

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY MELBOURNE SENATUS, 3 JANUARY 2016

In these days of Christmastide, the Church's reflection focuses on the mystery of the Incarnation, God becoming flesh – utterly central to our faith. And pivotal to that mystery is the role of Mary, since it's from Mary that God the Son takes to himself human nature. In God's plan, without Mary there is no Incarnation, and thus no salvation: God and humanity would not be united.

At the Annunciation we focus on the role of Mary's 'yes', her free obedience, in bringing this about. At the feast of Mary, the Holy Mother of God that we just celebrated, we focused on her very humanity as source of Christ's humanity. Mary gave to God the Son everything that any human mother gives her child.

The reality of Mary's motherhood draws our attention to the literal reality of the Word being made flesh, which is important to reflect on in our present circumstances, to recognise some misguided trends that it's good for us as legionaries to be aware of. We remember from John's Gospel the supreme testimony to this doctrine. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.' (Jn 1:1, 14)

And at the start of his First Letter, St John again expresses his wonder at the amazing closeness of God becoming human: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you ...' (1 Jn 1:1-2).

The invisible, incomprehensible God makes himself able to be 'seen with our eyes' and 'touched with our hands', as John says, expressing his own close experience of Christ.

How could God have come closer to us than becoming one of us? This utterly confounds human expectations. We can deal with the idea of a God creating the universe as First Cause – the 'distant architect' of all things. What we could never have expected is that the infinite God would actually *enter his own creation*, becoming flesh and affirming flesh. God isn't just concerned with the 'spiritual' – he also loves material things, fleshly things – he created them after all! The true God, Creator of all, has power over the material, and even enters into it.

Grasping what we as Christians and Catholics believe about the Incarnation knocks on the head two fashionable notions doing the rounds. 'I'm spiritual, not religious', we often hear. But this scorned 'religion of the common people' is that which has to do with outward ceremonies, physical miracles, sacraments, organisational structures of weak human beings, laws, dogmas (divine truth expressed in human words): the fleshly physical things, precisely the human realities claimed by God and affirmed as his own by becoming flesh. God created us as *spirit and body combined* – and the God who became flesh embraces both: the spiritual indeed as central, but expressing itself in the material, the bodily, and also the social (which involves bodily interaction).

Or another of the fads of the moment: something I've heard repeatedly from concerned members of the faithful in recent months, is of other people saying to them about some Catholic doctrine, the pseudo-intellectual phrase: 'Don't be literal, interpret it symbolically!' I don't expect legionaries would easily fall into that trap, but it's good for us to be aware of it, and know how to meet it if we come across it.

For example, someone might 're-interpret' by saying God didn't *really* become man, but that this is (supposedly) just a symbol that God loves us; or that Jesus didn't *really* rise from the dead, but that this is just a symbol that his ideas lived on in the hearts of his disciples. (A pretty boring faith, in my opinion!) Like a lot of fashions, to the people who latch on to it, it seems the most up-to-date thing. But actually, something similar was all the rage a hundred-or-so years ago, as part of the 'modernist' heresy – a key feature of which was keeping the *words* of Catholic teachings, but changing the *meaning*. And the Church said already back then, no, this isn't the real thing. This isn't the faith handed on to us by Jesus and the apostles.

Now of course, there *is* plenty of symbolism in the Scriptures. God, in communicating himself to humanity, speaks through the full range of human expression. The Church has always recognised that. But to take beliefs *intended literally* from the start, such as the physical 'fleshly' miracles of Christ, and above all his physical resurrection, and to now pretend it was all only 'symbolic' – that's really a roundabout way of saying our faith was wrong, but at the same time refusing to admit it!

The First Vatican Council in 1870, already foreseeing the danger to the faith, ruled infallibly against the false view that, 'as science progresses, at times a sense is to be given to dogmas proposed by the Church different from the one that the Church has understood and understands' (Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* DS 3043). So yes, we understand things more *deeply* as the centuries go by, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit – but never *taking away* the original meaning that the Church's faith understood in earlier times. That's the correct understanding of what we call 'development of doctrine'.

And yes, we do believe physical miracles literally happen (as evidence in various historical cases clearly shows) (cf. *Dei Filius* DS 3034). The God who *created* the physical has *power* over the physical, and the miracles are the necessary external signs to our reason of the supreme and central miracle, the Incarnation.

As for reducing the Incarnation itself to 'symbolism'! That would miss the whole point – that God has chosen to become utterly close to us, to become visible, tangible. God doesn't fear the flesh, and we don't fear God's closeness. The baby in the manger is not a 'symbol' of God's love. He is God made man. And yes, as the Catholic Church has been making clear for 2000 years – we do mean that literally.