

What Child Is This?

For most of us in America, our mothers have had the good fortune to birth us in the comfort and safety of a hospital under the vigilant care of a doctor, nurse, or midwife. But there are also some who have not experienced such pleasant accommodations. There are no fresh sheets, warm beds, or sturdy shelters to welcome these infants. Among those infants who have had this kind of reception was our Lord and King.

Jesus' first resting place was not a clean hospital bed or ornate cradle. It was a manger, a *feeding trough* for animals. It was a receptacle for hay as well as the animals' saliva and their masticated bits of food. This fact does not lessen His kingship or majesty but proves His magnanimity and wisdom. As King, He is also servant, as God, He is also human, and as omnipotent, He is also meek. How lovable is Jesus Who could have come down from the clouds in all His glory, yet chose instead to lay unseen in a feeding trough! Our God entered into this world humbly, softly, and vulnerably. His being laid in a manger certainly reveals much about who our Lord is, but most importantly it points to the ultimate reason for Jesus Christ's birth: He came to be food for us. He came so that we could *feed* on Him in the Eucharist and have eternal life.

In this light, the manger that we see in nativity plays is no longer a folksy touch or prop. It foreshadows Jesus' as Eucharist and reminds Catholics of the reality that happens at Mass: communicants literally eat, "feed on", the body and blood of Christ, albeit in a non-bloody manner. At Mass, when the priest says the words of consecration, the bread, although still having the appearance of bread, is no longer bread. It becomes in its entirety the flesh of Christ. In the same way, after the words of consecration, the wine becomes the blood of Christ, although it still has the appearance of wine. Thus, when we consume the host and drink the cup, we are eating the body and blood of Jesus.

This miracle is hard for many to believe, that what they consume at Mass, which appears to be nothing more than nondescript bread and wine, really is the King and Creator of the cosmos. Yet was not the infant born in Bethlehem in a manger, who appeared to be like any other helpless baby, the King and Creator of Universe? Virtually all men and women of Christian faith would assent to this apparent paradox. Even when Jesus grew to be of age, He looked to be like any other man. The prophet Isaiah speaks of Him as thus: "He grew up like a sapling...like a shoot from the parched earth; there was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him." Many during Jesus' earthly life were looking for something totally different than Jesus and in doing so never came to believe that He was the Son of God, their Savior. They were not men and women of faith, but men and women of sight. They ignored the words He spoke which were truth and life and paid attention instead to His humble appearance. Many Catholics fall into this same trap concerning the Eucharist. Because of its appearance, the Eucharist is dismissed as being a simple symbol of Jesus' presence rather than being Jesus Himself.

This Advent, reflect on the infant Jesus lying in a manger. Let that meditation serve as a starting point for overcoming those obstacles which stand in the way of an authentic faith in and relationship with Jesus, the Eucharist.

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