

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST 3

A. The Good News (III, 36, 1-2):

The angel announced to some shepherds: “*Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy*” (Lk 2:10). “*For, this day, is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David.*” (Lk 2:11). He also gave them a sign: “*You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger*” (Lk 2:12).

- A restricted angelic manifestation:

The angelic messenger could have spread the Good News to all, but restricted his manifestation to some simple shepherds, according to the will of God. We read in Isaiah: “*Thou art a hidden God, the God of Israel, the Savior*” (45:15), and also “*His look was, as it were, hidden and despised*” (43:3).

- Reasons:

The restriction was in view of the Cross and our own Redemption. If the Good News would have been given to all, it would have created too many difficulties to the Redemption of man. St. Paul reveals that “*if they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory*” (1 Cor. 2:8).

This would have also lessened the merit of faith, which He came to offer men as the way to righteousness. If the birth of the Savior had been made known to all by evident signs, the very nature of faith would have been destroyed, since it is “*the evidence of things that appear not*” (Heb. 11:1).

Moreover, a baby is feeble and without defense. A greater manifestation and a necessary special protection would have put His life at risk, as it would have troubled the Devil, Herod and the Jews.

However, the message to the shepherds and to the Magi and their testimony were necessary to oppose any doubt upon the reality of the human nature of Christ. St. Augustine says: “*If He had not passed through the different stages of age from babyhood to youth, had neither eaten nor slept, would He not have strengthened an erroneous opinion, and made it impossible for us to believe that He had become true man? And while He is doing all things wondrously, would He have taken away that which He accomplished in mercy?*” (Ep. ad Volusianum CXXVIII)

B. The Shepherds, the Magi, Simeon and Anna (III, 36, 3):

The Savior and His Mission concern all sorts and conditions of men, as in Christ there is neither male nor female, neither Gentile nor Jew, neither bond nor free (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

So the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ was made known to men of all conditions. “*The shepherds were Israelites, the Magi were Gentiles. The former were nigh to Him, the latter far from Him. Both hastened to Him together as to the cornerstone*” (St. Augustine, Sermon on the Epiphany, 32 de Temp.) Also, the Magi were wise and powerful, when the shepherds simple and lowly.

The Savior was also made known to the righteous such as Simeon and Anna; and to sinners, such as the Magi. He was made known both to men, and to women; so as to show no condition of men to be excluded from Christ’s Redemption.

The manifestation of Christ’s birth was a kind of foretaste of the full manifestation, which was to come. And as in the later manifestation the first announcement of the grace of Christ was made by Him and His Apostles to the Jews and afterwards to the Gentiles, so the first to come to Christ were the shepherds, who were the first-fruits of the Jews, as being near to Him; and afterwards came the Magi from afar, who were “*the first-fruits of the Gentile.*” (St. Augustine, Serm. 30 de Temp. cc.).

C. The Angels and the Star (III, 36, 5 & 7):

The shepherds, as Jews, were accustomed to receive Divine answers through the angels; through whom they also received the Law.

The Magi, Gentiles and astrologers, were accustomed to observe the course of the stars.

Thus the Holy Birth was made known by means of visible apparitions to the shepherds and Magi, as being occupied with material things.

Since this birth was not only earthly, but also heavenly, it is also revealed through heavenly signs to both shepherds and Magi. *“The angels inhabit, and the stars adorn the heavens; by both, therefore, do the heavens show forth the glory of God”* (St. Augustine, Sermon on the Epiphany cciv).

The righteous did not need the visible apparition of the angel; on account of their perfection the interior instinct of the Holy Ghost was enough for them.

Before our Lord Jesus Christ could speak, He was conveniently manifested by speechless elements.

Thus Simeon and Anna, the righteous, were chosen to receive the Good News by the interior instinct of the Holy Ghost. So, as writes St. Luke, Simeon: *“had received an answer from the Holy Ghost that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord”* (2:26).

- A special star:

The star which appeared to the Magi did not belong to the heavenly system:

- No other star approaches from the same quarter as this star, whose course was from north to south, these being the relative positions of Persia, whence the Magi came, and Judea.
- It appeared not only at night, but also at midday: and no star can do this, not even the moon.
- It was visible at one time and hidden at another. For when they entered Jerusalem it hid itself; then, when they had left Herod, it showed itself again.
- Its movement was not continuous, but when the Magi had to continue their journey the star moved on; when they had to stop the star stood still; as happened to the pillar of a cloud in the desert.
- It indicated the virginal Birth, not by remaining aloft, but by coming down below, as *“the star which they had seen in the east went before them, until it came and stood over where the child was”* (Mt 2:9).

The very nature of the star is still a great question and several opinions appeared.

As the Holy Ghost, after our Lord’s Baptism, came down on Him under the form of a dove, so He might have appeared to the Magi under the form of a star. The angel, who under a human form appeared to the shepherds, might have appeared to the Magi under the form of a star.

However, it seems more probable that it was a newly created star, not in the heavens, but in the air near the earth, and that its movement varied according to God’s will. *“It was not one of those stars which since the beginning of the creation observe the course appointed to them by the Creator; but this star was a stranger to the heavens, and made its appearance at the strange sight of a virgin in childbirth”* (St. Augustine, Contra Faust. ii).

D. The time of the manifestation of Christ’s Birth (III, 36, 6):

The Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ was first made known to the shepherds on the very day that He was born. *“There were in the same country shepherds watching, and keeping the night-watches over their flock. And it came to pass, after the angels departed from them into heaven the shepherds said one to another: Let us go over to Bethlehem and they came with haste”* (Lk 2:8-16).

Second in order were the Magi, who came to Christ on the thirteenth day after His birth, on which day is kept the feast of the Epiphany. For if they had come after a year, or even two years, they would not have found Him in Bethlehem.

Finally, it was made known in the Temple to the righteous on the fortieth day after His birth, (Lk 2:22).

The shepherds represent the apostles and other believers of the Jews, to whom the faith of Christ was made known first; among whom there were *“not many mighty, not many noble”* (1 Cor. 1:26). Faith came later to the *“fullness of the Gentiles”*, which is foreshadowed in the Magi. Finally, it came to the fullness of the Jews, which is foreshadowed in the righteous. Wherefore also Christ was manifested to them in the Jewish Temple.