

Mary, the Mother of God (*Theotokos*)

(Octave of Christmas)

<i>First Reading</i>	Numbers 6:22-27
<i>Response</i>	May God be gracious to us and bless us
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Galatians 4:4-7
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 2:16-21

The second reading for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, during the Octave of Christmas, comes to us from St. Paul's famous letter to the Galatians. And it's the only time in all of Paul's letters where he ever mentions Mary, where he ever mentions the mother of Jesus. So you can...it's pretty obvious why the Church chooses this passage for today. But what does it mean? Let's read through it together, and we'll try to unpack it, because it's one of these classic Pauline texts that's very brief, but it's dense. It's rich. It's got a lot going on in a short amount of text. So in Galatians 4:4-7...this is the one time Paul mentions Mary in all of his letters, and this is what he says:

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.¹

Okay. So obviously since today's the feast of Mary as mother of God, *Theotokos* (God bearer), the verse we want to home in on is that first one there:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

...when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman...
(Galatians 4:4a-c)

Now, what does Paul mean when he says this? Well, on the one hand you could say, well, he's just giving you a kind of account of the mystery of the Incarnation. God sends His Son to Earth, and He's born of a woman, and He's born under the law so that He can redeem those under the law—in other words, to bring about the redemption of Jerusalem, the long awaited hope of Israel, the salvation of Israel and the nations. And that's absolutely true, but one of the things that readers since ancient times have noticed here is that the way Paul formulates his description of the birth of Jesus is a little...it's a little peculiar. So for one thing, notice, he says that God sent His Son.

So on the one hand, that could mean that God just sends the Son on a mission—in other words, like he sends John the Baptist or he sends Isaiah or one of the prophets to bring His message to the world. On the other hand though, many interpreters have seen in this an implication of the Son's preexistence—in other words, that the Son takes human form in a way that's different than all other human beings. So all other human beings are created directly and immediately by God—you could say they're conceived in the womb. Especially from a biblical world view, humans don't exist in Heaven and then are sent to the Earth, right? Humans are conceived and they're born in this world and of this world.

But Jesus is different, and you'll see Paul himself actually does say as much elsewhere in his famous hymn in the letter to the Philippians. So if you look at Philippians 2 just for a second...in Philippians 2:5, the famous parallel with this is in his verses where he says this:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

So notice, in Philippians, Paul says that Christ Jesus was first in the form of God, but then He emptied Himself, and He took the form of a servant and was born in the likeness of men. So you have there Paul's description of the mystery of the Incarnation—that the Son exists in the form of God before He exists in the form of a human being.

So when you take that information from Philippians and you look back at Galatians, what Paul is saying there is not just in Galatians that Jesus is sent like, say, St. John the Baptist is sent or one of the prophets is sent...but that God sends His preexistent Son to be born of a woman in the mystery of Christmas, in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Now, if you have any doubts about that, the second part of the phrase is key there. What it says:

...God sent forth his Son, born of woman... (Galatians 4:3b-c)

...that should immediately strike you as somewhat redundant. Notice that when Paul says "born of a woman"—you can't see this in the English very easily, but in the Greek it's really clear. He doesn't use the word for childbirth, like delivery. So whenever you want to say a woman bore a child or she gave birth to a child, the Greek verb is *tiktō*. It literally means "to give birth" or "to bear." But the verb that Paul uses here is *ginomai*, and it means to be begotten, to come forth of a woman.

So the emphasis here—a case can be made—is really on the conception of Jesus, of His being begotten of a woman. And that actually would be unique, because all human beings are begotten, not just of a woman, but of a man and a woman. Just think of Genesis 2...a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Or in Genesis 4...Adam knew his wife Eve, and she bore a son. She bears Cain.

So some interpreters—although this is a debated point—actually see in Paul's language here, his seemingly redundant, somewhat strange phrase "born" or "begotten of a woman," an implicit allusion to the virginal conception. So this is

one of those passages—if that’s what Paul’s saying—it would provide yet one more witness to the miraculous nature of Jesus’ coming into the world.

Because sometimes skeptics, for example, about the virginal conception will say, “Well, if Jesus was born of a virgin, why is it only mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke? Why don’t we read about it anywhere else in the New Testament?” And sometimes people will respond by saying, “Well, actually we do read about it elsewhere in the New Testament.” Paul refers to it here in Galatians 4.

Now, it’s true he doesn’t explicitly say that, just like he doesn’t explicitly give the name of Mary and he doesn’t use Mary’s name. He doesn’t explicitly talk about the virginal conception. But if Paul is describing Jesus’ being begotten of woman in this kind of unique way, it’s reasonable to conclude that he’s here alluding to the fact that when God sends His Son, He is born of a woman. He is begotten by a woman in a unique way, although obviously that’s not Paul’s emphasis here. His emphasis is on the fact that when God sends His Son, who is born of woman, He’s born under the law because He’s going to come into the world to redeem those who are under the law, so that they might receive adoption as sons.

So what does that mean—adoption as sons? Well, this is one of those concepts that is difficult for contemporary Christians to get their brains around often times, because in contemporary discourse, we frequently speak of everyone as children of God. And there is a sense in which that’s true, because everyone in the world is created by God. And just like a father plays a role in the creation of his children—he gives them life—so too God, in giving life to all things and giving life to all people, is in a certain sense, the Father of all...and all human beings are children of God.

But when Paul in a first century Jewish context, uses the language of being a son of God or child of God, that has a very distinctive meaning. It has a very distinctive connotation that’s tied up with the covenant and tied up with the nature of God. Let me kind of explain what that means...

If you look at the Old Testament, for example, Israel is not called the son of God until Exodus 4, when God makes it clear that He has chosen Israel as the people who will be brought into a covenant with Him. So the sonship there is a gift that is bestowed on Israel, precisely through the grace and the gift of the covenant. In other words, Israel and the Israelites are not sons of God by nature; they're sons of God by grace. That relationship with God which was broken through sin—through the sin of Adam and Eve at the beginning of the book of Genesis—is going to be restored through the gift of the covenant in the account of the exodus, like in Exodus 1-24. Chapter 24 is really where the covenant is there. It's an adopted sonship.

So what Paul is saying here, is that through Christ—Christ comes into the world to restore sonship to God, but it's adoptive sonship. It's not a natural sonship. It's not an eternal sonship like His eternal sonship. But because He is the Son of God from all eternity, because He is the Son who has been sent into the world, He can make others who are brought into this covenant, adoptive sons in Him. This is very important to Paul's theology of Christ as the Son of God and of the Church as the Body of Christ, so that through Christ, those who become His members—who become part of His body—also become sons in the Son...or as Paul says here: "adoption as sons." And so it says:

...because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir. (Galatians 4:6-7)

There's a lot we could say here about the whole theology of adoptive sonship. But for now, the basic point is this—I just want you to remember this—that by nature, human beings are creatures. But by grace, we're made sons of God through the Spirit of the Son that is poured out upon us in Baptism. And that's the whole context of Galatians 3-4. So we aren't children of God in the strict sense. We aren't sons in the Son until we've received the Spirit of the Son through the grace of Baptism.

In fact, even the angels are sons of God by grace. They're not sons of God by nature. There's only one natural son of the Father, and that's the eternal Son of the

Father, whom the Father sends into the world—as Paul says—to be born of a woman, so that He might bestow the gift of sonship upon the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve who have broken covenant with God through sin. So this is the great gift of Baptism. And I just want to emphasize it, because sometimes it's easy for us to overlook how great a gift Baptism is, because we say, well, “Everyone is a child of God.” And by being baptized, you become a child of God. If you think, “Well, wait, I was already a child of God. Why do I need Baptism to make me a child of God?”

Well, Baptism bestows the gift of divine sonship that was lost through sin and is restored through the coming of the Son of God, who was born of woman, born of Mary, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law. That's the upshot of Paul's passage here.

In closing, though, I'd like to bring one last point to bear. And it's namely this—on this feast of Mary's motherhood, being mother of God, the God-bearer...what is the significance of the fact that the Son of God was born of a woman? In other words, that He was born of a virgin, that He was conceived virginally? And I'd like to end with two quotes along those lines.

The first is from St. Cyril of Jerusalem. And I just want to show you how he read our passage for today. In his *Catecheses* to the catechumens in the church of Jerusalem, in the fourth century, watch how St. Cyril is reading this text. He says this:

Notice how precise the Gospel is when it says: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God, to a town of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph” (Luke 1:26-27), and so forth... Indeed, God—says Paul—sent his Son, not born of a man and a woman, but of a woman (cf. Gal 4:4) only, that is, of a virgin...²

So notice, since ancient times, the passage we read for today on Mary, the Mother of God—the feast of Mary, Mother of God—has been interpreted as Paul's

² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 12.31

reference to the virginal conception...which is the great miracle that testifies to the fact that Mary wasn't just the mother of the Messiah. She wasn't just the mother of the king of Israel. She wasn't just the mother of the new Moses. She was the mother of God. She was the mother of the divine Son, the eternal Son, who in her womb, has taken on the flesh of a man.

And it's crucial for us to emphasize that and to understand that the reason—this is so important—for the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary is to reveal the unique divine Sonship of Jesus.

I don't know if you've ever wondered about this: Why does Jesus have to be born of a virgin? Have you ever wondered that? Why couldn't He just be born of the natural union of St. Joseph and St. Mary (and the Blessed Mother)? Is there something wrong with sexual intercourse? It doesn't seem like there's something intrinsically sinful about it. If you go back to the book of Genesis, the first command that God gives to Adam and Eve is be fruitful and multiply. You have marital union being instituted by God in the garden. So if there's nothing intrinsically wrong with marital union—with marital relations, with procreation—if God commands it, then why does Jesus have to be born of a virgin?

Well, the Catechism answers that question, and I'll leave you with this thought on the feast of Mary, Mother of God. What does it say? Quoting here:

Mary's virginity manifests God's absolute initiative in the Incarnation. Jesus has only God as Father. "He was never estranged from the Father because of the human nature which he assumed... He is naturally Son of the Father as to his divinity and naturally son of his mother as to his humanity, but properly Son of the Father in both natures." (CCC 503)

That's the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 503. So notice what the *Catechism* is saying there. The virginal conception, the miracle of the virginal conception, is meant to reveal to us that the only Father Jesus has is His natural Father, the eternal Father. So just like my children receive my human nature from me as their father, so too Jesus shares the divine nature with the divine Father.

And so what the Church is revealing to us here—what She’s teaching us here—is that in terms of His divine nature, He is Son of the Father. In terms of His human nature, He’s the Son of His mother. So He’s both true God and true man. And that’s why—that mystery of the virginal conception, that mystery of His Incarnation—is why we can celebrate on this day, not only Mary as mother of the Messiah or Mary, mother of the king of Israel, but *Theotokos*, the God-bearer...Mary, the Mother of God.