

## Christmas Eve Reflection

December 24, 2010

By Sr. Carol Besch, OSF

This evening we gather to celebrate the presence of God in our midst – Emmanuel – who longs to fill our hearts and our homes. As much as we proclaim God as the Most High Lord and King, this evening we celebrate the child that comes to us – poor and vulnerable, seeking the comfort of his mother’s milk and warmth. We remember Mary and Joseph who were unable to find a proper lodging for their child’s birth. As Franciscans we remember how Francis breathed new life into the celebration of Christmas. In the year 1223, Francis invited the people of Greccio to come to a cave outside the town and reenact the first Christmas. Bonaventure describes the event in these words:

“Three years before he died St. Francis decided to celebrate the mystery of the birth of the Child Jesus at Greccio, with the greatest possible solemnity. He asked and obtained permission of the pope for the ceremony, so that he could not be accused of being an innovator, and then he had a crib prepared, with hay and an ox and an ass. The friars were all invited and the people came in crowds. The forest re-echoed with their voices and the night was lit up with a multitude of bright lights, while the beautiful music of God’s praises added to the solemnity. The saint stood before the crib and his heart overflowed with tender compassion, he was bathed in tears but overcome with joy. The Mass was sung there and Francis, who was a deacon, sang the Gospel. Then he preached to the people about the birth of the poor King, who he called the Babe of Bethlehem in his tender love.”

This account reminds me of my first Christmas in El Salvador. I do not remember any gift giving among the people who lived in such poverty. However, I remember the celebration of the Posadas that took place the nine nights before Christmas. In the barrio where I accompanied the people, there were no fancy figurines of Joseph and Mary. Each evening one young boy and girl were selected to represent Mary and Joseph. They led the others in a procession that stopped at several houses in the barrio requesting lodging. Often they were refused and had to move on to another house. Finally there is a home where the pilgrims are invited in and there is great rejoicing. Actually the tradition of the Posadas changes the reality of the Christmas story. Joseph and Mary did not encounter an open door nor a suitable place for the birth of Jesus.

In the homes each night there would be the reading of one part of the Christmas story with the children representing Mary, Joseph and Jesus. That year in that particular barrio, there were very few male babies. So many evenings, Jesus was represented by a baby girl. I often noticed in their celebrations an emotional closeness to God, a familiarity with the divine that I longed to have. At the same time some of their practices almost seemed irreverent. I found it difficult to understand that parents would be so bold as to name their new born children, Jesus. Slowly I began to understand that maybe they have grasped the meaning of the incarnation in ways that our sophisticated culture has missed. In fact, Jesus lives in each one of us. Naming a child, Jesus, was one way to call attention to the reality of God’s presence in everyone.

Archbishop Oscar Romero captured this truth so well in his Christmas Homilies:

“No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God — for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God. *(December 24, 1978)*”

We must not seek the child Jesus in the pretty figures of our Christmas cribs. We must seek him among the undernourished children who have gone to bed tonight without eating, among the poor newsboys who will sleep covered with newspapers in doorways. (*December 24, 1979*)

We are sometimes slow to capture the reality of the incarnation – God takes on flesh so that we can know that God truly resides in our midst. We find Christ in one another. We need to be reminded of this again and again. Many of you know that my mom lives at Stonehill Care Center. Each evening I have a chance to visit her and hear about what has happened in her day. One evening the first thing she wanted to report was something the priest had said in his homily that day. She talked about how he imagined that most of them spent a good part of their days thinking about how difficult their lives were, with all their aches and pains. He challenged them for that particular day to open their eyes to those around them. He was sure that they might find someone whose suffering was greater than their own. They were to offer some encouragement and words of hope to that person.

Ron Rolheiser, in his book, “The Holy Longing,” explains the incarnation in this way: “The God who is love and family, who was born in a barn, is a God who is found, first of all, in our homes, in our families, at our tables, in sunrises, in our joys, and in our arguments. To be involved in the normal flow of life, giving and receiving, as flawed and painful as this might be at times within any relationship, is to have the life of God flow through us. “

So tonight we celebrate this God who became flesh so that we might know Emmanuel- God-with -us, present in our everyday lives. “If God is incarnate in ordinary life then we should seek God, first of all, within ordinary life. Too often we look for God in the extraordinary. We cannot bypass a flawed family on earth to try to relate to a non-flawed God in heaven.” We find Emmanuel in our own vulnerability and brokenness, in our joys and sorrows. We find Christ in our imperfect community, in our ordinary everyday lives. We give flesh to God when we strive to live our lives as Jesus did, when we embrace the spirituality of the incarnation. We celebrate the ordinary, incarnate God in our midst.