

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Collect

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may by his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Commentary

- Many will be familiar with this prayer from the *Angelus*, which commemorates the incarnation of Christ.
- The prayer comes from the seventh century Papal practice at Rome where it was assigned to March 25, the feast of the Annunciation, when the angel appeared unto Mary when she conceived Christ, for the 1970 Latin edition of the *Roman Missal* the prayer was transferred to the last Sunday before the birth of our Lord.
- The Angel announcing the birth of Christ refers not only to the Angel that appeared to Mary in the Annunciation but also to the Angels that appeared to the shepherds who came to do homage to the new-born babe.
- The prayer does not refer explicitly to the death of Christ, but rather subtly refers to Christ's Passion and Cross. As disciples of Christ, our way of life is often described as taking up our cross. The prayer also subtly refers to our future glory, already revealed in our history when Christ appeared in glory to the disciples. The Christian way of life, then, is characterized by carrying our cross and already sharing in the glory of the resurrection.
- This prayer preserves an early insight that the whole mystery of Christ from his incarnation, passion, death and resurrection and his continuing presence in his body the Church is one integral mystery. The specific moments of this mystery in salvation history are mapped out over the course of the church year, but this prayer reminds us that every Sunday, every liturgy celebrates the whole mystery and our share in it.

Prayer over the Offerings

May the Holy Spirit, O Lord,
sanctify these gifts laid upon your altar,
just as he filled with his power the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
Through Christ our Lord.

Commentary

- In the opening prayer the Angel made known the Incarnation, which was accomplished in the sanctifying power of the Spirit according to this prayer. The incarnation and the consecration of the bread and wine are connected in this prayer by the working of the Spirit.
- The Roman Sacramentaries representing both the Papal and parish practices of the city were widely diffused North of the Alps where the two traditions and local practices were conflated in numerous ways. From that creativity this prayer first appears in Francia during the eighth century and eventually became part of the Roman tradition.
- At St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, over the altar there stands a monumental baldachin, a canopy supported by four corkscrew columns of Bronze by Bernini. On the underside of the canopy directly over the place on the altar where the gifts of bread and wine are placed is an image of the Holy Spirit. The entire baldachin is, indeed, an architectural expression of the role of the Spirit in the transforming the gifts of bread and wine laid upon the altar. Many older churches have such an expression of the Holy Spirit above the gifts.
- We prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ with this reference to the incarnation, that is to the Annunciation of the Angel to the Virgin Mary when she conceived our Savior. The Spirit active in the mystery of the incarnation is also active now in the transformation of the bread and wine. In many churches as we approach the altar to receive communion, we come to stand under a dome with the image of the Spirit at its peak. So too the Spirit sanctifies the assembly engaged in the liturgy and brings unity to the Church.

Prayer after Communion

Having received this pledge of eternal redemption,
we pray, almighty God,
that, as the feast day of our salvation draws ever nearer,

so we may press forward all the more eagerly
to the worthy celebration of the mystery of your Son's Nativity.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Commentary

- Having already received the pledge of eternity, we pray to celebrate worthily the beginning of that pledge in the nativity of Christ.
- Newly composed for the 1970 Latin edition of the *Roman Missal*, the first part of the prayer comes from the mass booklet for the feast of St. Lawrence that was included in a sixth century compilation of Roman mass booklets. The second half was adapted from a prayer assigned to Friday of the third week of Lent in seventh-century Papal practice.
- This prayer reflects on the rite of communion it concludes and uses the language of commerce to speak about the Eucharist as a pledge or a down payment or a guarantee of eternal redemption.
- This prayer also looks forward to the coming week in which we celebrate the Nativity of Christ. We prepare to celebrate Christmas by preparing presents, meeting social commitments, decorating the home and preparing the festive meal. This prayer suggests that we consider our preparations in light of the mystery we are preparing to celebrate. The Nativity is also called the feast day of our salvation. The prayer challenges us to discern how our many commitments arise from this mystery of our salvation and to judge wisely the many ways of preparing for the feast according to their worthiness to the mystery we celebrate.
- As we prepare to celebrate the Nativity of Christ, so we have already received the foretaste of the wedding feast of the lamb, the heavenly banquet. While the Church year maps the life of Christ over the course of a cosmic year, each liturgy celebrates the whole mystery of our salvation in Christ. So too the Christmas holiday gives opportunity to celebrate this mystery of God's love among us not only on Christmas day but also at every meal and on every day.