

## Christmas - December 2025

**Why do we give Christmas gifts covered in ornamental papers?** It is because God gave Himself to us a Divine gift, covering His Divinity by coming as a human baby.

### **The Mysticism of the Crib** by Fr. Ron Rolheiser

When Pablo Picasso was a young child, a huge fire broke out in the city where his family lived. A night of chaos followed with people rushing about the streets shouting, commotion, and anarchy everywhere. Later, as an adult, Picasso recalled that night and described how, through all the commotion, he sat snug inside a harness-vest on his father's chest, watching everything around him, all the turmoil, from a secure, protected space. He felt no fear at all, only wonder, as he took it all in. People were fearing for their lives, but he was snug and safe on his father's chest.

This was not without long-term effects in his life. Art critics have pointed out that, as an artist, Picasso painted from precisely that perspective—a safe perch from which he could look at bedlam and disorder while being quite secure himself.

My memories are not exactly those of Picasso, but I have a warm memory too about being a child and feeling snug and secure in a world full of cold and chaos. My memory has to do with Christmas Eve and going to church and seeing in the crib at the front of the church, the baby Jesus. Our parish still has the same crib, all these years later, and when I am home at Christmas and celebrate mass in the local parish, I still see parents bringing their young children forward to the crib to look at the nativity scene.

What goes on in the mind of a child when she or he looks at the infant, Jesus, sleeping in a manger of straw, surrounded by Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the various animals? As adults, it is easy to be cynical about Christmas cribs—a plastic doll, lying on plastic straw. The stuff of saccharine, not of mysticism. But what does go on in the mind of a child?

Partly I am guessing and vaguely I am remembering, but a child, at least one who is not yet deeply wounded by some kind of abuse, will feel, before the crib, some of the same things that Picasso felt on the night of that great fire, the security of seeing things from the perspective of being held snug on a loving parent's chest.

To a child's eyes, the Christmas crib is heaven frozen in time. All the peace promised by Isaiah's vision is there: a little baby, the prince of peace, the God of the whole universe, asleep peacefully in the straw, surrounded by a loving mother and an attentive father and praying shepherds and animals who are too stunned by the very sight of it all to even move. To a child, the nativity scene is the snug-harness of safety on the father's chest or the mother's breast. The peace and security once felt at the mother's breast returns.

When a child sees and feels this, and any innocent heart will, that child walks away from the crib with a mystic's eye and a mystic's heart. For a time, at least, he or she will see and feel things from the perspective of the crib—where the God of the poor, the peaceful, the little and the innocent rules the world.

At the last supper, the scriptures tell us the beloved apostle rested his head on Jesus' breast, a gesture of unique friendship and intimacy. This is a mystical image that parallels what we have just been describing. When you put your head on another's breast, you have your ear just above that person's heart and are able to hear his or her heartbeat.

To see the world while hearing Christ's heartbeat: This is the real Christmas invitation. When the gospels tell us that it was the same disciple who leaned on Christ's breast who later looked into the tomb and "saw" that Christ had risen, it means much more than a simple physical registering of the fact that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. It means that the beloved disciple saw precisely as someone who is, at the same time, hearing the heartbeat of Christ. As a result, it says, he understood—with his soul.

St. Bonaventure once said that God gave us three eyes: the eye of the body, a physical eye through which we see things; the eye of the mind, a capacity to see things through reasoning and thought; and the eye of the soul, a capacity to see, feel and understand the things of God.

Christmas wants us to engage the eye of the soul. It is about leaning our head on the crib, Jesus' breast, in order to hear his heartbeat and then turning our eyes out to the world to see things from that perspective.

The crib is the harness-vest on the mother's breast.