

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: DECEMBER 2017

On Monday, 25th December, 2017, we will celebrate the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord. We will have prepared throughout Advent to approach Christmas with ever-deepening faith and devotion. By means of the Crib, the Nativity Play, the Carols, we will have done all we can to focus attention on the Holy Infant whose coming alone gives meaning to this blessed season. By means of collections and donations for those in need, we will have welcomed Christ by being Christian.

Even non-believers sense that Christmas is a family occasion. As we get ready to host WMOF2018, this Christmas may be deemed an especially privileged time to think and pray on the Joy of Love, on the inexhaustible richness and sheer good sense of Catholic teaching on Marriage and the Family.

Christ was born into a family but into an *extended* family, with the multiplication and intensification of family links, rights and duties this entails. This latter reality may, in fact, be lost in the more or less standard arrangement of our Cribs. There we see – rightly - the Infant Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds, the Angels, the ox and the ass, but no relatives whatsoever of the Holy Family. Modern scholarship insists that it would have been inconceivable (a) that Joseph would not have been accommodated by others “of the house and family of David (cf. *Luke 2:4*)” on any visit to his ancestral city of Bethlehem and (b) that, in her own condition, Mary would not have had female relatives with practical skills in midwifery to help her with the birth of her first – and only - child.

Experts suggest that we may have misunderstood and mistranslated *kataluma*, the word used at *Luke 2:7* and traditionally rendered in English as “inn”. They argue that, in *Luke*, this word means, not an inn in the sense of a lodging house or a caravanserai of some kind, but an upper room, such as that used for the Last Supper (see *Luke 22:11*), that part of the traditional Palestinian village home of the time where a householder would accommodate guests. For whatever reason – maybe because people senior to Joseph in the family hierarchy were already in residence – there was no room for Mary and Joseph in that upper room. Instead, space was given them in the lower room, where, it seems, much of the domestic business of the day was conducted, and where, at night, livestock – such as the precious family ox or ass - would be put for safe-keeping (Hence the “manger”). More, perhaps, than we had ever thought, the birth of Christ was a huge family occasion, one that, rightly and appropriately, we, too, regard and celebrate as such.

We are, of course, properly aware that modern households come in all shapes and sizes and none of us involved in schools would be so insensitive to this sociological reality as to mark Christmas in a way that gave hurt – unintended, perhaps, but still all too real - to any child entrusted to our care.

We must, though, be equally aware lest, in our laudable desire to avoid giving offence, we empty Christmas of its religious, Christian and specifically Catholic meaning. We must not – in reality, as Catholic schools, we may not – take commercials as our template for the celebration of the Birth of Christ, allowing “Happy Holidays” and Santa Claus occlude or replace “Happy Christmas” and the Word of God, made flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary and now born of her in Bethlehem.

There is no suggestion here that this balancing of charity and truth is easy. It is, most emphatically, anything but. Still, though, we must find ways and means of thinking, of speaking, and of doing, that help us open our hearts and our schools to people as we find them, without hiding, much less ditching, the Catholic understanding of Marriage and the Family, which is, in fact, an integral part of the Good News proclaimed in, and by, the Holy Infant and, for that reason, the focus of WMOF2018.

(Practices of the Faithful blessed by the Church have an authenticity no scholarship can gainsay).