

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Aug 22nd 2013

Today is the Octave day of the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. Thus the day is celebrated as the memorial of the Mary as Queen of Heaven. Although set aside as a specific feast in relatively recent years (1954) the title and honor of Mary as Queen goes back to some of the early Fathers of the Church, and was certainly celebrated in the Medieval period when Mary became central to Catholic devotional life.

This liturgical memorial offers us an opportunity to once again reflect how Mary has been held through the centuries as a kind of type or sacrament of the Church. She is the first of those saved from sin by Jesus' incarnation (even before her own birth, since God's activity is not limited to the boundaries of time) and she is the first raised from the dead, body and soul (which we celebrate in the Feast of the Assumption). The way we honor Mary, then, reflects how we might think of the mystical character of the Church. For most of us, the Church is too often encountered as a human community with the limits and warts of human structures. Members who are inadequately formed and thus half-hearted in their commitments, leaders who are also less than perfectly formed and pursuing leadership for other reasons than the service of God's reign. But at its core, the Church is so much more. It is the active, continued presence of the Resurrected Christ in time and history. The Church is both Body and Bride of Christ – to use two of the favorite metaphors of the Tradition. Mary keeps that awareness alive as long as we remember that she is the first member of the Church and its truest, purely human member. Mary had to be saved from sin (the Immaculate Conception celebrates that), lived a limited and confusing human life wherein she had to hold things in her heart and ponder them in order for them to make sense. She had to stand by helplessly as her own son is slaughtered in front of her, she had to await her own death and resurrection after Jesus Ascended to the Father. Mary stands as witness and surety for us that the promise of the fullness of life with God is intended for the whole human race.

Today's Gospel text, the one assigned to the day in Ordinary time, rather than a special Gospel of the memorial, is in an interesting way very appropriate to the memorial. Jesus tells the parable of the King's wedding feast to presumably challenge the leaders of Israel who cannot see that Jesus is the fulfillment of the messianic promise. The wedding is the "marriage" of God Son and God's people in such a way that the people are divinized or transformed through the Son into His very being. The symbol of the wedding garment has long been understood as taking on the life of the Spirit through Baptism (thus the traditional wedding dress is an "echo" of the baptismal gown, as is the alb, and even the pall on the coffin of the deceased). The symbol of the garment is the symbol for a transformed body (new skin) – so in this case the clothing DOES make the person. At least it is understood to make the person fully what he or she was created to be – a member of Christ's body within the Trinitarian life.

This is the wedding feast! To show up at the feast without accepting the garment of divine life (the fellow didn't have to come up with his own garment – it would have been given at the door) is not

possible. In other words, we aren't automatically divinized, there is some action on the part of our own freedom that accepts what God is offering. One has to embrace the life of God's reign with Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. Mary, symbol for the Church, is the "bride" who is crowned queen of God's reign – and all of us are invited to be as Mary is, perfectly docile to the desire of God for us – which ultimately is our perfect joy in participation at the Banquet of God.

Now surely someone will worry that this is all too ecclesial, and what about those who are not baptized Christians? Actually, since salvation is God's job – even if humans have to accept the offer – we presume that God has ways of accomplishing the offer beyond the boundaries of overt Christianity.

But what we are confident of, is that God has promised the invitation to the wedding to those who join Jesus in living and proclaiming God's reign – and the feast is here and now, not just eternally!

So with the Psalmist we sing: "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will!"

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