

Homily for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

January 1, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Numbers 6:22-27 (Aaron's blessing upon the Israelites.)

Responsory: Psalm 67 (May God bless us in his mercy.)

Second Reading: Galatians 4:4-7 (The Spirit in us cries out, "Abba, Father!")

Gospel: Luke 2:16-21 (Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.)

It seems fitting to begin each new calendar year by honoring our Blessed Mother. Since January 1st is also the octave (or eighth day) of Christmas, it also seems appropriate on this particular day to celebrate Mary with a title that recalls her special role in the Christmas story: "Mother of God." To us modern Christians, that exalted title for Mary doesn't seem the least bit controversial. Every time we pray the Rosary, we say *53 times*, "Holy Mary, *Mother of God*, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." And, every time we celebrate Mass, no matter which form of the Eucharistic Prayer the celebrant chooses, we always express our desire to live forever in communion with "the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Mother of God*" and all the other saints in heaven. Rarely, if ever, do we ponder the enormous gravity of our proclamation that Mary, *a mere human being*, is the Mother of God. But, perhaps we should.

In the early Church, theologians and Church leaders *did* ponder the significance of that title, and many found it quite disturbing. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing, all-loving, all-*everything*, and human beings are *not*. We are limited in all the ways that God is *unlimited*. We are finite creatures inhabiting this one little planet in a vast cosmos, while God is the infinite Creator and Master of the entire Universe. To suggest that a human being could in any way be on a par with God seems both blasphemous and, frankly, ridiculous. And, the notion that a woman could give life to the God who gave life to her seems paradoxical at best. Yet, this mystery is the inescapable consequence of another mystery which we have all come to accept by faith: *Jesus is Lord*. Once the Church finally put to rest all the heresies which, one way or another, tried to deny the Incarnation, they were left with the seemingly incomprehensible truth that humanity and divinity are united in the one person of Jesus Christ. He is true God and true man. And, that belief has an equally incomprehensible corollary, namely, that the Incarnate God was born of a mother who was merely human. To be sure, Mary was uniquely blessed and filled with grace, like no other human being before or since. But, she was still merely human, like us, and not divine, like her son.

When the angel visited Mary to tell her that she had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God, she didn't ask for a metaphysical explanation. She didn't inquire how a human being could give birth to God, only how a virgin could give birth at all. Once the angel assured her that the Holy Spirit could do the impossible, she was satisfied, saying, "I am the maidservant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." Then, I suppose, she had nine months to ponder what exactly had happened to her, and how future generations might look upon her. But, Mary's reflections certainly did not end with the birth of her son. When the shepherds came to see the newborn Jesus, they announced all that the angel had

revealed to them about this wondrous child, who was Christ and Savior and Lord. Mary, for her part, “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” As the Mother of God, she probably had to do that quite frequently. I’m guessing that she spent much of her life reflecting on the mystery of her Son. That’s one of many things about Mary which make her such a good role model for us.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Galatians, ponders the Incarnation from quite a different perspective. He sees it as the necessary precondition that allowed Christ to save all of us from our sins and make us adopted sons and daughters of God. In other words, by joining our human nature to his divine nature, God made it possible for our human nature to be transformed and exalted, to make us capable of entering into true communion with our Creator. It seems impossible that such an immense chasm could be bridged, allowing us to know God intimately and to share in his divine life for all eternity. Paul suggests that the only way for the bright line between divinity and humanity to become so blurred was for the Son of God to be “born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law.” Christ humbled himself to share in our humanity so that *we might share* in his divinity.

Paul suggests that the clearest proof of our adoption as sons and daughters of God is the fact that the Holy Spirit within us cries out, “Abba, Father!” The Spirit enables us to feel the paternal love of the Heavenly Father whom we have never seen, and it moves us to yearn for a closer, more intimate relationship with God, despite all the barriers inherent to our human nature. As our hearts instinctively reach out to the divine source of all love, we can take courage from our knowledge that God has already reached out to us, first by sending his Son into the world, and then by sending his Holy Spirit to dwell within us. The marvelous gift of the Spirit, which all of us have received through baptism, makes it possible for humanity and divinity to coexist *in each one of us*. We’re not true God and true man, like Jesus, but God’s Spirit remains a part of us, even as we live our mortal, human lives. That Spirit elevates our human nature, raising our minds and hearts to God in all sorts of ways, as we continue on our pilgrimage through this life, hoping for the eternal life to come.

As Paul reminds us, being a son or daughter of God also makes us an heir to the priceless inheritance set aside for us. We are accustomed to heirs receiving their inheritance when their *parents* die. In this case, however, we receive our inheritance when *we* die... and rise again. For, our inheritance is nothing less than eternal life with God.

So, on this first day of the year, this day dedicated to Mary and her special relationship with her divine Son, let us also ponder *our* special relationship with God, which her Son made possible. By becoming Incarnate of the Virgin Mary, he broke through the seemingly impenetrable barrier between heaven and earth. By dying and rising, he broke the power of sin and death. And, by sending the Spirit to dwell in our hearts, he has made us long for the everlasting prize that God wishes to share with all of his beloved children – *his own eternal life*.