

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Monday, January 1, 2018

Conventual Mass

Mary, Mother of God

In the north transept of the cathedral of Covington, Kentucky, is the world's largest stained glass window. It depicts the Council of Ephesus, held in 431, as it proclaimed Mary, Mother of God. The phrase "Mother of God" – in Greek "*Theotokos*" (God – bearer) goes back to the third and fourth century. Ever since Ephesus it has become the touchstone of the church's teaching on the incarnation.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to proclaiming the great honor bestowed on Mary when she was chosen to be the mother of the Word, the title also gives us insight into the mystery of the incarnation. In the Christological controversies of the early centuries, a teaching had sprung up which claimed that there were two persons in Christ, one divine and one

human united in a loose fashion. In this view, Mary would be the mother of only the human person of Christ. But the Council, following the teachings of the earlier Fathers, declared that the divine and human were intimately united in the one person, Jesus. And so, Mary is rightly called the Mother of God.

At the end of that particular session of the Council of Ephesus, people marched through the streets shouting, “Praised be the Theotokos.” This tradition reaches down to our own day. Vatican II in its Dogmatic Constitution of the Church calls Mary, “Mother of God,” twelve times.<sup>ii</sup>

When we think of Mary, the mother of the Lord, we are inclined to think of her as she shares in her Son’s glory. The depictions of the crucifixion, the fourth station of the cross and the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help tell

us of another reality. But even so, the beauty of these artistic interpretations veil the actual suffering and brutality.

The very fact that Mary was found to be with child before she became St. Joseph's wife must have been difficult. And I wonder whether some of the townspeople did not hold that against her as long as she lived among them. The birth of Jesus had its own difficulties as well. We tend to sentimentalize the birth of Christ. The reality was harsh: no female relatives to help Mary giving birth in a stable, having to lay the child on hard straw in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. These foreshadowed his ultimate rejection some thirty years later.

There were other hard moments; the death of Joseph, Jesus' departure from her to take up his mission and, of course, the devastation at seeing her Son on the cross.

Joys were not lacking, of course: the birth of Jesus, watching him grow, the social life of the community, and, of course, the great joy of the resurrection. But in the main, her life was governed by the ordinary, as is ours.

Above all, Mary's life was directed by her devotion to the will of God. When the angel Gabriel announced to her the birth of the Lord whose mother she would become, Mary gave her unconditional consent in full freedom. She relied entirely on God without a thought what would happen to her. God has spoken through his messenger; it is enough. The "Yes" of Joseph would echo hers (Matt 1:19-25). The mystery of the Incarnation is characterized by obedience: that of the Son of God who took a body to answer the Father's will, that of Mary and then that of Joseph, two righteous persons who welcomed the Word made flesh into the world.<sup>iii</sup> I wonder how often throughout

her life, Mary had to repeat to herself, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word.” Like us, she too had to always renew and deepen her faith. She is, after all, one of us.

Mary’s mission did not come to an end with the ascension of her Son. At the cross she also became the mother of the church, the mother of each one of us. It is her work now to minister to us and bring Christ to birth in us anew into the world.

In our Morning Prayer shortly before the end of Advent, we read a passage from the writings of Cardinal Jean Danielou. I found it so insightful that I would like to share part of it with you:

“The Messiah has come, but he is not yet fully manifested either in our individual souls or in the human race as a whole... The whole mystery of the spiritual life lies in the

continual birth of Jesus within us ...making our own the sentiments of his heart and the judgements of his mind...

Now what is true of the preparation of the coming of Christ in the flesh is also true of the spiritual preparation for his coming to our souls, and the preparation for his spiritual coming in his entire mystical body, for God's plan is an integral whole. And just as Mary played an important and altogether special role in the physical birth of Jesus... so Mary continues to play an important role in the preparation of each subsequent coming of Jesus. She is always present wherever he is to come.

This applies in the first place to the souls of each one of us... It is she who prepares for the coming of Jesus in us and gradually forms him in our souls. But as well as her relationship to individuals, Mary also has a part to play in the coming of Christ to the peoples to whom he has not

reached. Here we touch upon the missionary aspect of the mystery of Mary. The mystery of our Lady is that she was there before Jesus was. She was in Israel before him. In her, if one may so express it, there was already a secret presence of Jesus in Israel before his actual birth, since she was already perfectly united with him and there was no part of her life that was not wholly his. She was present, then, during the time before the incarnation, and so, since she is a figure of the Church, of humankind redeemed by Christ, it seems as if in some way the Church must have existed before Jesus was born. We can see, then, the part our Lady is to play among pagan peoples: the Church has not yet come to them, Jesus has not yet come to them, yet the Church is there because Mary is there.”<sup>iv</sup>

This gives hope to a world in which not only the old forms of paganism exist but also in those areas in need of re-evangelization from more modern forms. In the new year ahead, may Christ be more fully manifested in our lives, our church, our country and in the world through the intercession of Mary, Mother of God.



i" <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/mary-mother-of-god/>

ii" <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/mary-mother-of-god/>

iii" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.7 (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1994) 141.

iv From the writings of Cardinal Jean Danielou, S.J. *Le Mystere de L'Advent*, 126-128 in A Word in Season, v.1 (Villanova, Pa., Augustinian Press, 2001) 182-183.