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O Magnum Mysterium: The Nacimiento Tradition in the Barrio

Biblical Texts: Isaiah 2:9; Luke 2:7-20, 29-31

As a child, I was taken to visit “Nacimientos,” a manger scene that people in different barrios set up in their homes and invited others to come, view, and share treats, too. Typically, the manger scenes were large and rather strange, and not strictly “historical,” or even biblical. Raised up on tables and boxes covered with an old green carpet, the hilly nativity scenes took up the entire living room space, and people had to crowd into the doorway to view it. Typically, at the center was a rough structure made from logs, palm leaves, and twigs. Within its canopy stood three traditional human figures, modeled in brown clay and painted in very bright colors—Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, enthroned in a rough trough filled with shredded palm and yucca leaves. Around them were figures of animals, some modeled in clay, others made from papier-mâché, and even some plastic ones that looked like they might have come from a cereal box. There would be donkeys, roosters, goats, cats, dogs, ducks, and the occasional friendly-looking rat. As your eye moved towards the periphery, Bethlehem came into view, built as a typical barrio, with homes made from paper that resembled cement blocks, or cardboard covered with tin roofs. In the streets were many small figures involved in daily life--the barrio *tortillera* selling her tortillas, a mechanic lying on the ground fixing a car, a vendor selling *raspados* (snow cones). Nacimientos transcended time and culture, representing the birth of Jesus in the past, yet in the present; the joy and beauty found in the barrio contrasted physical poverty with an abundance of community. This was an invitation to contemplate a mystery both ancient and new.

This contemplative experience, which involves perceiving Jesus’s birth in the lives of people from all walks of life and in nature, is very ancient. *O magnum mysterium*, O great mystery, a poem dating to the 13th century, brings together Isaiah 1:3 and Luke 1:29-31. In Isaiah, animals are portrayed as understanding God better than human beings do: “The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” Nevertheless, the outpouring of grace in Jesus’s birth occurs through a human being, a woman who has herself been blessed and received grace (*charisma*) from God. (Luke 1: 29-31)

O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum,
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum,
iacentem in praeseptio!
O beata virgo, cuius viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Christum.
Alleluia!

O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,¹
that animals should see the newborn Lord,
lying in a manger!
O blessed Virgin, whose womb
was worthy to bear
the Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

¹ Luke 1:29-31 expresses the outpouring of grace in the world: animals are called to perceive a mystery (*mustērion* in Greek), which is rendered as *sacramentum* (sacrament in Latin).

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In Luke 2:7-15, shepherds, living their daily lives in the fields on the social periphery, receive a sign from heaven—the choir of angels, who invite them to come to Bethlehem to perceive an even greater sign; to go and *see* and *experience* the mystery of God born and placed in *this* world. Grace in the world of Bethlehem, and in the barrio, is ever ancient and ever new.

To close this meditation: A musical setting of *O Magnum Mysterium* for contemplation, by the American composer Morten Lauridsen, can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8uCEqKoaMc&list=PLr7g_GTqa0l7ph0lj2fGe9Kvk7vvRNN2o&index=4

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