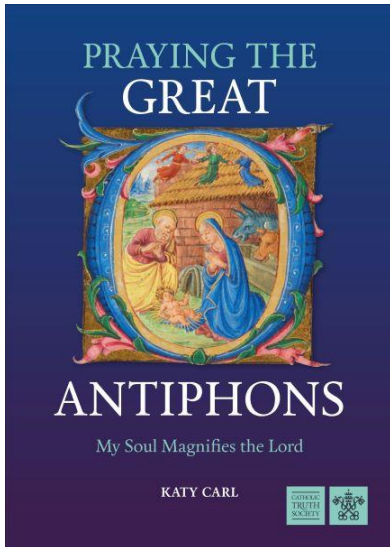


Christmas — 25<sup>th</sup> December 2022

'Foetal ejection reflex'

I was reading this book on Friday, a set of meditations on



the 7 great 'O' Antiphons which are a part of the Church's liturgy in the final run-up to Christmas: *O Sapientia*, ... *O Rex Gentium*, ... *O Emmanuel* etc. These are divine titles, drawn from the Old Testament, which describe the Messiah, the "one to come."

Suddenly, almost out of nowhere, in the midst of the final reflection, on the antiphon, *O Emmanuel*, the authoress of the work introduces the idea of the *foetal ejection reflex*, as she ponders the birth of Jesus from Mary, that sacred Bethlehem night. I was a bit taken aback, suddenly being presented with a term from obstetric endocrinology in the middle of a spiritual pamphlet. But the writer, who is herself a mother, explains her reason for mentioning it:

Anyone who has ever witnessed or experienced labour knows that transition is intense. Instinct takes over, and whatever is deepest in the heart finds itself coming up to the surface. It is a moment marked by one purpose: the child must be born, and the mother must find a way. She must put aside whatever stands in between her current state and the success of her effort. ... The technical term for the physical process that, quite literally crowns the endeavour — foetal ejection reflex — does not begin to cover the human experience of giving birth. It is totalizing, requiring in that moment all the person has, all she is: her heart, all her soul, all her strength.

I would hazard a guess that most of us here this morning have not given birth, nor ever been present at a birth, which by all accounts is a near-miraculous thing to experience, the sudden appearance of a new little life.

Blessed Mary, too, yes, really wants to bring the son of her womb into the world — there is an *urgency* to it, which derives from our human biology. But my thoughts went further as I pondered on this Nativity scene. How much, yes, she desires this — *spiritually* even more than biologically. Leaving aside the whole question of the birth pangs of the Messiah — theologians debate whether

sinless Mary would have experienced the actual pains of childbirth — one can try and imagine the wholeness of her being that Mary offers as she brings Jesus to birth. For the urgency, the expectation surrounding this child, is not just like that of any other mother, nor even just the greatest any other mother can have ... but it is of a greater degree than any imaginable. For Mary knows, sinless body and unclouded soul, just who this Child is, and what He is to be: the Saviour of the World. And therefore, yes, “the Child must be born, and the Mother must find a way.” Despite all the challenges, despite the Census, and the 70-mile journey, and the ‘no room at the inn,’ yet she will, with all her God-loving heart and sinless soul, bring this precious divine Son into the world safely. Can we even begin to imagine the *necessity* that Mary feels, and acts on? Not merely a ‘foetal ejection reflex,’ but an all-encompassing spiritual instinct, a ‘Messiah-protection reflex’: He *has* to be born; God’s plan demands it, the world needs it, humanity’s history is desperate for it! Mary, in some way at least, comprehends this, and she

gives her ‘all’ in that Nativity night, her Christmas child-bearing.

Those ‘O Antiphons’ I mentioned were written, centuries ago, to accompany the *Magnificat*, to top-and-tail that sacred song of Mary, which the Church uses daily at Evening Prayer, and which begins: “My Soul Glorifies the Lord.” Yes, the heart of Christmas is this young Jewish girl’s giving God the praise that He deserves, her total co-operation that is truly the model for all our faithful devotion. As we ponder with wonder that first Christmas, and admire the beauty of the sacred Crib scene, let our hearts be *overtaken* with love for God, as Mary’s was.

We all love Christmas, it is our ‘reflex’ — even those not so devout, or even unbelievers, recognise that Christmas is truly beautiful. That ‘reflex response’ to the mystery of the Nativity is because it is in fact utterly natural to believe, completely innate to expect, and to want, God to come from heaven to save us. And for Him to come as a defenceless baby — entrusted just to this poor couple, the Blessed Virgin Mary & St Joseph — touches

every heart at some level, and makes the hearts of believers resound with hope and joy.

And yet, alongside this extraordinary image of love for the unborn, and then the newborn, Christ — Mary’s love for her Son, Joseph’s for the One he is charged to protect — comes a sharply contrasting image, a news story from the last couple of days. And that’s from outside an abortion centre in Kings Norton, Birmingham, where an acquaintance of mine, Isabel, was arrested. She is the organiser of ‘March for Like UK,’ which maintains in the public eye the horror of our country’s abortion industry. She was arrested for, supposedly, *mentally praying* whilst standing on the pavement. She was not protesting; she was not vocal; she was carrying no placard; she was not approaching, let alone harassing, anyone; she was merely standing there, and “may have been” at prayer silently. And yet, the Police arrested her for that supposed crime of silent, prayerful, witness. It struck me that she — a ‘martyr’ to this new ‘thoughtcrime’ of breaking a ‘Public Space Protection Order’ by praying — is also driven by

this reflex to *love the child*, love the unborn child, and she sees the absolute necessity of it, to the extent of risking her being prosecuted.



What an antithesis to Christmas, this news story of her arrest and her being charged to appear in court! On the one hand we celebrate as a whole society the extraordinary birth of a child to a Mother in difficult, almost impossible circumstances; and on the other hand we prosecute even the *thinking* of someone who dares to reach out, silently and prayerfully, to any mother who feels she is in such difficult, almost impossible circumstances, that she wants to avoid the birth of her child. What a contrast! What an Orwellian ‘doublethink’! The natural love for Christmas,

the deep desire, and need, in Mary — and in each of us — that Jesus is brought to birth; and the unnatural rejection of the unborn child, that everyone knows, deep down, is always wrong. That *fœtal ejection reflex*, a mother's instinct to preserve her baby with her whole being, is substituted with *fœtal rejection*, an ultimate failure of love by those around the pregnant mother who should be supporting her and caring for her, most importantly the child's father. It's uncomfortable to think of it; to call to mind on such a happy festival, the discomfoting truth of 200,000 destroyed, aborted lives per year in this country — the 10 million lives lost across 55 years — and yet it's important. Christmas is precisely about God's reminding us of the supreme importance of care for the most vulnerable, that He Himself became.

Finally, within the last few days, too, I became aware of another image, a picture by the early-20<sup>th</sup>-c. artist from Cambridge, Gwen Raverat. One of her specialities was the woodcut, an etching in wood that allows the multiple printing in ink of the image she has etched. A

friend posted it on social media, in the run-up to Christmas. In Gwen Raverat's woodcut of the Nativity, Mary is seen leaning over the newborn Jesus — *her* newborn Jesus — on her knees, as if the birth is barely over, labour hardly finished, the young tentative mother that she was. St Joseph leans in, too, in an attitude of awe and protection, his staff at the ready providing steadiness and sturdiness. And the Child Himself is the radiant source of the only light there is. How can any artist even begin to portray this scene that has been painted, etched and carved, countless times across 2000yrs? And yet, every artist can bring to their Nativity scene something new, for every heart does relate to this dawn of salvation. It speaks to every human heart, and Gwen Raverat's woodcut helped me with its tenderness and deep humanity: Mary cares ... She cares *so much!* And she cares so much not only because God has asked her to bear this Child, but because she cares about *us*: this Child is for us, God-absolutely-with-us. With the intensity, the instinct, and the devotion of Mary, let's gaze at the Christ-child, the newborn Jesus — “radiance

beaming from His holy face” — and know that we cannot do without Him. We too need to exercise that ‘reflex’ that dearly wants to bring Jesus to birth in our lives; with breathless intensity we pant and long for Christ to be born anew today ... in our lives, in our family, in our community, in our friendship group ...

*Holy Mary ... blessed Joseph ... my Lord Jesus — help me keep Christmas properly today, with a life-changing gaze at you, a gaze that renews my soul so profoundly with a sense of God’s ravishing love, offered to me and to everyone through me.*



**Gwen Raverat, woodcut of the Nativity (1916).**