

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Dec 8th 2015

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Read the document in which Pope Francis explains the Jubilee of Mercy in the year ahead, beginning on December 8th.

Every year on March twenty-fifth, the Catholic Church celebrates the Immaculate Conception of Jesus in the womb of the sinless young woman of Nazareth, Mary. Every year on today's date, the Catholic Church celebrates its tradition-based belief and dogma that this same young woman was immaculately conceived in the womb of her very own human mother, Anne and through the natural biological father, Joachim. The traditional Gospel for this liturgy is exactly about the announcing by Gabriel to Mary that she would miraculously conceive, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus, Word of God made man. This perhaps results in the confusion that this celebration, on December eighth is about the Conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. Mary's immaculate conception in her mother's womb is not found anywhere directly in Holy Scripture. It is and has been a long-held belief in the Church and was defined as a dogma in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. This mystery of God's mercy and love for Mary continues through the life of Jesus.

Pope Francis has declared that this very day of days begins the Year of Mercy in his letter *Misericordiae Vultus*. Throughout this pastoral letter, Pope Francis speaks of the various aspects of the word "mercy". The word does mean a judicial decision in several passages of Holy Scripture. It can mean an acceptance or reception of the condition and truth of a group or a single person. There is a direct address to priests in their ministries as confessors. The pope advises the priests to not ask many questions during the sacramental exchange. The main meaning for "mercy" in his letter is not a judging, but a sense and prayer for healing. Jesus seemed to be in the ministry of healing, raising, comforting, finding and bringing persons back to their true and lasting dignity. Jesus' "mercy-Ministry" was often to have the people He healed to experience their being merciful toward themselves.

"Mercy" is about five percent forgiving and ninety-five percent healing of body, self-image, healing of the past and encouragement for the person's future. How does all this flow into and from the celebration of Mary's being conceived in a soul-stainless way?

The Hebrew word for compassion is "heshem" and the word-root of that word is "rechem" meaning womb. The Prophet Isaiah writes of God's love as that of a mother who might indeed forget the child of her "womb", but God's embrace is deeper and longer even than that. (Is 49:15) Later the same prophet describes the comforting of God as a mother comforting her child. (Is. 66:13) In today's First Reading, Adam has eaten from the tree forbidden him by God. Adam tells God that the woman gave him the apple and now they have lost their innocence and are ashamed. Mary, as the "New Woman," is herself invited now to eat of the apple of mystery and dignity. She responds, not out of shame at who she is, but out of a humility of self-acceptance. Instead of being naked in the shame of sin, Mary is clothed with a motherhood of mercy, comfort and healing. She would have been familiar with the Adam and Eve tradition and was taking her turn in waiting for the return of the loving-God's embrace of the world.

It is her not having been stained by sin that frees her spirit to be available to give the world “Jesus Christ, the face of the Father’s mercy.” (cf *Misericordea Vultus*, 1).” As God came looking for Adam who was hiding out of shame, God came asking Mary, not where she was, but how available would she be to give God a face. Eve is given the name at the end of the First Reading, “Mother of all the living.” In today’s Gospel, Mary is given the name, “Mother of the Holy Son of God.”

In the Catholic Church there is a prayer to Mary which begins, “Hail, holy queen, Mother of Mercy...”, which mercy is “our life, our sweetness and our hope.” The prayer continues,, “Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us...”, and concludes with, “O clement, O loving, O sweet virgin Mary.” Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit poet of the late nineteenth century compares Mary’s place in God’s relationship with us to the air we breathe. “I say that we are wound with mercy round and round as if with air..” “She wild web wondrous robe, mantels the guilty globe....”. Mary then is the motherly face of the mercy which Jesus was, is and always is.

One more important aspect of Pope Francis' letter announcing the Year of Mercy, is the dramatic gesture of his opening the “Holy Door” in the Bishop of Rome’s Diocesan Church and has asked that in every Cathedral a similar door be opened. This is meant to symbolize the portal of Mercy and welcome offered to all for the healing and forgiveness of all the world. Mary Immaculate is called the “Portal of Grace” and it was through the portal of her womb that the Person of the face of God was to take flesh. Her openness to the mystery of God becomes our invitation to our being available to His healing and our mission of also being the Face of our merciful God. Each of us might take the opportunity to step through that “Open door of Mercy” both to receive that gift and then to be ourselves doors of mercy.

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