

January 1, 2020

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God

It seems hard to believe that Christmas was already a week ago. I hope this has been a full and festive week for all of you, and that you've been able to celebrate with family and friends. On this 8th day, as we just heard in our Gospel passage when Mary's Baby Boy received His circumcision and was given the Holy Name of Jesus, we gather together again to celebrate the completion of the Christmas Octave and to give honor to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of our Savior Jesus, and the Mother of God!

And as we come together for Mass on this special Solemnity of Mary, and join with the rest of the world in celebrating the beginning of a not only a new calendar year but a whole new decade, I want to wish each and every one throughout our Diocese a happy, peaceful and blessed New Year!

For those who were able to stay up late enough, we love that moment as the clock approaches midnight, as the big Ball dropped in New York's Times Square, or the smaller Balls that dropped in other places where people gathered, marking the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, and launching us into the third decade of this 21st century. Every January 1st marks the beginning of a whole new year, filled with new beginnings and lots of possibilities, which also occasions all the traditional New Year's special festivities---singing "Auld Lang Syne", shooting off fireworks, and toasting one another with good wishes---celebrating this "newness" for us and for all the world.

For us, though, as we come together on this Holy Day, besides celebrating New Year's, our Liturgical "spotlight" still shines our attention on Christmas, as we complete the Octave, and continue our celebration of that life-changing, historic Event of the Birth of Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Mary. The three brief Scripture Readings we just heard for this Solemnity of Mary provide for us at least three important points for our reflection.

Today's Gospel passage continues the Christmas story as St. Luke tells us that after the Angel revealed to the Shepherds that amazing message that a Savior had been born for them and all the world, and were instructed to go immediately to see this amazing event for themselves, the *"shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph and the infant lying in the manger."* St. Luke also tells us that as soon as they saw the Child, they knew this was the one

that the Angels had told them about, and they, in turn, told Mary and Joseph what the Angel had told them. Luke tells us that they *“were amazed....and Mary kept all these things reflecting on them in her heart.”*

New Year’s Day is not only a good time to watch football and eat another delicious meal (for example the traditional pork and sauerkraut our family always shared), but today is also a great day to spend some quality time doing what Mary did: reflecting on all that has happened in our lives in 2019, and considering what resolutions we each might make about how we will live our lives differently in 2020. Just imagine all that young Mary was “reflecting” on!

It had only been nine months earlier when the Archangel Gabriel appeared and invited her to become the Mother of God’s Son. And, even though she was a Virgin and remained a Virgin throughout the remainder of her life, that amazing event took place by the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon her, resulting in the Conception of the One she was to name Jesus. When Mary said “Yes”/Let it be done to me as you say, the history of our salvation began.

Mary also left immediately and traveled many miles to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, and then stayed with her for three months to help her until she gave birth to John who would be known as the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus.

Then, Mary and Joseph had to travel the almost 100 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem in her final weeks of her own pregnancy to be enrolled in Bethlehem for the Census.

And of course, it was while they were there that Mary’s time to deliver Jesus took place, and because of the crowds of people, they had to experience that blessed event in a stable for animals and lay their precious Child in an animals’ manger.

So Mary reflected on all that had happened up to this point, and now that the Shepherds told her and Joseph what the Angels had said, she had a whole lot more to reflect on in terms of what the future might hold, and Who this Child would be. The fact that Mary said “Yes” to God, and was able to reflect on all these events with complete Faith and total openness to God’s Will, is precisely why Mary is our Model, and the one we continue to keep looking to as we try to improve the ways we live our lives in this world. Mary trusted, believed and hoped in what she could not see, or even understand; and through it all, she continued to say “Yes/Let it be done to me as You say”. Because Mary was able

to so courageously say “Yes” to God’s Plan, not only was she able to have a Happy New Year, but she enabled a Blessed New Age to begin for all humanity!

.As we reflect on this past year, and think about our hopes/plans/dreams for this new year, we need to reflect, as Mary did, on all that takes place in our lives in the context of our Faith. We need to keep in mind that God has a plan for each of us, not as dramatic a plan as He had for Mary, of course, but one that is just as real. If we don’t take the time to reflect---to ask God to help us as we make plans for our life----to ask God for guidance in the choices and decisions that we make for this new year----then how will we know what God’s Plan for us is? We need to take time---quality time each day---to pray, reflect, and ask for the courage to say “Yes” to God. Pope Francis recently commented that “*true holiness results when we can conform our will to God’s Will for us.*” And so our first Resolution could be: to take time each day to pray, to reflect, to seek God’s forgiveness when we fail, to ask for His grace to help us to hold on tight to our Faith amidst the world’s influences to disregard God, and to ask His help for us to grow each day in holiness.

In today’s Second Reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, he reminded all of us: “*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 God’s sons and daughters.*” And that, of course, means that we are not just God’s sons and daughters, but heirs to the Salvation that Jesus, God’s Son, came to win for all of humanity, including all of us who are members of Jesus’ Body, the Church. My dear Family of Faith, our membership in the Church means so much more than whether we come to Mass on Sundays/Holy Days or contribute to the Offertory Collection. Those are minimal signs of our membership in the Church. More than that, we are called to be mindful of who we are and what our membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, means for us as we live our daily lives, whether we’re in Church, or at our jobs, or while we’re going to school, or just hanging out with our friends. Our second resolution could be to reflect on what it means for me, and for you, to be a part of the Body of Christ; of what it means that you and I are called to be vibrant, active, missionary disciples of Jesus in the world.

Finally, our First Reading today from the Old Testament Book of Numbers provides for all of us a very appropriate prayer that we could pray for ourselves, for our families, for our Diocese, and for the world. This is the instruction given to Moses by the Lord Himself, to give to Aaron and the other priests to pray for the People of God. *“May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let His Face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look upon you with kindness and give you His Peace!”* What a beautiful prayer: a prayer for God’s blessing, a prayer for His protection, a prayer for the Divine Gaze of kindness, and a prayer for God’s peace, Who of course is Jesus Himself.

In addition to this being the Solemnity of Mary the Mother, of God, January 1st is also known as “World Day of Peace. In Pope Francis’ message for this year’s World Day of Peace entitled “Peace as a Journey of Hope”, our Holy Father helps us to understand what kind of “Peace” God desires all of humanity to experience. Pope Francis writes: *“We cannot truly achieve peace without a convinced dialogue between men and women who seek the truth beyond ideologies and differing opinions....It is a journey made together in constant pursuit of the common good, truthfulness and respect for law. Listening to one another can lead to mutual understanding and esteem, and even to seeing in an enemy the face of a brother or sister.”* (Section 2) Pope Francis also tells us that peace is far more than an absence of war. In fact, he makes this strong statement: *“Every war is a form of fratricide that destroys the human family’s innate vocation to brotherhood”.* (Section 1)

Perhaps our third resolution could be to pray for peace, and to commit ourselves to work for peace. That peace, of course, must begin first of all in our own hearts, among our own relationships, and in the ways we choose to seek forgiveness when we cause injury, even as we try to be an agent for reconciliation when relationships have been damaged.

My dear Family of Faith, may we all begin this new year in a truly significant, faith-filled way. On this Holy Day honoring our dear Blessed Mother---Mother of God, Mother of the Church, and our own spiritual Mother---may we, like her, *“keep all these things and reflect on them”* in our hearts. And may we, like Mary, say “Yes” to God’s grace-filled plan for us in this new year.

May you all have a blessed, peace-filled, and Happy New Year!