Editor's Note: In honor of Christmas and the tradition of decorating evergreen trees to celebrate Our Lord's Nativity, we offer readers this brief story about what could be called the first Christmas tree — one under which the Immaculate Virgin Mary and her most chaste Spouse enjoyed a much-need reprieve during their arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

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By Richard C. Moravsik

Most of us can relate to decorated pine trees during the Christmas season, with strings of colored beads, lights on every branch, ornaments of every shape and color, and a bright star or an angel on top, but do we know the story of the first Christmas tree?

Located in the Valley of Sichem (also called Shechem), the "Other Tree" has long been forgotten to most in the modern world. However, if we examine certain verses in the Bible we can learn of this long-forgotten tree — one perhaps just as wonderful as the Christmas tree we all know today.

Scripture tells us that Joseph and Mary were on their way to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of Joseph, to be counted for the Roman census (cf. Luke 2:1-5). At the time, Our Lady was in her last month of pregnancy. Travelling along the winding path on a cold, bleak might through the valley near the ancient city of Sichem (cf. Gen. 12:6), certain sources (e.g., Ven. Anne Catherine Emmerich) tell us that the Blessed Virgin became exhausted and could not proceed any further. As she reluctantly acknowledged her weariness to St. Joseph, the donkey that carried her suddenly stood still beneath a large terebinth tree, as if the beast was commanded by God.

The terebinth tree, allied to the *Pistacia vera* (on which pistachios grow), grew near a fountain by a well — the very same fountain and well where Our Lord would later ask a certain Samaritan woman for a drink (cf. John 4:5-7). Under the tree, Our Lady decided to rest. The tree was a very old and significant one, for in its shade Abraham had once built an altar to the Lord (cf. Gen. 12:6-7). Near its roots, Jacob had buried Laban's idols (Gen. 35:1-5). Under its branches, Abimelech was appointed king (Judg. 9:6). Here, too, Joshua exhorted the Israelites to renounce their false gods and serve the Lord, the one true God, wholeheartedly (cf. Josh. 24).

And now, under the same tree, the Blessed Virgin Mary rested — weary from the journey, but resigned to the will of God and full of trust in His providence. St. Joseph, unable to lessen the difficulties of the journey, offered words of sympathy to his beloved spouse. For

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her part, Mary prayed secretly to God, asking Him for strength and protection. Suddenly, the Lord was pleased to reveal to her interiorly the grand mysteries which had transpired near the memorable tree, and its intimate connection to her life and to the mission of her Divine Son.

Overflowing with heavenly consolation, the Mother of God was wonderfully strengthened and the flame of Divine Love which consumed her heart pervaded and invigorated her entire body. After then eating some food and quenching her thirst at the fountain by the well, she and St. Joseph continued their journey. At last, after having been nearly eight days on the road, they reached Jerusalem, and a few hours later they arrived in Bethlehem.

And so, this “Other Tree” may be called the first Christmas tree, as it truly prepared for the coming of the Christ Child. The next time you reach for a pistachio nut, remember its connection to the Birth of Christ.

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