YOU WILL FIND A CHILD

By GABRIEL REIDY

DEVOTION to the infancy of our Lord is implicit in the infancy narratives of the gospels of SS. Matthew and Luke, and in the primitive apostolic preaching which lies behind them. It must have been there already, germinally, in the earliest Christian life, if only to explain how it was that St. Matthew, departing from the normal sobriety of his manner, chose to include so dramatic an episode as that of the Magi's visit, so full of colour and movement. Similarly with St. Luke's first two chapters. Wherever he obtained his special information about the very beginning of Jesus, and tradition has always suggested Mary herself as the source, he would scarcely have given it such pride of place at the head of his gospel, unless he was aware that it was already an integral and acceptable part of the apostolic preaching. From then onwards, the gate is open: children and people of childlike simplicity may enter in and take their part in this solemn but lowly preface to their Saviour's life and work. Devotion to the humanity of Jesus, even in his babyhood, is henceforth and forever a valid introduction to the total mystery of the divine Word incarnate. This sort of devotion, and the practices to which it gives rise, particularly that whole 'way' of christian living which St. Thérèse of Lisieux, with all a child's boldness, would call 'little, and hers', and then bequeath to us all, may without fanciful exaggeration be claimed as something as primitive and venerable as the Church herself.

No more is attempted in these pages than to glean a little here and there in the rich harvest of christian reflection upon the Infancy of Christ throughout the ages. It will be enough to show that a full and balanced spiritual life has been and still can be built around, or at least inaugurated by, devout attention to the first recorded events in our Lord's earthly existence. The liturgical celebration of the Epiphany, even in its restricted western form, with devout meditation based on traditional spiritual interpretations of the elements of the Magi's visit, has enough doctrinal content, and prompt adequate affective responses, to lead us to the whole mystery of Christ.

Nowadays, in the west, we are apt to take our Christmas and Epiphany devotions for granted. We seldom stop to ask, for instance, how, when and where the Magi first got into the crib. From the standpoint of the earliest Christian art, as from that of the fully developed modern crib, the question in that form may seem to lack meaning. So also if we think of medieval mystery plays done on composite stages, or turn to the liturgies or typical ikons of the east. In a sense, there never was a time when the Magi were not there, along with the shepherds, the angels, and the Holy Family itself. Yet how did the Magi come by their royalty, their names and their complexions, to say nothing of their previous and subsequent careers? And why *three* of them, rather than just two, or four or more? Admittedly such speculations have not greatly distracted the minds of the devout, nor do they still; the questions that have always mattered more are 'Whom did they *represent?*', 'What did they do?' and 'What is the significance of their *gifts?*' Consequently we need not concern ourselves greatly with the minor and accidental modes of the cultus, the purely local and temporal modes of its expression associated either with the Middle Ages or that later phase which received so great an impulse in seventeenth-century France. Doubtless, a good deal of all this can still be traced in modern Catholic devotional life, at least as 'survivals'. It will be enough to illustrate the more substantial and enduring results of this manner of reflecting on the life of Our Lord.

If, in search for the roots of this devotion, we turn to the scriptures, we may distinguish, to begin with, in the Old Testament, a double line of mounting, prophetic hope, pointing always to a fuller divine, self-revelation in the 'last times'. The God of Israel will show forth His glory more openly than in the partial and figurative theophanies of the past. Furthermore, a God-sent messenger will come amongst his people, a Messias who will found a kingdom, complete and transcend all previous communications, and bring about the eternal plan of salvation. These two traditions merge together in Christ of the New Testament: he is both the longed-for Messias and God's own Son incarnate. The 'last times' are Christian times. His Kingdom, the Church, in what she teaches about her own nature and work, especially in Eucharistic theology, shows us how we may enter ever more effectively into union with our Head. Individual responses to this doctrine are personal and may be very varied, but by whatever door one enters, it must lead to the fullness of this pattern or it will serve only to mislead us. Wherever a Christian first meets Christ,

whenever he first hears Christ's voice, the ultimate goal is the same – union with Our Lord by grace and love.

It is possible to object that Christ's infancy, or even more a single aspect of it such as the Epiphany, is not really adequate from this point of view. Does it possess enough theological content by itself: does it really provide an effective devotional entry into the whole of the Christian mystery? It is a commonplace that the Nativity aspect, especially as exteriorised in the devotion to the crib, may in certain circumstances become impoverished, through being viewed in too human and sentimental a fashion. Might it not be urged that the Epiphany aspect too, can only be made significant when it is 'blown-up', glamourised and romanticised a little, by eking out the meagre gospel data with the aid of much apocryphal legend, and pious but uncritical interpretation? One must be forewarned against possible dangers, but the objection is confuted by the tradition of many centuries. Innumerable saints and holy persons through the ages have in fact successfully nourished and enriched their spiritual lives by cultivating a devotional attitude of this kind.

Devotion to the Infancy was, then, virtually existent, in its essentials, from the outset, as the oak is present in its acorn. But how can we date its more explicit emergence into Christian spirituality? Those who practice any devotion will very naturally try to trace back its roots to the gospel, or to the practices of the earliest Christians of all. It is not astonishing, therefore, to find the claim that Mary and Joseph are the first patrons of the Infancy devotion. They had the first close and physical contact with the Sacred Infant. So had, or might have had, Simeon and Anna. Later on there will be many who will aspire to imitate them by holding Jesus in their arms spiritually. Some of them, either through a more vivid imagination, or through genuine and objective supernatural visions, will convince themselves and others that such embraces have actually occurred. Mystics and poets will describe these intimacies, and artists will try to depict them. We shall come to envisage St. Antony of Padua and many others, as we do St. Joseph, holding the Infant in their arms. If we accept this as a symbol of the union which devotion to the Infancy may produce, Origen ranks as a pioneer, for he is amongst the first who, even in the third century, hints at the future developments. He uses the expression of St. Luke, 'the infant Jesus', as a current expression, and in commenting upon the *Nunc Dimittis*, he invites the Christian to imitate Simeon, 'and take Jesus into his arms, and hold him entirely to his breast'. He adds; 'Let us pray to

Almighty God, that we too, in our turn, may take the Son of God and embrace him, and merit the graces of pardon and progress. Let us also pray to this Infant Jesus himself, to whom we desire to speak whilst we hold him in our arms'.[1] St. Gregory of Nazianzus also, preaching on the feast of the Theophanies, takes up the same theme. 'We have run with the star, adored with the Magi, have been fascinated with the shepherds, and chanted the divine glory with the angels. With Simeon we have taken the Infant into our arms, and with that saintly old woman Anna, we have given praise to God'.[2] But these are no more than hints.

For the most part, these sparse and tentative indications of what the future might bring did not prevail against the customary attitude of the Fathers. They preferred a severely didactic and theological use of the infancy narratives of the gospel. Engaged as they were for centuries in the defence of the orthodox christological positions against heresy, they could not but be interested in every aspect of Christ's sacred humanity; but any devotional response they may have felt towards the infancy of Jesus is less in evidence. Thus the Christmas and Epiphany liturgies were viewed chiefly as expressions of christological dogmas, and occasions for preaching them to the people. They were what we should now term 'feasts of ideas' rather than historical anniversaries of episodes in the human life of Our Lord. Hymn-writers for such feasts might sometimes strike a more lyrical, though hardly a more 'devotional' note. The fabricators of the *apocrypha* embroidered freely on the gospel texts, to fill up what they regarded as the gaps in them, often with imaginary, grotesque and tasteless miracles, attributed to the period of his Infancy. Their outlook and aims were, however, in line with those of the Fathers: to furnish extra, even paradoxical proofs of Christ's divinity, even in babyhood. All this bore little devotional fruit, relatively speaking. The feature of ancient Christian times, therefore, which approaches nearest to our notion of devotional practice, is the growing habit of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Bethlehem and Nazareth, because of the Infancy, were only a shade less popular than Jerusalem, the site of the Passion. St. Jerome was only too proud to claim that he was 'a lover of the inn of Bethlehem and of Our Lord's Manger'. He settled himself there with his favourite disciples, and we shall never know how many pilgrims he inspired to come there from Rome, from the Gauls and Spain, and every part of the known world.

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[1] PG 13,1838–9. [2] Oratio 39, XIV, PG 36, 349–50.

Devotion to the Infancy, in fact, remained in a more or less unorganised and undeveloped form until the dawn of the Middle Ages. There was, accordingly, little distinction between its various aspects; between, for instance, the Nativity and the visit of the Magi, Christmas and the Epiphany. But the distinction begins to be of importance from the fifth century, when there was a liturgical exchange between east and west. The former accepted the western Christmas in addition to their own already established nativity celebrations, and the latter took the Epiphany from the east where it had originated, and very soon reduced it and focused the attention almost exclusively on the adoration of the Magi. It is of interest to set side by side two texts illustrative of the exchange and of the persistence of the notions about the Epiphany characteristic of the two parts of the Church. St. John Chrysostom is only one example out of many Easterns for whom the western notion of the Epiphany, or indeed any aspect of the Infancy, hardly deserves to be regarded as a 'manifestation' at all. 'We give this day the name of Epiphany', he explains, 'because the Saviour's saving grace was manifested to all. Now why is it *not* the day that he was born, but rather the day that he was baptised . . because his manifestation to all men does not date from his birth but from his baptism, for till then not many had known him'.[1] Chrysostom's criterion for manifestation is its public and official character. None of the spiritually precious 'hidden life' seems to count for very much from this somewhat rigid point of view. St. Maximus of Turin, also writing in the fifth century, is more accommodating. He writes, 'Although the tradition of the ancients about this feast is various, the belief of holy devotion is all one. Though some think that today Our Lord . . . at the leading of a star . . . was adored by the Magi, others assert that he changed the water into wine, whilst others insist . . . that he was baptised, in all these things there is belief in the Son of God, and our festival is concerned with all of them'.[2] Actually the western memory continued to recall the triple object of the feast from time to time, and indeed still does so today, in the hymns and major antiphons; but all the emphasis has been placed, especially since the time of St. Augustine, upon the adoration of the Magi. We are not at all surprised today that this should be called the 'manifestation' of Our Lord; it is rather a text like that of Chrysostom that astonishes us when we first meet with it.

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[1] *De Baptismo Christi*, PG 49, 565–6.

[2] *De Epiphania Domini* VII, PL 57,293.

We have five Epiphany sermons of St. Augustine; they make mention of no other object but the adoration of the Magi. This could only come about by developing the theme of the *representative* character of the Magi. They stand for the gentile, or non-Jewish, world into which Christ came. Similar spiritual interpretations of their journey, their adoration, and particularly their symbolic gifts, are equally relevant to the process. For Augustine and his followers, Christmas or the nativity is primarily the manifestation of God made man to the old Chosen People, while the Epiphany is his manifestation to the Church.

Pope St. Leo the Great had recourse to the same themes in his preaching on the Epiphany. For him the episode contains an 'evident sign of the gentiles' 'vocation', and the three Magi are 'representatives of all the peoples who worship the world's author, that God may be known not only in Judaea but throughout the whole universe'. He writes: 'This star which warned the Magi living far away, and drew them to the Lord Jesus, is without any doubt, the mystery of grace and a sign of vocation . . . the star which illuminated the eyes of the Magi did not illuminate the eyes of the Israelites. It signifies the light revealed to the gentiles, and the blinding of the Jews'.[1] The Pope is still using materials familiar to his predecessors, and speaking as a dogmatic teacher rather than as a spiritual guide. It is therefore all the more important to emphasise the fact that he is also amongst the first to assert explicitly the practical value of 'spiritual infancy' as a mark of Christ's followers. Here, Leo holds out a hand across the centuries to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose 'way' of infancy, in substance if not in the modes of expression which she adopted, is probably regarded by most people, as the most solid, permanent legacy of devotion to the Infancy. Commenting upon a passage from St. Matthew's gospel,[2] Pope Leo says, 'Christ loves infancy, wherein he himself began, both body and soul. he loves it as a mistress of humility, a rule of innocence, and a model of goodness. Christ loves infancy, and guides towards it even the most grown-up and the aged. He proposes it as a model for all whom he raises to the eternal kingdom'.[3] Far from countenancing any tendency towards infantilism, Leo stresses the goal of Christian maturity to which this 'way' is meant to lead. 'Not to the games of babyhood, nor to its awkward fumblings, must we return; we

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[1] *In Epiphaniae Solemnitate*, Sermo V, 1.
[2] Mt 8,3–4.
[3] *In Epiphaniae Solemnitate*, Sermo VII, 3.

desire from it something more becoming to the gravity of age – quick appeasement of anger, prompt return to calm, forgetfulness of offences, indifference to honours, love of brotherly union, and equanimity. What a blessing it is, not to know how to hurt, not to have any taste for wickedness . . . such is the serenity of Christian infancy'.[1]

When Europe entered the Middle Ages, the devotion to Christ's infancy found itself in an atmosphere more congenial for its growth. There was more relish for the concrete, more affectivity, or a freer display of it; people sought spiritual satisfaction in warmer, sometimes more exuberant types of personal devotion. The theological content of the liturgy now became relatively less important than its narrative and historical – occasionally pseudo-historical – elements. There was a taste for lively detail, and little pre-occupation with accuracy. This affective piety passed down from the more learned and cultured of clerics and religious, and spread through mystics, artists and poets to a wider public. The new accents, including a note of real human tenderness, can be heard even in a fierce castigator of clerical and monastic defects like St. Peter Damian, as well as in the gentler, more urbane St. Anselm. But devotion to the Infant Jesus only reached its full stature by coming into contact with two affective streams of piety which were especially favourable to its development – those of the Cistercians and the Franciscans.

The Cistercian or 'Bernardine' influence inaugurated a tradition of meditating Christ's human life point by point. St. Bernard's own childhood memory of a vision of the divine Infant was, doubtless, a root cause of this habit. It left its traces throughout his works, especially in all he said about the birth of Christ, his naming, and the adoration of the three kings. The other Cistercian spiritual teachers were not slow to follow his example. Amongst them, St. Aelred of Rievaulx stands out by reason of his well-known little treatise on *The Child Jesus at Twelve Years Old*.[2] He does not, of course, deal with the Epiphany aspect of the devotion in this work, but he does elsewhere. It is of interest to compare a Chapter sermon of his on this subject with the texts from St. Leo. They dwell on the same themes, but the tone is different. The pope expounds dogmatic lessons to the Church, whilst the monk sets a more homely, domestic meditation before his brethren. 'What tidings', he asks them, 'are better or more welcome than the news that he who lay in a manger was God Our Lord, and Saviour of the whole world? Pagans heard

[1] *Ibid.*, 4. [2] PL 184, 849–79.

the tidings, and so did the Jews. Up till then the Jews had been alive and the pagans dead: then, the pagans came alive and the Jews died. When these kings . . . learnt through the star they had seen in the east, of Our Lord's birth, they came with gifts to adore him: but when Herod heard the news, he sought, with the Jews, by some trick to kill him. Then it was that began the blindness in Israel of which St. Paul speaks; then also began to rise that light which the Lord through his Prophet promised to the Church which was to be gathered from amongst the gentiles'.[1] Aelred, however, is not altogether content with the notion of a Church that was only 'to be gathered': it may, in a sense, be back-dated to the Epiphany. For, 'to whom did that star call? Obviously not to the blinded Jews . . . The church began to be born today, in those pagans who saw the star and understood its meaning . . . in these three kings the Church arose'.[2] St. Aelred then allegorises the persons and objects of the gospel in customary medieval fashion. Simeon and Anna, Elisabeth and Zachary, *et caeteri spirituales*, stand for the devout of every age: the star is Holy Scripture; the gifts are our Christian – our monastic – virtues. 'Since', he concludes, 'we should not come to Christ empty-handed, nor so adore him, prepare your gifts for him. Offer him gold, or pure charity, incense or pure prayer, myrrh or your bodily mortifications. God will be pleased with you for such gifts. So, may he rise upon you, and his glory be seen in you'.[3]

Amongst the more interesting devotional relics from this age and in the same spiritual current, is the testimony, not of a Cistercian, but of a Benedictine nun. It is that of St. Elisabeth of Schonau, the well-known twelfth-century visionary. Her life, written by her brother, Egbert of Schonau, a Benedictine abbot, contains what purports to be a diary of hers, in which are two accounts of visions during the Epiphany liturgy in the years 1154 and 1155. The former and shorter account runs thus: 'In first vespers I saw three crowned kings, standing before the throne. Coming near they adored on bended knee, before the Son of Man. Taking the crowns from their heads they offered them into his hands, and then received them back from him. On the day itself at Mass I saw the same three, adoring before the Lord Jesus, and they were seen to give into his hands I know not what shining little gifts'.[4] The point about the crowns offered and then received back again is curious. Can it have any-

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[1] *In Apparitione Domini*, PL 195,228. [2] *Ibid.*, 229. [3] *Ibid.*, 233–4.
[4] *Vita de S. Elizabeth Schonaugiensis* (*die* 18*a Junii*), *Acta Sanctorum*, *Junii III*, p. 618 E.

thing to do with the struggle between Empire and Papacy? Is it, perhaps, an editorial touch by Egbert, a known propagandist? Notice how vague Elisabeth is concerning the nature of the gifts. Even after twelve months during which she could have easily informed herself through natural channels concerning them, she is content to remain only a shade less vague in her second vision. Apparently they were not of great interest to her. The act of adoration and the obvious kingliness of the visitors occupied the centre of her field of attention. The account of the 1155 vision runs: 'The Lord multiplied his grace upon me and I saw in spirit our Lady and her little Baby, dwelling, as it were, in a certain house placed a long way off. Behold, three men, in kingly garments, came in, and bending the knee adored the child. One of them, holding out a large golden coin stamped, it seemed, with the royal image, offered it into his hands. Similarly, the other two, coming up, reverently offered their gifts in certain vessels'.[1] Elisabeth then recalls visions of the Cana miracle and the Jordan baptism.

The Franciscan movement was another favourable stream of affectivity, in which Bernardine themes could still further mature. St. Francis himself had such a devotion to Christmas that he wished it to be a universal festival, in which even animals could share. And the story of what he did to celebrate the feast one year at Greccio is amongst the best known episodes of his life. He imparted this devotion to St. Clare, who is amongst the saints who were favoured with mystical graces – in her case, a 'locution' – connected with the Infant Jesus. But for the Seraphic Patriarch himself, the particular aspect of the Epiphany does not loom very large. It is merely the end of his favourite feast, and he mentions it in his writings only as the beginning of the 'fast of benediction'. It has been suggested that Franciscan churches of the earlier period favoured representations of the Nativity, whilst Dominican churches chose rather the Epiphany. If this generalisation is valid for art, there are other respects where it needs, seemingly, to be reversed, notably in the structure of the rosary. The Franciscan version – the *corona* of the Seven Joys – includes the adoration of the Magi as its fourth mystery, whereas the episode finds no place at all in the fifteen mysteries of the Dominican rosary. The Seraphic Doctor, St. Bonaventure, has left us more than twenty sermons preached on the Epiphany, to all sorts of audiences – the university of Paris, his

[1] *Ibid.*, 623, D & E.

Franciscan brethren and many other religious of different Orders, the royal court of King Louis. It would be impossible to summarise or even quote at length from them here, but we are fortunate in having also one of those miniature works in which he so excelled; it contains all the marrow of his thought on the subject. It is the little treatise *On the five festivities of the Infant Jesus*,[1] which merits comparison with St. Aelred's work on the Child in the Temple. Despite the title, the five liturgical feasts chosen are only a framework and the starting-point for a little book of methodical prayer, centred upon the 'mysteries' of our Lord's Infancy. It is, in a way, the opposite process to that of St. Francis at Greccio. Francis had wanted to 'exteriorise' the spiritual data of the Christmas feast. Here, Bonaventure wishes to 'interiorise' the outward and more obvious significance of the five feasts which he has chosen from the Nativity cycle. It is the aim of the little work to make the 'devout reader' able to conceive Christ *spiritually*, to give birth to him *spiritually*, to name him Jesus, adore him with the Magi, and present him in the Temple: all spiritually, with the aid, of course, of a good dosage of allegory. In the fourth section, Bonaventure shows himself quite as ingenious as Aelred in the manipulation of these allegories. Admittedly, it is a medieval manner which is apt to sound arbitrary to the modern ear, and very soon grows irksome; but St. Bonaventure is a past master in the technique. He sustains it with consideraable unction, and there is plenty of evidence of an external sort to prove that he supplied many generations of devout Christians with some quite germinable 'seeds for contemplation'. In his version of the matter the three kings – *reges devoti, reges devotissimi* – turn out to be the three powers of the soul. David's royal city of Bethlehem is 'the whole fabric of the world', viewed through the eye of a Franciscan; and the symbolic gifts, as with Aelred, are the virtues, and practically the same virtues. Here is a characteristic exhortatory passage: 'Offer, I say, the gold of ardent love, the incense of devoted comtemplation, and the myrrh of bitter sorrow. The gold of love because of the gifts that he has given, the incense of prayer because of the joys prepared and the myrrh of sorrow because of sins committed. The gold to his eternal divinity, the incense to the holiness of his soul, and the myrrh to the passibility of his body'.

With the climax of the medieval synthesis of the thirteenth century all the main lines of devotion towards the Infant Jesus had been

[1] *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, Vol. VIII (Quaracchi 1889), 93–8.

explored, and all its principal themes elaborated. There were to be many fresh impulses in the future, notably that imparted to the devotion in the seventeenth century by Bérulle, the Oratorians and the Carmelites of France. But as Bremond points out, the Bérullian manner was, in several respects, too rarefied and intellectually austere to become really popular. Thus, as it filtered down to a wider public, so it tended also to hark back to the simpler styles of medieval affective piety: according to Bremond, 'to the more ancient, *Franciscan* type of devotion'. Nesta de Robeck in her work on the crib side of the devotion generalises thus: 'Not only the Franciscans of the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries celebrated the Christmas crib, but also the newer Orders that were arising in the wave of enthusiasm for the Counter-Reformation, a wave as vital if more turgid than that of the thirteenth contury . . . Devotion to the holy Infancy was widespread, though it was a more self-conscious, more sophisticated devotion than that of the immediate followers of St. Francis'. The characteristic practices of this later time, local shrines, pictures, confraternities, novenas and months of special exercises, still exist. But they can be described by an authority on the development of the devotion as 'survivals'. Yet the essence of the devotion remains, and is still capable of absorbing new elements, and of serving as the nucleus of a full and rich attachment to Christ.

Before concluding, it will surely be of interest to recall the use made of the infancy narratives by two nineteenth-century figures on the English scene: Cardinal Newman and Father Frederick William Faber. In their different ways they sum up the age-long Christian attitudes towards the infancy of Christ. Newman, the historian and patrologist, recalls for us the ancient and severely doctrinal outlook of so many of the Fathers. His fellow-Oratorian Faber, warm-hearted and enthusiastic, moralist and spiritual director, represents a kind of synthesis of medieval affective piety, with a touch of the seventeenth-century French school, and more than a touch of Victorian romanticism. This is not to deny that Newman was able to share in many of the outlooks and assumptions of his contemporaries. But surely it is characteristic that, whilst still an Anglican in 1839, he should have preached on the feast of the Epiphany, and should have made use of the Magi episode in the day's liturgy as a mere text to a doctrinal and controversial discourse on Faith and Reason![1] Faber, on the other hand, writing *Bethlehem* in

[1] *Sermons on the Theory of Religious Relief* (London 1843), IX, 167–93.

1860, gives an exclusively 'spiritual' treatment, peopling the 'midnight cavern' with its 'first worshippers' and contriving to distinguish amongst them no less than nine differentiated types of devotion to the Infant Jesus. The kings are the representatives of the sixth type.

It is impossible to finish without once again referring to the great impact on our time by St. Thérèse of Lisieux. It was a part of her family background that she joined in childhood one of those confraternities which were keeping alive the traditional piety towards the Infant Jesus, and she took this devotion with her into the Carmel, as well as adopting it as part of her religious name. Her conventional life, and her writings, restricted as they may appear to some critics, have given a new and vigorous impulse to the infancy devotion. And the fact of her canonisation, with the way in which her 'little way' has been proposed as a universal model, is sufficient proof that there is no question here of a mere survival, or of a *particular* devotion of a merely temporal and local character; but a valid, though specialised interpretation of the Christian vocation *as a whole*. The terms and the images with which she chose – could not but choose – to express it, belong indeed to her age and French provincial background, but not the substance of the thing itself. Anyone who still finds difficulty in accepting this would do well to consider closely that other great portent in the firmament of modern French Catholic life, Charles de Foucauld. He derived from an utterly different social and cultural and spiritual background, and was prepared for his extraordinary vocation in a totally different way. It would surely be difficult to find a greater contrast than between this French officer, explorer, Trappist, convent-servant, hermit priest of the Sahara, and the Carmelite of Lisieux. Yet these two are astonishingly alike in so many of their spiritual insights, and even in the forms used to express them. He knew, from a more literal experience than she could enjoy within her enclosure, what it was to insert himself gradually in the hidden and lowly life of Christ, and he learned a great deal of this in the Poor Clare chapel, or in his little hut at Nazareth.

Wheter we turn to the meditative reading of the gospel of St. Matthew, or try to re-enliven our celebration of the festival of the Epiphany, it is the same. From Origen and Gregory – or from Simeon, or the Magi themselves, right down the ages, to Newman and Faber, or to Thérèse and Charles de Foucauld, and beyond into our own day, countless Christians have found out, over and over again, that the contemplation of Christ's infancy is a powerful and sure way of entry into the very heart of the whole Christian mystery.