

Episode: Journey to the Manger | The Nativity

Contributor: Rev. Eric Nicolai

Podcast Page: <https://stjosemaria.org/podcasts/journey-to-the-manger-the-nativity/>

We are pleased to offer a transcript of this podcast to serve the needs of all our subscribers. Please note, however, that this transcript is generated by AI and may not be perfectly accurate. This content may not be published or reprinted without permission from the St. Josemaria Institute.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

But finally, we were a few days away from Christmas, and we've gone through all these Advent preparations for this beautiful time in the liturgy. The preparations can- well, has included the mystery of the Annunciation of Mary, we saw her Visitation, her beautiful Magnificat Prayer. We saw the approach of the shepherds in the field, and now we arrive at that wonderful place where the Lord is born with Mary and Joseph watching him as he is born in the stable. Luke sums it all up in a brief phrase that is very limited in detail, but still, each line has a certain resonance for us. And of course, it's been translated in so many languages, and it's also been well translated in different ways in English. But the essential thing that we look at in Luke 2, it says this, "And she gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." It's amazing how many ways that this can be expressed. He was wrapped in bands of cloth, has been expressed as swaddling cloths, wrapped in a blanket or in baby clothes, he was laden in a manger, meaning he's been laid in a feeding trough for animals, a box where cattle are fed a bed of hay or in a creche. There was no room in the inn, meaning there was no room in a guest chamber in the living quarters, in a hostel, in the *kataluma* in Greek, or in a lodging place. Many ways of expressing that detail, and of course, it's become so familiar in the entire world.

We all know the scene, we've heard the songs, we've heard the hymns and all that comes back to us. It's a scene that is so familiar to us now, and I'm sure you've received Christmas cards by now, traditional Christmas cards with- with the scene expressed there. There are classic images from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, or maybe more modern ones. But, you know, somebody sent me an image of the Nativity, but it was generated by AI, an AI generated picture, and it gave me the creeps. You can see a very smooth skin and very attractive young Mary with a kind of, well, an over extended smile, perfect eyelashes with what looked to me like a form of mascara. She poses there next to a very- very handsome looking Joseph, who could easily have posed for a Louis Vuitton ad, or maybe, yeah, an expensive Ralph Lauren shot with some guy wearing an expensive watch. AI makes him look very, very cool. And in between them, well, there's this quirky looking child with a kind of a fake laugh, and he's dressed, not in swaddling clothes, but

he's dressed in a perfectly ironed mini alb with nice gold trim, yeah, not exactly swaddling clothes. And from behind them, there's this golden light streaming from a star that provides this insane backlighting. And you know, as I was looking at this, I actually counted the toes on Jesus, and to my horror, I saw that AI had produced six toes on Jesus, not five. And I looked and- well, he has the correct number of fingers this, yes, and all the colors are lovely. Well, that image is, I don't know- I'm sure you know what I mean. I'm sure you've seen many AI generated images and I felt, I don't know- I felt uneasy. It kind of triggered something in me, and not just because of the toes, and though we recognize it as yeah- as the Nativity, we know that the narrative suggests a much more nuanced picture. With Mary, our Blessed Mother, experiencing many more trials on her way to deliver Israel's Messiah, and the whole move, the whole traveling from Nazareth. Why did it happen? Why did they have to go all the way to Bethlehem? Well, we know it all happened with the famous census of Caesar Augustus, and it's thanks to Luke himself that we know this. Luke tells us in chapter 2 that there was a decree from Caesar Augustus that all should be enrolled. And this was the first enrollment when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all who went to be enrolled, we are told, each had to go to his own city. And Joseph went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Well, a lot is said in those few lines. Indeed, it has been pointed out that Luke mentions the word enrolled at least four times, and this Roman enrollment was forced upon Mary and Joseph. I read this book by this wonderful author, Edward Sri, who describes in his book titled *Walking with Mary*, he describes very well that enrollment and that that census that was carried out from time to time in the Roman Empire, and it involved listing people and property for the purposes of tax assessment and even military conscription. Now, since the Jews would not be drafted into the Roman army, the focus of this decree is the Roman tribute, a disturbing symbol of Roman dominance. The Romans used heavy taxes as a way of demeaning the people that they conquered and as revenue- a revenue stream for the purpose of a kind of Imperial domination. And this author, Edward Sri, he quotes a fairly famous Roman historian, his name is Tacitus. He quotes him, he says this, "We, though so often provoked, have used the right of conquest to burden you only with the cost of maintaining peace for the tranquility of nations." He says, "cannot be preserved without armies, and armies cannot be, cannot exist without pay, and pay cannot be furnished without tribute." So this is what the Roman Empire wanted from Mary and Joseph, they wanted some form of tribute, and that made them- or tried to make them, loyal to Rome and the Jews in Palestine in the time of Mary and Joseph would incur the Roman's wrath if that tribute was delayed. That's why Luke mentions this. And this particular decree required Joseph to be registered there in his ancestral town, which was Bethlehem of Judea, a small little city about seven miles south of Jerusalem. And it took quite a while, all the way from- from Nazareth, to make it there, to that place. And plus, Mary was expecting, was not an easy trip. And Jerusalem was important, of course, but Bethlehem was the foundation of the divinic dynasty. That's where he had been anointed himself. In fact, we know that the prophet Micah, way back in the eighth century, had prophesied this. He had warned about the corruption of the King Hezekiah, but he said a few words about Bethlehem that he is particularly remembered for about Bethlehem being that place of the king. So, we imagine now in our prayer, Mary and Joseph traveling that distance, but at the same time, they didn't feel victimized, they didn't whine about this trip. They kept the bigger picture, they knew that God was in charge.

When they arrived, well, there's all these people there, and this image, or this, this line about that there was no room for them in the inn. There was- there were different accounts about where exactly the child was born. Was it in a stable? Was it in a house? Was it in a cave? Different theories have risen up over the centuries, but in the end, we know that was well in a place that was not too warm, probably quite smelly and musty and damp and probably, yeah, quite dark. Israel's Messiah ends up in a place that is unfit for a

king. I love this passage from Pope John Paul II from an audience that he- he gave back in 1996. He says this, "Mary experiences childbirth in a condition of extreme poverty, she could not give the Son of God even what mothers usually offer a newborn baby. Instead, she was to lay him in "a manger," an improvised cradle, which contrasts with the dignity of the Son of the Most High," and precisely. Pope John Paul II is recognizing this was not really fit for a king. But what kind of place is it really indeed fit for a king? You know, we remember that Jesus was invoked as a King when he was on the cross, the good thief asked him to remember him when he entered into his kingdom. He was- Jesus was on the cross. Is the cross a place fit for a king? Lord, I want a place in my heart that is truly fit for you where you will really be, you can say, be happy. St. Josemaria would often speak of Advent as a time of interior preparation to make ourselves, you can say, our soul, our mind, our thoughts, truly a place fit for a king. And Blessed Alvaro, kind of quoted from St. Josemaria. He said, "As our father asked of us around this time of year, we must walk through the season of Advent trying to build with our hearts a Nativity scene for our God." Build in our hearts a Nativity scene for our God. And although one might expect the birth of Israel's long awaited king to stir great excitement and praise among the people, the newborn Christ completely escapes the notice of practically all the Jews in Judea. You know, none of the Jewish religious leaders of that day came to welcome the Messiah, not the priests, not the Pharisees, not the Sadducees, not the wealthy or governing authorities, only those unnamed shepherds, those poor shepherds that had heard, you know, the- the appearance- from the appearance of those angels that we mentioned in an earlier meditation.

Only they were given like a kind of special invitation. Of course, Mary is there, showing this great affection to the child, and Joseph is there. And none of them, despite the circumstances, none of them complained. She is ready there with him. She has, of course, that good interior preparation, and she has decided to forego any complaints that she- well, that we all might be tempted to when we are in harsh circumstances. And that's what we want to do during this time of Advent, just as we're about to, yeah, enter into the commemoration of Christmas, the birth of the Lord in that stable. That we really have this true interior preparation in St. Josemaria's book *The Forge*, he says, "We should receive our Lord in the Eucharist as we would prepare to receive the great ones of the Earth, or even better, with decorations, with lights with new clothes. And if you ask me what sort of cleanliness, I mean, what decorations and what lights you should bring, I will answer you to: cleanliness in each one of your senses, decoration in each one of your powers, light in all your soul." Well, we are now there with that cleanliness, you could say, inside the stable or the cave, just as Jesus is giving off this powerful light, that child.

You may know that St. Bridget of Sweden, she was in Sweden, but she's a mystic right from the 14th century, and she's traveled from Sweden all the way to Bethlehem, and when she arrived there, she had these tremendous visions of Mary and Joseph in this dark cave. And in one of the visions that she later recounted with great detail, Joseph, it's- the place is dark, so Joseph is trying to find a light to light the place up, and he finds a little candle. And as he lights that candle, suddenly, you know the child Jesus, this, well, he starts to shine with this luminosity, like- like radiating this light, kind of from the ground and that they are surrounded by angels in silent worship that the light was there. He didn't really need that candle because Jesus radiated already this light.

And artists began depicting the Nativity with Mary kneeling and Joseph kneeling in front of the child, and they're both illuminated by this divine light. There are no midwives present as the older representations used to have, and it's really from St. Bridget's vision, that the representation of the Nativity begins to change. I think that's better than those AI generated images, or even they were- were influenced by St. Bridget's vision. And she, St. Bridget, she really teaches us, you know, how to respond to the humiliations that we experience from time to time, or even- even it could happen every day. This image of not being- there not being enough room, is- is a striking one. The King is only surrounded, ultimately, by his best

friends, those who really pay attention to him. And that only makes sense if Mary and Joseph were, in some way, being shunned. She was, after all, pregnant there, and in their view, well, you know, they didn't receive her or Joseph, and they let- they let them go, but whatever was said or whatever was implied, whatever excuses were made, this didn't happen because of some bureaucratic or logistical Failure. I don't know, maybe too many visitors or not enough room in the hotel. Maybe it might happen in a Super Bowl city without prior arrangements, you can't expect to find a nice hotel.

What happened for them, for Mary and Joseph, in some way, you could say, was much more personal. They were down there in some cold and musty place, in some space, because they knew their family had no space for them. I hope you can call your family and during this time of Christmas that you can connect with them, and that you really be able to show your love, your affection, that you really sow some signs of warmth of affection. And this Christmas time is particularly a good time to pray for those who might be lonely, who won't get a call. I would say there's probably a phenomenon that has grown. It's very sad, I think of lonely people, and perhaps we want to give them a little bit of a smidgen of hope. You know, I read that 19 million Americans were expected to spend their Christmas time alone, doesn't necessarily mean that they're lonely. It could mean- that could mean that they become more contemplative. To be alone might seem like an indictment, but it could also be an opportunity for them to offer their home and their heart as an attentive, well-prepared inn, where the Word himself will be tenderly welcomed. But there is loneliness in the negative sense, where they are deprived of the company that they- that they want. It's true, there is solitude, and there is a state where also ourselves, that we can be in a certain way, alone with God. And this all-encompassing the real person creator of all that we need to connect with, you could say from the inside, it is the word, and I am made in his likeness, and now he is becoming like me as a- as a man, right? But without, sin.

St. John, in his Gospel, said "He came to his own, his own received him not." His own received him not. It's a very powerful phrase, who were his own in the end? Or his own were the people of Israel. They had been chosen by God. Jesus was a Jew, but maybe also mankind in general, because he was a man, and his redemption is for all, not just for the Jews, but that phrase, "his own received him not," is always, in some way, also a reproach, a painful reproach, where, in some way we say no, in some way when we reject God's plan- in some way when we are indifferent or unmoved somehow, or when we complain against God's plans. Or for all those who are maybe untouched by the transcendent, the reality of God, you know about what really happens in their soul. That traditional representation of the child between the ox and the ass, as the prophets of the Old Testament said that he was in the midst of two animals. Thou shalt be known in the midst of two animals. What is the meaning of this? Well, the ox and the ass. Some say the ass was the Jews, the ox was the Gentiles, who later embraced Jesus. But we know also many Jews also embraced him.

Some years ago, a childhood friend came to visit me with her husband, hadn't seen her for many, many years. She had been a neighbor many years ago, and she never showed any sign of religion at all in those days. But she was very cultured, very intelligent, and how she- she wrote to me and decided she wanted to investigate religion. She wanted to know more about this. And that's why, many ways, why she contacted me. She knew I was a priest and- and well, John wanted to note in his Gospel, this- this, reject Him, this- this idea that, you know, he came to his own, but his own received him not. And he wanted to note this, not simply as a kind of historical detail. He wanted to, in some ways, he wanted to show it as a sad moment, and it's an invitation for us not to leave him alone, you could say, to make him a place fit for a king in our soul. And that way he can- we can integrate the Lord Jesus to really have a place in our way of thinking, in our way of reacting, make room for him, give space for him in our way of thinking, in our

way of reacting, in wanting him truly win- in our lives and understanding the different way in which he appears, we could ask that, do we want to be converted to something deeper and more powerful?

Do we want the Lord to really do something with us, to help us really give of ourselves more generously? Do we want to open the door when Mary and Joseph come knocking asking for a place with their child as they knocked on that inn? In the end, it's really an opportunity for true conversion, seeing where he is knocking in these days, where he's asking us to open our hearts, to love him, to love others, and in some way, of course, to love ourselves too, that famous tripod, it must be stable and secure. Which one is little bit insecure? Maybe it's in we have to be stronger in loving others. Maybe, yeah, we're- we're lacking affection and kindness to others, or maybe it's in loving the Lord Jesus himself. Maybe we- we lack piety. Or maybe it's just loving ourselves more. It's a tripod, loving him, God, loving others and properly loving ourselves, that tripod of love gives us that interior stability. Let's ask the Blessed Holy Family to help us discover how we can open our door now to let that Holy Family in where the Lord can be kind of born, to take his place in our soul, to prepare truly a fit place for a king.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.