

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

December 8, 2011

Genesis 3:9-15, 20
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12
Luke 1:26-38

When we honor Mary each year on this day, the patronal feast of our entire country, we appropriately focus not simply on the doctrine of her having been conceived without Original Sin but, even more importantly, on our conviction that her entire life was sinless. It is also worth reflecting on what that might have looked like to those who knew Mary during her life on earth: first of all, her parents and other relatives, then her neighbors, including childhood playmates, and finally that wider circle of acquaintances that make up the largest number of persons that enter any of our lives. To what extent do you think that any of those persons would have recognized something genuinely extraordinary or unusual about Mary's behavior, the way she related to other persons, the way she spoke about others, the manner in which she carried out the requests of her parents or other persons who were in any way her superiors? Do you think any of them would have said that Mary was a living saint? Obviously we cannot answer such a question with any certainty, but the very question is a good entrée into thinking about sanctity or sainthood in general—and with regard to our own lives. After all, as a modern spiritual writer once wrote, "The only tragedy in life is not to become a saint." What might this mean?

A few decades ago the prominent religious writer Romano Guardini published a little book called *The Saints in Daily Christian Life*. Painting with broad strokes, he gave a summary of different attitudes toward holiness at various periods of Church history. St. Paul clearly expected all of his correspondents to be holy, for he regularly addressed them in his epistles as "the saints"—*hoi hagioi*. But, Guardini goes on to say, after the time of the Roman emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, when becoming a Christian no longer meant taking a serious risk but was instead a prerequisite to public advancement in a society where Christianity had become the state religion, people now began to limit the word "saint" to persons who had fulfilled to an extraordinary degree the great commandment of loving God with all one's mind, heart, and strength. These were, first of all, the martyrs but also those who served God and God's people in other striking ways, such as Sts. Francis and Clare of Assisi with their embrace of ultimate poverty, St. Elizabeth of Hungary and St. Vincent de Paul with their immense love of the poor, St. Boniface and St. Francis Xavier with their missionary zeal for souls.

Such holiness will, of course, always earn our respect and even our awe, but Guardini suggested that in our own time the very notion of sanctity is undergoing a transformation such that the notion of the exceptional or extravagant is no longer necessarily involved. Much more is it a matter of doing even small, unobtrusive acts in the perspective of fulfilling God's will. He writes:

It is hardly a matter of anything of consequence at all—except, and it is in this that its significance lies, it is a person who acts with God, and for God. There is nothing to call attention to the person. We might even work beside such a person, walk with him, and

note nothing special. But [someone] whose spirit is attuned to see these things will notice a quiet freedom, a calm assurance, a spirit of love and orientation to the divine, a heart that remains joyous and glad in all cares and trials.¹

This, I believe, is what most characterized the life of Mary, from the very beginning of her life up to the time of her death, including in a special way her quiet, patient acceptance of having to behold the cruel death of her beloved son and her willingness to suffer along with him. It is surely in this unobtrusive life of true holiness that Mary is most of all a model for any of us—and not just a model but an encouragement. As Guardini wrote in one of the most inspiring passages of his book, if we could but once really put all our heart, all our soul, all our strength into any action,

we would immediately sense the almost unlimited possibilities for progress that are latent in the world and in ourselves. There are possibilities in us which could lead us ever farther, out beyond the horizons, to a place where we would have to start over and over again the process of clarifying our intentions, ... shedding light on [our] interior dodges and dishonesties, conquering the rebellion and meanness in our hearts. These are the possibilities of which Christ has spoken in his 'All.'²

Through the example and intercession of Mary, his mother and ours, and by the grace of this Eucharist, may we come ever closer to that fullness of holiness that we see in her: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

Abbot James Wiseman

¹ Romano Guardini, *The Saints in Daily Christian Life* (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton Books, 1966), 62-63.

² *Ibid.*, 55.