

# A Proportioned Extravagance

By [Fr. Paul D. Scalia](#) DECEMBER 24, 2022

Christmas, when the Virgin-Mother gives birth to the God-Man, is a feast of paradoxes. One beautiful paradox at the center of this celebration is the union of proportion and extravagance, of what is needed and what is undeserved. The birth of Christ is both proportioned to our need and extravagant in its offering.

The Incarnation is a great example of that scholastic maxim, *Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.* (*Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur.*) By becoming incarnate of the Virgin Mary, **the Son of God proportions himself to our “mode” so that we can receive him.** In his mercy, he doesn't demand that we become capable of him but makes himself capable of being received by us. **True mercy always has this quality of being fitted, tailor-made for those in need, neither too high for them to reach nor too hard for them to accept.**

So God comes to us in a manner we can receive. The infinite becomes finite, the eternal enters time, and the Creator of all is born of the Virgin and laid in the manger. We can receive him because he has become accessible to all of us, and to every kind of us, from the lowly shepherds to the learned Magi. We can receive mercy more easily because – without losing any of its power – it has been scaled to our size.

And not only to our size. **God's mercy is also fitted to our wounded human nature. He is born poor to meet us – we who have squandered our gifts and lost our inheritance.** He is born homeless for us, who live in this world as exiles. He is born exposed to the elements and even to his enemies to encounter us, who are so weak and in danger. He is born alienated from his own people – who “received him not,” (Jn 1:11) – to be one with us, who are alienated from God and from one another.

He unites himself to us in these sorrows because **mercy does not stand far off and look patronizingly on the suffering. The**

**Lord of mercy draws near, unites himself with us, and becomes one with us in our misery.** The poverty of his birth already points to Jesus as the *man of sorrows*, the one united with humanity's every kind of suffering – mental, emotional, physical, spiritual.

But the simplicity and ease with which we can now approach God doesn't mean that his mercy is indulgent and permissive. On the contrary, like all newborn children, he calls out and asks something from us. The infant Christ cries out to us, asking that we receive him and respond. Yet even this inconvenience is proportioned to our needs, for it keeps us from the vice of taking his mercy for granted.



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God does not impose His mercy. But he does call out to us, offering that mercy to all who desire to receive and to live according to it. And the response that he desires makes his mercy all the more ours. Indeed, it becomes all the more a part of us when we respond to his

offer, when we avail ourselves of what he gives, when we hasten to Bethlehem.

At the same time, even as God's mercy is proportioned to our needs as wounded, rebellious creatures, it's also extravagant in what it accomplishes. "From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace." (Jn 1:16) God's mercy is proportioned to what we are but seeks to make us more than we are. "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." (St. Athanasius)

Unlike our stingy, confined mercy (*I'll forgive when I'm asked. . .I'll forgive you this time. . .*), the Lord's mercy always runs ahead of and surpasses what his people ask and desire. Israel waited for God to send a savior; God himself came to be their savior. They awaited deliverance from worldly powers; he delivered them from all powers, natural and supernatural. They expected their own savior; he came to save all, even his enemies. They prayed that the Kingdom of Israel be restored; he led them into the Kingdom of God.

This extravagance is already revealed at His birth. **The shepherds – the dregs of society as they were thought of at the time, living in the fields – receive the first announcement and are privileged to adore Him first.** It is far more than they deserve or imagine. Likewise, the Magi, foreigners and outsiders with no claim on the promises, receive the grace to adore him even before his own people know he is born.

This Bethlehem extravagance sets the tone for our Lord's public life. He begins his ministry by changing not just a little water into wine, but over a hundred gallons. And not just into wine, but into the finest wine. He concludes by opening his side and allowing blood and water to gush forth. **His definitive parable is of a son whose prodigal living is outdone only by his father's prodigal mercy.**

**The infant Christ cries out for a response.** In his littleness and poverty, he has proportioned himself to us, fallen creatures. **May we not deny him access to our weakness and wounds.** In his divinity, he has come to give us *grace in place of grace*. May we not expect or ask for anything less. Let us hasten to Bethlehem, to thank him for coming to us in our need and to receive the richness of grace he desires to impart.

\*Image: *Adoration of the Shepherds* by Bernardo Strozzi, ca. 1615 [Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland]. Strozzi (1581-1644) was known as *il Cappuccino* because he's was a Franciscan Capuchin friar. The shepherds adoring the Christ Child was a favorite theme of St. Francis.

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## **From a treatise Against Heresies** **by Saint Irenaeus, bishop**

(Lib. 3, 20,2-3: SC 34, 342-344)

### *The plan of redemption through the Incarnation*

God is man's glory. Man is the vessel which receives God's action and all his wisdom and power.

Just as a doctor is judged in his care for the sick, so God is revealed in his conduct with men. That is Paul's reason for saying: *God has made the whole world prisoner of unbelief that he may have mercy on all*. He was speaking of man, who was disobedient to God, and cast off from immortality, and then found mercy, receiving through the Son of God the adoption he brings.

If man, without being puffed up or boastful, has a right belief regarding created things and their divine Creator, who, having given them being, holds them all in his power, and if man perseveres in God's love, and in obedience and gratitude to him, he will receive greater glory from him. It will be a glory which will grow ever brighter until he takes on the likeness of the one who died for him.

He it was who took on the likeness of sinful flesh, to condemn sin and rid the flesh of sin, as now condemned. He wanted to **invite man to take on his likeness, appointing man an imitator of God, establishing man in a way of life in obedience to the Father that would lead to the vision of God, and endowing man with power to receive the Father**. He is the Word of God who dwelt with man and became the Son of Man to open the way for man to receive God, for God to dwell with man, according to the will of the

Father.

For this reason *the Lord himself gave as the sign of our salvation, the one who was born of the Virgin, Emmanuel. It was the Lord himself who saved them*, for of themselves they had no power to be saved. For this reason Paul speaks of the weakness of man, and says: *I know that no good dwells in my flesh*, meaning that the blessing of our salvation comes not from us but from God. Again, he says: *I am a wretched man; who will free me from this body doomed to die?* Then he speaks of a liberator, *thanks to Jesus Christ our Lord*.

Isaiah says the same: *Hands that are feeble, grow strong! Knees that are weak, take courage! Hearts that are faint, grow strong! Fear not; see, our God is judgement and he will repay. He himself will come and save us*. He means that we could not be saved of ourselves but only with God's help.