

March 2017 – The Joyful Mysteries



Antonio Allegri, known as Correggio (Correggio, Italy 1489 – 1534), *Nativity*, 1522-1530, oil on poplar wood, cm 256.5 x 188, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie

This large table that Correggio painted for the chapel of the Pratoneri family in the church of San Prospero in Reggio Emilia, Italy, represents an unusual scene. It is night, the special night in which Mary gave birth to Jesus. We know that something special happened that night for there is a warm, very intense light emanating from the child. It is a light that illuminates directly Mary, and then hits the other protagonists of the painting: the woman, the shepherds, the angels and even Joseph, who's on the background.

We are reminded of the words with which the angel greeted Mary the day of the Annunciation: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). In the painting, this favor is in some way embodied by the beam of light that shines on the face of Mary.

In this very unique night, Mary is visited by some unexpected persons, in the place where Jesus is born, near Bethlehem. Correggio has been able to represent the "type" of these visitors in a simple but effective way. Let's look at them carefully.

The woman, most probably a commoner, seems almost to protect herself with her left hand from the intense light emanating from the child. The bearded shepherd appears to be thoughtfully reflecting on what he is seeing, after the announcement he received from the angels in the place where he was grazing the flock a few moments earlier. The young shepherd turns his ecstatic gaze toward his older companion, perhaps in search of answers.

By simply contemplating the painting, we cannot hear what Mary and the shepherds may be telling each other. However, if we just let ourselves be transported by the reverberations that the image arouses in our eyes, mind and heart, we can definitely feel the fear and trembling with which the three characters on the left, who first experienced the terror of the apparition and then decided to go to Bethlehem "to see this thing that has happened, which the Lord told us about," "hurried off" to find that baby who will change the history of mankind forever (cf. Luke 2:8-16).

What may have Mary thought when she saw these really unexpected "anawim", the "poor of God", coming to her? She must have surely rejoiced and showed to them her baby, that "rising sun to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace" (Luke 1:78-79).

It is not coincidental that Correggio set the scene at the end of the night. Let's look at the horizon: it is dawning, the sun is about to rise ... actually, the sun has already risen!