

THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

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Sunday

HOW SERIOUS ARE YOU ABOUT BEING ONE WITH JESUS?

A reflection from a homily by Basil of Seleucia

Born of the Virgin Mother of God, the Creator and Lord all shared our humanity. He had a real body and soul even though he had no part in our misdeeds. He committed no sin, says Scripture, and no falsehood ever came from his mouth. O holy womb, in which God was received, through which our sin was effaced, in which God became human while remaining God! When he was received by a mother's arms, he didn't leave the bosom of his Heavenly Father. God isn't divided as he carries out his will; God saves without suffering division.

There isn't a real need to enumerate the prophecies foretelling Christ. Mary brings forth the flower of Jesse and gifts no one can worthily praise. If Paul could say of the other saints that the world wasn't worthy of them, what can anyone say of the Mother who outshines all the martyrs as the sun does the stars? Let us echo Gabriel's cry of joy: "Rejoice, most highly favored one!"

Immanuel has come into the world he had made. God from all eternity is a child conceived in Mary. She was radiant with joy and amazed. The gifts the Spirit gave to Elizabeth and to her son, John, weren't denied to Mary. Mary spent nine months in meditation on all that God was doing to fulfill the hopes of Israel through her; she certainly would have us imitate her as we contemplate Christ's coming and the fact that the Spirit has caused Christ to come to be and begin to develop in us too.

Mary spent these months exploring the riches contained in such hidden and unobvious ways in what Israel had gradually learned to hope it could become for God, and even for the nations. Isn't that a meditation we are called to immerse ourselves in with Mary? She did it without interrupting her work to help Elizabeth with the daily chores that a 90-year-old first-time pregnant woman could find overwhelming. This too was a subject for meditation and thanksgiving. Mary was blessed because in her God was doing such great "little things" for Elizabeth and others. Haven't we received the same grace in our way?

Mary received the sages from the east and her reflections then gave new depth to God's promises to draw all to Jerusalem, to God's House and presence. She could sing to herself the hymn that the angels had sung to the shepherds and imagine its fulfillment in the ages to come. The Mother of God and of the Lord of all creation pondered in her heart and her heart was filled with gladness at what the sages from the East signified.

What was the focus of all her thought and prayer, whether in the petition for the strength to do the daily deeds of love that feel to her even while thinking constantly of the child growing within her? And the child's birth simply brought all this to fulfillment. We learn from her what the vocation to contemplation is and what wonders it can bring us, to give us joy and to give us reason to share that joy with all near us. Are we ready to contemplate as seriously as Mary did?

Monday

WHAT IS LIVING IN THE SPIRIT?

A reflection from St. Basil the Great's Treatise on the Holy Spirit

What do we mean when we speak of someone as a “spiritual person”? We mean that this person is led by God’s Spirit and is a child of God who lives by new standards, not of this world. It is like having a new ability. We hear our heart crying out “Abba”, Heavenly Father, or saying something and realizing the words don’t come from us alone.

Even more, it is a matter of living with other believers as one Body. In Christ, we are all members of one another even though God’s grace has given us different gifts. In the unity of the Spirit, each uses the special ability given to serve others according to their needs. There exists among us all a spiritual fellowship that makes it natural for us to share one another’s feelings, joys and sorrows. So, when one member suffers, all the members suffer too, and when one rejoices all rejoices together.

Now as the Heavenly Father is seen in the Son, so is the Son seen in the Spirit. To worship in the Spirit, then, is to open one’s mind and heart to the divine light. We can learn all this from our Lord’s words to the woman of Samaria. She believed it was necessary to worship in a particular place, but the Lord corrected this misunderstanding by declaring that it is in Spirit and Truth that one must worship.

By ‘truth’ he clearly meant to refer to himself. Wherever Jesus is there we can worship our God in the Spirit and be one with God and one another. So too, when we speak of adoring the Son, we mean that we worship God as revealed in and by the Son, for He is the perfect image of God. Likewise, we say that we adore in the Spirit and mean by this that we worship the Lord whose divinity is revealed in the Spirit.

Thus, the Spirit enlightens us to perceive the Son and the Son, as the radiance of the glory of God, enlightens us to perceive the workings of the Spirit within us. The Son, who bears the very impress of the Heavenly Father, raises us up to that Father, who is now Our Father, because we too have that stamp and impress placed on and within us.

But what is the evidence for all this? It is the working of the Spirit within us and through us in all that we do in loving support of the other members of the One Body of which we are members. It is the Spirit that teaches us to love just as Jesus did and who has made us one with Father and Son and Spirit in and through this love.

Whenever we love as Jesus has commanded us, we experience the Spirit working within us. As often as you do what the Lord has commanded you the Spirit’s transforming power is acting within you and transforming you more and more completely into the living image of the Heavenly Father’s loving Son. You are receiving the Son’s love in the Spirit. The more “spiritual” a person you are the more saving and loving deeds you will do for others, even for people who have not yet come to faith.

Tuesday

TWO STAGES IN CELEBRATING CHRIST'S COMING

A reflection taken from homilies by St. Pope John XXIII

Today is called a "weekday before Epiphany". This is to remind us that the coming of Christ is not solely for those who have already heard God's call to become children of their creator and redeemer. After the shepherds come to Jesus the holy Magi must come. The shepherds represent the poor and oppressed and the Magi represent the great ones of the earth. All people of goodwill are, by the very fact, open to the good news that the angels proclaimed. The Magi welcomed with joy the same child that filled the shepherds with joy. Shouldn't that be as true today as it was in the beginning?

One has to admire the eagerness and earnestness with which the Magi carried through their purpose and the generosity of their gifts. They stand for all who are endowed with worldly goods and advantages and use them according to the holy inspirations they receive from on high.

Let's consider these wonderful events from a human point of view. The magi came from among the rich and powerful, we believe. Clearly, it is more pleasant to give than to beg, and yet Jesus teaches a sublime lesson about this very attitude. Poverty doesn't signify misfortunate or humiliation. Further, the rich are obliged to do many works of mercy simply because of what they have been given. They have to do this besides having to satisfy the requirements of justice. This is not easy.

Perhaps this reflection helps us understand why Jesus, the Lord of the World, chose for the course of his entire life upon this earth the state of poverty and want and reliance upon others. He proclaimed the blessedness of those who have no possessions, and even of those who suffer. On the other hand, he threatened with grave punishments any of the rich who are unmindful of their duties to those who have not.

Of course, all this pertains not only to persons but to whole Peoples and nations. Those nations who are most powerful are all the more eager for tranquility and peace, and this longing is all the more widespread because everyone is aware of the dangers, both latent and obvious, that threatens all with genuinely apocalyptic calamities. But even nations can't prevent it by the mere exercise of power.

The cause of peace doesn't leave anyone unmoved. But who can give it to us? Jesus claimed to be able to give peace, and he declared it to be the fruit of the sort of concern and love that he showed to all, and commanded us all to share on our side. Only if we can celebrate Christmas in a way that unites poor and rich, oppressed and powerful, and all types and classes, are we moving closer to the blessing of Peace that Christmas and Christ's Gospel can realize for the entire earth.

O, Lord Jesus, save your people and bless your inheritance. Make known to your beloved flock the truths you lived by and proclaimed, not just in words but embodied in living deeds. Bless the innocent, strengthen those who waver, and fill those who have lost hope in you with new faith and enthusiasm. Make us your instruments by which peace and all good may be accomplished! Amen.

Wednesday

JESUS' CALL TO PRACTICAL CHARITY

The Daughters of Charity Constitutions by St. Elizabeth Ann Seaton

“The principle end for which God has called the Sisters of Charity is to honor Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity by rendering to him every temporal and spiritual service in their power by serving the poor, sick, invalid, children, prisoners, the insane or people who through shame conceal their need. In order that they may correspond with the grace of that vocation .. they must endeavor to live a holy life and apply great care to their own perfection, joining the exercises of the interior and spiritual life to their exterior work. ... The first thing they must endeavor to observe inviolably is to hold the salvation of their souls in higher consideration than anything in the world and to keep themselves always in a state of grace and shun mortal sin more than the infernal spirit... They shall perform all they do, both spiritual and temporal, in a spirit of humility, charity, and simplicity. They shall abhor the maxims of the world and embrace those of Jesus Christ, among these they shall recommend mortification, the contempt of self and all things earthly, preferring work that is repugnant to the inclinations of nature and taking always the last place, persuading themselves that with all this they will still be better off than they deserve on account of their sins.

They shall have no attachment to anything created—particularly to places, to works, and to persons including their parents. They shall always be disposed to quit all when obedience requires it, remembering the Lord’s words that we aren’t worthy of Him if we are not ready to part with father, mother, brothers and sisters for His sake, and renounce ourselves as well. They shall suffer cheerfully and for the love of God inconveniences, contradictions, scoffings, and calumnies and other mortifications which may happen to them, even due to their good actions ... and that all this is only part of the cross which Jesus wills them to carry following Him on earth so as to deserve the happiness of living forever with Him. They shall have great confidence in Divine Providence, abandoning themselves to it without reserve as an infant to its nurse, fully persuaded that, provided on their part they strive to be faithful to their vocation and to the observance of their rules, God will ever keep them under his protection and assist them in every necessity of soul and body, even when everything should appear to be lost.

They must, above all things, cherish and respect one another as true sisters who our Lord has united together in his service by a special profession of charity and do their utmost to preserve a perfect union amongst themselves. They shall treat one another with Christian meekness and respectful cordiality which must always appear both in their words and on their countenance. They must willingly bear with the imperfections of their sisters as they would wish their own frailties to be overlooked. If through human frailty it should happen that a sister gives some cause of mortification to another, she shall not fail to ask pardon on her knees before going to bed, and the other sister shall receive this humiliation with humility and kindness going on her knees also. This is a sovereign and speedy remedy to heal the bitterness of heart and resentment which may remain due to the fault.”

Thursday

SEEKING TOTAL DEDICATION TO GOD'S SERVICE

From the Seminary Diary of St. John Neumann

“Reason and revelation, the nature of our soul and intimate and multifaceted connections between all things teach us that the present is tied to the future in a way that cannot be dissolved. Everything that we have and do has its consequences and these extend to infinity. One day we will reap what we have sown. Regarding that which we can expect as recompense, we know it won't be insignificant. It may be that the good or bad thoughts that we cultivate, or the good or bad passions that we sustain, that the good or bad actions we do will darken one another, weaken one another, or lead us to forget them, but there is no passage of time that can cancel out the traces they leave in our souls.

Actually, after years and years or even centuries, they can come to life again as vivid and powerful as ever, and as able to cause us shame or contentment, pleasure or displeasure. And we will be just as wise or stupid about them, just as good or evil, just as perfect or imperfect. It will be just as easy or difficult to think prudently and live a virtuous life and reflecting on the past will be just as agreeable or disagreeable (as it was). Reason and Scripture teach us to believe that the Lord, our Judge, will sharpen our spirit's perception on That Day and will cause us to see finally the thoughts, imaginings, and deeds we have long held out of sight and buried in the abyss we call forgetfulness.

If then, the present is connected with so much precision and so inextricably to the future, then we ought and are able to look at the present and deal with it always by considering the future. That is what every wise person does, and every priest does it in a special way. I am not ever going to lose sight of the future! The future is going to be in my view every day of my life so that each day becomes a preparation for eternity. In this way, I will sow each day some good seeds for the future harvest.

O Jesus, my Lord, you have already given me a most powerful longing for you! Come to me and rest in me always. Take me from this valley of tears so that I may be able to praise you forever with your saints. Jesus, grant that I may die for you! I want to be your disciple and be near you forever! Yet, during this very Christmas time when you seem so near, I told a lie. And then I got upset and forgot my morning prayer. O my God, where will I end up? Turn my consolation into repentance so that I may regret my sins. My great vice is laziness, and even laziness in carrying out the duties that go with my state in life. O Jesus, give me greater humility and more fervent zeal! You know I want to let go of everything that gets in the way of following you. I was carried away by vanity hearing my language skills praised by an English-speaking visitor. Give me the humility to acquire basic virtue. O most wise, O most holy One, guide my tongue. If you wish to send me to help other peoples make me capable of being faithful to you.

Friday

SHARING IN ALL THAT GOD IS

A reflection from the Refutation of all Heresies by St. Hyppolytus

Our faith doesn't rest on empty words. We aren't to be carried away by mere whim or taken in by specious arguments. However, we don't want to turn a deaf ear when a message comes from the Power of God. This is what God entrusted to his Word. He delivered it to humankind in order to cure us of our disobedience, not by reducing us to slavery or using force but by calling upon our freedom. God's is a call to liberty.

In these "last days," the Heavenly Father sent the Word in person. He no longer wanted to have it spoken by prophets or proclaimed in obscure ways. He didn't want it to be understood dimly. So he instructed the Word to reveal himself openly. He wanted people to be won over by what they actually saw.

We know the story. He took a body from the Virgin and so remade our fallen nature. We know that he was of the same clay as we are. Otherwise, a precept about following our teacher would have been given in vain. He wanted us to realize that he was like us, and so he worked hard and experienced hunger and thirst and slept. Without protest, he endured his passion, submitted to death, and then showed himself as having risen from the grave. He showed us his own humanity to keep us from losing heart when suffering comes our way. He made us look forward to receiving the same reward as he did.

When we have come to know God as God is, our bodies will be immortal and incorruptible like our souls. We who have paid homage to the Heavenly King during our life on earth will receive the Kingdom of Heaven. We will be friends of God and co-heirs with Christ. We won't any longer be subject to wrong desires or passions or disease or death. We will share the Divine Nature.

God, by the very fact that we were created human, made us sharers in suffering. But when we have been made immortal sharers in his Godhead, he promises that his attributes shall be ours. This explains the saying: Know yourself! Thus you will learn to know the God who made you in his own image. When a human person is called by God it is a call to know God and be known by God.

It isn't for us to be at enmity with one another. We are to change our way of life without delay. Christ, who is God exalted above all, has determined to renew our nature by washing away our sins. In deciding to do this he gave proof of his love for us. If we obey his holy commandments and imitate his goodness on our own he will honor us by making us like He is. God doesn't lack means. For the sake of his own glory, he will admit us to a share in divinity.

Saturday

THE DAILY RENEWAL OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE AMONG US

A reflection based on a text by St. Maximus the Confessor

The Word of God, born once for all in Bethlehem, according to the flesh, is born anew at every instant according to the Spirit. He is born anew to all those who long for him. You see, he delights in goodness and humaneness and so he became a little child to clothe himself in just these qualities. He knows that all can accept one who is good and humane and thus seeks to free us from every trace of ill will or aversion. He is taking the measure of those who long for Him.

This is why St. John, with truly wise insight into the meaning of the mystery of the Incarnation, exclaimed: "Jesus Christ, yesterday and today and the same forever!" He perceives that the mystery is always new and never grows old in the understanding of those who give themselves to Him. Christ our God is born. The one who created all things out of nothing takes flesh and a human soul and is made a human being. A star guided Magi to the place where the Word made flesh lay. The truth confounds the evidence of the senses and guides all nations toward the fullest light of understanding and truth. The Law and the prophets mysteriously direct us to the Word, if we interpret them with reverence. Then they are like a star leading those called by the power of grace the incarnate Word.

God has become a perfect human being. Nothing of human nature is changed but sin is no part of his living. In the beginning, after all, it was no part of what is genuinely human. God makes his human body a kind of bait to lure the dragon. When this evil one attempts to devour Jesus the very assault on his flesh proves that dragon's undoing. By the power of the Godhead within it this flesh brings the devil to utter destruction. At the same time, this flesh is the sovereign medicine that restores to mankind the grace that was offered it in the beginning.

The serpent infused the poison of disobedience into the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and so ruined those who tasted it. But when he tried to repeat this stratagem with Jesus he ruined himself. The power of Godhead within Jesus brought this about.

The great mystery of the divine incarnation remains a mystery forever. How can the Word truly and substantially exist in human flesh, while at the same time his whole being is with the Father? How can that same Word, who is wholly divine by nature, have become completely human without in any way disowning either his divine nature, in which he subsists as God, or our nature in which he was made human? Only faith can perceive the truth of these mysteries. They themselves are truly the essence and foundation of truths that surpass what the mind can either see or understand. And this faith has been given us! And from this gift springs that love which binds us to our God and leads us to serve and love one another. What a marvelous exchange!