

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, 2014
AND SIMPLE PROFESSION OF BR. BERNARD MARRA

Since the liturgy is so much a part of the Benedictine life to which you, Br. Bernard, are making profession this morning, I would like to begin this homily with a few comments about the history of today's feast. Younger Catholics today know it only as the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, for this has been its designation for the past 45 years, ever since the revision of the liturgical calendar by Pope Paul VI in 1969, but for the seven years before that it was called simply the Octave Day of Christmas, while from 1570 until 1962 it was the feast of Christ's circumcision, and in still earlier times the first day of January was celebrated in Rome as a feast of Mary. The most recent change is therefore a revival of what had been Roman liturgical practice from the seventh century until the late Middle Ages. This is exactly the point that Pope Paul made in naming the octave day of Christmas the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. He wrote:

In the revised ordering of the Christmas period ... the attention of all should be directed towards the restored Solemnity of Mary, the holy Mother of God. This celebration, placed on January 1 in conformity with the ancient ... liturgy of the city of Rome, is meant to commemorate the part played by Mary in this mystery of salvation.¹

What Pope Paul there referred to as "the part played by Mary" could hardly be overemphasized. Historians of Christian doctrine sometimes point out that the earliest Christian heresy, so forcefully opposed by St. Irenaeus back in the second century, was what we call docetism, that is, the teaching that Jesus only appeared to be human but was not really so. Three

centuries after Irenaeus, when Mary was declared to be the God-bearer, *theotokos*, at the Council of Ephesus, one major point of that dogma was not Mariological but Christological: After all, if Mary, certainly a fully human being, gave birth to the incarnate Son of God, then that Son was himself truly human. So, too, today's solemnity is at least as much about Christ Jesus as about his mother.

Those of us who grew up familiar with this teaching from catechism classes or CCD, and who still accept it but without giving it much thought, may not realize the power that the doctrine can have for persons who at one point left the Church or were never Christians to start with. A very poignant essay was recently co-authored by a young couple who had given up on Christianity in their teens and had begun dabbling in other religions and even in atheism. Here are their reflections about what drew them back to the Church:

[What] makes the truths of Christianity and the person of Jesus Christ stand out from the religions of the world or rise above the void of atheism ... [is] that Christianity is not first and foremost about a God who is infinitely mighty and radically separate from us.

Christianity is about a God who “stoops,” an all-powerful Creator who loves humanity so much that He chooses to become human. Whatever this suggests about God, it tells us even more about what it means to be human.... The Incarnation — God's response to our sin — tells us that we don't need to reject our humanity to become holy... God reminds us of our own goodness, our own enough-ness, by choosing to become one of us.... This is not a religion that makes people look up and feel small, but rather look to one's neighbor and remember a God who infinitely loves and values each human being.²

This is precisely the point made centuries ago by your patron, Brother Bernard, the great doctor of the Church St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In one of his Christmas sermons he said:

[Christ] came in the flesh so that at least he might make himself manifest to our earthly minds, so that when this humanity of his appeared, his kindness might also be acknowledged. Where the humanity of God appears, his kindness can no longer be hidden. In what way, indeed, could he have better commended his kindness than by assuming my flesh?... The lesser he has made himself in his humanity, the greater has he shown himself in kindness. The more he humbles himself on my account, the more powerfully he engages my love. “The kindness and humanity of God our Savior appeared,” says the Apostle. The humanity of God shows the greatness of his kindness, and he who added humanity to the name of God gave great proof of this kindness.³

It need only be added that the rule to which you are making profession today is fully in accord with this teaching about Christ, whom St. Benedict actually names about twenty times in his rule, from the opening verses where he speaks of our doing battle “for the true King, Christ the Lord” (Prologue 3) to the very end of the 73rd and final chapter, where the saint reminds us that it is with Christ’s help that we are to keep what he calls “this little rule that we have written for beginners” (RB 73.8). Of course, we ought not assume that the reference to beginners means that the teaching is watered down, as one might water down mathematics or reading material for

children in kindergarten or the first grade. The Benedictine rule is demanding enough, as our holy founder acknowledges when he says, again in the Prologue, that the way that leads to salvation is bound to be narrow at the outset. Any of us who have lived according to the rule, and to the still more basic rule that is the Gospel itself, know well enough the demands of discipleship. Among these are the demands named in chapter 72 of the Rule, such practices as “supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior” (RB 72.5) and consistently pursuing “not what one judges better for oneself, but instead what one judges better for someone else” (RB 72.7). But there are blessings awaiting those who persevere along this way, for Benedict promises that they will eventually find themselves acting in a Godly manner “no longer out of fear of hell but out of love for Christ, good habit, and delight in virtue” (RB 7.69). This is the trajectory that we wish for you, Brother Bernard. May the grace of the Eucharist, the most fitting setting for anyone’s profession, be with you today and for all days to come until you arrive at that greatest of all blessings, eternal life with the One who so graciously stooped down to us in our humanity so as to make us to some degree sharers in his divinity.

¹ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, no. 5.

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Jordan Denari and Chris Duffner, “Dreaming With Isaiah: How a baby brought us back to the Church,” <http://bustedhalo.com/features/dreaming-with-isaiah> (accessed Dec. 27, 2013).

³ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Christmas sermon, <http://texanglican.blogspot.com/2004/12/st-bernard-on-incarnation.html> (accessed Dec. 27, 2013).