

Mary, the Holy Mother of God

The death of Pope Benedict XVI on New Year's Eve fittingly accompanies the turning of the page on the calendar. He was a pope of uncommon intelligence who led the Church with courage and insight. His retirement from the papacy after eight years of service refined our ideas about Church leadership and helped all of us accept the grace and limitations that come with life.

At the threshold of a new year, we foresee the same grace and limitations ahead. We have control over some things. But no one can predict what will happen in society, the environment, global health, or the weather. Because many factors extend beyond our control, we start the new year in prayer. Specifically, in today's responsorial psalm, we sing, "May God bless us in his mercy."

It follows a passage in the Book of Numbers where, through Moses, the Lord instructs Aaron and his sons how to bless the other Israelites and let his face shine upon them. Psalm 67 offers a similar prayer: "May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine upon us." We appropriately sing this at the start of a new year when we remember the losses and graces of the past and put the unpredictable parts of the upcoming months into the hands of God.

As with any favor we may ask, this psalm attempts to beguile God with a sales pitch. While we ask God for a blessing, we explain how God benefits from it as well. We don't just acknowledge our limitations; we remind God that, if we get our blessing, the new year will go well for him also. "[If you] bless us," the psalm goes, "So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations, your salvation." If God is good to us, other people will take notice. God's reputation will sparkle. It's a clever way to pray, whatever blessing we may seek in the new year.

This psalm is not greedy. It does not seek pleasure for us alone. Instead, it accepts that God rules the world "in equity." God does not play favorites. Everyone can get a blessing. Praying is not a zero-sum game. If we get what we want, it doesn't have to mean someone else doesn't get what they want. There is plenty of blessing to go around.

This is good to remember whenever we enter disagreements with people and want our side to win. If God rules all peoples in equity, God may have some way that both sides win. This does not always satisfy those people who pray for someone else to lose or come to shame. If God blesses someone else, that may not mean God has blessed us less. We all have blessings aplenty, and God may be distributing his kindness "in equity."

When we remember a blessing like we received with the election of Pope Benedict and pray for blessings in the new year, our prayer will probably please God more if it is not selfish, if we want our blessing to be a benefit for God, and if we rejoice in the blessings that others receive.

We begin the new year under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of God. As Luke says about the days after the nativity of Jesus, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." As we recall the losses and graces of the past year, let us pray in the new year that all peoples may come to praise God, the source of every blessing.

Sunday, January 1, 2023