

## Don't Miss the Christmas Stairway!

*"And he said to him, 'Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"*

John 1: 51

Every time I read this line of the Gospel I'm stunned thinking of how many times I read it for years without understanding it and without even thinking of how obscure it is. I know that this is the case with many of you, too. Believe me! I asked so many students and friends over the years... Sometimes we are so distracted that we don't even become curious about things that are supposed to appear odd. Think about it! At first glance, this passage does not make much sense, "ascending and descending on the Son of Man." What is it, literally, an escalator? Amazingly enough, the answer is, "Yes!" Jesus is comparing himself to an escalator—"stairway" in the English translation of the Bible; "scala" in my native language, and He is mysteriously disclosing the greatest miracle after the very act of Creation.

If we want to figure out what that line is really about, we need to go back to another passage of the Bible, this time from Genesis—A passage which is a figure of the Incarnation of Jesus and of the miracle it brings with it.

Let's read it:

"Jacob departed from Beer-sheba and proceeded toward Haran. When he came upon a certain shrine, as the sun had already set, he stopped there for the night. Taking one of the stones at the shrine, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep at that spot. Then he had a dream: a stairway rested on the ground, with its top reaching to the heavens; and God's messengers were going up and down on it."

Genesis 28: 11-13

Christmas is approaching, and many people might miss the point of what is really going on with this important anniversary—the cosmic moment in which heaven and earth have been joined together thanks to a very special *stairway*.

Too often we think of this world as if it were different from what we call heaven, where God and the angels are and where the souls of the departed ones rejoice in their new lives. This is a mistake as well as an unfortunate lack of imagination. God didn't create this world to look at it from afar. He "is not the Absolute that remains outside of the world, indifferent to human suffering. He is Emmanuel, Godwithus, a God who shares man's lot and participates in his destiny." (John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*). Still, how can this earthly reality reach God? As much as we jump and stretch our hands towards the sky, we will never be able to touch God. We cannot touch what is not material, and God is definitively not material, is He?

Well, as a matter of fact, He is now. It's called Incarnation.

After creating us, God was eager to complete His desired picture, so to speak, and give us a world in which we could touch Him, see Him, hear Him, talk to Him and walk with Him.

"Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us... Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14, 8-9). His body, His humanity, His taking on our human nature, is the real "mystery" (in Greek, "sacrament") of this world. The mystery is that when we see Jesus as a man, we are truly seeing God. And this mystery doubled after the Ascension, because now His body too is with us in mystery. We call it "the mystical body of Christ," and we need to close our eyes and use our faith to touch it, eat it, and be one with it. Still, it's as real as two thousand years ago.

Creation, Incarnation, and then the Passion and Resurrection, is a marvelous love story with a fantasy setting made of magical creatures (the angels), earthly creatures made divine (us) and a loving God who cannot stay away from our neighborhood too long, even when we do our best to mistreat Him with our sins. This is why J.R.R. Tolkien thought that the real fantasy book is the Bible, because it is the only book that tells of a fairytale which is real, and in which, when everything seems to be lost, the unexpected and impossible happens—a sea splitting in two, a sterile woman conceiving, a virgin giving birth to the "stairway," and God being born as a human being.

This world is enchanted for many reasons. First of all, God is creating as we speak. One more time, use your imagination to glimpse the truth. There is nothing if God does not think of it. Creation is not in the past. There is no past in God, and there is no preexisting matter to His action. This world is not like us molding a statue. *We* don't have to create the marble, and this is why our statues keep existing after we take our hands away from them. But with God,

CREATIVITY is different. There is absolutely nothing before he puts His hands on it, and there would be nothing if He removes His hands. God is creating us now as He was at the very beginning of time. It's just one instantaneous act—More than that, It's before and outside time. He is creating the whole piece of the universe at once, from day one to the Apocalypse. The passing of the years is just our perspective, not His. So, here we are, right now, in the invisible hands of God, with His divine power holding us into existence. We and this world are a thought in His mind.

Indeed, when we open our minds and truly focus on the mystery of Christmas, joy and gratitude are the only possible outcomes.

The other day, I woke at about 4 a.m., and all of the above came at once to my attention, powerfully and vividly. I started to make a list (pretty long, I have to say) of all the things I am grateful for in my life, from my existence, to my family and friends, to the many opportunities to help in our Lord's vineyard. I pray you do the same so we can grow together in commitment this Christmas. To me, that's the privilege of taking time together to focus on great good for God.

Merry Christmas!

*Dr. Fulvio Di Blasi*

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## **A TIC Online Core Curriculum**

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The Thomas International Center is preparing an online university project, which, over the next several years, as resources become available, will provide access to a liberal arts Online Core Curriculum.

The Core Curriculum will offer introductions to a variety of different disciplines, inspired – as a sound core curriculum should be – by an integrated vision of knowledge, rooted in the philosophy of the great theologian and philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas.

The program will eventually consist of over twenty full, university-level courses. Each course will be divided into about five online “short courses,” with each of the short courses divided into about fourteen half-hour classes.

The taping of the first course will begin this spring. “American Constitutional Principles” will be taught by Center Co-Director Christopher Wolfe. Dr. Wolfe taught this course at Marquette University for about thirty years, and it draws heavily on his expertise regarding the Constitution.

The pace and timing of our rollout of the core curriculum are entirely dependent on the generous contributions of our supporters. To facilitate our development of the Core Curriculum, please consider donating!

The Online Core Curriculum is an intermediate goal: it will be a “preview” of the university we hope to establish in a few years. Online university programs and courses can be a valuable resource, but – despite currently fashionable predictions – a genuine liberal arts education, which helps students achieve an integrated Christian view of life in all its varied aspects, will always require personal contact and discussion between students and excellent teacher-scholars.