
The Color of Christmas Extended

BY EMILIE GRIFFIN

The Christmas season through the feast of Epiphany is twelve days and more to ponder and receive the grace of Incarnation. It is a banquet for the affections, a time to glory in the amazing story of Christ incarnate, the full meaning of the Trinity in Christmas dress.

It was cold and rainy on the January night when I approached the door of our small Catholic cathedral in downtown Alexandria. I praised God for our Catholic Louisiana celebration of Christmas – not one day, not twelve days, but even a few days more.

In some ways it was an anxious time. My husband and I had left the house together, heading downtown for a “final” performance of that lovely opera of the Wise Men, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. It was one of our favorite parts of the extended Christmas season that ends with the celebration of Epiphany. But Bill had an asthma attack in the car and had to turn back. I dropped him at our front door, determined that it was safe to leave him there, and drove downtown through the cold rain on my own.

When the cathedral door opened, the grace of the moment overwhelmed me. Our small but elegant “pocket cathedral” was filled with music, color, and song. I was late. The opera was half over but I knew the story and the music so well I could start in most anywhere.

“Have you seen a child, the color of wheat, the color of dawn?”¹

The three Wise Men are mysterious figures whose identity is not explained at first. They come looking for the Christ child. They have seen his star in the east and they are searching for him. They stop on the road and beg hospitality from a poor woman and her crippled son, Amahl.

This stunning music and lyrical text carries me back in memory to the time when Jesus was born. The modern Italian composer, Gian Carlo Menotti, has captured in a contemporary opera the intensity and wonder of the Incarnation.



But there is another memory linked to this particular work of art. My own first full-scale experience of Christ Jesus came in my twenties. I like to call it a time of conversion. By grace I felt led from place to place, from decision to decision. Filled with a sense of wonder at the scope of Christian history and teaching, I accepted Jesus for myself, was later baptized and confirmed, and embraced Roman Catholic faith sure that God's grace had been with me all along. I suspect the reason why I make this Menotti connection is that during my conversion time in New York City a determined revival of the cathedral play was in progress in many Manhattan churches—Anglican, Roman, and Orthodox. That was a heady time of renewal. We hoped to recover the practices of ancient Christianity and in Milton's phrase, to "fetch the age of gold."²

I believe this is the argument and rationale for the extended celebration of Christmas which is today being recovered by Christians of all persuasions. Theologically, we know that every day is Christmas. If we have studied the history of the Reformation—with its odd, sometimes angry, zigzag course—we understand why many resisters and objectors of the Puritan stamp refused to celebrate Christmas and wanted altars stripped and holy objects destroyed forever. Their fear of idolatry extended to imagery and for many centuries suppressed the observance of Christmas at least for the northern Christian churches and sects in Europe and America. That experience is part of our legacy.

Yet, the extended celebration of Christmas has remained strong within the liturgical churches—Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic. In my home city of Alexandria it is plain to me that the Roman Catholic bishop considers himself a witness to the full meaning and experience of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany for the wider community. Other downtown churches, notably Emmanuel Baptist Church, have taken part in their own extended observance of Christmas as well.

Mind you, I have not discussed this with our current bishop. But everyone in our community has come to appreciate his personal love of music and the arts, and his way of extending a welcome to everyone through the cathedral. In Roman Catholic practice the cathedral is "the bishop's church." In a few brief years as Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Alexandria, Bishop Ronald Herzog has sponsored musical and creative events at the Cathedral, often with an ecumenical breadth. At our cathedral concerts and through the Red River Chorale, Bishop Herzog has emphasized gathering, rejoicing, celebrating—and reaching out to others, including those who do not fully embrace the Christian faith.

As a lifelong Roman Catholic, I have paid attention to how the Church has guarded the ancient beliefs of Christians and embodied them in feasts and seasons – occasions for fully experiencing the gospel. As a writer, speaker, and spiritual director, I appreciate this aspect of Roman Catholicism. Christmas – an extended time that begins with Advent, runs throughout the days of Christmas, and is summed up in the Epiphany – is a banquet for the affections, a time to glory in the amazing story of Christ incarnate, the full meaning of the Trinity in Christmas dress.



For many believers and unbelievers, Christmas is the most important time of the year. Children love Christmas, and many adults justify the huge display of gifts, food, and self-indulgence because Christmas is “for the children.” Christmas is designed to explore and proclaim the importance of memory. The Church remembers the life of Christ in this amazing, large scale festival. The feast of Christmas itself, on December 25th, is a time to imagine the birth of the Christ child, the entrance of Christ Jesus into history.

As this feast is recovered some awkward facts are exposed. Scholars today suppose that the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was probably in summer. Because of the re-juggling of calendars the dates of these events are in flux. The Davidic lineage is clearly a factor in the biblical story, yet some scholars question the Infancy Narratives. Our Scripture study reveals that the genealogies given in the Gospels

do not line up neatly. Similar questions are raised about astronomical history. What do we know about the star the Wise Men followed? Who were the Wise Men anyhow? Why are Roman Catholics so confident about naming them when their names – Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – are not actually in the Bible?

Are these our primary questions as the Christmas season spools out? Not

usually. Most contemporary people, even faithful believers, experience the Christmas season – of whatever length – as a time of busy preparation, of gift-giving, of hassle, sometimes of exhaustion. Travel may be involved. Coordination is needed. Long awaited visits and elaborate plans may not work out just right. Even in a time of peace there are fits of temper and annoyance. Some relatives and neighbors may feel excluded, unwelcome.

In that heady time of renewal, we hoped to recover the practices of ancient Christianity and in Milton’s phrase, to “fetch the age of gold.” This is the rationale for the extended celebration of Christmas which is being recovered by Christians of all persuasions.

People bring their worries and anxieties into the Christmas season – what to wear, what to buy, what to bring – how to keep up with the neighbors’ more affluent or less affluent standards. Will I be welcome? Will I fit in? Will so-and-so’s mother or father like and accept me? Will I feel, in some unexplained way, that there is really “no room for me at the inn”?

Today’s Christian teachers, pastors, and spiritual leaders are conscious of these anxieties. They know that Christmas is a holy time for some and just an extended bash for others. On another level they know the hunger of the human heart for acceptance and for a sense of identity. The longer celebration of Christmas, which harks back to the earliest days of Christianity, extends this sense of anticipation and this yearning for home. The whole drama of salvation is acted out in the season that begins with Advent, moves through the twelve days of Christmas, and ends with the January feasts including Epiphany.

I cherish the Advent readings in the liturgical calendar because they lift us into an almost angelic place. Here is the first reading for the first Sunday of Advent:

In days to come,
the mountain of the LORD’S house
shall be established as the highest mountain
and raised above the hills.
All nations shall stream toward it;
many peoples shall come and say:
“Come, let us climb the LORD’S mountain,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may instruct us in his ways,
and we may walk in his paths.”

*Isaiah 2:1-5 (NAB)*³

I love the long-distant prophetic tone, the sense that God is with us then, long ago, now, right away, and in the days to come. Somehow, it is enough to take my mind off things, worrisome but global things like climate change, which are way beyond my control. God is in charge of it all and he loves us with an inexhaustible love.

Christmas is a festival of homecoming and the Christmas story is clear about the “real” meaning of Christmas. Home is not a physical place but a God-space. Christmas – not one day but the whole celebration – reminds us of our deep welcome into the heart of God.

The story of Jesus is what matters. As Christian missionaries throughout the world have told us, it is the story that converts. The full celebration of Christmas embeds the story in almost every day of this long season. We begin our observance with Advent, which proclaims not only the first but the second coming of Christ. Advent helps us to look forward to a messianic time.

When we reach December 24 and 25 we think, ah, Christmas is here at last. But no, Christmas is more than one day even though Christmas Eve and Christmas Day may feel like the ultimate in sacred, holy time. But as the early church fathers knew, the pull of the secular will always be with us. Christmas allows us to feel and know how the entrance of Christ Jesus into our world transforms us, gradually and imperceptibly. Our ordinary living is changed by grace. We become God's people. No, we become God's people again and again. I always love those words of John Henry Newman: "The most perfect Christian is to himself but a beginner...."⁴ Newman accepts, and blesses, our human failings and imperfections, our tendency always to be "falling back" or "falling down." Our simple human condition is what plagues us. But Jesus comes to make it right.

Our worship on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day gives us a sense that our childhood hopes are still alive, that the child Jesus has them well in hand, that new hopes and new beginnings are possible.

But these two great feasts, the Vigil of Christmas and Christmas Day, are only opening a door. It is something like the cathedral door that opened for me when the Menotti music poured out. A flood of grace is waiting for us as we enter into worship and into the heart of Christ. When we come into the cathedral we are looking for the child in the manger, the Christ child in Mary's arms. We find him, yes. But if we are open to it, we find Christ in his fullness, the second person of the Trinity. We find God the Father and the Holy Spirit as well. The simplicity of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the simplicity of the animals and the shepherds, all these are images both of our imperfection and of God's willingness to come to us where we are.

We live in the middle and the muddle of things, and Jesus comes to find us there.

The longer observance of Christmas is a good idea. Because of it, the full range of Christ's personality takes hold of us. The many attributes of his identity become part of our desire for a new beginning.

Most people who relate to the twelve days of Christmas think about "calling birds and turtle doves." Actually, this lively song commemorates an interesting episode in Christian history and has its own cunning revelations.

But the liturgical feasts of Christmas as presently observed in Catholic churches are sometimes a bit less merry and more challenging. The feast of

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Stephen which falls on the day after Christmas is a good example. Tradition has it that this feast was placed next to Christmas in order to pull us back from the high of sensible pleasures, to enhance our sense of the mystical and our yearning for heaven. Maybe it does that for some. You must enter deeply into the story of Stephen and the Scriptures appointed for the feast in order to get the connection. Another great feast that falls within the twelve days is that of the Holy Innocents. This feast commemorates a horrifying event described in Matthew 2:13-18. Still another daunting observance is that of Peter and Paul. In this holy day, emphasis is often placed on their martyrdom. Why, the theologians ask, do we focus on suffering and death in the midst of a happy time of visiting and celebration?

Various explanations are offered. Some say the liturgical calendar grew in a hodge-podge kind of way. Nowadays the common interpretation is somewhat mystical and influenced by John's gospel. The Christmas season, like other great extended festivals of Christianity, reflects both light and darkness. God is sovereign over both, but in our humanity we continue to experience the ups and downs of ordinary living, the joys and the sorrows, the brokenness of the human condition.



In January 2011, just as the Christmas season was ending, I had an intense experience of spiritual formation and transformation. I was teaching and offering informal spiritual direction at the Renovaré Institute. About forty participants were on hand and our emphasis was on Christian history as it affected spiritual transformation and instruction. Participants were from many different Christian churches and groups. For some the liturgical tradition was a novelty even though its ancient structures are still felt in modern Western societies.

On January 6th and 7th I led the morning prayers. I thought I was following a simple, comfortable prayer format that would be easy for everyone. Instead I found that the emphasis I put on the Epiphany – the interpretation of the Wise Men and their long journey to find the Christ child – was new and powerful for our assembled group. Old as it was, ancient as the dawn of time, God's Word became new and powerful to me again as I stood up to lead the morning prayers.

This chance to bring the message was both a high and a low. I felt exalted by God's Word, lifted up by the joy of interpretation, and very unworthy, all at the same time.

The power of God's grace seemed to penetrate those teaching days. When I returned to my home city in Louisiana I was filled with gratitude.

At the closing dinner some participants told me that though they were lifelong Christians and students of the Bible, they had never had the visit of the Wise Men fully explained and taught to them before. Even the names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, were a pleasing novelty. They thanked me

with an almost childlike pleasure for this larger interpretation. Inwardly, I was grateful for this validation of my work. I resolved to try to live better, to accept the full reality and blessing of God's grace.

When I came back to Louisiana, the Feast of Epiphany should have been over. But it wasn't. There was a little bit more to the story.



At home I found my own life, very real, very ordinary. My gifted husband had been soldiering on without me through the cold and rainy January days. He was struggling with asthma and other challenges. I was wrestling with health challenges and life challenges, too.

But when he met me at the airport I could see the joy. A new year was beginning for both of us and nothing could dim our sense of God's grace.

So there was an extra meaning for me when the cathedral door opened and the color of Christ's extravagant presence poured out.

The church was not crowded. Some of us were rain-soaked. Wet umbrellas were everywhere. The Wise Men in their tall gorgeous turbans and silken hats were magical, but a little worried about how to deal with the winter rain. Yet our small cathedral was filled with the grace of God. I felt a sense of God's abundant mercy. It was enough to take us through storm and trouble in search of the amazing Christ.

When the opera ended, we all trundled over to the reception where we would have hot punch and cold punch and sandwiches and cake—and the beauty of each other. Along the way, as I inched down the rain-soaked ramp (built for people like me who are handicapped and rely on a cane) I passed the child Amahl and one or two Wise Men. In the story, Amahl had left his crutch behind to follow the Lord Jesus.

I felt sustained and lifted up by the healing power of grace. I thought...I hoped we would get better. The doctors said it was just a flu infection and would go away in the next few weeks and as warm weather came again. But inwardly I had felt a spiritual healing with Amahl, who rose out of poverty to meet the mystical visitors and to join their search of the mystical child, the gift of grace.

The Christmas season reflects both light and darkness. God is sovereign over both, but in our humanity we continue to experience the ups and downs, the joys and the sorrows, the brokenness of the human condition.

*"The Child we seek holds the seas and the winds on his palm.
The Child we seek has the moon and the stars at His feet...."*

*"He's fed by Mother who is both Virgin and Queen.
Incense, myrrh, and gold we bring to His side, and the Eastern Star is our
guide."⁵*

The music had flooded my heart. The words of Menotti's opera were etched in memory and would remain.

Throughout Christian history the creative impulse of Christians to tell stories about Jesus Christ and his kingdom has festooned and extended the holy season till it permeates our consciousness and wonder in the darkest and most sunless time of the year. The light of Christ penetrates our darkness. The color of Christ's presence spills out of the church doors and floods into our sometimes discouraging world.

NOTES

1 Gian Carlo Menotti, *Amahl and the Night Visitors: Vocal Score* (New York: G. Shirmer, Inc., 1986 [1951]), 28.

2 John Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629), section II ("The Hymn") XIV.3. Speaking of the angels' song announcing Christ's birth, the poet says "For if such a holy song / enrap our fancy long, / time will run back and fetch the age of gold."

3 Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible with Revised New Testament* © 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

4 John Henry Newman, "Christian Repentance," *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, III (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997 [1831]), 542.

5 Menotti, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, 31-32.



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