

Feast of Mary, the Mother of God January 01, 2016

Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

Today the church affirms the doctrine that Mary is the Mother of God. This Catholic Dogma finds its origin from the passage found in the Gospel of Luke. After the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Upon her arrival, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit expressed her joy at the arrival of the Mother of God. We Christians are aware that life of Jesus begins with Mary. Her Motherhood began when the eternal God entered human history. The second Divine person of the Trinity, the Word, took on a human nature in the womb of Mary. Secondly, we celebrate the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. The scriptures tell us that on the eighth day Jesus was circumcised and was given the name as told by the angel. Thirdly, the church celebrates this day as the world day of peace and invites us specially to pray for peace in the world indicating to everyone that Jesus Christ is the prince of peace and Mary Mother of God is honoured as the "Queen of Peace". This is also for us the New Year day as we look with hope into a future year of grace while we thank God for the many blessings received in the past year. On this first day of the New Year we ask for grace to know Jesus more intimately, love him more ardently and follow him more closely so that this may be a truly Happy New Year. We pray that the Lord Jesus will fill our lives during the coming year with an abundance of blessings that will enrich our spiritual lives so that we may continue to be his shining lights in the world.

Today we acclaim Mary as the Mother of God and our Mother. In 431 A.D, the Council of Ephesus affirmed that Mary was truly the Mother of God because "according to the flesh" she gave birth to Jesus, who was truly God from the first moment of his conception. Twenty years later the Council of Chalcedon affirmed that the Motherhood of Mary was a truthful dogma and an official doctrine of the Holy Catholic Church. Since Mary is the Mother of God she is the mother of joy, which is the joy to the world. Mary became Mother of the Church through her total adherence to God's will in her life. Mary is a mother to all of us and her motherhood extends to all of us when Jesus on the cross offered the disciple to Mary, he offered the whole humanity to her. It is significant that the most venerated human person by the Church is a mother. Mothers participate with God in an exceptional way to bring new life into the world. A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness. Today is a good day to remember our own mothers, living and deceased, and to implore the Blessed Virgin's intercession for them.

This feast of Mary the Mother of God is closely connected to the feast of Christmas and is the most important and oldest of the feasts of Mary. It is based on the source of her privileges: her divine motherhood. Jesus Christ, God's Son "born of a woman," came to deliver us from sin and make us children of God. He is also Mary's Son, and she, his mother, helps bring his blessings to the world. She is "truly the Mother of God and of the Redeemer...not merely passively engaged by God, but freely cooperating in the work of our salvation through faith and obedience." Mary was not simply a passive instrument in God's hands; rather she discovered and accepted new dimensions to her motherhood as her life unfolded. This Solemnity of Mary Mother of God falls exactly one week after Christmas, the end of the octave of Christmas. It is fitting to honour Mary as Mother of Jesus, following the birth of Christ. Calling Mary "mother of God" is the highest honour we can give Mary.

In the First Reading from the Book of Numbers we hear the people of God begin their journey home. Here the Lord blesses their journey in a special way. He is preparing the people of Israel for the journey toward the Promised Land. Occupying the central place throughout their journey is the Ark of the Covenant. They are now given the privilege of pronouncing the name of God over the people which takes the form of a blessing. This blessing, in the form of a prayer, was frequently used by the priests when they blessed the people. The Lord spoke to Moses and asked him to speak to Aaron and his sons, giving them these words of Blessing: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.' This echoes a sign of the Divine pleasure, a time when the grace of God that results in peace. The blessing builds a special bond between God and his people. God's benevolence is a light shining on them like the sun to nourish them and guide their way. God's peace will protect them from all harm. He will be with them always and will bless them. God's graciousness will be plainly evident throughout their journey.

St Paul tells us in today's Second Reading, that God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as children. The woman who bore Jesus is Mary. Since he is the son of God, she is rightly called Mother of God. Paul tells us that Jesus coming under the natural law has transformed us making us the children of God. No longer slaves and servants but heirs as sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters of Jesus. As Paul says, with Jesus the Son, we now can, like him, address in loving intimacy God the Father as "Abba", a term of affection. The Spirit of God's Son has entered into our hearts. This Spirit enables us to call God Abba Father. At the same time we become brothers and sisters of Jesus

and thus form a new family in Jesus our brother. In today's feast we need to remember that it is Mary who played a crucial role in the bridging of the gap between God and ourselves. Therefore Paul tells us that we must love one another, because love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love. Mary who is the beacon of love has transformed us into a family of love. We are adopted into God's family.

In today's Gospel Luke describes the simple scene in the stable at Bethlehem. The setting is of a peasant family with a new born child that has found hospitality and shelter in a facility shared with farm animals. We see a man, a woman who has just given birth, and baby Jesus lying in the manger. Truly primitive surroundings and yet this little child is the Son of God and that young woman is the Mother of God. This is the great mystery of the Incarnation. Their first visitors are the shepherds, a group of poor and despised and marginalized people, persons of low economic status, the discard of the community. We are not sure whether those shepherds really understood the message given by the angels that a saviour is born. But they obey the voice and go in search of the child born to bring peace to the world. We often portray Mary as Queen of Heaven, dressed resplendently in beautiful clothes with crowns, jewels and stars. But this Gospel scene is the one that is most striking, filled with total simplicity. They find in the little family the ordinary simple people. Once they encounter the child Jesus they come close and worship him. Luke tells us that Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. She had indeed a great deal to ponder about, give a careful thought to the message of the shepherds. There was much that now and in later years she would have to reflect on with regard to this Child of hers. For Mary the meaning of this event will only unfold over time. This is not a matter of the intellect but of the heart and pondering is a fitting process. The message is too big and the event is too powerful and it needs to be treasured and pondered. In a way this is Mary's greatest gift and sets the stage for why in the gospel tradition she is understood as the prominent model for Christian discipleship.

The shepherds went back to their fields and flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. They also told everyone around of what they had seen: the shepherds were the very first heralds of the Good News, the Gospel message. They were the first missionaries who proclaim the word of God. A strange choice is made by God with the ordinary persons, regarded as outcasts and not surely social companions. They had the joy of contacting their Lord, knowing Jesus, and by its very nature, had to be shared and

communicated with others. The shepherds may not have understood a great deal of this mystery. Certainly they could not understand Mary as the Mother of Jesus is also the Mother of that Person who is God, one with Father and Holy Spirit. Clearly we too are not expected to be able to understand or explain this any further. The nature of God is quite beyond us. The shepherds accepted this in their simplicity and faith. We need the simple and trusting faith of the shepherds. Luke tells us that all who heard what the shepherds had to say were amazed because nothing about the message made sense. They were providing with something unheard of. But they gave a message of something new and wonderful making people wonder about their words. The extraordinary has occurred in and through the ordinary.

In a way this is Mary's greatest gift and sets the stage for why in the gospel tradition she is understood as the preeminent model for Christian discipleship. No sooner has this extraordinary event taken place than things move quickly to the ordinary. The shepherds return to their fields and the family has the newborn child circumcised and names him just as every other pious Jewish family would do, a name chosen by God. Nevertheless nothing will ever be same again. Mary is well aware of this. At this point she does not know the full meaning of this event. For her it is a time for pondering and not for drawing quick conclusions. This ritual would mark Jesus clearly as a child of Abraham. Mary, of course, is primarily the mother of Jesus. She contributes from her own body to the formation of his human body. She is the mother of Jesus. But the Gospel speaks of his Father being God, not Joseph. The whole early life of Jesus and, even much in his later life, takes place within the ambience of the Jewish Law.

The Nativity scene attracts humble shepherds, a reminder that the rich and mighty hold no special favour in God's eyes when it comes to the spiritual realm. Likewise we can't forget the humble and needy among us. The Christmas season reminds us that Our Lord lives in the humblest of places even today: in the poor, in the forgotten, in the abandoned. A complete Christian life includes besides our beliefs, the works of charity. The Gospel speaks of the earthy reality of Jesus and his mother. The shepherds in great excitement after hearing the message of the angel and the sudden outbreak of the first "Gloria" being sung want to discover the new part of history. Perhaps what they discovered must have seemed an anti-climax: an ordinary baby being born in a manger and we are told that they were amazed. No words of Mary or Joseph are recorded although they must have shared something with their visitors. In all of this time Mary must have been trying to understand what was really going on. One imagines at this stage that if she had been greeted as "Mother

of God” she would have been both alarmed and surprised, even shocked. So the Gospel says that during all this time Mary treasured all these words and experiences and perhaps a hint that Mary had shared these reflections later with the writer of the gospel.

Mary represents, as it were, the maternal aspect of God, not only because her Son is also the Son of the Father, but because the Holy Spirit, through whose power she conceived, took up his dwelling in the Word made flesh. This mysterious relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit, who made her virginity fruitful, manifests another maternal aspect of the Father, namely, his merciful love. The maternity of Mary is not therefore something purely functional; she is an authentic icon of the mystery of the Trinity. As the Father from all eternity generates the Son in the love of the Holy Spirit, so Mary, in the flesh, generated the same eternal Word by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In recent years, the first day of the New Year, has been designated World Day of Peace. It is very appropriate because today's gospel story presents us with a total invitation to a world of peace. In fact, it was in response to the angels' song, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth", that the shepherds had gone in search of the author of peace. On this day, the Pope asks all of us to pray for peace and to work for peace. The message for this year tells us that in building a world of peace and justice, the Catholic Church must listen to the ideas and hopes of young people and offer them educational opportunities that will strengthen their ability to work for the common good. Today, we are starting a new day and a new year with inner knowledge and understanding of the greatness of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mother of God. We greet each other with the same blessing as in the first reading of today: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you his peace. May the peace of the Lord remain within us, our families and communities and bring us the joy and happiness in the year to come. The divine name appears in the Blessing, giving them life and warmth. The graciousness of God may remain with each one of us throughout the New Year.

According to legend, a young man while roaming the desert came across a spring of delicious crystal-clear water. The water was so sweet he filled his leather canteen so he could bring some back to a tribal elder who had been his teacher. After a four-day journey he presented the water to the old man who took a deep drink, smiled warmly and thanked his student lavishly for the sweet water. The young man returned to his village with a happy heart. Later, the teacher let another student taste the water. He spat it out, saying it was awful. It apparently had become stale because of the old leather container.

The student challenged his teacher: "Master, the water was foul. Why did you pretend to like it?" The teacher replied, "You only tasted the water. I tasted the gift. The water was simply the container for an act of loving-kindness and nothing could be sweeter." I think we understand this lesson best when we receive innocent gifts of love from young children. Whether it's a ceramic tray or a macaroni bracelet, the natural and proper response is appreciation and expressed thankfulness because we love the idea within the gift.

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