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# The Incarnation as Mystery of Faith

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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## **The Incarnation as Mystery of Faith**

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**Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell  
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies  
Seton Hall University  
South Orange, NJ**

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## **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Sunday Readings for December 18, 2011 for Cycle B:

2 Sm 7:1-16; Ps 89:2-5, 27-29; Rom 16:25-27; Lk 1:26-38

### **THE INCARNATION AS MYSTERY OF FAITH**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

"Mysterium fidei" is a phrase imbedded from time immemorial in the Roman rite's narrative of Eucharistic institution, when the priest recounts the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. In the English translation, the laconic Latin becomes more expansive: "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith." These words elicit our response, an act of faith that moves from the Paschal Mystery of Jesus's Death-and-Resurrection to his second coming.

St. Paul completed his long letter to the Christians of Rome with a summary of his work: "I preach Jesus Christ, the gospel which reveals the mystery hidden for many ages but now manifested..." (16:25-26). The Greek word "mystery" is used to convey the Jewish concept of the divine plan for the universe and humanity. From the time of Abraham and Sarah, God slowly unfolded his plan to call all human beings back to union with the profound purpose for creation. Christians believe that Jesus embodied in himself and his work (especially in his obedient death for the forgiveness of sin) the culmination of this plan, drawing all human beings to the Father.

The feast of Christmas recalls the paradoxes of the mystery of faith: the Lord of the universe, whose riches overflow into creatures, is born in poverty and would die dispossessed even of his garments. Yet in his human nature, Jesus is son of Abraham, son of David; he is of royal estate both as God and man.

For all his faults, King David was generous, so he felt inspired to build a temple for the God of Israel. This resolution became an occasion for God to teach him that we are always the beneficiaries of divine benevolence. David's aspiration to build a house for God was the context for the divine promise of an everlasting house or dynasty. Other prophets would specify that the instrument whereby God would establish his kingdom would be an anointed royal figure (Messiah) of this Davidic line.

In their narratives of Jesus' infancy, both Matthew and Luke stress this Davidic heritage. The Gospel of the Annunciation, chosen for this Sunday, depicts Mary as the first recipient of the Good News centered on Jesus. His titles are sublime: Son of the Most High and Son of David. "He will rule over the house of Jacob forever and his reign will be without end" (Lk 1:33). Thus his work continues that of David, who consolidated the twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob) around the city of Jerusalem.

Mary was very puzzled by the message, overwhelmed by its impact on her life. Assurance is given that the divine purpose will be achieved in her life as in the past history of Israel, for "nothing is impossible with God" (Gn 18:14). Her response in faith provides the pattern for us all. As servant of God, we repeat: "Let it be done to me as you say."

The mystery of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus is part of the larger "mystery of faith." St. Luke knew from the Jewish Scriptures of the marvelous way in which God gave progeny to aged or barren parents; in fact, this pattern is continued in the annunciation to Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son (1:5-25). The coming of Christ into the world involves a surprise of even greater dimensions. Mary could have been told that after marriage she and Joseph would have a child. Rather, the message is that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35). Mary's faith and obedience must be the model for the Church in her poverty and for each of us as we face seemingly impossible tasks in our lives. Like Sarah and Mary, people of every age must recall: "Nothing is impossible with God!"

Because Jesus was born a Jew, he was under the Law; so he was circumcised on the eighth day. This sign of the Covenant given to Abraham was linked to the new name whereby he was designated "father of a multitude of nations" (Gn 17:1-5). The initial blessing given to Abraham was to extend to all the families of the earth (Gn 12:1-3). Now we rejoice in the Name given to Mary's Son, signifying that he brings the divine gift of salvation (yeshua') to the world. His presence and gifts are the basis for our confidence as we ask for strength to face the challenge of a new year.