

Homily, 1 January 2012

Mary, Mother of God

Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21



In the middle of the mass, at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, I pour a little water into the Chalice and mix it with the wine. As I do, I pray quietly: *“By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”*

In the last few weeks I’ve been struck by the incarnational nature of this prayer. What an appropriate prayer for the season of Christmas!

Yet almost every time I say this prayer, I feel a little bit arrogant. How can we, such flawed and imperfect people, come to share in Christ’s divinity? What does it mean: for us to “share in the divinity of Christ?”



Fr. Ronald Rolheiser has noted that one of the common flaws of human nature is that familiarity breeds contempt, ... which makes it very difficult for us to see what is extraordinary in the ordinary, ... to see the spark of the divine within the stuff of every day life.

In other words, it is very hard for us to really understand the meaning of Christmas.



In the early centuries of Christianity, people struggled to understand the nature of Christ. Revelation in the Old Testament teaches us that there is but one God, and it was difficult to understand how to speak about Christ’s divinity and still hold to the true nature of God.

Was Jesus human, or divine, or both in some way? How could he be God, if there was only one God?

Although the foundation of our Trinitarian profession was given to us by the apostles, especially by John and Paul, the nature of Christ was still a real controversy in the early centuries of Christianity. There were a great number of heresies that had to be confronted and corrected.

Some heresies denied the divinity of Christ, while others, believing flesh to be utterly evil and beneath the dignity of God, denied his humanity. And there were many more subtle heresies: that Christ was not conceived in Mary, but only passed through her as through a channel from the divine into the material world. Others denied that Christ was even born at all, arguing that he appeared out of the desert full-grown, or that the divinity of Christ was given to Jesus only at his baptism. Still others believed that Jesus humanity was only a vessel in which his divine form resided.

These were turbulent times theologically and spiritually, and many people were troubled by these fundamental questions. Although most held to the orthodox faith, they didn't yet have the words to express it.

In the early fifth century the issue was framed in this way: was Mary the Mother of God, or was she not? How you answered that question depended upon your understanding of the nature of Christ.

At the General Council of Ephesus, in the year 431, the council Fathers unanimously declared that because Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine, it was proper to call Mary *Theotokos*: the Mother of God. In response to the Fathers' declaration, there are reports that crowds of people surged through the streets of Ephesus shouting "Holy Mary, Mother of God." Today, alas, I don't think we take our theology so seriously!

But that was the origin of today's Solemnity. It is the oldest Marian feast in the Church's calendar.



Today we acknowledge that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity and that Mary, as Jesus' mother, was also the Mother of God. But what does this mean for us? The late Cardinal Dulles wrote something I find very helpful:

*The incarnation does not mean that God saves us from the pains of this life. It means that God-is-with-us. For the Christian, just as for everyone else, there will be cold, lonely seasons of sickness, seasons of frustration, and a season within which we will die.*

*Christmas does not give us a ladder to climb out of the human condition. It gives us a drill that lets us burrow into the heart of everything that is and, there, find it shimmering with divinity.*

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, described what it meant to have such an insight: that the heart of things shimmers with divinity. He had been in the monastery for twenty years, living a life of prayer and reflection. One day, as he did from time to time, he went into Louisville Kentucky, the town near the monastery. It was there, in 1958 that he had an epiphany on the corner of Fourth & Walnut streets:

*I was suddenly overwhelmed, he wrote, with the realization that I loved all those people, ... It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race ... there is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. ...*

*I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all of the time.*



This is the meaning of Christmas. That God is with us and transforms us. This is the answer to my puzzle about sharing in the divinity of Christ. We share it because God has given it to us.

It is what Paul was telling the Galatians: we are now adopted children of God, heirs with Christ to the kingdom and a share in his divinity.

Mary, the Mother of God, kept all these things – the message told by the shepherds and the words of the Angel Gabriel – and reflected on them in her heart.

It took Thomas Merton twenty years to understand the insight that Mary must have received. I am still trying to comprehend it, every time I perform the rite of the water and wine.