns him when the time of her delivery has come. Simeon is the one who questions the midwife with great interest and believes everything she says about the virgin birth; during the visit of the Magi, he describes to Joseph everything they do.<sup>132</sup>

Thus, not only is a personage who never existed introduced and given a role that corresponds to that of St. Joseph, but also St. Joseph's virginity is thereby denied, and his person and mission are seriously undervalued and misrepresented. Taking into consideration the popularity of the Apocryphal writings among many people, the damage that this kind of misrepresentations and lies produce is clear.

### 2. The Midwives

The *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.) introduced the idea that Joseph brought a woman to help Mary in her delivery.<sup>133</sup> It is interesting to note that older and contemporary texts speak rather with great wonder at the fact that *there was no midwife at the birth of Christ*.<sup>134</sup>

The purpose of introducing a midwife, not at all mentioned in the Gospels, was probably well-intentioned: to have her as an authorized witness of Mary's Virginity *in partu*. That is probably the reason why the Apocrypha continue bringing up

<sup>131</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 1, p.63; 18, 1, p.64; *Arabic* II, 1, p.104; *Armenian* VIII, 1; 7, p.140; 141; *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Epiphanius* XII, p.71-72.

<sup>132</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 60; 62-68; 70; 75-76, Erbetta, p.209-210; 211.

<sup>133</sup> *Protogospel* 18, 1; 19, 1-3; 20, 1-4, p.64-65.

<sup>134</sup> *Isaiah* XI, 12-14, Cothenet, p.79; *Odes of Solomon* 19, 6-8, Cothenet, p.81; *Acts of Peter* IV, 24, Piñero, p.623. Ubertaine of Casale (†ca.1330), in his *Arbor vitae* I, 11, fol.35v-36r, p.517, affirms that *Mary herself acted as the midwife*.



this idea.<sup>135</sup> In the Middle Ages, it is still found in authors like Roswitha (X. cent.) and Jacobus of Voragine (†1298), who try to conciliate both sides by saying that Joseph called them only because "it was the custom of the country."<sup>136</sup> The midwives are not mentioned in the Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin," in the works of Medieval Women Mystics, or in many important "Lives of Christ" like those of Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. cent.) and Ludolph of Saxony (†1378).

The Apocrypha vary in the way they describe how the midwives come to Mary: Joseph goes for them or sends his "son" Simeon for them; he finds them on the way or they suddenly happen to be coming down the road; or they come because they were alerted by "a young man."<sup>137</sup> In most cases, the midwife finds the baby already born, in Mary's arms or lying in the manger. In a few, she is there for some time before the birth takes place and is an eyewitness to it. Her main function is not to help Mary, but to give witness to the fact that Mary remained a virgin after childbirth.<sup>138</sup>

Most accounts present two midwives. The first one, who is given different names, goes into the cave, finds out that Mary is a virgin after having given birth, and cries out, proclaiming the Virginity of Mary and the uniqueness of the Child. The second one, consistently called Salome, informed of the virgin birth by the first midwife, does not believe until she has personally examined Mary. Punished, she bewails her incredulity and asks for God's forgiveness. Advised to touch the Child, she is instantly cured.<sup>139</sup> A young apprentice midwife is also mentioned.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>135</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93-94; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; III, 1-2; IV, 2; V, 1, p.105; *Armenian* VIII, 7; 9-10; IX, 2-7, p.141-142; *Arundel/Hereford* 67-76, Erbetta, p.210-211; also in *Epiphanius* XII, p.73-74.

<sup>136</sup> *Roswitha* 89, 1074 D-1075 C; *Voragine*, p.48.

<sup>137</sup> *Protogospel* 18, 1; 19, 1, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; *Armenian* VIII, 7; 9-10, p.141; *Arundel/Hereford* 67-68, Erbetta, p.210; *Roswitha* 89, 1074 D.

<sup>138</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93-94; *Arabic* III, 1, p.105; *Armenian* VIII, 2, p.141; *Arundel/Hereford* 69-76, Erbetta, p.210-211 (eyewitness); *Roswitha* 89, 1075 A.

<sup>139</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 1-3; 20, 1-3, p.64-65; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93-94; *Armenian* VIII, 9-IX, 7, p.141-142; *Arundel/Hereford* 68-80, Erbetta, p.210-211; *Roswitha* 89, 1074 D-1075 C; *Voragine*, p.48. In *Arabic* III, 2, p.105, a similar story is given but it presents an old woman, sick with palsy, who is healed through Mary's intercession.

<sup>140</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 68, Otero, p.263-264; 76, Erbetta, p.210; 211.

The midwives are involved in several dialogues with Joseph,<sup>141</sup> Mary,<sup>142</sup> Joseph's "son" Simeon—the longest dialogue, in which the believing midwife explains at length to Joseph and Simeon how the birth took place<sup>143</sup>—and even with Eve!<sup>144</sup> There are also short dialogues between Joseph and Mary on the way to Bethlehem and at the cave.<sup>145</sup> The midwives also pronounce prayers of thanksgiving to God for having granted them the blessing of witnessing such an incredible fact, or of repentance and supplication in the case of Salome.<sup>146</sup>

Mysteries are revealed to and by the midwives: Joseph reveals to the midwife Mary's true identity and conception of the Holy Spirit;<sup>147</sup> to the midwives is revealed the Mystery of the virgin birth of Christ,<sup>148</sup> a revelation which they share with each other and with others, even though they are sometimes told not to mention it to anybody.<sup>149</sup>

As we can see from all this, besides the lack of scriptural foundation, the main problem is that some writings do not content themselves with mentioning a midwife, but give her a totally uncalled-for important role. In some Apocrypha, the midwife becomes the true protagonist, leaving Mary in the shadow or even usurping her maternal role. For example, the

<sup>141</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 1, p.64; *Armenian* VIII, 9-10, p.141; *Arundel/Hereford* 68, Santos Otero, p.263-264; 69, Erbetta, p.210.

<sup>142</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93; *Arabic* III, 2, p.105 (the longest one); *Armenian* IX, 4, p.142.

<sup>143</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 70-76, Erbetta, p.210-211.

<sup>144</sup> *Armenian* IX, 3-4, p.142.

<sup>145</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93; *Armenian* VIII, 2-3, p.140; *Arundel/Hereford* 65, Erbetta, p.210; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 B.

<sup>146</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p.64; 20, 2, p.65; *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93-94; *Arabic* IV, 2, p.105; *Armenian* IX, 1, p.141; IX, 5-6, p.142; *Arundel/Hereford* 70, Erbetta, p.210; (in *Arundel/Hereford* 81, Erbetta, p.211, it is Joseph who pronounces a prayer); *Roswitha* 89-90, 1075 B.

<sup>147</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 1, p.64; *Armenian* VIII, 9, p.141; *Arundel/Hereford* 68, Santos Otero, p.264.

<sup>148</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2-3; 20, 1, p.64-65; *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93-94; *Arabic* III, 1-2, p.105; *Armenian*, IX, 2-7, p.141-142; *Arundel/Hereford* 69-78, p.210-211; *Roswitha* 89, 1075 A-B; *Voragine*, p.48.

<sup>149</sup> *Protogospel* 20, 4, p.65; *Armenian* IX, 7, p.142; *Arundel/Hereford* 80, cf. Erbetta, p.211.

midwife is presented as the one who gives the Child to Joseph to carry, or the one who wraps him in swaddling clothes and lays him in the manger.<sup>150</sup> In Arundel and Hereford (IX. cent.), she alone is the personal witness and herald of the virgin birth.<sup>151</sup> In Pseudo-Matthew (VI. cent.), she becomes a preacher of this truth to the point that "many believed through her preaching."<sup>152</sup>

Thus, even though the original intention of defending Mary's virginity at childbirth is praiseworthy, by introducing something which is untrue in order to attain their purpose, these writings end up deviating the attention from, disregarding, silencing, or undermining completely Mary's true role and importance in the Economy of Salvation. The same thing is true when they try to affirm Christ's Divinity by making up fantastic descriptions of the Child or multiplying false miracles supposedly performed at childhood. The perfect sobriety, simplicity, and faithfulness to historical truth of the New Testament needs nothing of all this to affirm clearly both incontestable truths.

### 3. *Eve*

In the Armenian Infancy Gospel (VI. cent.), it is Eve, often called "our first mother," who becomes the protagonist and assumes the roles of the midwife and Mary in caring for the Child. Eve takes the place of the first midwife who enters the cave, sees the newborn child, and later informs Salome of the virgin birth. Together with Joseph, she witnesses a small cloud rising to heaven from the cave, a bright light appearing and coming to rest before the manger in the stable, and then the Child at His mother's breasts, returning to His place, and sitting down. Amazed before such prodigies, she prostrates herself, and glorifies God with a prayer of thanksgiving. In an incredible and unjustified transposition of facts, Eve

<sup>150</sup> *Armenian IX*, 3, p. 142; *Arundel/Hereford* 75, Erbetta, p. 211.

<sup>151</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 70-77, Erbetta, p. 210-211; cf. *St. Maximus* 34, p. 210, where Elizabeth is the "witness and messenger" of the birth.

<sup>152</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p. 94.

Took the child in her arms and started to caress him and hug him tenderly, blessing God, because the child was extremely beautiful . . . Then she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger of the oxen and went out of the cave . . .<sup>153</sup>

#### **4. Elizabeth**

St. Maximus the Confessor (†662) wrote a very interesting *Life of the Virgin*. Usually faithful to the Gospel account, he nevertheless introduced the idea that Elizabeth, "the worthy mother of the forerunner," was present at Jesus' birth. According to the *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.), Elizabeth fled to the mountain in order to protect John the Baptist's life from Herod's hands. Following this idea, St. Maximus says that Elizabeth was able to come because she had not yet gone there.

The reason given for Elizabeth's presence at the Nativity of Christ is that, since she had been a prophetess and witness of the conception of the holy Virgin, she likewise was an eye-witness and messenger of the virgin birth. She would certainly have rejoiced at contemplating the fulfillment of the ineffable Mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>154</sup> Epiphanius Monk (VIII.-IX. cent.) also mentions Elizabeth, saying that when she heard about what had happened, she informed her family and help was brought to Mary.<sup>155</sup>

#### **5. The Ass and the Ox**

Animals also play a role in the Nativity story. Several authors say that Joseph took with him a beast to carry Mary.<sup>156</sup> According to Ludolph of Saxony (†1378), he also took an ox to sell it and get some money to pay for the trip, the taxes, and their living expenses.<sup>157</sup> Pseudo-Bonaventure believes that Joseph traveled with an ox and an ass as poor merchants of beasts do.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>153</sup> *Armenian VIII*, 9-IX, 4, p.141-142.

<sup>154</sup> *St. Maximus* 34, p.209-210.

<sup>155</sup> *Epiphanius XII*, p.74; 76.

<sup>156</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 2-3, p.63-64; *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93; *Armenian VIII*, 1; 2; 5, p.140; *Arundel* 64, Erbetta, p.209; *Epiphanius XII*, p.72; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 B; C; *Voragine*, p.49-50; *Ps.-Bonaventure VII* p.31; *St. Bridget VII*, 21, 2-3, p.202; *Ludolph IX*, p.145.

<sup>157</sup> *Ludolph IX*, p.145; *Meron* 6, p.518.

<sup>158</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure VII*, p.31.

Starting with Pseudo-Matthew, the ox and ass are presented as a fulfillment of two Old Testament texts: "The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib" (Is. 1, 3), and "Between two animals you are made manifest" (Hab. 3, 2).<sup>159</sup> The beasts recognize Christ and adore him.<sup>160</sup> In Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. cent.), realizing that the Child is cold, the animals breathe on Him to warm Him.<sup>161</sup> In Ludolph of Saxony (†1378), the ox and ass between which the Lord is placed represent the Jews and the Gentiles respectively. They are also a sign of Christ's poverty and humiliation.<sup>162</sup>

### **6. The Angels and the Shepherds**

Angels appear several times in the Nativity accounts. They are variously called "an angel of the Lord," "a resplendent child," or "a young resplendent man."<sup>163</sup> Angels appeared to Mary on the road to Bethlehem and to the midwives.<sup>164</sup> Several authors mention the presence of angels adoring the newborn Child or singing to Him.<sup>165</sup>

An angel appeared to the shepherds to announce to them the birth of the Savior. His message was corroborated by a multitude of heavenly hosts singing: "Glory to God in the highest . . ." (Lk. 2, 14).<sup>166</sup> According to Ludolph of Saxony (†1378),

<sup>159</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p. 94; *Arundel/Hereford* 86, cf. *Erbetta*, p. 212; *Voragine*, p. 50; *Magdeburg* VII, 60, p. 328; *St. Bridget* VII, 25, 1-2, p. 205; *Ludolph* IX, p. 147; 153-154; 167.

<sup>160</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p. 93; *Arundel/Hereford* 86, *Erbetta*, p. 212; *Voragine* p. 50; *Ubertine*, I, 11, f. 36r, p. 518; *Ludolph* IX, p. 153; *Celestin* fol. 30v, p. 34.

<sup>161</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p. 33-34.

<sup>162</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p. 153; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 B; also *St. Bridget* VII, 25, 1-2, p. 205.

<sup>163</sup> *Protogospel* 20, 3-4, p. 65; *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p. 93; 94; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 B; 90, 1075 B.

<sup>164</sup> *Protogospel* 20, 3-4, p. 65; *Armenian* VIII, 4, p. 140; IX, 6, p. 142; *Roswitha* 88; 90, 1074 B; 1075 B.

<sup>165</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p. 93; *Armenian*, VIII, 11, p. 141; IX, 4, p. 142; *Arundel/Hereford* 73, *Erbetta*, p. 210; *Roswitha* 89, 1074 D; *Magdeburg* V, 23, p. 200; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p. 38; *St. Bridget*, VII, 21, 12, p. 203; *Ludolph* IX, p. 154; 161; 162; *Meron* 7, f. 28r-29v, p. 523-524.

<sup>166</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p. 94; *Armenian* X, 1-2, p. 142-143; *Arundel/Hereford* 83, *Erbetta*, p. 211-212; *St. Maximus*, 34, p. 210; *Metaphrastes* 12, p. 988; *Roswitha* 90, 1075 C ("vision"); *Valenciennes* 435, p. 261; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p. 38; *Ludolph* IX, p. 155-156; 157; 159; XI, 219; *Gerson* VII, p. 76; *Celestin* fol. 30v; 32, p. 33-34.

this angel is Gabriel himself, who more than any other would rejoice at this event. When he returned to heaven, he gave the same announcement to the other angels, all of whom came down to visit the Child in the manger and adore Him, thus fulfilling St. Paul's words in Hebrews 1, 6: "Let all God's angels worship Him."<sup>167</sup>

Concerning the shepherds, the two more common tendencies for those who depart from Scripture are: 1. To describe their encounter with the angels, trip to Bethlehem, and adoration of the Child with made-up stories, as in the case of Arundel and Hereford (IX. cent.),<sup>168</sup> or 2. To exploit their symbolic or spiritual meaning, something done by, among others, Ludolph of Saxony.<sup>169</sup>

### III. THE NATIVITY OF THE SAVIOR

#### A. General Characteristics

When we come to the moment itself of the Nativity of the Savior, how is it dealt with in the works we examined?

1. The majority of them just state that "Mary gave birth," or that "the Child was born."<sup>170</sup>
2. Several affirm that Mary was alone when she gave birth, either because Joseph had gone in search of the midwife,<sup>171</sup> or because he did not want to be present at the birth.<sup>172</sup> When Joseph and the midwives arrive, or when Joseph comes into the stable again or wakes up, she has already given birth and the Child appears before their eyes.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>167</sup> Ludolph IX, p.155.

<sup>168</sup> Arabic IV, 1, p.105; *Arundel/Hereford* 82-85, Erbeta, p.211-212; 216-217.

<sup>169</sup> Ludolph IX, p.155-165.

<sup>170</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93; *Radbert*, X, 2, p.258; *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Metaphrastes* 12, p.988; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 C; *Wace* fol.88v, p.50-51; *Valenciennes* 434-435, p.261; *Voragine*, p.47-48; *St. Gertrude* II, 16, 4, p.141; *Gerson* VII, p.75; *Celestin* fol.28v-29, p.32; *Meron* 6, f.20v-21r, p.520.

<sup>171</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93; *Arabic* III, 1, p.105; *Roswitha* 89, 1075 A.

<sup>172</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 3, p.202; cf. also *Ps.-Bonaventure*, VII, p.32-33.

<sup>173</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93; *Arabic* III, 1, p.105; *Armenian* VIII, 2, p.141; *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 8; 10, p.203.

3. A third group speaks about Mary "suddenly" seeing the Child born. It underlines that the birth took place in an instant, the Child suddenly appearing in Mary's arms or at her feet, without Mary knowing "how it went with her."<sup>174</sup>
4. A few, like St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373) and some Medieval "Lives," specify that Mary and Joseph were alone, prepared everything together with great love, and were deep in prayer when the birth took place.<sup>175</sup>

Let us see some of these writings in more detail.

### ***1. The Apocrypha (II.-IX. Cent.)***

In their treatment of the Nativity Scene, the Apocrypha follow Sacred Scripture very little and include a lot of foreign material, showing no regard for historical truth, contributing nothing really interesting, or actually confusing their readers with their made-up stories. The following fact should suffice: Speaking about the Nativity of Christ, they never quote Luke 2, 6-7!

It is important to remember that, when dealing with the Apocrypha, a distinction should be made between the "pious" Apocrypha, written with the good intention of "filling in the blanks" or defending a specific doctrine—even though the way they go about doing it is not the best—and the "heretical" Apocrypha, written with the evil intention of promoting heretical doctrines and confusing people. The latter are to be completely rejected; the former can be taken into consideration, and might offer some interest from the point of view of history, art, or popular devotion. In general terms, however, as we have seen, even what the "pious" Apocrypha offer is rather unimportant and superficial. They tend to dwell on trifling details,

<sup>174</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 73, Erbetta, p.210; *St. Maximus* 35, p.210-211; *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.198-199; *Hacheborn* I, V, 7, p.14; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.33; *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 14, p.203.

<sup>175</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31-35; *St. Bridget* VII, 21 (all); 22 (all), p.202-204; *Gerson* VII, p.74-75; *Celestin* fol.28v, p.31-32; *Meron* 6, f.20v-21r, p.520; cf. the strange presentation of *Isaiab* XI, 6-14, Cothenet, p.78; 79, which nevertheless states that Joseph and Mary were *alone* in Joseph's house.

and leave out the really important ones that the Gospels faithfully transmit to us.

## **2. The Byzantine "Lives" of the Virgin (VII.-XI. Cent.)**

With the exception of Epiphanius Monk (VIII.-IX. cent.), whose *Life of Mary* is rather poor in content and follows a good deal of apocryphal material, the Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin" are very interesting. Their description of the Nativity differs substantially from that of the Apocrypha. First of all, both St. Maximus the Confessor (†662) and Simeon Metaphrastes (†ca.1000) always base themselves on Sacred Scripture, following closely the Gospels, often quoting them—including Luke 2, 6-7—and showing how Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Christ's birth.

Following a practice widespread in the East, they do not mind to include details from the Apocrypha, but they do it mainly as the framework within which they present their teachings, or a literary device to awake the interest of their audience.<sup>176</sup> For example, St. Maximus makes a brief reference to Joseph's "children."<sup>177</sup> However, they are more sober and, for the most part, follow only innocuous things that do not contradict doctrine. They omit completely the stories about the midwives and the references to "the light" and Nature's catalepsy. They also correct the Apocrypha on several points, affirming, for example, that the Mystery of the Nativity was not revealed to anybody, and that Christ did not perform any miracles before His public ministry.<sup>178</sup> They put the shepherds in a good light, and are more theological when they deal with the Magi. For example, they insist that the Magi were not astrologers, but represent the believers; they also take great pains to explain the meaning of the star.<sup>179</sup>

<sup>176</sup> This can also be seen, for example, in the Sermons *On the Assumption* written by St. Germanus of Constantinople (†733), St. Andrew of Crete (†740), and St. John Damascene (†749). All three of them include details from the Apocrypha, but their main purpose is not to tell the story of the Assumption the way the Apocrypha do, but to establish solid biblical and theological foundations for it.

<sup>177</sup> *St. Maximus* 33, p. 209; cf. *Epiphanius* XII, p. 71-72.

<sup>178</sup> *St. Maximus* 35, p. 210-211; 62-63, p. 231-233; *Metaphrastes* 15-17; 19, p. 991-993; 993-994.

<sup>179</sup> *St. Maximus* 34; 36-40, p. 210; 211-214; *Metaphrastes* 12; 15-17; 19, p. 988; 990-993; 993-994; cf. *Ludolph* XI, p. 191-192; 195.



Their most important characteristic is that they give great importance to theological considerations concerning Christ's true Divinity and Humanity, and Mary's Divine Maternity, perpetual Virginity, Holiness, and Mediation. They also warn their audience against heresies. In fact, the "Life" of Mary is for them but the framework within which they present their teachings on fundamental Christian doctrines. Moral considerations are also common. Simeon Metaphrastes (ca.1000), for example, likes to dwell on the poverty of Christ, thus anticipating a practice that will be strong among the "Lives" of Medieval Franciscan authors.<sup>180</sup>

### **3. The Women Mystics (XII.-XIV. Cent.)**

In order to understand and appreciate the Women Mystics, we must bear in mind that *they were moved by a genuine love of Jesus and Mary*, which ignited in them the desire to be present at the different events of their lives and to know everything about them. Love, in fact, is not satisfied until it knows everything about the Beloved. Their mystical visions spring from their intense liturgical and prayer lives, and combine possible private revelations with their own very pious imagination and the highly symbolical language with which they sometimes express themselves. They often see themselves as taking part in the scene, dialoguing with Jesus and Mary and asking them questions. Mary often gives them the baby Jesus to carry in their arms, hug and kiss Him.

One of their main characteristics is the prominent role that the official Liturgy of the Church plays in their lives and revelations. In the case of Elizabeth of Schönau (†1165), Mechthilde of Magdeburg (†1282/94), St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn (†1299), and St. Gertrude the Great of Helfta (†1302), their revelations on a theme take place on the day of the liturgical feast of that same theme, during a state of ecstasy. For example, their visions about the Nativity of the Savior take place while they are attending Mass or praying the Canonical Hours on the Vigil or

<sup>180</sup> *Metaphrastes* 12; 15; 17; 18, p.988; 991; 992-993; cf. *Ludolph IX*, p.145-152; 157; 161; XI, 204-205; 216-217; *Celestin* fol.32v-33v, p.34-35; *Meron* 6, f.18v-19r, p.518; 7, f.28r-29v, 524.

the day of the Solemnity of the Nativity. It is also common for them to enjoy the apparition of a saint on his or her feast day.<sup>181</sup> In the case of St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373), not only the liturgy but also the actual location is important. Having traveled a lot, her visions sometimes take place *in loco*. For example, her revelations concerning the Nativity take place in Bethlehem itself.

While the Apocrypha are concerned with external details like the Census, the trip to Bethlehem, or the Magi, and seldom mention Mary, the Women Mystics usually omit all these (e.g., not a single one of them mentions the midwives), and concentrate themselves precisely on Jesus and Mary as persons, emphasizing—in particular, St. Bridget—their sentiments and actions.

#### **4. *The "Lives" of Christ, Mary, and Joseph (X-XV. Cent.)***

The majority of the Medieval "Lives" of Christ, Mary, or Joseph include many narrative details, together with considerations of a higher tenor. In fact, they offer abundant descriptive material, which they take from the Apocrypha, other Medieval authors, or their own imagination. However, they avoid strange things, and tend to be more sober and orthodox in what they say. For example, in their description of the Nativity, following the Gospel, they simply say that: "Mary virginally gave birth to her Divine Son." Of all the "Lives" from this period, only Jacobus of Voragine (†1298) mentions the midwives.<sup>182</sup>

A characteristic of the "Lives of Christ" of influential writers like Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. cent.) and Ludolph of Saxony (†1378) is that they were addressed to an audience hungry for devotional literature that would nurture their love of Jesus and Mary and respond to their desire to know more about them in order to imitate them. Thus the descriptions of the different scenes that are given are aimed at helping the readers make themselves present to the event, participate in

<sup>181</sup> Cf. *St. Bridget, Preface*, p. 6: e.g., St. Ambrose (†397) spoke to St. Bridget in Milan (*Revelation* III, Ch. 6), and St. Francis of Assisi (†1226) appeared to her in Assisi (*Revelation* VII, Ch. 3).

<sup>182</sup> *Voragine*, p. 48.

everything that is taking place in it—something upon which they strongly insist—in order to be moved by it and reap greater spiritual fruit.

For the same reason, in many of these "Lives" there are frequent theological, spiritual, and moral digressions, inspired by the scene at hand, that interrupt the narration of the events and may be several pages long. Quotations from important authors from Tradition are often brought up in order to explain the points made in these doctrinal digressions. A favorite among these authors is St. Bernard of Clairvaux (†1153).

Like those of the Women Mystics, these "Lives" underline the indissoluble union between Jesus and Mary, and give more preponderance to Mary and Joseph as persons, and to their unique relationship with Jesus. The importance of poverty is also greatly stressed, in particular by Franciscan authors, together with the Holy Family's example of humility, obedience, and sacrifice, which we are all called to imitate. Some of these "Lives" mention "miracles" that took place at the Nativity of the Lord,<sup>183</sup> first and foremost, of course, the virgin birth, which all of them affirm.

## **B. Description Given by Some Important Authors**

In order to have a firsthand experience of what these authors say, we shall examine twelve of them in more detail. In order to avoid repetitions of what has been said elsewhere, we shall present only what is more characteristic or original about each author.

### ***1. Protogospel of James (II. Cent.)***

The *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.) is very important for two reasons: it dates from the second century, and it exercised a great influence not only on many subsequent writers, but also on religious art and even the Liturgy. It follows very little the Gospels. Echoes from Scripture are present, but they are transposed to other persons or situations.

<sup>183</sup> *Voragine*, p.48-50; *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.42; *Ludolph* IX, p.175-176; *Celestin* fol.29-30v; p.32-33; 34.

One of the main concerns of the *Protogospel* is to proclaim and defend Mary's Virginity: at conception, childbirth, and ever afterwards. This excellent intention mistakenly led the author to introduce the idea that Joseph was a widower with children, supposedly in order to protect better Mary's integrity and solve the problem of the "brothers and sisters" of Christ mentioned in the Gospels. This idea was widely followed in the East. In the West, on the other hand, St. Jerome (†419) forcefully rejected it, rightly presenting St. Joseph as a virgin.<sup>184</sup> With him agree Latin ecclesiastical authors and the Magisterium of the Church.<sup>185</sup> But at the popular level, to which the writings under consideration belong, several continued mentioning Joseph's "family" and even more of them retained the idea of his being "an old man."

As we already saw, another idea introduced by the *Protogospel* and widely followed was the presence of the midwives as "authorized witnesses" of the virgin birth. Other details that come from this text are the birth in a cave, the vision of the cloud enveloping the cave, and in particular the importance given to the "light."

## 2. Pseudo-Matthew (VI. Cent.)

The Pseudo-Matthew is another Apocryphal writing that exercised great influence on later writers. Angels are important here: An angel announced when the time of the birth had come and ordered Mary to come down from the donkey and enter

<sup>184</sup> St. Jerome, *De perpetua virginitate B.M., adversus Helvidium*: PL 23, 203 A; cf. St. Ambrose (†397), *In Lucam* 2, 5-6: PL 15, 1554 C-1555 B; St. Augustine (†430), *Sermo* 51, 26, 26: PL 38, 348.

<sup>185</sup> Cf., e.g., Alcuin, *In S. Joannis evangelium* 2, 4: PL 100, 771 D-772 D, esp. 772 C; St. Bede (†735), *Homilia 5 In vigilia nativitatis Domini*: PL 94, 33 B-C; Haymo of Halberstadt (†853), *In Isalam* 62, 5: PL 116, 1048 B; Rabanus Maurus (†856), *Commentaria in Matthaeum* I (1-24): PL 107, 753 A-C; St. Peter Damian (†1072), *Opusculum 17 De caelibatu sacerdotum*, 3: PL 145, 384 D; St. Thomas Aquinas (†1274), *In Gal.* 1, 19, in Santo Tomás de Aquino, *Comentario a la Epístola a los Gálatas*, trad. de Salvador Abascal (México: Editorial Tradición, 1982), 34-35; *Eximenis* c.212 (f.132v), p.463; c.67 (f.45v), p.464-465; *Celestin* fol.42, p.38; fol.49v, p.40; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris custos* (August 15, 1989) nos. 18-21; Idem., *General Audience, Catechesis* (August 21, 1996).

the cave;<sup>186</sup> angels also adore the newborn Child.<sup>187</sup> Another popular idea is that the cave, always dark, was filled with light when Mary went in, and stayed like that for as long as she remained inside. The midwife was afraid of this light, and would not dare to come in until Mary bade her at Joseph's request.<sup>188</sup>

Pseudo-Matthew also introduced the scriptural quotations about the animals: Isaiah 1, 3: the ox and ass adoring the Child, and Habakkuk 3, 2: the Child placed between two animals.<sup>189</sup> As we already mentioned, Pseudo-Matthew subdivides into three periods of three days Mary's stay at the cave, the stable, and Bethlehem, where the Holy Family stayed until the seventh day; on the eighth day the circumcision took place.<sup>190</sup>

### ***3. Book of the Infancy of the Savior: Arundel and Hereford (IX. Cent.)***

Among the Apocrypha, the *Book of the Infancy of the Savior* offers the longest description of the Nativity. There are two important codices of this Apocrypha: Arundel (IX. cent.) and Hereford (IX. cent.). Although similar in many ways, they also present some differences. One of this book's characteristics is the great importance given to one of Joseph's "sons," called Simeon or Simon, who, together with the midwife, is a protagonist of the story.<sup>191</sup>

The idea is introduced that Mary was praying at the moment of the birth. This is supplemented by saying that she "became a vine," that she was "motionless as a rock," and did not see or hear anything. When the midwife talked to her, she remained silent, totally intent on heaven.<sup>192</sup> When the Child was born, Mary was the first one to adore him, and "the voice of many invisible beings proclaimed in unison, 'Amen.'"<sup>193</sup>

<sup>186</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 13, p.93.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *Ps.-Matthew*, 14, p.94.

<sup>190</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 14, p.94; 15, Santos Otero, p.212.

<sup>191</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 62; 64-68; 70-76, Erbetta, p.209-211; 216.

<sup>192</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 66; 71; 73 Erbetta, p.210; 216.

<sup>193</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 73, Erbetta, p.210-211. To the image of the light is added that of the perfume and the dew.

Another significant addition is the more detailed description of the Child given by the midwife, who dared to touch and carry Him in her arms. Among the characteristics given that make Him unique are that He was born perfectly clean, was weightless, and did not cry. He shone brightly like the sun and was "beautiful and most delightful to see," because He alone brings peace. The midwife gave Him to Joseph to carry, and it was Joseph who wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and placed Him in the manger.<sup>194</sup>

The midwife is the witness of a prodigy never heard of before; the mother's breasts are full of milk, but the newborn Child proclaims the virginity of the mother: "Virgin she conceived, virgin she gave birth, and she remained a virgin." The framework within which this proclamation of the virgin birth is given is rather crude.<sup>195</sup>

#### **4. *St. Maximus the Confessor* (†662)**

St. Maximus the Confessor's *Life of the Virgin* is very interesting from the theological point of view, but his description of the Nativity is not too long. He believes that the Son did not reveal to anybody, not even to His Mother, how the virginal and painless birth took place. In a way Nature's laws are ignored, without Mary knowing how; in an instant, He was out of her womb and placed Himself in her arms as if in a throne. He makes a parallel between Judges 6, 37-40, and Jesus, the "divine dew," who silently and painlessly entered His mother and ineffably exited her, in a manner of which the immaculate Mother was not conscious.<sup>196</sup> Maybe this insistence was prompted by Maximus's desire to eliminate the midwives as the witnesses of the virgin birth.

St. Maximus also refers to the "narrowness and exile" which Christ chose for love of us. He did not find a lodging, and "the Inaccessible and Uncircumscribed" was contained in a small cave and a manger. "The Word of God without beginning," the Creator of the world, "guided the Mother to a cave in

<sup>194</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 73-75, Erbetta, p. 210-211; 216.

<sup>195</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 69; 75; 77-78, Erbetta, p. 210-211.

<sup>196</sup> *St. Maximus* 35, p. 210-211.

Bethlehem."<sup>197</sup> As we already mentioned, St. Maximus believed that it was fitting for Elizabeth to be present at the Child's birth.<sup>198</sup>

### **5. Simeon Metaphrastes (ca. 1000)**

Simeon Metaphrastes' presentation of the Nativity is quite brief. He quotes Luke 2, 6-7, and dwells mainly on two things: 1. the fact that Mary and Joseph were not able to find a place for Christ in Bethlehem because they arrived last, and the multitude that had come had already taken all the available spaces, and 2. the poverty and suffering that Christ chose for our sake: He, Who abundantly feeds all creatures, was willing to be born in a poor manger; He, who came to eliminate man's original poverty, honors it first in Himself.<sup>199</sup>

### **6. Mechthilde of Magdeburg (†1282/94)**

According to Mechthilde of Magdeburg, Mary did not know in advance when God willed to be born of her, until she saw Him in her lap on the road that night in Bethlehem.<sup>200</sup> In this she differs from St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373), for whom the opposite is true.<sup>201</sup> Mechthilde offers a very interesting "Trinitarian" description of the birth:

*The almighty Father with his wisdom, the eternal Son with his human truth, the Holy Spirit with his delicate sweetness passed through the intact wall of Mary's body with blissful ease and without any effort. It had happened just as quickly as when the sun in loving calm sends forth its light upon the sweet dew.*<sup>202</sup>

She believes that from the time of His conception until Mary placed Jesus in the crib, "the power of the Holy Trinity and the blissful celestial fire in Mary were so intense that the spirit of

<sup>197</sup> *St. Maximus* 33, p.209.

<sup>198</sup> *St. Maximus* 34, p.209-210.

<sup>199</sup> *Metaphrastes* 12, p. 988.

<sup>200</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p. 198-199.

<sup>201</sup> *St. Bridget* 25, 9, p.206; cf. also *Celestin* fol.39v-40, p.37 (concerning the Magi's visit).

<sup>202</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.199; cf., in p.198, a Trinitarian description of the Incarnation.

hell . . . was not able to approach closely enough . . . to learn of the miraculous way the Child had gotten there."<sup>203</sup> According to her, and here she differs again from St. Bridget's account, Mary wrapped her Son "in a coarse blanket taken from Joseph's saddle," and laid him in the crib. He immediately began to cry like a newborn child to express his need. "The virgin was sad, and the Child was hungry and cold."<sup>204</sup>

Mechtilde describes very forcefully, again in Trinitarian terms, Mary's breast-feeding: "The mother had to nurse her Son," because "this was the Father's will and the Holy Spirit's pleasure."<sup>205</sup> Yet another original idea is that Mechtilde saw the Child "lying alone on the hard straw in front of two animals." When she asked Our Lady why "her dear Child was thus lying alone, and when would she take it on her lap," Mary replied that it was the Father's will that He should "lie on the straw for seven hours by day and by night."<sup>206</sup>

### **7. *St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn* (†1299)**

St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn, "on the most sacred night of the Nativity of Christ," saw herself in a vision "on a rocky mountain, on which was seated the Blessed Virgin who was near her delivery . . . The Virgin was filled with unutterable joy and jubilee." When "the light of God shone round about her,"

. . . She quickly rose, seized by amazement, and falling down in her profound humility to give thanks to God she bowed herself to the earth. She was so surprised that she did not know how it went with her, until she held on her bosom the tiny Child Who is the fairest of the sons of men. Then with unutterable joy and most fervent love she took the Child in her arms, and gave Him the first three kisses of her maternal tenderness."<sup>207</sup>

On another Feast of the Nativity, St. Mechtilde saw again Mary sitting upon a mountain holding against her breast a

<sup>203</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.199.

<sup>204</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.199.

<sup>205</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.199-200.

<sup>206</sup> *Magdeburg* VII, 60, p.328.

<sup>207</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 7, p.14.



perfectly beautiful Child. Mary explained to her that the cave where she gave birth was on a high place, close to one of the doors of Bethlehem.<sup>208</sup> St. Mechthilde was concerned because Mary lacked the necessary, but Our Lady assured her that she wanted for nothing, because her labor was painless and the Child perfect. When the mystic insisted, saying that she had nothing to offer to her kinsfolk and friends who came to visit her, Mary answered that they had no need of her gifts, but rather brought her the necessary.<sup>209</sup>

### **8. St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373)**

St. Bridget of Sweden spoke about the Nativity several times. Her most important account, found in Book VII of her *Revelations*, is interesting for several reasons. The experience was promised to her fifteen years before in Rome by the Virgin, as a reward for her great love of her Virginity and her deep desire to know more about Christ's Nativity.<sup>210</sup> This account is the longest and most detailed one, and it is the result of a vision which St. Bridget had *precisely in Bethlehem*, while she was on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. Unlike other Women Mystics, she is not present to the scene, but she does talk to Mary and ask her questions, which Mary answers, describing everything that took place. Her description differs from that of other writers, among other things, because she mentions details which would probably have occurred only to a married woman and mother of eight children, like the afterbirth or the cutting of the Child's umbilical cord.

St. Bridget sees Mary pregnant and very beautiful, with "her womb full and much swollen, for she was now ready to give birth." She describes minutely how Mary prepared herself and all the things she needed for her Child. When everything was ready, "the Virgin knelt with great reverence, putting herself at prayer . . . [and] she was as if suspended in an ecstasy of contemplation." St. Bridget describes the birth thus:

<sup>208</sup> Hackeborn I, V, 10, p. 19.

<sup>209</sup> Hackeborn I, V, 10, p. 19-20.

<sup>210</sup> St. Bridget VII, 1, 1-6, p. 159-160.

And while she was thus in prayer, I saw the One lying in her womb then move; and then and there, in a moment and the twinkling of an eye, she gave birth to a Son, from whom there went out such great and ineffable light and splendor that the sun could not be compared to it. Nor did that candle that the old man had put in place give light at all because that divine splendor totally annihilated the material splendor of the candle. And so sudden and momentary was the manner of giving birth that I was unable to notice or discern how or in what member she was giving birth.<sup>211</sup>

She goes on to describe the Child, the afterbirth, "which she saw lying wrapped very neatly beside him," the angelic songs that she heard, and the fact that the Virgin's womb, "which before the birth had been very swollen, at once retracted; and her body then looked wonderfully beautiful and delicate." Then St. Bridget dwells on the relationship between Mother and Child:

When therefore the Virgin felt that she had now given birth, at once, having bowed her head and joined her hands, with great dignity and reverence, she adored the boy and said to him: "Welcome, my God, my Lord and my Son!" And then the boy, crying and, as it were, trembling from the cold and the hardness of the pavement where he lay, rolled a little and extended limbs, seeking to find refreshment and his Mother's favor. Then his Mother took him in her hands and pressed him to her breast, and with cheek and breast she warmed him with great joy and tender maternal compassion.<sup>212</sup>

St. Bridget continues describing how Mary "deftly cut his umbilical cord with her fingers," and wrapped him carefully in the linen and woolen cloths that she had brought with her, binding his body with a ribbon, and tying on his head two small linen cloths. She also mentions St. Joseph's deep emotion, and how Mary and he both adored the Child together.<sup>213</sup>

On another occasion, in the same place, Our Lady appeared again to St. Bridget and said:

<sup>211</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 1-10, p.202-203.

<sup>212</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 11-16, p.203.

<sup>213</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 17-20, p.203-204.

Know for very certain that I was in such a state and gave birth in such a manner as you have now seen: on bended knee, praying alone in the stable. For I gave birth to him with such great exultation and joy of soul that I felt no discomfort when he went out of my body, and no pain. But at once I wrapped him in the small clean clothes that I had prepared long before.<sup>214</sup>

Our Lady assured her that "however much human beings, following their human perception, try to assert that her son was born in the common manner, it is nevertheless more true and beyond any doubt that he was born" just as she elsewhere told her, "and just as you now have seen."<sup>215</sup>

### **9. *Jacobus of Voragine* (+1298)**

Jacobus of Voragine's *Golden Legend* was an extremely influential work in the Middle Ages. His presentation of the Nativity, however, is not very interesting. He returns to some apocryphal details, saying little about the actual events, but rather dwelling at length upon the miracles that, according to him and other authors, took place at Christ's birth.

The first miracle is Mary's Virginity, concerning which he gives five witnesses, including the midwives—albeit lowering the tone with respect to their role. The other miracles he mentions have to do with the idea that the Nativity was revealed to the entire creation, from rocks to angels, and to the Gentiles, including the Roman emperor and the Roman Sybil.<sup>216</sup>

The moment of the birth itself is described very briefly: Joseph set up a crib for his ox and ass, and at midnight, Sunday eve, "Mary brought forth her Son and laid her beloved Child in the manger upon some hay."<sup>217</sup>

### **10. *Pseudo-Bonaventure* (XIII. Cent.)**

The *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, written by an anonymous Franciscan author of the thirteenth century, is another work which exerted a great influence. The author presents his

<sup>214</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 22, 1-3, p.204.

<sup>215</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 22, 6, p.204.

<sup>216</sup> *Voragine*, p.48-50.

<sup>217</sup> *Voragine*, p.48.

account as a revelation given by Mary to a holy lay brother of his Order, who later related it to him.<sup>218</sup>

The description of the Nativity is not too long. Sent away by everybody, Mary and Joseph had to lodge in a cave which Joseph, being a carpenter, possibly closed in some way. The birth took place at midnight on Sunday. Pseudo-Bonaventure introduced the idea—picked up by famous painters—that “when the hour of birth came, the Virgin rose and stood erect against a column that was there.”

Then the Son of the eternal God came out of the womb of the mother without a murmur of injury, in a moment; as He had been in the womb so He was now outside, upon the hay at His Mother's feet. Unable to contain herself, the mother stooped to pick Him up, embraced Him tenderly and, guided by the Holy Spirit, placed Him in her lap and began to wash Him with her milk, her breasts filled by heaven. When this was done, she [wrapped Him in the veil from her head and] laid Him in the manger.<sup>219</sup>

The ox and ass “breathed on the Infant as though they possessed reason and knew that the Child was so poorly wrapped that He needed to be warmed.” Mary knelt down to adore Him and gave thanks to God saying:

I thank you, most holy Father, that you gave me your Son and I adore you, eternal God, and you, Son of the living God, my Son.<sup>220</sup>

Mary placed a stone covered with some hay under the Child's head, because she did not have a pillow. She sat down and “stayed with her face turned constantly toward the manger, her eyes fixed affectionately on her sweet Son.” After the Magi's visit, the Holy Family stayed at the cave until the time of the Presentation in the Temple.<sup>221</sup> With all these details, the author wants to stress the poverty in which Christ was born, and elicit our pity and love.

<sup>218</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.32.

<sup>219</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31-33.

<sup>220</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.33-34.

<sup>221</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VIII, p.43-44; VII, 35; X, 53-54; cf. *Ludolph* IX, p.150; XI, 217; *Celestin* fol.41v, p.38.

### **11. Ludolph of Saxony, "The Carthusian" (†1378)**

The *Life of Christ* written by Ludolph of Saxony (†1378), known as "the Carthusian," is another extremely popular and influential work, which was translated into several languages and read by St. Teresa of Avila (†1582) and St. Ignatius of Loyola (†1556), for whom this book played a decisive role during his conversion.<sup>222</sup> Ludolph's description of the Nativity, which is not long, is characterized by the emphasis given to the extreme poverty and indigence that Christ suffered from His mother's womb to the Cross and the borrowed tomb.

In fact, there was no place for them anywhere to lodge. Mary wrapped and laid her Child not in a golden crib but in a simple manger between two vile animals, "with bitterness placing a stone for a pillow under the Child's head." On the other hand, informed of what had taken place, there was not a single angel in heaven who did not come down to visit and adore the Divine Child in the manger (cf. Heb. 1, 6).<sup>223</sup>

### **12. Anonymous Celestin (XV. Cent.)**

In an interesting *Life of Christ*, written by an anonymous Celestin author, not only Mary but also Joseph are depicted as being in a high state of contemplation when the Nativity of the Lord took place.

In fact, after preparing all the necessary, while waiting for the birth, they retired each to an angle of the poor stable to pray to God. Then, while contemplating this most high Mystery, Mary gave birth to the Fruit of Life without pain or injury, like a sunray that goes through a glass. She took the Baby in her arms and reclined Him in a manger.<sup>224</sup> Like Jacobus of Voragine and Ludolph of Saxony, Celestin also mentions the miracles that happened at the Nativity of the Savior.<sup>225</sup>

<sup>222</sup> Rogelio García Mateo, *El misterio de la vida de Cristo en los Ejercicios ignacianos y en la Vita Christi Cartujano. Antología de textos*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos 626 (Madrid: BAC, 2002).

<sup>223</sup> Ludolph IX, p. 145; 146-147; 150-151; 154; 161-162; cf. also Ps.-Bonaventure VII, p. 38; Meron 6, f. 20v-21r, p. 520, and the Apocrypha in note 23.

<sup>224</sup> Celestin fol. 28v-29; p. 31-32; cf. Gerson VII, p. 74-75.

<sup>225</sup> Celestin fol. 29-29v; 30v, p. 32-33; 34.

### **C. The Presentation of the Three Protagonists**

The presentation of the three Protagonists of the Nativity scene has changed more over time than the presentation of the events described—be it those taken from the New Testament, or those made up at some point through the centuries—which in their general lines tend to remain the same, at least for long periods of time.

#### **1. The Divine Child**

The absolute protagonist of the Nativity scene is, of course, the God-Child. But, precisely as a consequence of the ineffable Mystery of the Incarnation, this protagonist lies in a manger, a silent, impotent, newborn Baby. What went on in Jesus' mind and heart when He was lying in the manger? What went on between Jesus and Mary, or between Jesus and Joseph? What was their relationship like? This is a great, ineffable mystery, revealed only to very pure and humble souls who truly love the Holy Family.

Among the authors examined, it is only from the fourteenth century onwards that they describe in detail the relationship between the Child, Mary, and Joseph. In general, there are three ways of referring to this theme:

1. The first one, typical of the Apocrypha, is to present the Child acting above His age. He is able to come on His own to suckle at His Mother's breast.<sup>226</sup> He reveals His identity from the crib, saying that He is the Son of God, sent for the salvation of the world.<sup>227</sup> As soon as He was born, He stood upon his feet, and the angels adored him.<sup>228</sup> He is also described in fantastic terms, for example, like a "light that shrinks and becomes a child," weightless, with his whole body immaculate and shining, not crying like the other newborn infants.<sup>229</sup>

<sup>226</sup> *Protogospel* 19, 2, p.64; *Armenian* VIII, 2, p.141; *St. Maximus* 35, p.210.

<sup>227</sup> *Arabic* I, 2, p.104.

<sup>228</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93.

<sup>229</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 74-75, Erbetta, p.211; 216.

2. When speaking about His relation to others, they usually mention His gaze and smile: He looked and smiled at the midwife "with a most joyful smile";<sup>230</sup> He smiled "most kindly" to the shepherds, who saw Him change His appearance: "cheerful and merry, austere and dreadful, most mild and humane, small and great";<sup>231</sup> He often favored St. Joseph with His reassuring smiles.<sup>232</sup>
3. The third way of presenting Him is to dwell on the Child's sufferings. This idea is found in the Women Mystics and the Medieval "Lives."

Mechthilde of Magdeburg (†1282/1294), for example, says that as soon as the Child was born, He not only cried the way babies are wont to do in order to express their needs, but "He wept for all humankind, hiding all his happiness and all his power. The Virgin was sad, and the Child was hungry and cold."<sup>233</sup> Mechthilde prayed to Him "for those who had commended themselves to her," and she heard the Child answer: "If they want to keep me in their minds, I shall keep them in my favor. I have nothing to give them but myself and eternal life."<sup>234</sup>

St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373) describes both the splendor of the Child, who was "glowing in the greatest of neatness, His flesh most clean of all filth and uncleanness," and the fact that He was naked, crying, "trembling from the cold and the hardness of the pavement where he lay," "rolling" and "seeking to find refreshment" from His Mother, who pressed Him to her breast and cheek and "warmed him with great joy and tender maternal compassion."<sup>235</sup>

Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. cent.) likes to emphasize Christ's real humanity and the pains He assumed for our sake:

<sup>230</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 74, Erbeta, p.211.

<sup>231</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 84, Erbeta, p.212; 217. Cf. also in *Armenian* XI, 19-21, p.146 (the Magi see the Child changing his appearance).

<sup>232</sup> *Meron* 6, p.519; f.20v-21r, 520; 7, f.28r-29v, p.523.

<sup>233</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p.199.

<sup>234</sup> *Magdeburg* VII, 60, p.328-329.

<sup>235</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 11; 15-16, p.203.

The child Jesus cries today because of the pain He felt in His soft and delicate flesh, like that of all other children, for He had real and susceptible flesh like all other humans.<sup>236</sup>

He presents in a beautiful way the interaction between Mother and Son, and their mutual love and concern:

But when He cries, do you think the mother will not cry? She too wept, and as she wept, the Child in her lap placed His tiny hand on His mother's mouth and face as though to comfort her by His gestures, that she should not cry, because He loved her tenderly and wished her to stop crying. Deeply stirred, in sorrow and tears for her Son, she in turn consoled Him with gestures and words. Most intelligently she understood His desires, even though He could not yet speak, and she said, "My son, if you wish me to cease from weeping, you must not cry, for as long as you cry I shall too." Then out of pity for the Mother the Child stopped sobbing. And the Mother wiped His eyes and hers, laid her cheek on His, nursed Him, and comforted Him in every way she could. This she did whenever He cried, as perhaps He often did, according to the custom of children, to show the misery of the human nature that He had truly taken.<sup>237</sup>

Ubertine of Casale (†ca.1330) adds something very important: Jesus "suckled more from Mary's heart than from her breasts."<sup>238</sup>

## **2. The Virgin Mother**

### **a) The Apocrypha (II.-IX. Cent.)**

In the Apocrypha, Mary usually has a secondary role, and practically does not speak (with the exception of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*), except for a few words to Joseph, the midwives, or the Magi. References to her as a person, to her acts and sentiments, or to her importance, are very rare and brief.

In the *Protogospel of James* (II. cent.), the *Armenian* and the *Arabic Infancy Gospels* (VI. cent.), while on the road to Bethlehem, Mary feels that the Child is pressing within her to go out, and asks the anguished Joseph to make ready a place for her. In the last-mentioned source above, an apocrypha

<sup>236</sup> Ps.-Bonaventure VIII, p.44.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ubertine, I, 11, f.35v-36r, p.517-518.



where Mary is taken more into account, she is conscious that both her Child and herself "have no equal," and she is the one who tells the old woman sick with palsy to touch the Child in order to be cured.<sup>239</sup>

*Arundel* and *Hereford* (IX. cent.) present Mary *praying* at the time of her delivery; actually, so intent in prayer that she was motionless, not seeing or hearing anything around her, and becoming like "a vine." After the Child came out of her womb, immediately she was the first one to adore Him.<sup>240</sup>

### **b) St. Maximus the Confessor (†662) and Simeon Metaphrastes (ca.1000)**

In the Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin," Mary's role becomes more prominent, in the sense that great theological importance is given to her Divine Maternity, she is highly praised, and her virtues are mentioned.

St. Maximus the Confessor is the first among the authors examined who takes into consideration Luke 2, 19, and tries to explain what are the things that Mary "pondered":

Mary pondered in her heart not only the words of the Shepherds, but everything else she had seen and heard from the beginning: at the temple, at the Annunciation, the virginal conception, the painless birth, her virginity after childbirth . . . These were the inexpressible wonders that Mary kept in her heart.<sup>241</sup>

He also presents Mary conscious of her Divine Maternity, "enraptured by the fact that the true God has been born of her," the God "who rendered blessed His own immaculate mother, most blessed among generations, and would make her glorious in heaven and the object of everybody's praise."<sup>242</sup> When describing the visit of the Magi, he speaks about the grace and glory that came to them from contemplating and listening "to the intact Virgin Mother."<sup>243</sup>

<sup>239</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 3, p.64; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; III, 2, p.105; *Armenian* VIII, 5, p.140.

<sup>240</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 66; 71; 73, *Erbetta*, p.210; 216.

<sup>241</sup> *St. Maximus* 35, p.210-211; cf. 63, p.232.

<sup>242</sup> *St. Maximus* 35, p.211.

<sup>243</sup> *St. Maximus* 39, p.213.

It is interesting to note that St. Maximus not only speaks about Mary's glory as Mother of God, but also about all the fatigues and works that she had to undergo from beginning to end. Indeed, her life was a combination of consolations of the Lord and tribulations: the angel's annunciation and Joseph's doubts; the birth and the emperor's command to go to Bethlehem, with all the hardships this meant for her; the fact that she gave birth to the Son of God, but wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Poverty alongside the experience of angels, shepherds, and the Magi.<sup>244</sup>

Finally, Mary's physical appearance after the birth of her Son is also taken into consideration. St. Maximus wonders at "the harmonious composure of her aspect," and how "nothing of the law of pain and weakness of childbirth" was visible in her. Rather, "after the birth, she was more splendid and beautiful, full of grace and light . . . something wonderful for all to see." Her words in the Magnificat were fulfilled: God did great things for her and she was called blessed.<sup>245</sup>

Simeon Metaphrastes also wonders at what Mary "kept in her heart," and at the thoughts that crossed her mind when the Magi came. He answers in a way similar to St. Maximus and other Fathers of the Church and Medieval authors: Mary meditated upon *everything she heard and saw concerning her Son*, delving ever more deeply into the Mystery of His Divinity. Like St. Maximus, he also underlines the contrasting dimensions of Mary's reality: poverty and glory, suffering and joy, humility and greatness.<sup>246</sup>

**c) Mechthilde of Magdeburg (†1282/1294),  
St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn (†1299), and  
St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373)**

Mechthilde of Magdeburg points out that, when the time had come for Mary to give birth, "when other women are sad and move about with difficulty, Mary was agile and cheerful.

<sup>244</sup> St. Maximus 57-58, p.227-228.

<sup>245</sup> St. Maximus 39, p.213-214.

<sup>246</sup> Metaphrastes 13, 18, 19, 21, 25: p.989, 993, 994, 995, 998.

And yet her body was quite swollen because she had within it the fully developed Son of God."<sup>247</sup> She "did not know in advance when God wanted to be born of her until she saw Him in her lap." Mary's reaction at the birth of her divine Son is described thus:

When Mary gazed at her fair child, she inclined her head to his face and said: "Welcome, my innocent Child and mighty Lord, all things are yours."<sup>248</sup>

Mechtilde mentions the Virgin's sadness at seeing her Child crying, hungry and cold, and her ineffable joy at suckling him.<sup>249</sup> As she had done with the birth, she describes Mary's breast-feeding in Trinitarian terms:

*Then the mother had to nurse her Son. This was his Father's will and the Holy Spirit's pleasure.* In maternal love, with maidenly bearing, the virgin bent down to her afflicted child and offered him her youthful breast. Now hear of the marvel! The bright blossoming of her fair eyes, the spiritual beauty of her maidenly countenance, the sweetness flowing from her pure heart, and the delightful sparkle of her noble soul: *these four things drew together according to the will of the Father, the need of the Son, and the delight of the Holy Spirit in her maidenly breast.* And sweet milk flowed from her pure heart without any pain. The Child suckled like a human child and his mother rejoiced in a holy manner.<sup>250</sup>

St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn presents Mary "filled with unutterable joy and jubilee" at the time of her delivery, "falling down in her boundless humility to give thanks to God," "not knowing how it went with her, until she held on her bosom Him Who is the fairest of the sons of men."<sup>251</sup> She mentions three kisses which the Mother gave to her Child, giving to them a Trinitarian significance:

Then with unutterable joy and most fervent love she took the Child in her arms, and offered him the first three kisses of her maternal

<sup>247</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p. 198.

<sup>248</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p. 199.

<sup>249</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p. 199-200.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 7, p. 14.

tenderness. Through these three kisses, the Virgin was admitted by the Blessed Trinity to a union so intimate with God that it surpasses all that man can possibly hope for, except for the Hypostatic Union [of Christ].<sup>252</sup>

According to St. Bridget of Sweden, Mary knew very well the hour when her Son would be born and the Magi would come. "She came according to God's foreknowledge to Bethlehem, bringing with her clean clothing and cloths that no one had ever used before," to wrap Him with them. Mary prepared herself and everything that was needed beforehand.<sup>253</sup> The birth took place while the Virgin was kneeling, deep in prayer,

With raised hands and with her eyes intent on heaven . . . as if suspended in an ecstasy of contemplation, inebriated with divine sweetness.<sup>254</sup>

"And while she was thus in prayer," St. Bridget "saw the One lying in her womb then move; and then and there, in a moment and the twinkling of an eye, she gave birth to a Son." She describes the Virgin's reaction to the birth in these words:

When therefore the Virgin felt that she had now given birth, at once, having bowed her head and joined her hands, with great dignity and reverence, she adored the boy and said to him: "Welcome, my God, my Lord and my Son!"<sup>255</sup>

When the boy, crying and trembling, "rolled a little and extended limbs, seeking to find refreshment and his Mother's favor,"

Then his Mother took him in her hands and pressed him to her breast, and with cheek and breast she warmed him with great joy and tender maternal compassion.<sup>256</sup>

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 25, 9, p. 206; also *Celestin*, fol. 39v-40, p. 37 (concerning the Magi's visit).

<sup>254</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 6-7, p. 203.

<sup>255</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 8; 14, p. 203.

<sup>256</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 15-16, p. 203.

St. Bridget addressed Mary: "With exultant joy, in motherly fashion, you used the most sacred milk of your breasts to nurture him."<sup>257</sup>

Like St. Maximus the Confessor (†662), St. Bridget also mentions Mary's physical appearance after giving birth:

Not even at the birth was that Virgin changed in color or by infirmity. Nor was there in her any such failure of bodily strength as usually happens in other women giving birth, except that her swollen womb retracted to the prior state in which it had been before she conceived the boy.<sup>258</sup>

The Virgin herself assured her that she had given birth "with such great exultation and joy of soul that she felt no discomfort . . . and no pain," but "at once wrapped him in the small clean clothes she had prepared long before."<sup>259</sup> The Swedish Saint also saw the Virgin adoring the Child together with St. Joseph "with gladness and immense joy."<sup>260</sup>

#### **d) Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. Cent.) and Ubertine of Casale (†after 1330)**

Pseudo-Bonaventure, after affirming Mary's virginal and painless childbearing, describes how Mary, "unable to contain herself . . . stooped to pick Him up, embraced Him tenderly and, guided by the Holy Spirit, placed Him in her lap," washed and wrapped Him, and laid Him in the manger.<sup>261</sup> "With a sorrowful heart," she placed a stone under His head. "She would much rather have used a feather pillow if she had had it," but she had nothing else.<sup>262</sup> She knelt down to adore Him, rendered thanks to God, and "stayed with her face turned constantly toward the manger, her eyes fixed affectionately on her sweet Son."<sup>263</sup>

Pseudo-Bonaventure is very good at describing the great love with which Mary took care of her Son:

<sup>257</sup> *St. Bridget, Four Prayers*, I, 13, p.222.

<sup>258</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 21, p.204.

<sup>259</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 22, 1-3, p.204.

<sup>260</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 22, p.204.

<sup>261</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.33.

<sup>262</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VIII, p.43-44; cf. also *Ludolph* IX, p.150.

<sup>263</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.34, 35.

Solicitously and intently she watched over the care of her beloved Son. O Lord, with how much concern and diligence she nursed Him, that He might not have the least trouble! And with how much reverence, caution, and saintly fear did she who knew it was her God and Lord treat the Child, kneeling to take Him and put Him back into the manger! With how much happiness, confidence and motherly authority did she embrace, kiss, gently hug, and delight in Him whom she saw as her son! Oh, how often and how gently she looks at His face and all parts of His most holy body! How regularly and skillfully she placed the tender limbs while swathing them! As she was most humble so she was most prudent. In all offices and services, waking or sleeping, she continually ministered to Him, not only to the infant but also to the man. How readily she nursed Him, feeling a great and unknown sweetness in nursing this Child, such as could never be felt by other women!<sup>264</sup>

Ubertaine of Casale speaks about Mary's joy when God became man in her womb; how humbly she adored Him and reverently welcomed him, embracing and kissing him. She is His spouse, daughter, sister and mother. She herself acted as the midwife at His birth, and the Child Jesus suckled more from her holy heart than from her breast.<sup>265</sup>

Mary constantly contemplated and meditated upon the events of her Son's life, all of which point to the Mystery of His true Divinity and Humanity. She dealt with him with great delicacy, and the Blessed Trinity delighted in her solicitous care of her Son.<sup>266</sup>

### **e) Ludolph of Saxony (†1378) and Anonymous Celestin (XV. Cent.)**

Ludolph of Saxony meditates often on the mystery of Mary, who, as Mother of God, was called to adore the Son Whom she at the same time nourished with incomparable joy at her breasts.<sup>267</sup>

Who could depict the zeal and attention with which this tender Mother surrounded her divine Child? Oh! With how much solicitude, with how

<sup>264</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* X, p.54-55.

<sup>265</sup> *Ubertaine*, I, 11, f.35v-36r, p.517-518.

<sup>266</sup> *Ubertaine*, I, 11, f.36r, p.518.

<sup>267</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.146-147, 150.

much promptness did she watch so that He should not lack the slightest thing! With what profound respect, care, and pious shyness did she touch Him Whom she knew was her Lord and her God! ... With how much joy, with what confidence and maternal authority did she take Him in her arms, covered Him with kisses, and pressed Him sweetly against her heart!<sup>268</sup>

Moreover, the services that Mary so painstakingly rendered her Son, day and night, accompanied Him not only during His childhood, but throughout His life.

The anonymous Celestin depicts Mary preparing everything for the birth, deep in contemplation of the great Mystery wherein she gave birth to the Fruit of Life. She was the first one to adore, honor, and revere Him.<sup>269</sup>

### 3. *St. Joseph*

St. Joseph is the third protagonist of the Christmas story, but his importance has not always been understood or taken into consideration. In the *Apocrypha*, St. Joseph's role consists mainly in bringing Mary to Bethlehem and going in search of a midwife to help her. Some writings unfortunately present him in a rather negative way; others have the tendency of ascribing to other personages what corresponds to him. In the *Byzantine "Lives of the Virgin,"* where Mary's role is much better presented than in the *Apocrypha*, the figure of St. Joseph has a rather low profile, although he is not put in a bad light. Among the *Women Mystics*, St. Bridget (†1373) offers the most complete picture of him.

In the *Medieval "Lives,"* more attention is given to him. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in particular, there are *Lives of St. Joseph* which give him special preponderance, exalting his virtues and importance, and giving him a more active and positive role. This increase in devotion to and interest in St. Joseph is precisely a characteristic of this time period, thanks to the good offices of several writers, among whom are Cardinal Peter d'Ailly (†1420), John Gerson (†1429), and St. Bernardine of Siena (†1444). Several of these writers affirm

<sup>268</sup> *Ludolph XI*, p. 217-218.

<sup>269</sup> *Celestin* fol. 28v-29, p. 31-32.

that Joseph willingly obeyed the imperial decree, discovering in it God's Providence.<sup>270</sup> He took Mary with him to Bethlehem because he wanted to take personal care of her,<sup>271</sup> and did not want to miss the joy of contemplating the Nativity of the Lord.<sup>272</sup>

**a) The Apocrypha (II.-IX. Cent.)**

*The Protogospel of James* (II. cent.) unfortunately introduced the idea that Joseph was an elderly widower with children. It gives two brief insights concerning him: On the road to Bethlehem, Joseph wonders how he is to enroll Mary—"as his wife or his daughter"—knowing that she is neither.<sup>273</sup> His concern for Mary is shown mainly by searching for a place for her and bringing a midwife to help her.<sup>274</sup>

*The History of Joseph the Carpenter* (II., IV., VI. cent.) is the first work where his virtues and importance are praised, presenting his figure in quite positive terms, maybe promoting devotion to him.<sup>275</sup>

In the *Ascension of Isaiah* (II. cent.), "he wonders at what he sees and praises God."<sup>276</sup> In the *Armenian Infancy Gospel* (VI. cent.), when he sees the Child at his mother's breast return to his place and sit down, Joseph gives glory to God at such unheard-of prodigies.<sup>277</sup>

In the *Book of the Infancy of the Savior* (IX. cent.), Joseph shows great concern for Mary, even though the protagonist is his "son" Simeon. He invites her to rest and take care of herself,

<sup>270</sup> *St. Maximus* 32-33, p.208-209; *Epiphanius* XII, p.71-72; *Metaphrastes* 11-12, p.987-988; *St. Bridget* VII, 22, 5, p.204; *Gerson* VII, p.73; *Celestin* fol.28, p.31.

<sup>271</sup> *St. Maximus* 33, p.209; *Voragine*, p.47; *Celestin* fol.28-28v, p.31; *Meron* 6, f.18r-v, p.518.

<sup>272</sup> *Meron* 6, f.18r-v, p.518.

<sup>273</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 2, p.63.

<sup>274</sup> *Protogospel* 17, 3; 18, 1, p.64; *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93; *Arabic* II, 2, p.104; *Armenian* VIII, 5, 7, 9-10, p.141; *Arundel/Hereford* 62-63, 65-67, *Erbetta*, p.209-210; *Roswitha* 89, 1074 D.

<sup>275</sup> Cf. G. Giamberardini, "Saint Joseph dans la tradition copte," *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 17 (1969); idem, *San Giuseppe nella tradizione Copta*, *Studia Orientalia Christiana Aegyptica* (Cairo: Ediz. del Centro francescano di studi orientali cristiani, 1966), 5-291.

<sup>276</sup> *Isaiab* XI, 10; *Cothenet*, p.78.

<sup>277</sup> *Armenian* VIII, 2, p.141.



and does not want to move from her side.<sup>278</sup> It contains an original scene: an encounter at the entrance of Bethlehem between Joseph, who had gone there to praise the birth he had just witnessed, and the shepherds, who were coming in search of the Child. Joseph, calling himself "*the minister of this Mystery*," invited them to go into the cave. When they came out, they narrated to him their experience with the Child, called him blessed for having such a Son, and promised to send him some provisions.<sup>279</sup>

Unfortunately, references to St. Joseph's character in the Apocrypha are not always positive. In three writings, in the scene of Mary's vision of the two peoples, Joseph scolds her for saying superfluous words.<sup>280</sup> Something similar occurs in Pseudo-Matthew (VI. cent.), where he scolds her for not being willing to receive the midwives.<sup>281</sup> Arundel and Hereford (IX. cent.) repeat this story, but the latter omits Joseph's words.<sup>282</sup> In yet another example of this negative presentation, Joseph complains to his "son" Simeon that, whereas the Magi, being foreigners, brought many gifts to the Child, the Shepherds, belonging to their people, did not bring anything.<sup>283</sup>

#### **b) Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. Cent.)**

Pseudo-Bonaventure depicts St. Joseph as "downcast" because he could not prepare for the Child all that was necessary. He showed his concern for Mary in a twofold way: before the birth, by rising, taking hay from the manger, and placing it at Mary's feet; after the birth, by putting a pack-saddle besides the manger so that Mary could rest on it.<sup>284</sup> He turned away so as not to be present at the birth, but after it had taken place, he also adored the Child with Mary.<sup>285</sup>

<sup>278</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 65-67, 84-85, Erbetta, p.210, 211-212.

<sup>279</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 81-85, Erbetta, p.211-212, 216-217.

<sup>280</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.92-93; *Arundel/Hereford* 61, cf. Erbetta, p.209, 216; *Roswitha* 88, 1074 B.

<sup>281</sup> *Ps.-Matthew* 13, p.93.

<sup>282</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 69, Otero, p.264; cf. Erbetta, p.210, 216.

<sup>283</sup> *Arundel/Hereford* 92, Erbetta, p.213, 217.

<sup>284</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.32-33, 35.

<sup>285</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.32-33, 34-35; also *Meron*, 6, f.20v-21r, p.520.

During Jesus' childhood, "knowing that he was his God and Lord," Joseph treated the Child with great "reverence, caution, and saintly fear," "kneeling to take Him and put Him back in the manger." Quoting St. Bernard, Pseudo-Bonaventure says that "saintly old Joseph often held the Child Jesus on his knees, laughing and praying with Him, and comforting Him."<sup>286</sup>

**c) Mechthilde of Magdeburg (†1182/94) and St. Bridget of Sweden (†1373)**

Among the Women Mystics, only Mechthilde of Magdeburg and St. Bridget of Sweden mention St. Joseph. In her account of the Nativity, *Mechthilde* asked Mary where Joseph was. She answered that he had gone into town "to buy some small fish and plain bread," and that they only drank water. Mechthilde then told her that she should be eating "the very best bread and drinking the finest wine," but Our Lady replied that "such is the food of rich people," but they had nothing of that in the poor life they led.<sup>287</sup>

*St. Bridget* presents a very positive image of St. Joseph, albeit depicting him as "a dignified old man."

When they had entered the cave, after Joseph tied the ox and ass to the manger, . . . The old man went outside and brought to the Virgin a lighted candle and fixed it in the wall, and went out in order not to be personally present at the birth.<sup>288</sup>

When Mary had given birth and taken care of her Child, "the old man" returned. When he came in, "prostrating on the earth, he adored Him on bended knee, and wept for joy." Moreover, *together with Mary*, he put the Child in the manger:

[Mary] arose holding the boy in her arms, and *together both of them, namely, she and Joseph*, put him in the manger and on bended knee they continued to adore him with gladness and immense joy.<sup>289</sup>

<sup>286</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* X, p. 54, 55.

<sup>287</sup> *Magdeburg* V, 23, p. 200.

<sup>288</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 3, p. 202; cf. notes 775, 778-780, 782, 784, p. 306-307, on the influence of this and other Brigittine Nativity details in art.

<sup>289</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 21, 9; 20-22, p. 203, 204; cf. 23, 1, p. 205.

St. Bridget is one of the first authors to mention what Mary and Joseph *did together* after the Child was born, how *they both* took care of Him as Man and adored Him as God—a glimpse at the ineffable Mystery of Christ's first moments on earth and His relationship with His Mother and foster-father. She also offers an insight into Joseph's sentiments: when he saw how Mary gave birth without help, "he marveled *with great gladness and joy*."<sup>290</sup>

In another revelation, Mary informed St. Bridget that St. Joseph knew in the Holy Spirit before their betrothal about her vow of virginity, and that he betrothed her with the intention of serving her. She also said that when Joseph found out that she was expecting a child,

[He] feared very greatly. Not suspecting me of anything sinister, but mindful of the saying of the prophets who had foretold that the Son of God would be born of a virgin, he reckoned himself unworthy to serve such a mother until the angel instructed him in his sleep not to be afraid but to serve me with charity.<sup>291</sup>

Mary "was known to God alone *and Joseph*," and she "did not disdain to prepare and serve the necessary *for Joseph and herself*," just as the Son of God was subject "*to Joseph and her*."<sup>292</sup>

#### **d) Francis of Eximenis (†1409)**

In his *Life of Christ*, the Spanish author Francis of Eximenis presents Mary revealing Joseph's holiness:

Know that the holiness of Joseph was very great. He was chosen by God to be his special servant and bring up his precious Son all the time he was alive.<sup>293</sup>

<sup>290</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 22, 4, p.204.

<sup>291</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 25, 5-7, p.206.

<sup>292</sup> *St. Bridget* VII, 25, 10-11, p.206.

<sup>293</sup> *Eximenis* c.161 (fol.92v), cf. Herrán, p.461; about his holiness, cf. also c.161 (f.93, 93v), p.461; c.67 of I.II (fol.44ff.), cf. Herrán, footnote 24, p.462; c.243, p.462; c.67 (f.44), p.462; c.68 (f.46), p.463; c.67 (f.45), p.463.

Eximenis, who clearly affirmed Joseph's virginity as well,<sup>294</sup> is sure that having spent so much time with the Lord and his holy Mother in the same house "is sufficient reason to believe firmly that he was a man of very excellent holiness and consummate perfection."<sup>295</sup>

St. Joseph served Jesus most faithfully, and cared for Him with great fervor and love, so much so that Jesus rewarded him with great consolations and proofs of His Divine kindness. He often carried the Lord in his arms, looked after all His needs, treated Him with the utmost reverence, and was worthy to be considered His father by the people. He also suffered a lot for His sake. Now in paradise, he has a place among the great patriarchs, just as on earth he knew the secrets of Christ and Mary.<sup>296</sup>

#### e) John Gerson (†1429) and Philippe van Meron (XV. Cent.)

John Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, wrote several works in honor of St. Joseph, including the *Josephina*, a famous poem of 4600 lines, which is like a "Life" of St. Joseph. He did much to promote devotion to the Holy Patriarch.

Philippe van Meron presents the Nativity scene in a "Life" of St. Joseph himself. His view is extremely positive. Often quoting entire passages from Gerson's works, in particular the *Josephina*, he praises St. Joseph's faithful service of Jesus and Mary.

Who could ever say or express with what humility and ardent love the most holy Joseph treated the Virgin Mary, and with what solicitude he served her? No work seemed too difficult for him. He did not rest nor was he happy if Mary was not serene and happy.<sup>297</sup>

At the Nativity, when Joseph heard the sweet melody of angels and saw a great light around the Virgin who was giving

<sup>294</sup> *Extmenis* c.212 (f.132v), p.463; c.67 (f.45v), p.464-465.

<sup>295</sup> *Eximenis* c.161 (f.93, 93v), p.461; c.212 (f.132v), p.463; c.67 (f.45v), p.464, 465.

<sup>296</sup> *Eximenis* c.243, p.462; c.68 (f.46), p.463; c.67 (f.45v), p.464.

<sup>297</sup> *Meron* 6, f.19r-v, p.519.

birth to the Man-God, "he moved away out of his great humility and respect, and fell on the ground humbly and piously, glorifying the omnipotent God." When Mary called him, he returned,

And when he saw that Christ had been born, and that the Virgin Mary had knelt down, and with joined hands was adoring Him to Whom she had given birth, he came near and prostrated himself on the ground. Because of his great humility, he did not dare to come stand near the august divine majesty . . . He cried abundantly for joy, and felt unworthy of coming near.

At Mary's appeal, he approached, prostrated himself in profound adoration, and, with her permission, kissed the Child's feet, and immediately the Newborn smiled at him.

When the holy man Joseph had adored Christ, he raised—first among all men—this blessed Child, God and Man, from the ground, trembling with holy veneration, an authentic witness of His humanity and His divinity.<sup>298</sup>

Philippe is convinced that,

Even though great familiarity and daily conversation may result in a lack or diminution of respect towards those whom one frequents every day, Joseph never had too much of this holy company and conversation. From hour to hour he grew in devotion and holy solicitude. He was saddened when he could not be in the presence of the glorious Virgin Mother and her blessed Child. He was filled with ineffable joy when he was able to serve them. Neither age nor any pain could delay him from his service. Inwardly and outwardly he felt such happiness to be in the presence of Christ and Mary, His Mother, . . . that he desired to be nowhere but with them.<sup>299</sup>

What has never been granted to any other saint was granted to Joseph: To take often in his arms and embrace the God-Man!<sup>300</sup>

#### **f) Anonymous Celestin (XV. Cent.)**

Even though the Anonymous Celestin wrote a *Life of Christ* and not of St. Joseph, he mentions him more often than other

<sup>298</sup> Meron 6, f.20v-21r, p.520.

<sup>299</sup> Meron 6, f.22v-23r, p.520-521.

<sup>300</sup> Meron 6, f.28r-29v, p.523-524.

authors in very positive terms. He presents not only Mary, but Joseph also, in deep prayer before Christ's birth. In the poor stable where they had to lodge, both of them, after preparing everything first, retired each to a corner to pray devoutly. Joseph was occupied in meditating and marveling at the fact that Mary did not feel any pain, and was all beautiful and joyous. After she virginally gave birth to Jesus, Joseph was "ravished in contemplation" of this "great mystery":

At the voice of the little Child, he woke-up, and came humbly to adore the sweet Child. Then he took Him in his arms, with great fear and reverence, and began to kiss and lull Him.<sup>301</sup>

Celestin pronounces himself incapable of speaking about St. Joseph:

Oh Joseph, noble and excellent nourisher and father of Jesus, what shall I say about you? In truth, every sense and comprehension fail me when I consider your graces and privileges! Are you not the guardian of the Son of God? Did you not contemplate Him with your own eyes? Did you not touch Him with your hands, and carry Him on your knees and in your arms? Let everyone judge as he will; on my part, I do not think that there was ever any creature, except for the Virgin Mary, who felt or could feel so much love for blessed Jesus and His consolations as noble Joseph did.<sup>302</sup>

Celestin makes a parallel between St. John the Evangelist, who rested during the Last Supper on Christ's breast, whence he drank His secrets and mysteries, and St. Joseph, who did just that so many times!

Oh, what blessed company where Mary and Joseph are, and with them the Fruit of life, Jesus! And if we cannot see this noble assembly with our bodily eyes, at least let us contemplate it in our heart and our thoughts!<sup>303</sup>

Quoting St. Bernard, Celestin says that God granted Joseph the grace to see what many longed to see and did not see, and

<sup>301</sup> *Celestin* fol.28v-29, p.31-32.

<sup>302</sup> *Celestin* fol.29, p.32.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

to hear what many longed to hear and did not hear. And not only this, but even to carry Jesus, hug and kiss Him, nurture and take care of Him, and be worthy to be called His father. From this we can see the dignity and honor granted to him by God.<sup>304</sup>

Without doubt Joseph was a loyal and good man, to whom was entrusted as wife the Mother of the Savior; a loyal and prudent servant constituted by God to nourish His humanity; in short, "*the secretary of all the Mysteries of our Redemption and a very loyal co-helper*."<sup>305</sup>

#### IV. OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE NATIVITY

... Let us go in spirit to the stable  
To kiss His little feet,  
And say to Him: Gentle Child,  
Reign over us as Sovereign King ...<sup>306</sup>

The power of attraction of the Nativity is such that all generations of Christians have been deeply moved by it. Moreover, the desire to see and be present at the stable in Bethlehem with the Child, His Mother, and St. Joseph, accompanies every pious soul. This desire is not an impossible dream; the Liturgy, the Rosary, prayer, meditation, contemplation—accompanied by deep faith, humility and ardent love—make it possible!

##### A. The Women Mystics (XIII.-XIV. Cent.)

This truth is clearly seen in the Women Mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who, in and through the Liturgy and mystical contemplation, received the gift of becoming present at the manger.

##### 1. *Mechthilde of Magdeburg* (†1282/94) and *St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn* (†1299)

During her vision of the Nativity, *Mechthilde of Magdeburg* prayed to the Child Jesus for those who had commended themselves to her prayers.

<sup>304</sup> *Celestin* fol. 42, p. 38.

<sup>305</sup> *Celestin* fol. 42-42v, p. 38.

<sup>306</sup> St. Louis de Montfort, Hymn 64, "Noel of Spiritual Souls" 9, in *God Alone II*, p. 328.

Then a voice spoke out of the Child, though its mouth did not move at all: "If they want to keep me in their minds, I shall keep them in my favor. I have nothing to give them but Myself and eternal life."<sup>307</sup>

*St. Mechthilde of Hackeborn* saw herself on a rocky mountain together with Mary. After her vision of Jesus' birth,

Mechtilde saw herself sitting by the Blessed Virgin, and she ardently desired to kiss too the lovely Little One. The Virgin Mother, after she had pressed Him to her heart and addressed Him with sweet words, she gave Him also to her soul to be embraced by her. Then Mechtilde, with unutterable love, took Him in her arms, and embraced Him lovingly, while she saluted Him with these words: "Hail, marrow of Thy Father's Heart, sweetest nourishment and most blessed refreshment of the soul that languishes, I offer unto Thee my heart and the entire marrow of my heart for everlasting praise and glory."<sup>308</sup>

During the Midnight Mass, the Father told her to go to the Virgin Mother of His Son, and ask her to give her Jesus, with all the joy she had experienced when she gave birth, as well as with the goods which the Son received from the Father as Savior of the world. St Mechtilde went, and found the Baby lying in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. The Child explained to her that He willed to be bound by the swaddling clothes and the nails on the Cross to show us His desire to give us everything He possesses as God and Man.<sup>309</sup> During the Morning Mass, in her soul she took the Child in her arms, and pressed Him so closely to her heart, that she could count "the four throbs" of His Heart, which He explained to her.<sup>310</sup>

## **2. St. Gertrude the Great of Helfta (†1302)**

On Christmas Eve, "that most holy of nights," when St. Gertrude of Helfta "was intent, through meditation and the practice of certain devotions, *on being present and offering help at the heavenly birth*, at which the Virgin brought forth

<sup>307</sup> *Magdeburg* VII, 60, p.328-329.

<sup>308</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 7, p.15.

<sup>309</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 8, p.16.

<sup>310</sup> *Hackeborn* I, V, 9, p.17-18.



her son, true God and true man," her soul realized "that it had been offered, and had received, in place of its heart so to speak, a tender little boy."

When my soul cradled him within itself it suddenly seemed to be completely changed into the same color as him—if that can be called a "color" which cannot be compared with any visible quality. Then my soul perceived a meaning that defies explication in the sweet words, "God shall be all in all" (1Cor.15, 28). It felt that it held within itself the Beloved, installed in the heart, and it rejoiced that it was not without the welcome presence of its Spouse, with his most enjoyable caresses.<sup>311</sup>

St. Gertrude also relates how she took Jesus "from the manger as a tiny child wrapped in swaddling clothes," and He was "imprinted on her innermost heart." Conscious that she could never receive "any gift greater than this," at the same time she knew that the Lord "often follows up what has gone before with an even nobler gift." And indeed,

The next year, on the same day, during the mass *Dixit Dominus*, I took you from the lap of your virgin mother in the shape of a most tender and delicate little child. While I was carrying you on my bosom, it seemed to me that the sympathy I had shown someone in trouble before Christmas by offering special prayers was at work here too. But I have to say that even though I had that gift, to my sorrow I was not as ardent in my devotion as I should have been.<sup>312</sup>

And indeed, on the feast of Candlemas, the Virgin asked St. Gertrude "with an air of severity to give her back the dear little child of her womb," because she had not looked after Him as well as she wished. St. Gertrude then appealed to Mary's loving-kindness, and to her mission "to win mercy for all those in need of grace," and cover "with her boundless love the multitude of our sins and shortcomings." Our Lady immediately became "calm and merciful," showing that, "although she had seemed severe since her [Gertrude's] evil demanded it, her inmost being was nonetheless brimful of love," suffused as she

<sup>311</sup> *St. Gertrude* II, 6, 2, p.117.

<sup>312</sup> *St. Gertrude* II, 16, 1-2, p.139-140.

was "with the sweetness of divine love." Her severity "vanished, and a tranquil sweetness, her innate characteristic, shone forth."<sup>313</sup>

The next year, on the same feast, God graced St. Gertrude with an even greater gift: While the Gospel of Luke 2,7 was being read,

With her spotless hands your spotless mother proffered me you, the child of her virginity, a loveable baby struggling with all his might to be embraced by me. I (though to my sorrow most undeserving) took you, a fragile little child, who clung to me with your little arms. I became aware of such life-giving refreshment from the breath of the sweet-flowing spirit coming from your blessed mouth that my soul should, in all justice, bless you from that moment forward, and all that is within me should bless your holy name (Ps. 102, 1).<sup>314</sup>

While Mary was wrapping Jesus in swaddling cloths, St. Gertrude "was asking to be wrapped in them with Him, lest He should be separated from her by even so much as a thin piece of cloth." The mystic understood that if she wished "to be wrapped and bound in them with Him, she was obliged above all to work wholeheartedly at purity of heart and works of loving charity."<sup>315</sup>

## **B. The Medieval "Lives" of Christ (XIII.-XV. Cent.)**

Several Medieval authors insist in their "Lives" of Christ that actually *all Christians should make themselves present at the different scenes of Our Lord's life*, in order to see, listen, and participate in everything that is taking place, helping and serving Our Lady and the Child. Their aim is to ignite the love of God in our hearts and help us imitate Jesus and Mary.

### **1. Pseudo-Bonaventure (XIII. Cent.) and Ubertine of Casale (†after 1330)**

*Pseudo-Bonaventure* frequently exhorts his readers in this direction. For example, we should watch Our Lady on the road

<sup>313</sup> *St. Gertrude* II, 16, 3, p. 140-141.

<sup>314</sup> *St. Gertrude* II, 16, 4, p. 141-142.

<sup>315</sup> *St. Gertrude* II, 16, 5, p. 142.

to Bethlehem, and have pity on her, fatigued as she was by the journey, and unable to find a place to rest.<sup>316</sup>

Together with the Shepherds, we should kneel and adore the Lord and His Mother and greet "saintly old Joseph." We should kiss the Child's feet, and beg the Mother to offer Him to us, to let us hold Him for a while, and gaze devoutly at His face, and reverently kiss Him, delighting in Him. His benignity allows us sinners to touch Him, but always with the utmost veneration and fear, "for He is the Saint of saints." Then we should return Him to His Mother, and watch how Mary cares for Him, and remain there to help her if we can.

We should meditate on these things constantly, and familiarize ourselves as much as we can with them. We should rejoice at the Nativity, and grieve at the affliction and discomfort He bore for our sake.<sup>317</sup> Every faithful soul should visit Mary at the manger daily from the Nativity to the Purification, in order to adore Child and Mother, and learn from their example of poverty, humility, and benignity.<sup>318</sup>

*Ubertine of Casale* mentions the great consolations that we feel in Bethlehem, as we contemplate Mary, our Advocate, kissing the Man-God. The Judge became a Child in order to call the sinner to conversion. We are invited to suckle with Him at His Mother's breasts, if only we become like children.<sup>319</sup>

## **2. Ludolph of Saxony (†1378)**

*Ludolph of Saxony* follows a very similar line, stressing often the symbolic meaning of every detail. For example, the Shepherds teach us the solicitude, ardent faith, and progress in virtue with which we should seek Jesus. In order to find Him, we need Mary's purity of heart, Joseph's justice, and reverent humility.<sup>320</sup> The negligent never arrive, only the faithful

<sup>316</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.31.

<sup>317</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* VII, p.38-40; also in *Ludolph* IX, p.168-170; cf. *Gerson* VII, p.77-78; concerning their example of poverty, cf. *Ludolph* IX, p.145; *Meron* 6, p.518; 7, p.523-524.

<sup>318</sup> *Ps.-Bonaventure* X, p.55-56; *Ludolph* XI, p.218.

<sup>319</sup> *Ubertine* I, 11, f.28v, p.517.

<sup>320</sup> *Ludolph* IX, p.163.

imitators of Christ.<sup>321</sup> We should also watch Mary and see how she takes care of the Child, ready to serve them both.<sup>322</sup>

Now is your turn, Christians, to go see the Word who became man for your sake; and bending your knees, adore the Lord your God, venerate His august Mother, and greet respectfully saint Joseph. Then, kiss the feet of the child Jesus who is lying in a manger, and ask Our Lady to give Him to you or to allow you to take Him. Receive Him, and keep Him in your arms. Consider His face with attention, embrace Him with love, and press Him with joy to your heart. You can do all this without fear and with confidence, because He came to save sinners; He deigned to converse with them, and He ended up leaving them His flesh as nourishment. Thus the sweet Jesus will allow you to touch Him, according to your desires, if it is love and not presumption which moves you . . . Contemplate His mother, and remark with what zeal and propriety she suckled Him, treated Him, and lavished upon Him all the attention which His infancy demanded. Be ready to serve Jesus and help Mary, if you can. May these great mysteries be the habitual subject of your affections, your joys, and your meditations. Remain, as much as you can, near Our Lady and the Child Jesus; do not cease to contemplate the features of Him at Whom the angels long to look (1Pet. 1, 12).<sup>323</sup>

### CONCLUSION

How many millions of nights have been followed by splendidous days since the creation of the world! One after another, in a seemingly endless sequence—and yet, among all those millions, two Nights stand out: The Night when Christ was born and the Night when Christ rose from the dead. All the other nights that came before and all the ones that have followed and will follow converge, find their fulfillment and their meaning in these two Nights alone, or rather these two Days, which have given us the Light that never sets: first as a tiny Child, then as the victorious Risen One.

We have examined many texts written through the centuries which try to "tell the story" of the Nativity of the Savior. Their success is uneven; they cannot be judged as a whole. The

<sup>321</sup> *Ludolph IX*, p. 165.

<sup>322</sup> *Ludolph IX*, p. 168.

<sup>323</sup> *Ludolph IX*, p. 168-169; cf. *Celestin* fol. 42-42v, p. 38.

most important contribution of the Apocrypha is to help us appreciate the Canonical writings in all their incomparable worth. In fact, from the comparison of the two, the fidelity of the Gospels to the truth of the matter, to the historicity of the events narrated, to what Jesus actually "*did and taught*" (cf. Lk. 1, 1-4; 24, 19; Acts 1, 1), and how people—including His Apostles—reacted to "what happened," the beautiful simplicity and simple beauty with which it is recounted, the inexhaustible depth of each and every word. Everything points out to the fact that the Scriptures stand apart, because they were written "*under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*,"<sup>324</sup> and that we are called to honor the Divine Wisdom that decided which details were to be told, and which were not.

The value of all the other works examined varies depending on their fidelity to Sacred Scripture. The closer they come to the Fountain, the better we are refreshed by them. However, no matter how well-written or interesting they may be, or even how much spiritual good they may have done—as in the case of St. Bridget or Ludolph of Saxony—nothing can be compared to the diaphanous perfection and unfathomable depth of the original account to which we must unceasingly return.

In our world today, so complicated, so full of distractions of every kind, with so many different—and often contradictory—theological and exegetical trends, how urgent it is to return to the Bread of the Word of God, in all its purity, in all its power, as the Saints have taught us through the ages!

*"To whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life"* (Jn. 6, 68). Blessed Manuel González García (†1940) places on Jesus' lips words that are strong but true:

...I must tell you that in the centuries that I have been living among men, I have heard many repeat those words, and nevertheless, I see that such few follow me! Do not think that they lie, no, they deceive themselves, because instead of following Me, the true Jesus, they follow *another Jesus*.

<sup>324</sup> Cf. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), nos. 7, 9, 11, 12, 18, 21, 24.

Do not be surprised or scandalized. The true Jesus is but one: He is the Firstborn of the heavenly Father and the Son of the Immaculate Virgin. But there are many, many falsified, apocryphal, fantastic Jesuses ... And of course, it is easier to follow the falsified one than the true one ... But You follow Me! Me! The Son of Mary Immaculate, the Apprentice of the workshop in Nazareth, the Teacher of the wooden Cross, the Crucified One of Calvary and the Altar, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!<sup>325</sup>

## APPENDIX

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—Editions followed (two were used):

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—Critical edition: Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*. Traduite par Michel-Jean van Esbroeck, in aedibus E. Peeters (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium [CSCO] 478; Scriptores Iberici, t.22) (Lovanii, 1986—textus); CSCO 479 (Lovanii, 1986—translatio). Concerning the attribution of this work to S. Maximus, Van Esbroeck [p.V-XXXVIII] attributes it to St. Maximus; cf. also S. C. Mimouni, "Les Vies de la Vierge. État de la question," *Apocrypha* 5 (1994): 211-248, esp. p.216-223.

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