

Holy Family

12.29.19

We celebrate the feast of the Holy Family today. As our pastor Fr. Costantino told us in the bulletin last week, Pope Francis issued a brief letter on December first of this year, urging us to continue the tradition begun by St. Francis of Assisi of portraying the birth of the Lord as it is described for us in the Gospels of Luke and Matthews. In Luke's Gospel, ch. 2:7 we read: "She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there no room for them in the inn." Then shepherds, having been instructed by angels to seek the child and his parents, find him there. In Matthew, ch. 2, we learn of the Magi, the wise men from the East who came looking for this special child. They find him and offer him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Those two accounts, one from Matthew and the other from Luke, are the biblical basis of what we call the nativity scene: the parents and the child, the shepherds and the magi. There is no explicit mention of animals being present in these texts, but the child is in the trough where the domestic animals ordinarily ate. Therefore it is not unrealistic to portray some animals as present. Would there also have been camels present? If camels were the magis' mode of

travel, then their presence there also seems realistic. In any case, that is what we usually see in nativity scenes, and that is what you see here today in our church. And Fr. Costantino is very happy that the pope wrote this letter urging us to make use of nativity scenes precisely this year when he acquired a new one for our church. Thank you, Pope Francis, he says to the pope. We are doing just that.

But this year there have been some new “takes” on the nativity scene. For example, in a daily prayer book I use, which is entitled “Give us This Day,” there is a picture of a couple walking with their child. The father is wearing jeans, a tee-shirt and sneakers. The mother is wearing jeans and flip-flops, is carrying a bag, and has her child slung over her shoulder in a huge scarf. Yes, they are migrants, maybe even illegal, walking across our southern border, looking for a better life for themselves and their son in our land. And in the papers recently there have been photos of the traditional nativity scene on display in different parishes across the nations, but something new had been added to them. The whole nativity scene is wrapped in a chain fence to remind viewers of what has been happening to migrants at our borders this past year under the present administration. Families are imprisoned, and children have

been separated from their parents, an action in itself worthy of impeachment.

Oh, we might be tempted to say, such portrayals destroy the beauty of the Christmas event. Let us remember it as we have always remembered it: a tender scene of family bliss, and one enhanced by the beauty which western culture has created over the centuries to honor it: the magnificent paintings of the Renaissance and the glorious music of Handel's Messiah and our Christmas carols.

But if we go back to the biblical texts, what do we find? The fact that the child is portrayed as having been laid in a manger is telling us that he and his family are very poor. There is no room for them in the inn. And despite the fact that angels and magi adore him, his parents, we are told, have to flee to Egypt because Herod is seeking to kill him. And they remain there until Herod's death. Then they travel home again but have to go to a different part of their country because Herod's son, now ruling in Bethlehem, is also vicious. In short, all is not sweetness and light even in the biblical accounts.

Scripture scholars would certainly tell us that in these nativity stories we are not dealing simply with historical accounts. No, we

are dealing with the authors' understanding of what they thought this child must endure because he is the promised messiah. Therefore, since his nation suffered exile and displacement, he would suffer the same. And so the accounts of his birth and earliest years tell us of poverty, murder and exile.

But since that is the case, we cannot say that the updating of the story by portraying the holy family as a migrant family seeking entrance to a new land and as a family imprisoned and separated, parents from children and children from parents, is untrue to the original. On the contrary, it is true to it. And we have to recognize that fact and respond to it.

According to Google, there are 272 million migrants in our world today, and they constitute 3.5 % of the world's population. And no one, or at least almost no one, wants them. The only one who seems interested in them is Pope Francis. Let us hope that he will find a few followers who see in these people the holy family itself. And let us hope that we will be among these people.