



October 2004

Dear Mars Hill Audio listener,

About eight or nine years ago, a few weeks before Christmas, I was in my car running some errands. I turned on the radio and tuned in to a local Christian radio station, just to hear what was going on. (Christian radio is not my regular fare, but that is the subject for another letter.) The station was playing a song performed by the then-popular Sandi Patti, a song about the Nativity. It was a big, boisterous number, with full orchestra (including prominent timpani), a swelling chorus, huge crescendos, and about three or four modulations into higher keys which stoked the emotion higher and higher as Ms. Patti's voice ascended to the ledger lines. It was an exuberant display of enthusiasm (Hector Berlioz would have been jealous), all of these assembled musical and technical forces in the service of focusing on the miracle of the birth of Jesus, the turning point in human history as the Word was made flesh.

It was an emotional performance, but I remember thinking (and feeling), even as Sandi Patti made her final ascent, and the tonic-dominant-tonic kettle drums were rolling, that it was the wrong kind of emotion, and achieved too hastily. The text was about the birth of a baby, an event better accompanied and better understood with expressions of quiet mystery than with fanfares and pseudo-operatic bravura. Phillips Brooks's "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given" and Joseph Mohr's "Silent Night" seem more apt.

Now of course there are a lot of loud rejoicing Christmas tunes, inspired in large measure by the choir of angels who allegedly sang the first "Gloria." But that joyful and noisy celestial ensemble was not manger-side; they were out hovering over the fields somewhere outside of town. I can imagine that if the shepherds had shown up at the stable singing as loudly, Mary would have shushed them rather sternly.

The coming of Christ into the world is the coming of the Lord of Heaven and Earth, of a great and mighty King, but it is also the birth of a fragile baby and an occasion weighty with awe-inspiring paradox. The mystery of the Incarnation requires that we leave room for quiet wonder before bursting forth in celebration. John Donne's "Annunciation" begins to describe some of those silencing paradoxes:

. . .
That All, which always is all everywhere,
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
Lo, faithful virgin, yields Himself to lie
In prison, in thy womb . . .

Donne continues reflecting on these paradoxes in the sequel sonnet, "Nativity."

Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,
Now leaves His well-belov'd imprisonment,
There He hath made Himself to His intent
Weak enough, now into the world to come. . . .

Part of the mystery of the Nativity (and of the Incarnation it introduced) is suggested in that word “weak.” The sacrifice of the cross is anticipated in the humility of the manger. The awesome paradox of this event is one that should inspire great emotion, but not the kind of emotion conveyed by the Sandi Patti song I happened to hear.

The venerable text “O Magnum Mysterium” conveys simply and compellingly this natal mystery. In translation, it reads:

O most awesome mystery
and sacrament divine and most wondrous:
that animals should look and see the Lord a babe newborn
beside them in a manger laid.

O how truly blessed is the Virgin whose womb was worthy
to bear and bring forth the Lord Christ Jesus.

Alleluia!

This text has been set to music by composers for centuries, but it's hard to imagine it working very well without aspiring toward silence.

I fear that such texts (and their requisite presentation) are becoming less and less likely to shape Christian worship and the consciousness of believers. We are living under the influence of what Todd Gitlin describes as “media unlimited,” a regimen of perpetual stimulation of sight and sound, resulting in “a relentless pace, a pattern of interruption, a pressure toward unseriousness, a readiness for sensation, an anticipation of the next new thing.” It is a restless condition, a cultural disorder for which the Church has a tradition of restorative practices and disciplines which are increasingly unavailable to believers and seekers alike.

They are ways of slowness and silence. The Nativity is a reminder that God takes time to do important things, and that they are often accomplished quietly. But I fear one could never guess that in the current landscape of evango-tainment.

A friend of mine who works for NPR helped to produce a minidocumentary for *All Things Considered* about a megachurch in Texas. I talked with her afterwards, and she confessed that while she was not a religious person, she thought that if she ever was to pursue an interest in spiritual matters, such a church was the last place she would look. “There was no sense of mystery there,” she observed. She was clinging to the sense that a quest for the spiritual would offer her something that the world could not give. Despite media unlimited, there are still people like this out there, people with a sense that if God were to enter human history, it would be an event both transcendent and personal, as opposed to the predictable and impersonal spectacle my friend witnessed in the church on which she was reporting.

The parables of the Kingdom reiterate the often imperceptible and humble ways of God, who works like yeast and a mustard seed, who unglamorously searches for a single lost lamb. (Surely modern consultants would have advised that fanatical shepherd to cut his losses and stay with the 99% of the market already tuned in.) Such ways are not the dominant ways of our culture. Writing in 1948, Richard Weaver observed: “It seems to me that the world is now more than ever dominated by the gods of mass and speed and that the worship of these can lead only to the lowering of standards, the adulteration of quality, and, in general, to the loss of those things which are essential to the life of civility and culture.”

I'm sure there are many Christians who would balk at Weaver's concern for "the life of civility and culture" as somehow elitist and sub-Christian. But civility and culture are in fact the ramifications of our humanity. The Incarnation and the Resurrection confirm God's concern for our humanity. We are saved in order to fulfill our humanity, not to abandon it. So Christians are rightly concerned about human flourishing in all of its forms. In our cultural involvement, we are not concerned merely to assure ourselves that God's laws are not broken. Rather we are eager to encourage the full flowering of human well-being, as much of it as can be known between the Fall and the Second Coming.

If you've been listening to the **MARS HILL AUDIO** *Journal* for any length of time, you know that these are important themes guiding my discussion with my guests. Concerned as I am about the cultural consequences of the Christian account of life, I have come to appreciate the critiques of many observers that modern culture is in many ways *dehumanizing*. And so I have come to believe that the Church has a diaconal task of working to *rehumanize* cultural life as much as we can. This is not, to be sure, the only task of the Church. But the obligation to love God and neighbor (which Jesus says summarizes the whole of the Law) and the necessity that we care for widows and orphans and remain unstained by the world (which James says comprises all of true religion) surely requires that we renounce all social habits and institutions that fail to do justice to the kinds of creatures human beings are.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, alerts us to the great chasm between the modern view of reality and that of the Church. "For the wise men of old," writes Lewis, "the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality." According to this view, human beings are particular kinds of creatures living in a particular kind of world, the meaning of which had been established by God. The pursuit of a well-lived life involved the recognition of the true, the good, and the beautiful, and the shaping of institutions that would enable and encourage such recognition.

The modern view assumes that "the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men." Nature has no nature, human nature has no nature, and therefore social institutions exist principally to maximize the freedom of individuals, to expand the range of their experiences. But in making freedom the only good, modern culture eliminates the personal; if being human means whatever we want it to mean, then it intrinsically means nothing. This is why Lewis's title refers to the abolition of man: if acquiring the power to remake reality to fulfill our wishes is the human vocation, then "the human" disappears.

The Nativity is just one of many wondrous events in the story of salvation that reaffirms God's love for the human. The Gospel guarantees us a salvation that is more than spiritual, more than volitional. It's not just a message that we are forgiven, that our penchant toward destructive disobedience will be exorcized, and that we will come to know perfect peace and abundant joy. On top of all this is the Resurrection promise of humanity fulfilled. All of the joys of our embodied life, of color and sound, of taste and motion, of conversation and play, are thus affirmed as God's blessings on the Creation he pronounced good. By taking on human flesh, Jesus confirms the goodness of our humanity and thus of our cultural life, which is the extension, the ramification, of our human nature.

What is even more remarkable, more awesomely silencing, is that the Incarnation is not over. As Nigel Cameron has written, "The dignity of human nature, fashioned in the divine image, is such that God can take it for himself—and keep it." And as Charles Wesley rejoiced in a poem on the Incarnation, "Of our flesh and of our bone, Jesus is our brother now, and God is all our own."

Nativity, Incarnation, Second Advent. These are the themes that dominate the end of the calendar year and the beginning of the Church year. They are also the theological loci (along with Creation, Resurrection, and Ascension) around which Christian thinking about human nature and Christian concern about cultural life are shaped. They are themes at once cosmic and personal, and they require a deliberateness and definition in theory and practice that must be counter-cultural. If we live in a way that is truly resonant with the realities these six terms describe, our lives will take shape in ways increasingly unlike those of our neighbors. The trajectory of our culture's dominant institutions guarantees this. Those institutions are gnostic, anthropocentric, relativistic, even nihilistic. The Church is called to affirm (and live according to) the goodness and givenness of Creation and the sovereignty and holiness of our Creator.

Over the past twelve years, we at **MARS HILL AUDIO** have labored to introduce our listeners to people, books, and ideas that will aid in the task of growing in discernment about our times and its challenges. I believe that this task is more urgent than it was when I started this project. The disorder of our culture seems more obvious with each passing year, as is the paucity of Christian witness against that disorder. To the extent that Christians are themselves shaped by the cultural disorder around them, it is not surprising that they fail to recognize it.

But every week I correspond or converse with people who are at some level struggling to be faithful to a way of life that rejects the idolatries of our day. Every month, I discover a new book or article that either helps put some puzzling feature of contemporary culture in a new light, or offers ideas about ways of resisting some confusion I was already aware of. That's how each issue of the **MARS HILL AUDIO** *Journal* begins to take shape.

This has always been a project made possible by the generosity of our listeners, who are somewhere between a "community" and a "constituency." Many of you have become our friends, and we know of some friendships that have been encouraged by our work.

Please help us continue to provide this service, by contribution, gift subscription, passing on information about us to others, and continuing to uphold us in your prayers.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers

P. S. A bit of housekeeping: If you give a gift subscription at the special rate of **\$30** on cassette or **\$42** on CD, you may begin or renew your own subscription at the same low rate. Mail in the enclosed form, fax it to **434.990.9090**, call us at **1.800.331.6407**, or see **www.mhaj.org/xmas** (you must enter promotion code **XMAS04** in order to receive the special rates). We must receive your order by Wednesday, December 15 in order to assure delivery in time for Christmas. This offer expires on December 31, 2004.