

Georges De La Tour

The Adoration of the Shepherds



Stefano Titta SJ

From the very first centuries, Christians have always sought to depict the Nativity of Jesus as it is recounted in the Gospels, not so much out of the curiosity to know “how things actually happened”, as it was to satisfy the need to meditate and contemplate the gift manifested within this biblical narrative: God has given his Son because we too would become his children.

Only in more recent history did it so happen that Christmas was reduced to a moment of tenderness, proud of its own hypocrisy and false feelings, an occasion in order to show the worst in oneself within society wherein one may “become a child once more, for a single day” as a justification of our age and frivolity for the rest of the year! And this is not to mention the cycle of consumerism which, evidently, has nothing to do with this feast.

The history of spirituality and the multitude of artistic witnesses that have accompanied and sustained it, tell us that Christmas was, for many centuries of the Christian period, as time dedicated to the meditation of the greatest mystery of all Christendom: The Incarnation of the Word. Out of all Christian dogma, this is the foremost truth, which Edith Stein (St Therese Benedicta of the Cross) has “*always though – and perhaps, at a risk – that the mystery of Incarnation is greater than that of the Resurrection. Because a God that became a baby...and then a child...and then a man, in death He can only but resurrect.*”¹ The unconditional gift from God to mankind *can be seen* – it manifests itself before our own two eyes, in the mystery of the Baby in a manger.²

¹ E. STEIN, *Il Mistero del Natale*, Queriniana, Brescia 2010, 36.

² The term ‘*mystery*’ does not imply something which cannot be explained, but it implies a truth which is essential for our life, a truth which cannot be understood rapidly but requires a continuous dedication and encounter in order to be able to comprehend something of its depth. The more we

Seen in this light, the plastic arts have, over the centuries, challenged and toiled around with an essential quality: that of allowing the *invisible to be seen*.

The strong link between the mystery of Incarnation and artistic expression is synthetically put by the well-known Italian sculptor, Arturo Martini (1889-1947): "For us artists, Christ represents the greatest and most expressive figure in our world...The *complete vision of Being* is given stability with the Incarnation; with Christ, expression is also born for us, that is, Christ is the direct opposite, the anti-thesis, of the Greek Olympic mythology. I say this in order to demonstrate how our Art was born with Him, and who would rather live outside of Him, can only but perform academic exercises on form."³ A concept of Massimalist Art (art of an Italian Socialist Movement in the early 20th century), but one which helps us to understand the completeness of many artistic expressions: the senses (sight and sound) allow one to approach it, when otherwise it would have remained incomprehensible.

Thus, by taking into consideration some of the points put forward in the well-known studies of André Fossard on the production of Palaeochristian art in Ravenna, it can be said that "art is a fragment of contemplation which fell in matter."⁴ It is precisely the matter of art which accompanies us to the encounter with all that cannot be spoken or seen.

involve ourselves within the mystey, the more we are able to comprehend new aspects, while acknowledging the fact that there is always more to know and more to *see*. It takes time for one to adjust to the darkness of a room after having stepped in the from an illuminated exterior. Likewise, we must therefore, have the patience to *dwell within the mystery* so that, little by little, things become more clear, and progressively, what *at first sight* might have seemed *invisible*, becomes visible.

³ A. MARTINI, *Il Regno*, Pro civitate cristiana, Assisi, (3) 1942. Italicised additions are mine.

⁴ A. FROSSARD, *Il vangelo secondo Ravenna*, Itacalibri, Castelbolognese 2004, 73

“If you remain silent, says the Lord to the apostles, the stones will start to call’. In art, the stones, the colours, the medium, celebrate the crucified and resurrected Christ in solitude. Skill, art, inspiration, there is all of this in art, and something more, something mysterious which fascinates and intrigues the intellect, and indifferently moves it to discover a soul. This mysterious quality is precisely the Christian mystery of a Christ-centric vision which emanates from the cross of Christ. A cross which he is not nailed to, because once all is completed, the era of the Resurrection, in which we live, begins – that moment in the Creed wherein every Christian maintains: ‘and his Kingdom will know no end.’ It is the cross which radiated light and life to all the ends of the universe and bestows it with all that it is and will be – without end, of a quantity which is infinitely superior to what it had ever been in time and history.”⁵

The Nativity of Christ is among one of the most commonly and frequently represented subjects in the art of the Western world. Indeed, winding back the clock by centuries, one may find such references in the early third-century enigmatic wall paintings in the catacombs of Priscilla in Rome, where, the Virgin and Child are depicted together with the adoration of the Magi.⁶

Alongside the other plastic arts, the use of sacred representations began to spread as from the thirteenth century. The first to emphasise the element of “live” contemplation of the mystery of Incarnation was St Francis of Assisi. During a particularly delicate moment in Church history, a period when the desire to renew and repair the Church on the pillars of spirituality and poverty

⁵ ID., 102. Here, Frossard refers to the art found in Ravenna, but I believe that the concept may be applied to any work of art in general.

⁶ For more information on this wall painting, see S. CARLETTI, *Catacombe di Priscilla*, Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Roma, 1981.

began to profuse rapidly, the popular *pietas* made a strong comeback. This *pietas* was considered as a “sacred” expression of a community of people who wanted to be in close proximity to Christ, to actually see themselves as active and passive protagonists of the most iconic moments of His life. The most famous of such representations is that of Greccio, in Lazio.⁷ In this portrayal of the birth of Jesus, the saint of Assisi does not quite face a fragile infant, so easily loveable, but the humble force of the love of God, overflowing and abundant, lasting even up to this point. St Francis, in conversation with his friend and benefactor of Greccio, Giovanni Velita, explains in which way this image calls his brothers and the villagers to contemplation: “If you wish to celebrate the Nativity of Jesus in Greccio, then go ahead and prepare for what I tell you: I would like to depict the birth of the Child in Bethlehem, and in some way or other *see, with the eyes of the body, the discomfort and troubles to which he born, as a result of the lack of basic needs, necessary for a new-born*, and how he was nestled in a manger, lying on hay between the ox and the donkey’... (In this sacred representation) the gifts of the Omnipotent manifest themselves in abundance, and one of those present, a virtuous man, is struck by a wonderful vision. In the vision, it seems that the Baby lying in the manger is devoid of life, but Francesco, on approaching him, brings him out of that sort of profound sleep. Nor could the fantastic vision be at odds with the facts, since, through the intercession of the saint, baby Jesus *was brought to life in the hearts of many, of those who forgot*, and instead left them with an indelible and profound mark of this encounter lodged within their memory.”⁸

⁷ A. D'ANCONA, *Sacre rappresentazioni dei secoli XIV, XV e XVI*, LE Monnier, Firenze, 1872.

⁸ T. DA CELANO, «Vita Prima», in *Fonti Francescane*, Editrici Francescane, Assisi, 1986, nn. 468 – 470. The added emphasis are mine.

Participating in this sacred representation implies the ability to deepen its spiritual meaning, to be able to personally and directly experience the presence of He who is called *Emanuele*, Christ is with us. (cfr. *Mt* 1, 23).⁹

When the execution of the Sacred representation is not possible or poses certain difficulties, there are always painters and sculptors who are able to *represent* the mystery of the Birth of Christ for personal or communal meditation.

In the following pages, a “guided contemplation” on a representation of a Nativity scene will be provided – a type of sacred representation wherein the observer is called to “enter into the scene”, to allow the work to resonate intimately with the viewer, encouraging personal participation.

There are numerous masterpieces that may be considered in order to illustrate this argument, however, I will be limiting myself to a work by a great 17th-century French artist of whom we actually know very little, George de la Tour.¹⁰ The work in question is *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, found in the Louvre Museum, Paris.¹¹

⁹ In the Spiritual Exercises, the suggestion to contemplate the Birth of Jesus is also an invitation to identify and place oneself within the scene: “I pretend to be like a small and unworthy servant, observing them, contemplating them, and serving them in all their needs, as if I were present there with all the respect and reverence possible. At the end, I may reflect on myself in order to gather any of the fruit of the prayer.” I. DI LOYOLA, *Esercizi Spirituali*, Ed. ADP. Roma, 1991, n. 114.

¹⁰ The real story of George de la Tour is, for the greater part, still shrouded in a veil of mystery. Of his private and professional life, his artistic formation, and success as an artist, very little is known. He is documented to have been born on the 14th March 1593 in Vicsur-Seille, Lorraine (Eastern France), while his death is recorded on the 30th January 1652 in Lunéville. The other few known documents associated with him are somewhat irrelevant and useless for attempting to understand the temperament and character of the artist. He is the son of a modest family (his father was a mere baker) and who, after his marriage, moved to the family of his wife, in Lunéville, where he spent the majority of the rest of his life. In this region, a *bourgeoisie* in the service of Enrico II, duke of Lorraine, who supported de la Tour and suggested that he be taken up as a court painter of King Louis XIII, in the residence of Nancy. We also know that he had numerous children, but only one, Etienne, continued in the footsteps of his father on reaching adulthood. With the death of de la Tour, however, the activity of his *bottega* (workshop) diminished and rapidly came to an end.

When one stands before the work, it feels as if he or she is being “drawn into it.” Why does this happen? The composition departs from that adopted in the representation of group portraits in the *sacra conversazione* (‘sacred conversation’) typology. In such works, real persons lend their appearances and faces to ancient characters, be them of pagan or Christian religion, with the dual intention to concretise their virtues and to take on the responsibility to practice these virtues throughout their daily life. In fact, this painting focuses on the protagonists of the group, and hardly allows any space for the surrounding environment to be depicted, in case it were to prove to be a distraction from what is essential. A few elements typical of Nativity scenes, however, are missing: the ox and the donkey, and the angels. Meanwhile it consists of a neutral background: is the scene set in a room, or is it an external location, at night? The biblical text itself does not make any particular reference to a cave or a stable, as was handed down through the tradition of devotion. All it mentions is that: “[Maria] wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” (*Luke 2,7*). The viewer is assisted into entering the scene, precisely due to the absence of a landscape, or of a definite historical setting: there are no Roman ruins which typically allow the painter to display his dexterity and technical ability, or his knowledge of the antique, symbolising the victory of Christianity over paganism; there is no landscape with the small city of Bethlehem on the

From this point onwards, de la Tour and his *oeuvre* fell out of the limelight, only to be re-discovered at the end of the 19th century.

Little is also known of his students and followers. Their work under the patronage of Enrico II certainly contributed to their knowledge of the Caravaggesque tradition of painting, which de la Tour himself adopted. The Duke of Lorraine, in fact, commissioned Caravaggio’s Annunciation of Nancy – a work which de la Tour was likely to have seen in person. However, it is not known whether de la Tour had actually carried out an “Italian tour”, since no documentary evidence has yet been found on this. It is, perhaps, more likely that de la Tour never left France, but instead, augmented his own personal style within a local cultural context, influenced by Northern, Flemish and Dutch painting, but not untouched, however, by the Caravaggesque ripples that had by then arrived in Europe.

¹¹ The work is carried out in oil on canvas, dated to 1644, and measured 107x131cm.

horizon, or the group of magi riding in the distance, approaching the cave. This space, as depicted by de la Tour, in reality, could be any space and, therefore, it could also refer to the space in which the viewer stands, at any given time! Surrounding the manger-cot there is, in fact, an empty space: for the person, perhaps, who observes and contemplates! Thus, the viewer becomes part of the painting, and enters into the scene, where the thoughts, feelings and gestures which characterise the different protagonists may be shared and experienced more closely. Even the type of dress utilised somewhat favours the onlooker. They are dressed in an *all'antica* style of clothing, reflecting the fashion of the time in which the painting was executed. They are dressed, in fact, according to the fashion of the Lunéville *bourgeois* and probably, even the facial features were inspired from the inhabitants of the time. The halos, too, are missing – the attributes which often are applied in order to distinguish the saints from the rest! In this manner, the viewers encounter a familiar context, encouraging them to identify themselves and personally participate in this event.

Apart from this minimalistic setting, the composition is likewise extremely studied and precise, and which, together, are an expression of this pedagogical intention of involving the viewer. There are no secondary figures, and each one represented is placed to another in order to form a semi-circle where the viewer may easily identify each figure: be it the face, the dress, the objects which characterise and distinguish them. They are men and women, young and old, smiling or wrapped up in thought – each and every one is, in his or her own way, a protagonist responding to an encounter with this mysterious little child.

In the order from left to right, one may identify: the Virgin Mary, a bearded shepherd who holds onto a staff and carried a lamb in his arms, a young piper who raises his cap as a sign of respect, the nurse who holds a

basin, possibly containing warm water to assist the Virgin when giving birth, an event which has, however, already happened.¹² Furthermore, in the extreme right of the painting, and as a counterpart of the Virgin, is St Joseph who holds and shields a candle with his hand – the source which illuminates the entire scene.

Having said this however, the naturalistic and meticulous manner by which de la Tour illuminated the scene (as is apparent in most of the mature works of the painter) seems to emanate from the child rather than from the candle itself. Baby Jesus, covered in linen, lies in the manger and releases what might be described as a divine gleam that outshines that of the candle. And this may be particularly noted when considering the shadows cast on the clothing of the Virgin: on her breast, the shadow of the hands seem to have been cast by the candle held by St Joseph; however, at the height of his left knee, the straw in the manger betrays another source of light – one that can be none other than that coming from Baby Jesus. Furthermore, the shadow cast by the hands on the chest of the Virgin somewhat resembles the form of a dove. This momentarily recalls the announcement of the angel to Mary “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (*Luke 1, 35*).

This light attracts, astonishes and, together with the simplified composition, leads us to concentrate on its mysterious nature. It is a light which is both natural and supernatural, human and divine, within the child and beyond, carried by the “father”! As a result of this duality, this double-sided device, also represents one of the most perplexing aspects of this mystery: the human and divine nature of Jesus, son of Man and son of God.

¹² See the account of the “Protovangelo di Giacomo”, n.19 in *I vangeli apocrifi*, Marcello Craveri, ed., Torino, Einaudi, 1969.

In addition, every figure is illuminated to a different degree by this mysterious light. This does not detract any of the realism of the painting but confers, in effect, a mysterious origin.¹³ How can one not be enthralled by the stillness and profound contemplation of this truth? How can one not feel “revealed” by this mysterious light? Whoever observes is invited to stay, to stop and be bathed by the light, all throughout to the inner core of the heart.

The range of the feelings and emotions expressed by the figures is deceptively varied but we shall return to that in a moment. For now, however, we will focus on the figures of the Virgin and St Joseph who are placed at opposite ends of the composition, almost as if to introduce and accompany the observer.

St Joseph: light and shadow alternate in a dramatic manner, outlining his figure; his solemn face is that of an old man modelled by the lines of concentration, but whose pensive gaze and strong *chiaroscuro* also reflect contrasting, possibly conflicting, thoughts. Perhaps, he is recounting all that has happened up to that point...the “decree of Augustus Caesar” is something which could befall anyone... what would you do? It might stir your anger, and view it as an abuse of power, that it does not make any sense: but it’s there! Do you think of Maria? We left, perhaps someone would have exclaimed: “they almost seemed resigned to their fate, they somewhat cause anger with their submission! Yes, they allow their ruthless, cruel logic to overwhelm the ‘things of this world.’” We have entered completely and, at first sight, we might have been subjected to what everyone did or would have done: “and everyone went to their respective town to register.”¹⁴

¹³ The light, which is also the most intangible of the earthly elements, was since the very beginning one of the most common attributes associated with divinity, and it is one of the themes which has, in fact, particularly intrigued and preoccupied artists over time, especially those working between the end of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century.

¹⁴ *Luke 2,3*. Even worse, in the Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius adds: “to pay tribute” *Id.*, n. 111... which is indeed, the case – it will also cost us something.

Their disposition, their presence, almost broken and scattered by the impositions of their time, actually irritates me: how is it possible, first the angel, then the promise, then the birth of a great baby, and now this decree! But why risk undertaking a tiresome, dangerous and useless journey, while Mary is pregnant? Why allow the demand of the time have such weight on our life? A burden which alters the sense of things and causes one to act irrespectively of one's own will!

Nonetheless, they still embark on this journey in complete faith that, even then, there might be something worth journeying for – if I *look* well, I will *see* that they are not as passive, as prone to do as “all the others” do. They become, thus, protagonists of all that they are experiencing, evident precisely in their endurance to withstand whatever obstacles and difficulties they may encounter. They take the bull by the horns – the decree will not be the be-all and end-all, perhaps, they never thought it was...but this decree became a bridge instead, because even this situation could be an opportunity provided by the grace of God...perhaps, they spoke of this while they were journeying: “if we have not yet abandoned our faith then God, they say, will certainly not leave us!” They were not crippled by the challenge. Sure, it left them momentarily winded, but as a result of their determination, realism, faith and simplicity, they managed to face the challenge and, even, overcome it.

“Come on, let's look for another solution...we cannot stop, not now, do not allow poor judgment to convince you that nothing will change, we must pick up what we started and continue the journey, come on, have faith, we must keep looking!” Do you remember, Maria? These were the words which you told me when we could not find a place to stay....Joseph looks at the child in the warm light of the Mother – Maria, here, emerges with all her beauty, her lucidity and gentleness, and through her example, Joseph learns how to handle the difficulties of life, and as a result, he trusted and now he admits to having done the right thing in trusting....What did he want to do? Return

back, and lose everything? No! Joseph continued to trust, without ever giving up...if he had allowed himself to be engulfed solely by the harsh reality of the situation, his final decision would truly have been grim: it would not have been worth it, we were mistaken, we were naive and foolish. Perhaps, tears of pain were still welling in his eyes as a result of this but, despite the situation, he did not succumb to the grim insignificance of adversary things.

Perhaps, Maria told him: "it is not with the strength of desperation, but with the gentleness and subtlety of faith that we can take another step – the necessary step. Find this gentleness in your heart, and have the courage to take this other step!"

And thus, little by little, step by step, the solution became clear...although perhaps, one which he had not thought of initially: But how? A manger? In this crisis?

The Virgin is draped in rich vermillion red, a tone which the artist further saturates through the play of light. Symbolically, this colour is often linked to the God, generally, to his infinite and passionate love. The colour emits a strength which, incidentally, contrasts sharply with the pensive figure, absorbed in a contained meditation, a fixed gaze and serious expression, and hands placed in the act of silent prayer. Without a doubt, the Virgin is "pondering [all these things] in her heart." (*Luke 2,19b*). In this situation she was, perhaps, on the side of God...but what kind are you, God - you, who needs and relies on nothing in order to prove your greatness! You do not even need a house to be born in, a crib is enough for you: truly you are great! Don't you see, Joseph, how great our Lord is? We are, at the most, a shed and uses us so that he may come to this world of men and women, to visit them! Adore this God who, precisely because has no need to prove anything, does not fear to subject himself to the harsh reality of earthly things.

Likewise, the other figures in the painting, participate in this silent dialogue; the shepherd, the piper have responded to the calls of the angel, but now stand paralysed before the great mystery manifesting itself before their eyes. The shepherd holds tightly onto the stick he uses to guide his flock, as he stands before the child who is later to be identified as the Good Shepherd. This is both a strong parallel and contrast: with which staff shall the Shepherd lead his people? The shepherd also carries a lamp, so meek and gentle that it stops itself from eating the straws sticking out of the manger. The lamb strongly mirrors and foreshadows the passion of Christ, just as the closed eyes of the Baby Jesus suggest his death and resurrection.¹⁵ This is what shall, therefore, be the “staff” of the Good Shepherd: that of the cross!

The piper and the nurse, on the other hand, participate in other manner, caught somewhere in between awe and reverence: each one enters into the scene according to his or her own faculties, each responds to this encounter differently, thus, receiving something unique and personal.

These people offer their resources to God, no matter how few or small they may be, and they offer them with great simplicity, and let themselves fall into his graceful hand. This letting go, this abandonment, is represented by the piper’s flute, because the breath of the Holy Spirit inspires its own melodies within him.

Similarly, the nurse does not know where to look – at the basin or at the child who came to the world without any assistance, without the labour of birth and who emits this mysterious light. She is a well-kept and capable woman, evident through her neat and refined look. Perhaps, she was moved by empathy for the married couple who could not find a sheltered and safe

¹⁵ The section of the Gospel of Luke, on which this painting is inspired from, is actually divided into three parts, and articulated with a refrain: “she wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger” (*Luke 2: 7. 13.16*). This reference does not simply imply the setting of a scene, but it is actually a key element for the interpretation of the text. The evangelist is providing guidelines in order to be able to glean the paschal message of salvation in this birth.

place to stay; she might have worried for this young mother, who was certainly in her first pregnancy, and perhaps, she might have been perceived as generous within the cavern, with the warm water to ease the pain of labour and the burden of the entire ordeal. Now, however, she feels useless as she acknowledges that this young mother and wife is on another level all together, that this baby is conditioning her to follow another kind of path, one of a different nature. Her heart, therefore, is filled with peaceful warmth because she understands, at that point, that she is being called to experience the moment in a different way: it is not her that she is being asked to serve, but to welcome him who has made himself the servant of all. Her water basin, no longer of any need, is not without meaning – it is a sign of the manner in which she responds to a call which shook her very core, which surprised her. Like the shepherds. This woman teaches us how we are to commit ourselves completely to all that we choose to do, to all that we are asked, knowingly however, that all our doings are not ours, but of Another.

All of this occurs in a suspended context, which is, at the same time, very real and concrete.

This is a masterpiece that is poetically and existentially married to the mystery of the Nativity and which, with great technical and artistic dexterity, sheds light upon external and internal shadows alike. It is a work which calls each and every observer to take his or her place – the place of the missing person, so much so that the painted “frame” would constantly appear incomplete without them, without stepping into the frame as a participant and protagonist of this sacred representation.

Stefano Titta SJ



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