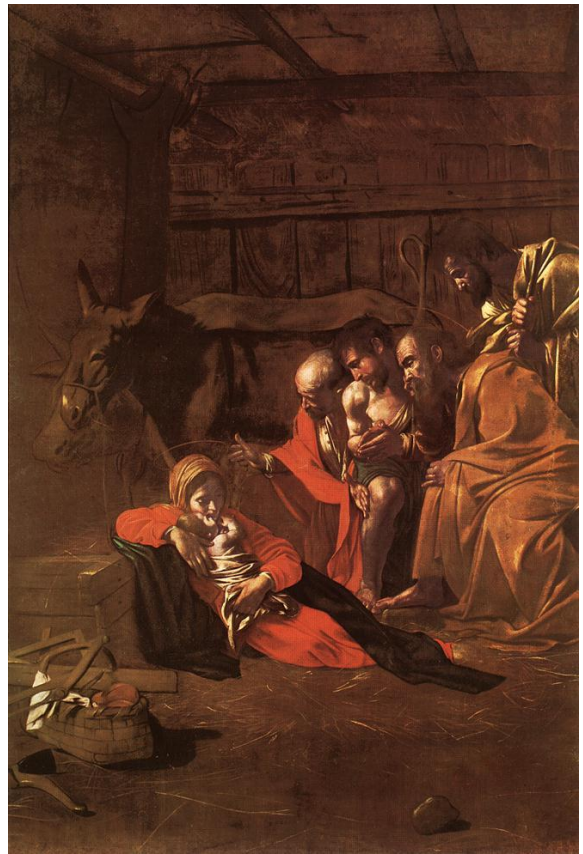


Christmas Sermon 2011

In 1603 the last great altarpiece was painted in Sicily. Its artist was the Renaissance genius, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, known to the generations simply as Caravaggio. The title of the masterpiece is the *Adoration of the Shepherds*. It is a strange painting, inasmuch as it depicts the familiar Christmas scene with no angels, no trumpets, no human tributes and no celestial light. All the spectator sees is the Blessed Virgin Mary, as a refugee mother owning nothing but the clothes on her back. She clutches the Infant Jesus, who is barely covered by some tattered rags. The Virgin stares blankly into an uncertain future, exhausted in the semi-darkness. Her weariness is propped up by an animal's feeding trough, anchored firmly in the beaten earth of the windswept stable. The adoring shepherds are three baffled workmen not knowing quite what to make of the supernatural episode unfolding before them. Finally, there is St. Joseph, the Virgin's elderly husband, beholding the entire event with restrained fear.



This Caravaggio Christmas scene is brutally bleak and hard. Aptly so. For Christ breaks forth into a world which has been made brutally bleak and hard by man's sins. A world wizened by the exhaustions of self-love.

But the master strokes of Caravaggio's brush place the Christ child at the center of his canvas, announcing to every man and woman, to ever set their admiring eyes upon this painting, that the world's only hope is Christ, the Infant King, born in Bethlehem. Without Him there man suffers only an aching hunger, but never any bread; maddening questions, but never the comfort of answers; wrenching anxiety, but never a blessed peace; a brittle vanity upon vanity, without even a whisper of truth.

When Bethlehem fades from the heart and souls of men, then their starved souls escape to a dead-end transcendence. Look at our culture without Christ. Its men and women, especially its young, seek to step beyond their flattened world by absorption with ghosts, and zombies; with end of the world obsessions and cartoon superheroes. In Eliot's arresting lines from *Burnt Norton*, they "distract themselves from distractions by distractions". A thousand pities – for the true Hero is so close - awaiting them in the unthreatening face of a Divine Child.

Christmas imposes upon every Catholic a solemn obligation: to tell the world that our joy, our answer, our peace and our escape lays in the humility of Bethlehem. We must tell them that looking anywhere else is staring into the abyss.