

15 November 2009    Given at the Shepherds Field near Bethlehem

One of the things St. Francis of Assisi was known for was his love affair with the one he called "Lady Poverty." St. Francis spoke of poverty as the love he pursued with great devotion, for in her he found a means of becoming more like Christ, his first love. Our Catholic tradition tells us that Jesus was poor, and by embracing a life of poverty of his own volition, St. Francis has become recognized as the man most like our Lord in the 2000 years of our Christian history. Simply put, Francis' poverty transformed him.

Here in Bethlehem, as we sit in the field where the angel appeared to the shepherds to announce to them the good news of our Savior's birth, we are called to meditate on our Lord's poverty in a profound way, for it is here that we see His poverty so clearly. It was here in Bethlehem that Mary and Joseph, in their poverty, could not find room in an inn, and therefore were forced to take shelter in a stable - a cave. Instead of being surrounded by family as Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Holy Family, in their poverty, was surrounded by animals. And in their poverty Mary and Joseph had no bed in which to lay Jesus and had to lay the newborn King of Kings in a manger. Even our Lord's first visitors showed forth the humble nature of His birth as they were the simple shepherds who quivered in fear as they received the angel's message.

Some of us may wonder why God the Father would allow His Son to be born in such crude manner. In looking at our Lord's birth through the eyes of faith, we come to see some very beautiful symbolism. For example, the very name of this town: Bethlehem, tells us a little about our Lord, for Bethlehem means "house of bread" and thereby reminds us that Jesus is the Bread of Life. The fact that our Lord was laid in a manger, a feeding trough, reminds us that as the Bread of Life, Jesus came to feed the entire world. And the wood of the manger upon which our Lord was laid by His Blessed Mother is a foreshadowing of the wood of the cross, upon which He was nailed by our sins some 33 years after His birth. Moreover the poverty of Jesus' birth is brought to its fulfillment in the utter poverty He experienced on the cross, when He was stripped of everything - even His clothes.

While perhaps most of us here will never know true material poverty, we certainly can embrace a poverty of spirit, like is spoken of in the Beatitudes, that will help transform us so that we might become more like Christ. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that the poor in spirit are blessed for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. Thus we know that in cultivating within ourselves a poverty of spirit, we begin to merit eternal life. And this poverty of spirit that we are called to cultivate within ourselves is a humble acknowledgment that everything we have and everything that we are is a gift from God. Every possession, every talent, every skill is given to us by God, and of ourselves we can claim nothing as our own. All has come from God! Therefore we must learn to constantly give thanks to Him, recognizing that we are nothing without our Lord.

As we continue to pray in this beautiful place in which our Savior was born, let us pray for the grace to be truly poor in spirit. May we grow in the virtue of humility so that we may recognize how truly poor we are without our Lord's grace, and may we gratefully embrace that poverty as a means to becoming more like Christ.