

### ***The God-Bearer***

In the name of the Virgin Born, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel is the delightful account of Mary's arrival at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, which was located in an unnamed town in the hill country of Judah. Mary has traveled here in haste from her home in Nazareth where, just a few days before, she received from an angel the startling news that she is now pregnant with the Christ Child. Mary didn't understand how that could be. It's true she was engaged to be married; but she was still very much a virgin. The angel told her that with the Lord all things are possible. And for a proof of it, he informed her that her cousin Elizabeth, who in her long married life had been barren and who was thought to be well past the age of childbearing, was now six months along and would soon give birth to a son – and not just any son, but the one who would grow into the man John the Baptizer, God's promised forerunner who would prepare the way for Christ the Lord.

It's hard to imagine what thoughts and emotions must have flooded Mary's heart upon hearing all this. It was likely the whimsical dream of every young Jewish maiden that she might be one chosen for this honor; but surely a poor, humble girl like Mary never seriously thought it would be her. She must have thought that so wonderful a task would have to be assigned to someone exceptional: a girl nobly born, wealthy, and extremely pious. But, no; the Lord chose her. As terrific as this was, it wasn't the kind of news Mary could share with her family or the neighbors without sounding either arrogant, downright crazy, or both. I suspect that this was a big part of her decision to immediately go see Elizabeth, for she was the one woman on earth with whom Mary could freely share her joy, her fears, and her excitement – and to whom she could be helpful during Elizabeth's last trimester and in the weeks after the birth of her baby. And this speaks volumes about Mary's character, that though she was to give birth to the Son of God – something that would cause most expecting mother's heads to swell as much as their abdomens – Mary goes gladly to serve another.

Upon arrival at her destination, Mary calls out a greeting to her aged cousin. We're not told the precise words she used; but just as people often say "Hello" today, a typical salutation at that time would have been "The Lord be with you." If that's what Mary said, and I think it more than likely, then it takes on extraordinary significance coming from her, for with Mary's arrival, the Lord is indeed with Elizabeth and her household in a very special and substantial way in the womb of Mary. The Lord is with them. What's more, both Elizabeth and her unborn son know this immediately. Upon hearing the sound of Mary's voice – the spoken word from the one who bears the Word of God in flesh – John stirs suddenly. And Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, declares that she's amazed and honored that the mother of her Lord would pay her a visit, and that even her son is leaping for joy within her. Note that well: if John is leaping for joy, it's because he too believes in the Lord who is present now in Mary. And what's especially nice about that is that John will spend his ministry baptizing people. Here he is now, completely surrounded by *water* in the womb. The Spirit is resting on his mother. And at the word of Mary, he comes to faith in the unseen Lord and rejoices in his saving presence. Water, Spirit, Word - faith: do you see it? This is the baptism of the Baptizer. Pretty neat, huh?

But I'd really like to turn our attention back to Mary. Elizabeth says to her, "*Blessed* are you among women, and *blessed* in the fruit of your womb!" The word that's translated twice there as "blessed" is actually "eulogized", that is, "spoken well of". Elizabeth is telling Mary that people will say nice things about her. It's not the same word that's translated "blessed" later in

the passage where Elizabeth says, “Blessed is she who believed ... what was spoken to her from the Lord.” There it’s a different word that means *blessed* in the sense that you’ve received gracious favor and gifts from the Lord. And we’ve already seen that that’s true: Mary was indeed blessed to be chosen to be God the Father’s instrument to bring his only-begotten Son into this world in human flesh in order that he could be our Savior from sin.

And that’s why it’s right for us to honor and speak well of Mary as Elizabeth said, just as we honor and speak well of all those saints who were chosen by the Lord to play special roles in the unfolding plan of his salvation: saints like Noah and his family, who believed the Word of the Lord, built the Ark, and were saved from the flood that destroyed the rest of the world; and Abraham and Sarah who, though they were old and childless, believed the Lord’s promise to make of them a great nation through which would come the Savior; and Moses, who prefigured the work of Jesus by delivering God’s people from slavery and who gave to them God’s Word. These and so many other Old Testament persons and prophets foreshadowed and foretold the mission and ministry of Jesus. And we should honor and bless them all – but Mary even more so, for the others only spoke about Christ and gave us images of him; but Mary actually delivered the Savior to us. To her alone was given the task of actually bringing Christ Jesus, who is true God and true man, into the world. And therefore it’s right that we celebrate her uniquely as the God-Bearer, the woman through whom the Father gave to us his Son.

But in paying Mary the respect that she is due for her role in our salvation, there are two ditches we want to avoid. The first is to elevate her to nearly divine status as is done in some Christian groups. In their overly zealous attempts to honor Mary, they end up essentially worshipping her, ascribing to her perfect sinlessness, and such powers as the ability to hear and answer prayers, to watch over and protect people, and to perform miracles of healing. This is blasphemy. Only God can do such things. Mary, as important as she is, is still only a human. And in her life on earth, she was a sinner just like the rest of us. Some, however, even go so far as to revere Mary as the “Co-Redemptrix”, asserting that her suffering as a mother was part of the payment price of our salvation. They say that Jesus didn’t do it alone when he died on the cross; no, it was Jesus *and* Mary’s suffering that saves you. This too is blasphemous – part of the cult of Mariolatry that makes a false god of the Virgin Mother.

That’s the ditch on one side of the road; the other is to go too far the other way and either ignore Mary, refusing to mention her at all, or to scorn her for all intents and purposes. This happens in other Christian circles. Because some overstate her role, they respond by understating it. Among these are people who say things like, “Well, yes, Mary provided a human body for Jesus, but we can’t really say that her child was actually God. The divinity of Jesus came to him at some point later in his life.” This is to completely misunderstand who Jesus is, and to flatly deny what the Scriptures clearly teach about him: that the infant born of Mary is Immanuel, which means God with us – God with us from the very moment of his conception – as both Elizabeth and her yet-to-be-born son attest. Of course, others in especially liberal churches denigrate Mary still further, claiming that she was not a virgin, that Joseph or some other guy was the biological father of her son, and that there was never anything divine about Jesus. Assertions like these destroy the Christian faith entirely.

Thus it’s necessary that when honoring Mary for her singular role in God’s plan of salvation, we maintain a proper balance: neither raising her to a level above what she is, nor lowering her significance to something less than the Scriptures declare. We ought to honor her for what she is: a sinner, who was a recipient of God’s amazing grace, who believed the Word and promise of God spoken to her, and through whom God gave us what no other person in history ever did: the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the eternal Son of God made man. And it’s

important that we do this, not just for Mary's sake; but also for what Mary represents. You see, just as Moses and some other Old Testament saints were pictures and images of Jesus, so also the Virgin Mary is a prophetic picture and foreshadow of something much bigger.

What's that? Well, Mary was the human means by which God *first* gave us his Son. But God continues to give us his Son even today – *in the flesh*. He does this through the ministry of his Church, the present human means by which God delivers his Son to save sinners. So, our Mary is the Church – she's our God-Bearer. And she really does give us Jesus: in the proclaimed Word, in the water of Baptism, in the Lord's Supper in which we receive Christ bodily for the forgiveness of our sins. Through this humble, very human and flawed instrument, the Church, God delivers to us Jesus.

And she does more than that. Just as Mary later gave birth to other sons and daughters who were the brothers and sisters of Jesus, so also the Lord uses the Church to give birth to *his* other sons and daughters – which would include us, together with all the faithful who have gone before us and will come after us. The Church is *our* mother. Through her the Lord gives us birth in Holy Baptism. And in her loving embrace we are cradled and cared for, while through her the Lord feeds and nourishes our faith, washes away our sins, and clothes us with the perfect righteousness of our elder brother, the firstborn and only-begotten Son. She also attends us when we're sick, both spiritually and physically, she treats our wounds, she calms our fears, and she's there to comfort us in the hour of death. And through her the Lord gives us other brothers and sisters, the whole family of God in Christ Jesus, whom we are to love and care for as the family we are. And we can take this a step further: just as Jesus, when he was on the cross suffering and dying for our sins entrusted the care of his mother, Mary, to his disciple, John, so also he entrusts the care of our mother the Church to those of us who are more mature in the faith. When we're older spiritually, it's our job to care for her; but she never stops being our mother who continues to give us Jesus the Savior, and to whom as a mother we owe proper honor and respect.

With this in mind, the same two ditches are there to avoid. On one side you've got the mistake of elevating the Church and ascribing to her divine powers that she does not possess, thus making an idol of her. And on the other, you've got the error of minimizing the significance of the Church and claiming that we can get along in the Christian faith just fine without her, thank you very much. And though this is not an airtight rule without exceptions, it happens that those who tend to excessively glorify Mary, also end up essentially worshipping the Church; while those who tend to ignore or steer clear of Mary, also belittle the Church and its role.

The Church is made an idol when it's claimed that she speaks with an authority greater than that of the revealed Word of God in Holy Scripture; that she can add or change Christian teachings apart from the Word of Christ; that when she speaks officially through her one appointed spokesman who is called the successor of St. Peter she is incapable of error; or that she can, through her ministers add to the merit earned by Jesus through his atoning sacrifice on the cross. This last claim is to assert that Jesus' suffering and death for sin was not enough to save us, and thus the Church becomes for us a sort of Co-Redemptrix – a savior beside the Savior. It's also to say that when Jesus bowed his head in death and said, "It is finished", he didn't know what he was talking about. Obviously we don't want to fall into this ditch.

But the ditch on the other side is equally dangerous and deep. The Church's role is despised in any number of ways. One is when it's taught that she really doesn't bear and give us Jesus in any tangible way – oh, she talks about him; but she really doesn't bring him into our presence and deliver him. Another is when it's taught that she doesn't by Christ's command

have the authority to forgive sins, something the Bible clearly teaches. A third is when her Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are called mere symbols designed to aid the memory or show our obedience to the Lord. A fourth is when people shun her saying they don't need the Church and her ongoing services to nurture and sustain their faith – that they can go it alone. Thus they despise not only their mother the Church and her gifts; but also the rest of the family, denying their responsibility to love and care for their brothers and sisters in Christ. A fifth way people show contempt for the Church is to deny their duty to care for her and provide for her upkeep. When this happens, they may think that they are mature in the faith; but by their actions they show that they are more like spoiled teenagers who expect all things to be given to them but who would never think of lifting a finger to help out around the house. I'm sure there are other ways to despise our mother the Church; but for the time being let these suffice. The main point is that just as we need to avoid the extremes when giving honor to Mary, the God-Bearer; we need to do the same with the Church, which is our God-Bearer today.

Therefore let us all make every attempt to walk in the middle of the way the Lord has made for us. With grateful hearts let's give thanks to the Lord for Mary, the Virgin Mother, and for our collective mother, the Church. Let's show them the honor and respect they are due. But even more, let's give thanks and praise to God our heavenly Father for what the God-Bearers gave and continue to give to us – what we need most: the Savior Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***