

Cycle C The Octave Day of Christmas

Feast of the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God

Reading I Numbers 6:22-27

The LORD said to Moses: “Speak to Aaron and his sons and tell them: This is how you shall bless the Israelites. Say to them: The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace! So shall they invoke my name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

Reading II Galatians 4:4-7

Brothers and sisters: When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. As proof that you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God.

Gospel Luke 2:16-21

The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Happy New Year! For the vast majority of our fellow citizens today obviously is New Years Day, the beginning of the secular year. No doubt a day to celebrate!

But for us Catholics, January 1 is a much more significant celebration...and one that unfortunately is easily overlooked. 8 days after celebrating God becoming human, the birth of Jesus, we celebrate the mystery linking our Creator to His created, humanity sharing in the divine!

Today is the feast of the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God. Mary's divine motherhood feast is the most important and oldest of the major feasts of Mary dating from the 6th century... but it was placed on January 1 very recently in 1970...it was another gift of Vatican II.

The rich Tradition of the Church has recognized January 1, the octave day, the 8th day after Christmas, as a special holiday since the early church. For 1500 years it had been celebrated as the feast of the Circumcision, when Jesus on the 8th day after He was born underwent the ritual that rendered him a Jew. Today's Gospel echoes that feast and reminds us that the naming of Jesus, meaning Savior, is also celebrated.

When we consider the title of Mary as "Mother of God," this feast and the underlying teaching stress that Mary was not just the mother of Jesus in His human nature. But, Mary was also Mother of the Christ, in His divine nature as the Son of God.

Theotokos the Greeks called her – the God bearer. This belief is not like Greek mythology, however, where Hercules whose mother was a mortal and whose father was a God, and he was in turn called a demi-god. No, we believe Jesus was born fully human and fully divine. He had a human mother, the Mother of the person of Jesus fully in his humanity and divinity.

I know how difficult that sounds. How could a human parent the divine? But it is precisely in that paradox, in that mystery of joining the human and divine, in the inexplicable linking our Creator with the created, that hope is what we celebrate anew on this 1st day of the new year!

Mary knew from the start that life would not be easy. So, on January 1, we see Mary just days after a grueling journey to Bethlehem and an amazing birth in a barn. She carried out the promise she had made to Gabriel. *"Let it be done unto me according to your will,"* Mary said.

The child was born healthy and cuddly, and the angels, unable to contain their joy, once more danced into her life! It would seem that Mary should be able to seek some quiet and rest after all that had happened. But, no...company came! Unkept shepherds, straight from the fields, "*went in haste*" to the shelter, announcing that they had been told who this baby was. The angels had trumpeted it to them! The "Wise Men" also found the holy shelter and barged right in, bearing royal gifts. Does this all impinge on Mary's peace? Incredibly, it seems not. She was good to her word. The Gospel says that she quietly "*kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.*" No doubt, part of it was her personality, but even more, it was the presence of God deep within her, so deep that her human life had united with His divinity.

There's that "human and divine" again. We call it a mystery, but for us Catholics it is all around us. In the scripture today, "*God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.*" At our Baptism, our soul is flooded with the Holy Spirit. At Confirmation we receive the full gifts of the Spirit. At every Mass at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist when the altar is being prepared, the water and wine are mixed and a silent prayer is said: "*By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*" The mingling of the wine points to the Incarnation: the mystery of God becoming man. It also points to our call to share in Christ's divine life, to become '*partakers of the divine nature.*' Remember, we don't just come to Mass just to receive some-thing, Communion. No, we come to receive and then become some-one...the Body of Christ! Humanity sharing in the divine!

Today we are reminded that Mary is not only the queen of heaven, but that God loves us so much that even as sinners all of us are an extraordinary part of His plan. Like Mary, who, along with Joseph, played the critical role of teaching God how to be a human being. We are called to have her humility and tenacity. Mary, the God bearer, had a graced-filled fidelity to her son's ministry, and so should we! Maybe Mary has something to teach us as the old year transitions to the new...our simple resolutions to lose a few pounds and to eat healthy are aiming much too low! We need to follow Jesus Christ and resolve to reach out to find new friends and live a more authentic life as the Body of Christ serving others with God's love! Maybe humanity sharing in the divine is not such a mystery after all! The real mystery, I think, is why don't more people celebrate this today!

And the Church says with renewed devotion: *“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”*