

Mary, the Holy Mother of God

We have too many things to celebrate today. On January 1st we begin the new year. Recent popes have designated this a world day of prayer for peace. We commemorate the eighth day of Christmas with a gospel reporting Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. He also formally received his name on the eighth day, so we honor the Holy Name of Jesus. But the formal title for today's observance in the Roman Catholic Church is Mary, the Holy Mother of God. Having celebrated the birth of Christ, we gaze today upon his mother. Her title reminds us of the miraculous nature of the conception of Jesus: at the word of the angel, Mary conceived Jesus while remaining a virgin. Because of the nature of her Son, she bears the illogical title "Mother of God." At first it would seem God could not have a mother without ceasing to be God; the mother would have to be God. But as St. John reminds us, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh. Mary did not make Jesus God; she made him human; his divine and human natures are so intertwined she could not be mother of one without being mother of the other.

Mary has many exalted titles, yet St. Paul calls her by the simplest of them. Throughout all his letters in the New Testament, only once does he refer to Jesus' mother. It's in today's reading from Galatians. Paul doesn't even use her name. And before you think that was rude of him, recall that St. John's gospel never uses her name either. From the wedding at Cana to the foot of the cross, John calls her "the mother of Jesus." We only know her name because of the other gospels. Her role is always subordinate to that of her Son. But Paul calls her something even simpler: namely, "a woman." He writes, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." For Paul, Mary had this fundamental role: bringing about the birth of Christ so that in becoming like us he could redeem us and make us his brothers and sisters.

Translators usually struggle with the phrase "adoption as sons." They'd like to say Jesus became one of us so that we could receive adoption as sons and daughters. But in Paul's day, sons got the inheritance, not the daughters. To say we're all adopted as sons, both men and women, means we all reap the same rewards of our faith.

This moves us to yet another theme of today's celebration. Paul says that because we are adopted, we can call God our Father. As Mary gave birth to the incarnate Son of God, so the Church in baptism gives birth to adopted sons and daughters of God. Paul invites us to call God our Father. We do, and we also rightly call Mary our mother. She is the mother of God and our mother too.

We have too many things to celebrate on the eighth day of Christmas. As Mary "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart," so we may do the same. It's a new year, a day to pray for peace, a remembrance of the circumcision and naming of Jesus, an affirmation of Mary's role as virgin and mother of God, an amazement of how her own humanity as one woman brought God's universal plan to fulfillment, and a consolation that she continues to live as our mother too. It's too much to celebrate in one day. It may take us all year.