

Afterbirth

Back home, the end of the summer vacation was marked by our annual trip to the state fair. There were certain things that we absolutely had to do every year: trips to the horticulture building for a free baked potato, to the dairy building to get a cooling drink of milk (white, chocolate, and/or strawberry) at the “rainbow milk bar”, and to the youth building to watch baby chicks hatching in an incubator. Also *de rigueur* was a trip to the cow barn in the hope of witnessing the birth of a calf.

One year, we arrived there shortly after the birth of a calf. The calf was lying there in the hay, still wet; it was heartwarming! The mother was standing there watching over it; how maternal! However, a closer look revealed that there was this disgusting thing still hanging out of the cow – the placenta which had held and nourished the calf before its birth. Horrified, I said to my mother, “What’s that?” She said, “That’s the afterbirth.” Needless to say, I couldn’t bring myself to drink milk for a month!

By the time you read this, all of us will have celebrated Christmas, no matter which calendar is chosen for our particular parish. After all the preparations for Christmas, the hectic running around, the assault by blinking lights and canned carols, and the hype whipping us into a buying frenzy, the big day finally comes – and, for many, falls with a thud like the newborn calf. Christmas tree needles crouch as if in wait to ambush the unshod foot, while piles of dirty dishes, mountains of wrapping paper and broken toys, not to mention an avalanche of credit card bills – all of these and more conspire to bring us down off of our incense-and-sugar-induced high. Such is the inevitable reality of the afterbirth.

Morning sickness notwithstanding, expecting a child carries with it a sense of hope and excitement – baby showers, Lamaze classes for mother and “coach”, and the suitcase which stands ready, waiting for the trip to the maternity ward. After the baby arrives, cries of “Oh, how cute!” soon turn to much more mundane concerns: sleepless nights, dirty diapers, diaper rash, colic, and many other things which a celibate can only speculate about. Birth brings consequences and complications.

There is much concern in the Church and in the society for what happens before birth, both to the unborn child and to the birth-giving mother – as well there ought! Concern for life cannot stop there, however; I repeat: birth brings consequences and complications. In order for them to become more fully human, children need to be loved, cared for, and nurtured; they need to be fed, housed, nursed, taught, encouraged, and corrected. Don’t we all?

This is hard work: the “labor” doesn’t end in the delivery room, and it doesn’t concern only the mother. In the Nativity icon, we see the recumbent Mother of God who is exhausted after having given birth. Around her and her child is gathered a whole community: Joseph is there, pushed into a corner, experiencing his own post-partum depression at the prompting of the

tempter; while angels both sing celestial lullabies and take care of the birth announcements, while admiring shepherds and magi come to visit, midwives are hard at work taking care of the dirty work involved in childbirth. “God-with-us” enters the world and shares all of this with us, for such is the human condition which He has embraced in the process of embracing us. Afterbirth isn’t pretty, often hiding the glory which lurks, seeking to become manifest.

In this time after Christmas, we indeed find ourselves in the midst of the season of afterbirth. Not only has Christ been born to us in the flesh, but we are once again reminded of the birth among us of His body which is the Church. It is as if we were the midwives assisting that birth, a birth which is indeed our own; after all, it is we – the members of the Body of Christ - who constitute the Church. May we recognize the glory hidden beneath the accomplishment of the task which we share, this continual birth and maturation process in which we as Church are all involved!

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