From the Editor: God knows what it's like to be human

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He came as one of us. He knew what it was to be human. He came to tell us human beings are God’s image and likeness. He loved us, and the world, so much that he gave his life for us.

The gospel of John soars: “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.” It’s sublime. Beyond our reach. Way up there. Far, far away.

But then — “The Word became flesh.” There’s so much we can learn from how his earthly life began: who was involved, who got the news, who was invited, who came to visit.

But then again — it’s not just ‘once upon a time this is how it happened.’ The story is ongoing. William Kurelek, artist, mystic, got it right: “If it happened then, why not now? If it happened there, why not here?”

Not just then and there. Here and now it continues to happen: as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

Bethlehem

I remember walking there south from Jerusalem into the hill country — olive trees to right and left in the surrounding farms. I passed Rachel’s tomb. I climbed the hill to Manger Square to seek an outdoor bar-café. A cold beer never tasted more refreshing. Then back across the square to the church of the Nativity. Bend low to get inside through the opening in the stone wall. Once within stand tall and take in the surroundings. It was … ugly.

Then line up to enter the Grotto of the Nativity beneath the main altar. Since I was traveling all alone, I didn’t have to hurry through with a group. So, finding my way to the back of an alcove I sat down and took my time: the star of Bethlehem in the floor, the fireproof hangings along the walls, the non-stop file of pilgrims passing by the “very spot.”

Several years later I was back again as part of a group. We spent more time in the hill country. There we sang our carols in a cave church. In those fields Bethlehem became more real.

Now, there is a dividing wall between Israel and the West Bank: a gross encroachment walling out the people among whom Jesus was born, among whom he became one of us.

Word made flesh

One of us — he knows what it’s like to be human. Growing up: baby, child, teenage independence, sense of purpose, daily life, rejection, opposition, some success, letdowns, betrayal, death and resurrection.

One of us — we call it Christmas. There is such a “getting ready” for it. There are so many pre-Christmas preparations that we’re often glad when it is over. And yet — is it ever over? Are we celebrating just one day — or is Christmas with us day in, day out the whole year long?

Bethlehem/Christmas is not just past tense, over and done with, whose memory lingers on. It is here and now, any day, any season, any place. Bernadette Gasslein sees it as a metaphor of refugees arriving in a strange land. And who of us in Canada is not a descendant of people from someplace else? Deirdre McLoughlin recalls a phone ringing with an urgent plea to come to the bus station in downtown Toronto. Brian Joel relives the birth of his young daughter. Erik Reicher plumbs its depth as a metaphor for Catholic Education: Build Bethlehem Everywhere.

So, this February issue of Spiritan is not out of season. Bethlehem is always in season — God comes into our lives who knows when, who knows where, who knows how. In the beginning, right here, right now, and down the road wherever that may take us. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Getting in touch with God is always a local call.