

The Incarnation and pro-life work

By Sister Constance Veit, lsp

Several weeks ago, we packed away our Advent and Christmas decorations, but I find myself wanting to linger over the spirituality of this season, even as Lent approaches.

Advent and Christmas had special meaning for me this year thanks to a book entitled *Redeemer in the Womb* (a new edition is available from Word on Fire Publishing).

In the book, Father John Saward draws from Scripture, the Fathers of the Church and later writers to delve into the relationship between Mary and the unborn Savior in her womb. Father Saward explains that the original idea for the book came from a friend's suggestion that he draw out the pro-life implications of Catholic faith in the Incarnation.

Father Saward invites his readers to "reconsider a forgotten pearl from the treasury of revelation: the nine months of Jesus' life as in unborn child in Mary."

He writes, "Since the Incarnation of God the Son in the Virgin's womb reveals the greatness of man's dignity, I am inviting my readers to look again, this time in the light of the Son of God, at the womb-weeks of their own and every human life. I am going to suggest that we re-read this first chapter of the human story and find afresh its beauty, truth and goodness."

The Incarnation of God's only Son in Mary's womb reveals the greatness of human dignity – this statement alone should shape our convictions but I don't think the abortion debate will be settled based on human dignity alone.

Father Saward tackles the hot-button question of when life begins.

Despite the assertions of many abortion supporters that it is impossible to determine the moment when human life begins, it has always been the Church's teaching that this question does, in fact, have a precise answer.

"There were no successive stages in Christ's taking of manhood," Father Saward writes. In Christ's Incarnation, "the body did not come into being before the soul, nor the soul before the body ... the flesh was conceived, ensouled and assumed simultaneously ... The adventure of being human began for the eternal Son at the moment of his conception."

St. Maximus the Confessor, a theological giant of the early Church, taught that the coincidence of the eternal Word's assumption of human nature with his conception in the Virgin's womb confirms that the rational soul of every human person "is created immediately by God and infused into the body at the moment of conception" – a doctrine referred to as "immediate animation."

Tertullian, one of the earliest Church Fathers, had also asserted this doctrine: "To prevent birth is anticipated murder; it makes little difference whether one destroys a life already born or does

away with it in its nascent stage. The one who will be a man is already one" (cited in the Vatican's *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, November 18, 1974).

These teachings of the early Church Fathers forcefully grabbed my attention because they reminded me of certain Catholic politicians who evoke the Church Fathers to justify their pro-abortion positions.

Perhaps the most hardcore proponents of abortion will never care about theological distinctions but armed with a more thorough understanding of centuries-old Catholic teaching, we do stand a chance of winning over at least some of our fellow Catholics.

I have only touched upon the first chapter of Father Saward's intriguing book but I hope that I have opened your eyes, as Father Saward opened mine, to the awesome dignity that is ours as human beings thanks to the nine months that a divine embryo – the God-Man – spent in his mother's womb.

Respect for this awesome dignity should inspire our actions with regard to all vulnerable human life, especially the unborn.

Our Advent candles and Christmas nativities may be stored away until next year, but we can remind ourselves of the Incarnation – and release its saving power – throughout the year each time we pray the joyful mysteries of the rosary.

In a few weeks we will celebrate the liturgical feast of the Annunciation, another opportunity to heighten awareness of the connection between Christ's Incarnation and the pro-life cause.

Jesus living in Mary, through the power of your Incarnation help us to rediscover the beauty, truth and goodness of every human life from conception until natural death and to celebrate the Gospel of Life each day of the year!

Sister Constance Veit is the communications director for the Little Sisters of the Poor in the United States and an occupational therapist.