

Matt's Message for THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

How do I describe the talent of Mario Lemieux? How can anyone describe the smooth way he moved and the way he baffled defenders with tricks never seen before and never to be repeated? A quick head fake and the defenseman moved the wrong way and Lemieux was past him in an instant. A flick of his wrists and the puck was in the top corner of the net. He was fast without ever looking like he was expending any energy.

But the real magic was his intelligence. He once fooled Ray Bourque (one of the best defensemen ever!) by putting the puck in among Bourque's skates and skating along just behind him at the same speed as Bourque. Whichever way Bourque would look, Lemieux would shift the other way. Bourque was completely helpless as Lemieux was doing a move that no-one had ever seen in all of hockey history. Bourque was still trying to figure out what to do when Lemieux fired the puck into the net, scoring one of the strangest and smartest goals you'll ever see.

But the cleverest thing Lemieux ever did was when he was playing for Canada's Olympic Team in 2002. A Canadian player fired a pass toward Lemieux who was in a great position to try a shot on goal. But Lemieux's stick passed over the puck and it kept sliding right between his legs. It looked like he missed it. Luckily, it kept sliding all the way to another Canadian player who shot the puck into the American net. Years later, I was watching the highlights of the game with some friends. As we watched the replay of that goal a few times, we slowly started to realize: *Lemieux missed the puck on purpose!* He knew what he was doing! When he swiped at the puck with his stick, the American defenseman AND goalie were both totally faked out. As they moved to block Lemieux's pretend shot, the puck kept on moving (as Lemieux knew it would!) right to the Canadian left winger who had an open net because the American goalie had been focussed on Lemieux.

In my opinion, no-one had ever done something so unexpected and so flawlessly executed in hockey before. And most people didn't even notice it. As my friends and I watched the goal over and over again, we were actually freaking out, shouting, "I can't believe it! He faked out the whole American team without even touching the puck. How is that even possible!?"

By 2009, Lemieux had been retired for a few years and he now owned the Pittsburgh Penguin franchise – the team he had played on for his whole career.

As owner of the Penguins, Lemieux was a living legend for the team and the city of Pittsburgh. By buying the team, he saved it from being moved away from Pittsburgh. He had been a mentor to the young stars, Sidney Crosby and Marc-Andre Fleury.

The owner of a hockey team has to have a hands-off approach to the team. The general manager and coach have to be able to do their jobs without having someone looking over their backs all the time. So Lemieux didn't interfere much, but just sat up high in the owner's private box and signed the paychecks.

In 2009, the Penguins were in the seventh game of the Stanley Cup Final. They were a very talented, but very young team. During the intermission, just before the third and final period, they were feeling pretty nervous. The game was close and their opponent was the defending champion Detroit Red Wings. Usually, at this point, the coach talks to the team or even just leaves the players to their own thoughts. But the players were shocked and delighted when into the room walked Mario Lemieux himself! His six foot, four inches and his calm, yet commanding presence and his few words of encouragement were exactly what the team needed. He had come all the way down from the owner's private box to the middle of the dressing room, knowing that the time was right for him to pay a visit.

So this larger than life, living legend was right there with them. This guy had once scored 85 goals in a season. He had won a Stanley Cup when his back was so bad that someone else had to tie up his skates! He had beaten the Soviets in 1987! He was in the Hockey Hall of Fame while he was still playing! He had done it all and there he was! It was just the right time for him to finally make an appearance.

Of course, the Penguins went out and won the Stanley Cup – for the first time since Lemieux himself won it for them 15 years earlier.

And here's the point I'm trying to make. If Lemieux had phoned down from his private box and talked to the players, would it have had the same effect? If he had sent a text message to the coach to read to the players, would it have had the same effect? Absolutely not. He had to be there *in person*. The magic of that moment was that when the team thought they were on their own, *the Legend* suddenly was right there with them.

He didn't give them a new game plan or a new technique or a secret for how to score a goal. But suddenly everything was different because he was...right there.

And now I've finally got to the point of this article!

I've always thought of Lemieux's visit to the team's dressing room as a good metaphor for what happened at the first Christmas.

God didn't call us on the phone and give us a message. God didn't write a letter to humanity. God didn't send an angel to tell us what we needed to know. He came here Himself. The God of Christmas didn't stay up in His private box watching and awaiting the results. He didn't stay up on a golden throne in the security and bliss of heaven and utter a commandment.

I think we're really getting to the heart of the Church's belief here. I think this is an idea that a lot of Christians neglect: the humanity of God. I think a lot of people still have a picture of God as being as old man on a throne. He's "the man upstairs." And it's an image of God that many people – understandably – don't like.

At Christmas, the nature of God was revealed in a completely new way. God became "God With Us" or "Emmanuel." Through Christ and then through the Holy Spirit, God became a more earthly, *human* being: a God who has joined humanity in a *physical* way.

This exposes as a lie a very dangerous idea that has appeared quite a bit in Church history: gnosticism. Gnosticism looks at the physical world as evil and the

spiritual/intellectual world as good. How in the world could a religion with a God who was born as a human baby turn into a Gnostic belief? It makes no sense, but it has indeed happened quite a bit.

My point is: you can be a Gnostic without realizing it.

Do you remember those old redneck jokes: "If you cut your grass and find a car, you might be redneck."

Well, there could be a whole bunch of Gnostic jokes like that. "If you dislike life on earth and deny your emotions and judge everyone harshly and take great pride in your religiosity...you might be a Gnostic!"

"If you're uncomfortable in your own skin and you do not care about the environment and isolate yourself from nature with technology...you might be a Gnostic."

Christ's birth is supposed to *root* us in our fleshly human existence. Creation is good. Good ol' humanity has unlimited capabilities...though the past and present prove that we usually choose war and violence instead of peace and love.

Human life is not just a long wait, looking forward to heaven. The truly spiritual person should be a truly physical person, really enjoying and thanking God for the good things of creation.

The ancient Christmas celebrations really taught this idea effectively. First there was the long Advent season of spiritual preparation, self-examination, and repentance. Then, starting with the Christ Mass on Christmas Eve, the celebrating began. And it wasn't like it is today. Nowadays, people are so sick of Christmas that the decorations are down by Boxing Day sometimes. For the ancient Church, there were Twelve Days of Christmas celebrations: twelve days of feasting and playing and relaxing and talking and making music and hunting and feasting and turkey and wine and ale and coffee and story-telling. All these festivities were interspersed with Church services.

Back in the day, when they partied, they really partied. Old Norse wedding feasts were a month long or longer if it was a harsh winter outside. Christmas is the perfect time for partying since it's the darkest time of the year. Why worry about getting work done when there's about three hours of daylight and about three inches of ice on your car? It's the perfect time to relax and be...HUMAN.

And as the Twelve Days of Christmas continue, you'll begin to notice a great change happening: the days start getting longer. At Christmas, the light triumphs over the darkness. It's a truly *cosmic* celebration, drawing our attention to both the birth of the Son and the re-birth of the sun. Of course Jesus wasn't born on December 25th, but it's the perfect time to celebrate his birth: the light is born and begins to shine more and more on the earth. The light shone in the darkness. Nature itself becomes not just nature, but a symbol of the eternal love that conquers all darkness and evil.

That's the beauty of these ancient Church traditions. Christmas, Easter, Rogation (praying for the seeds in May), Michaelmas (the start of Fall), even All Hallows' Eve connect us to nature. In a modern society that is largely isolated and disconnected from nature, the

Church can actually help us connect to nature as we participate in the liturgical year. I love how our participation in worship can open our eyes to God's wisdom and love in nature. For Gnostics, nature is meaningless or even evil. Sometimes our industrial society sees nature that way too; it's just a thing to be controlled and escaped. Is the technological society Gnostic? Interesting thought...

Anyways, all I'm saying is...be like Mario Lemieux. Don't just observe life from a safe distance. Don't just stay up in your private owner's box in your nice suit with your millions of dollars. Come right down here where the team is tired and sweaty and the opponent is really, really good. You'll inspire us all just by your presence.

Be incarnate. Become flesh. Enjoy family and friends. Take some time for yourself. Work for environmental justice. Worship the newborn baby King in an old country church. Watch or play hockey. Have that good nap you've been putting off. Enjoy your presents. Enjoy all TWELVE days of Christmas. Enjoy life as an incarnate human being: spirit AND flesh, heavenly AND earthly.

There is a time for repentance. There is a time for celebration. There is a time for earth and a time for heaven. And all these times are brought together in a crying baby, born to a poor middle-eastern Jewish family 2023 years ago. What a strange, unforgettable mystery. It makes me feel honoured to be part of such an interesting universe.