

# JOY TO THE WORLD

## How Christ's Coming Changed Everything (And Still Does)

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**Chapter 1.** We normally think of Jesus as the “hero” of the Christmas story, and, while Jesus is certainly at the center of the unfolding drama of the nativity story, the author challenges us to broaden our thinking. In a sense, he presents us with a triune “hero”: Jesus, family, and salvation.

*Reflect on ways in which Jesus, family, and salvation are interrelated. How does the absence of one alter the essence of the others? What parallels do we see in modern society between efforts aimed at deconstructing traditional family models and the actions of King Herod in the Bible?*

*How does the message of “Jesus, family, and salvation” influence the importance of family in your own life?*

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**Chapter 2.** The history of our Christian family can be traced back to the Birth of Christ, who was born with a specific genealogy as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Through Baptism, which incorporates us into Christ, we become actual characters in the history of our Christian family, the Church.

*How does the concept of being part of Jesus's own family history make the Christmas story relevant to each of us? How does it challenge or inspire you to assume an active role in the on-going history of the Church?*

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**Chapter 3.** The identity of the Jewish people at the time of Christ (and even today) was intimately linked to their family tree, with a common history going back to Abraham and the Twelve Tribes of Israel. This was certainly true of Jesus, whose genealogy identified him as coming from a specific Jewish family, which included patriarchs, kings, and common citizens. Yet, as Son of God, Jesus was the agent of a new creation, which began an entirely new family tree.

*Reflect on the divine filiation (sonship) of Jesus. How did the Virgin Birth unbind Christian history from the ties of Jewish genealogy, especially in regard to the Gentiles?*

*How can you look to the Christmas story to understand your own divine filiation as a son or daughter of God by adoption?*

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**Chapter 4.** At the time of Christ, it was widely known and understood that the Messiah would come from the House of David. Acutely aware of this, King Herod tried to mold himself to fit the prophetic image of the Messiah: he took the title of King of the Jews, conquered the lands that belonged to Israel under the Davidic monarchy, and rebuilt the Second Temple. He also killed anyone who challenged his kingship. Meanwhile, “hidden from the prince of this world,” the true Messiah was born in poverty and obscurity.

*What does the humble Birth of Christ teach us about truth and exterior appearances?*

*Can you think of modern day “Herods” who fail to pass scrutiny when examined against the truths of Christ?*

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**Chapter 5.** Mary—a young, ordinary girl from an ordinary place—became the extraordinary “icon of human freedom and dignity.” However, her faith was neither simplistic nor blind. When the angel announced God’s plan for her, she questioned how this was possible. Yet, in an exercise of true freedom, she chose to submit to the will of God, and, because of her “yes,” God dwells among us, and Joy has come to the world. That one moment in history gave future generations the perfect model of intelligent acceptance and voluntary submission to God’s will.

*How does Mary’s submission differ from passive submission or blind faith?*

*How can we look to Mary to find the balance of tenderness and tenacity in the exercise of our freedom and dignity so that we too can become vessels of Joy to the World?*

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**Chapter 6.** Joseph

In the genealogical narrative Joseph was identified simply as the “husband of Mary of whom Jesus was born” (Mt 1:15–16) as if to make clear that he was not the biological father of Jesus. Yet, despite Mary’s perpetual virginity, Joseph was truly a husband to Mary and father to Jesus. He modeled the paternal role of instruction, protection, and provision and dedicated his life to the service of the Holy Family. However, as part of the Holy Family, he experienced persecution, exile, and poverty.

*From Joseph we learn that the only reward Christian parents should hope for is to be with Christ. What are some of the struggles we face, and how can we look to Joseph to help us practice faithful service to others?*

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**Chapter 7.** Angels

In the Old Testament, angels, as messengers of God, interacted with human beings, but their interaction often inspired fear. Even the virtuous prophet Daniel fell to the ground when an angel appeared before him. The Christmas story changed this relationship between believers and angels. For example, we see in the New Testament that angels are recognized as providers of guidance, protection, prayer, and wisdom. Mary received the message of the angel and accepted her call. Joseph heeded an angel’s advice and decided against putting Mary away quietly. The Holy Family fled from King Herod into Egypt at an angel’s urging.

*What part do the angels play in God’s plan for each of us? How can we incorporate the angels, especially our Guardian Angels, into our spiritual lives?*

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**Chapter 8.** Because of the Roman census, Mary had to travel to Bethlehem, where she gave birth to the Christ child. Hence, the “little town of Bethlehem” became important to the entire world. The word Bethlehem comes from the Hebrew *Beth Lechem*, which means “house of bread,” and from Bethlehem came the Bread of Life.

*Reflect on the parallels between Bethlehem and the Church. How does this story relate to the Commandment to “keep holy the Sabbath” and to our reception of the Eucharist at Sunday Mass?*

*With Mary as a model, how should we answer to the message of the angels and bring Christ into our midst?*

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**Chapter 9.** Magi

The Magi sought knowledge and truth in the stars, and it was a star unlike any other that led them to Bethlehem in search of the “king of the Jews.” By sending a celestial body to guide them, God was reaching out to the world beyond the Chosen People, signaling that salvation was meant for all. The story of the Magi speaks to the importance of seeking truth. If we are humble and sincere in our search, truth will speak to us in our own language and lead us to God.

*What can we infer from God’s action of sending a star to nonbelieving astronomers to lead them to witness to the birth of salvation?*

*How can we incorporate this into our personal journey to holiness and our call to the apostolate?*

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**Chapter 10.** Shepherds

They were “dressed for the elements, not for the banquet hall. And they smelled like their sheep,” yet it was they, the shepherds, not the well-dressed Pharisees (despite wealth, rank, and adherence to the laws of ritual purity), who were invited to celebrate and worship the King of kings. Along with the Magi—Gentiles who were also considered unclean—the shepherds were the first present at the nativity scene. In the Gospels, Christ is presented not as a mighty king who commands obedience, but as the Good Shepherd, who goes in pursuit of his wayward sheep to bring them gently back into the fold.

*How are we like the lowly shepherds at the foot of the Christ child?*

*How does this imagery affect the way you approach our Lord and the role you play in society?*

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**Chapter 11.** The Presentation

As God, Jesus was not bound by the Law, yet his life is the perfect fulfillment of both the letter and the spirit of the Law. For example, forty days after his Birth, the Holy Family traveled to Jerusalem to present or consecrate Jesus to God and for Mary’s purification, both of which were required under the Law. The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple reclaimed the priesthood lost by sin, and his sacrifice on the Cross restored salvation to fallen mankind. Among the effects of Baptism are the forgiveness of Original Sin, adoption as sons and daughters of God, and incorporation into the priestly, kingly, and prophetic mission of Christ.



*How does our redemption help us make sense of Christ's suffering and our own participation in his suffering?*

*At the Presentation, Simeon prophesied that Mary's soul would be pierced by the sword. How can you use the example of Mary's sinless suffering for her beloved in the trials you may face in life?*

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**Chapter 12.** The Flight

An angel appeared to Joseph, instructing him to flee with the Holy Family to Egypt to escape King Herod's plan to murder those who could threaten his throne. Egypt was significant not only because it was a repeated place of refuge for the Jews, but as the place where the Twelve Tribes of Israel suffered enslavement. Moses delivered the Israelites from slavery, and Jesus would deliver them from enslavement to sin. Egypt is symbolic of the world beyond the Chosen People. A place where goodness and evil coexist.

*It easy to fall into the sins that surround us, but this chapter in the Christmas story should give hope. Reflect on a time when you may have had to "flee" evil to stay in step with God's plan.*

*How does the knowledge that you were "intended for redemption" help you accept weakness, seek refuge, and persevere on the path to salvation?*

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**Chapter 13.** Blessed Trinities

In the first chapter we considered a triune hero of the Christmas narrative: Jesus, family and salvation. Upon the close of this book we examine two other trinities: The Blessed Trinity and the Holy Family.

In the nativity scene God speaks to humanity in the universal language of love: "The Holy Family was a trinity on earth which in a certain way represented the Blessed Trinity itself" (St. Francis de Sales). The Holy Family as a reflection of the Blessed Trinity is forever preserved in the iconography of the nativity scene. Salvation was born as an act of love. Becoming man to reveal himself in our own language, Jesus made it possible for us to share in his divinity. Created in the image and likeness of God, we are invited into the divine life of the Blessed Trinity.

*Considering the ideas presented thus far, how can we participate in Jesus, family, and salvation?*

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**Chapter 14.** Joy to the World

You've been asked you to consider the triune hero of the Christmas story and modern-day "Herods": anti-heroes of the Christmas story who seek to negate the divine kingship of Jesus, destroy the meaning of family, and nullify the concept of salvation. Joy came to the world through the Holy Family, but it didn't leave the world with Jesus's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. Through the Sacrament of the Eucharist, we can continue to share in Christ's Joy and bring him into the lives of others.

*How can you keep Joy in the world amid the "Herods," who, perhaps unwittingly, try delegitimize Christmas and rob the world of Joy?*

*How can contemplating the characters of the Christmas story motivate you to seek truth, defend it, preserve it, and share it for the sake of Joy?*

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