

A Reflection on Sieger Köder's Painting, the 'Rosenberg Nativity', by Kiltegan Father, Fr Niall Martin

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The Rosenberg Nativity

"See, look there; there's a man poking holes in the darkness and letting in the light."

Robert Louis Stevenson spoke these words from his sick bed, whilst gazing out at the lamplighter going about his nightly duties. With the cold and the darkness closing in the light, any light was welcome!

Indeed how much more was the light generated and radiated outwards by a small baby, a mother and a father (apparently asleep!) in a stable at Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago? Sieger Köder's painting captures the poet's imagery. What a beautiful combination!

Köder entitles his painting *The Rosenberg Nativity*. Rosenberg is a town in Germany, so you may ask, "But the birth of Jesus was in Bethlehem?". People all over the world gather every December to celebrate and welcome the birth of the God-child who was named Jesus. For many years I have celebrated that birth in my home village of Belcoo in Co Fermanagh. The light this feast disperses through my priestly ministry has reached many places in South Sudan and Kenya. In those predominantly nomadic areas I believe (and hope!) I was "poking holes in the darkness". In a small way maybe I was "letting in the light". Any missionary would be happy and proud to acknowledge that through his or her ministry they "were poking holes in the darkness and letting in the light."

Köder's painting is my favourite Christmas scene. I feel we are easily drawn into the action and become part of the unfolding drama and mystery. He presents us with one of those "AH!" moments. Joseph Campbell once wrote, *When before the beauty of a sunset or a mountain, you pause and exclaim, "Ah!" you are participating in divinity.*

The first thing to notice is the simplicity of the scene. Two men dominate part of the scene, one at the top of the painting is fast asleep – seemingly! How he can "sleep" in that crumpled position is a mystery! The man at the bottom is alert and showing facial expressions of wonder, surprise and awe. The observer gazing on the painting, has to choose which is Joseph. Who is the other one? You? Me? Why not? We then move to the center of the painting, a mother cloaked in blue and clutching



Birth of Jesus, detail of high altar by Sieger Köder in Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Rosenberg, Germany.
(Photo: Zvonimir Atlečić / Alamy Stock Photo)



a small baby wrapped in a white gown. To the right you see a young boy – or is it a girl, in a pose that suggests prayer.

We turn now to the atmosphere of the work. There is an absence of noise. No sheep bleating! Here, in this painting and unlike most nativity scenes there are no heavenly choruses ringing out. Just the silence of the night, the calmness expressing the enormity of what has just taken place, namely, the birth of Emmanuel, the Promised one. And all this in silence and exclusion. All this in a stable with a grass roof and varied finely carved wooden beams. Köder draws inspiration from the ordinary, in the ordinary we are likely to find HIM.

We look to the exhausted figure of Joseph. Already he has had a very interrupted life. He has travelled to this place with his pregnant wife. The pregnancy has been difficult for him to accept at first. Perhaps he continued to struggle with it. It is not easy. What has just happened is just too much for him to grasp. In fact interruptions are going to become very much part of his life.

His faithfulness in the midst of so many interruptions is the mark of a man of faith, a person of great compassion and care. This moment, captured vividly by the artist, reminds us just how much trying to follow the values of the Gospel can take its toll on each of us. In the midst of preparations for this Christmas is there room in our lives to pause and recognise His presence in the ordinary?

In his exhausted pose Joseph leans against a timber post but if you look at the surrounding scene you will notice the images of three crosses. The scene at Calvary! Incarnation and Crucifixion resting side by side. Two great mysteries. And then there is that other man at the bottom of the painting clutching a piece of wood bearing the inscription INRI (the King of the Jews). Köder here depicts the two great pillars of our faith, the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. The artist holds both mysteries together. Wonderful! Poking holes in the darkness.

Mother and child fill the centre space – from where light radiates. The star shining from that dark corridor above points to the source of the light, that is, from the heavens. The Father! And the light falls equally on the two main actors in the drama, Mary and her newborn. This is the moment in the drama, that is the

Incarnation. No choruses ringing out. Silence invades this moment as it is presented by Köder. The message is to follow the light and you will come to center. Has Joseph missed it? Be alert to the light!

Mary holds the child with both hands. The child – remember a newborn – reaches out with one hand to caress the mother. A moment of real tenderness. Signs of suffering are all around with the images and instruments of crucifixion but here you are drawn into the calm and peace of the surroundings and the MYSTERY. The scene is one of tranquility.

Nevertheless, this is a wonderful moment that all parents treasure. Holding a little bundle of energy all dressed in a white garment (baptismal). Is the mother gesturing at giving away the child, presenting him to the world? Do you have the sense that the child is clinging to its mother, not wanting to leave her side? The ministry of Jesus might never have happened. I for one am glad he didn't cling on. "His nature was divine but he didn't cling....."

And then there is that little girl/boy in a prayer pose and standing over the mother and her child. Sometimes what is necessary is just to stand beside and wonder in silence. There is the man in the bottom corner, a bystander with mouth wide open. Is he proclaiming something? We are drawn to his accentuated hands. One large hand reaches out to the child, a gesture of welcome? But his facial expression suggests he is frightened. Who does he represent? And he is clinging to that piece of timber with the inscription 'King of the Jews'. Crucifixion reminds us where this event eventually leads to.

Köder of course offers us hope. The white roses in the bottom corner are in full bloom. White is the colour of purity, in contrast to the red of Crucifixion. These roses represent resurrection, the Lord's triumph over death. Köder had witnessed the Holocaust. His choice of the white rose reminds us to have hope in the risen life, again "poking holes in the darkness and letting in the light."

This wonderful painting invites us all in the Advent Season to catch a glimpse of 'the great mystery which is Jesus the Christ'. A light in the darkness. ■

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