

The Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God

The Octave Day of the Nativity of the Lord
(Year A, B, C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Numbers 6:22–27
<i>Response</i>	May God bless us in his mercy.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 67:2–3, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Galatians 4:4–7
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 2:16–21

Every year on January 1st, the Church celebrates a very special feast, the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God. So this year we will be looking at this feast in detail. I want to look closely at the Gospel. We are going to try to unpack the Gospel, see why the Church picks certain readings for this very special day, and then also just shed a little bit of light on the biblical background of why we, as Catholics, call Mary the Mother of God, and what exactly we're celebrating on this feast day. So we are going to begin, as usual, with the reading from the Gospel itself. Every year it's the same text that we read on this day, January 1st. It's from Luke 2:16–21, and it is the story of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, but in particular with a focus on the reaction to the message of Christ's birth that had been given by the shepherds. So let's read together from Luke 2:16–21. It says this:

And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.¹

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.

The first thing that might strike you about this particular Gospel is it seems a bit of a strange choice for the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. For example, you might expect that on the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God, we would pick the passage about the actual birth of Christ, or we might pick the Annunciation, where the angel Gabriel comes and tells Mary she's going to be the mother of the Son of the Most High; or you might even think that the Church would pick the Visitation, when Elizabeth says to Mary, "who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). So why does the Church pick this passage—Mary's reaction to the message of the shepherds? Well, there are a couple of reasons.

First, you might have noticed that at the end of the passage it says "at the end of eight days he was circumcised and given the name Jesus" (Luke 2:21). So the first reason that this passage is on this particular day, is that January 1st is the eighth day after the birth of Christ. It is the octave, so to speak, within the season of Christmas and, in fact, in earlier times, before the Second Vatican Council, January 1st was actually the Feast of the Circumcision and the Naming of Jesus. It was after Vatican II that Pope Paul VI transferred the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God—which used to be in October—to January 1st. So what you're seeing here is kind of a remnant of the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus, but also an indication of the significance of this being the eighth day. So we're celebrating her motherhood on the day that Jesus was circumcised, during the Octave of Christmas. So that is the reason this passage is chosen.

There are some other things going on here as well. You'll notice that it begins with the message of the shepherds to Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:16–18). And so if you'll go back to the Gospel of Luke 2:11, what was that message? Well, Luke said that the shepherds heard the message of the angel, who said, "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." That was the word that was given to the shepherds and then which the shepherds then gave to Mary and Joseph: that this child was a savior, that he was the Christ—the Messiah, and that he wasn't just the Christ, he was the Lord, the *kyrios*—which was one of the names for God in the Old Testament. So he is not just the Messiah, he is the divine Messiah, he is the divine Son of God, he's the Savior of the world. So the message of the shepherds is being brought to Mary and Joseph, and Mary has a very special function in this particular passage. It's one of two times in Luke's Gospel where Luke tells us what was going on interiorly within Mary. So when she hears the shepherd's words of Christ, about the child being the Christ, the Savior, the Lord, it says that she "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

Now what is interesting about that—to use a little Greek for just a second—there are two key Greek words here. First it says that Mary kept these things. The Greek word *syntērēō* literally means to “treasure up” (Luke 2:19). It is from the idea of putting money into a treasury. So she’s taking the words of the shepherd and she’s treasuring them up in her heart, she is storing them up inside of her interiorly, in her heart and in her mind. And then second, it says that she was pondering them in her heart. The Greek word here is *symbállō*, which literally means to “throw together” or to “piece together” (Luke 2:19). So it’s an interesting expression because it kind of gives the connotation of Mary tossing these things around, pondering them, ruminating on them, turning over and over and piecing together the various parts of the mystery that is being revealed to her, of who her son really is, of who this little baby in the manger really is. Which, by the way, it is interesting if you think about it because this is a reading from the Gospel of Luke. Where would Luke have gotten information about what the Virgin Mary pondered in her heart? This is the kind of thing that suggests to some scholars that Luke’s infancy account is actually based on the testimony of Mary herself, that it goes back to eyewitness testimony to the event—which Luke tells you at the beginning of the Gospel in Luke 1:1–4: he says this Gospel is based on the testimony of “eyewitnesses from the beginning” (Luke 1:2). Well who was the eyewitness from the beginning par excellence? It was Mary. And you might say, “well, that seems a little far-fetched,” but it’s important remember that in the Book of Acts 18 and 19, we know that Luke, who was the companion of Paul, spent three years in the city of Ephesus—between 54 and 57 AD—which is where the Blessed Virgin Mary went to live after the death and resurrection of Christ. We know that from the ancient Church Fathers, from history outside the New Testament. Anyway, just a side note there.

What is important though is that on the feast of Mary, Mother of God, we kind of get a window into Mary’s soul, a window into Mary’s heart, and a window into her mind, as she’s pondering, reflecting and tossing about this great mystery of the birth of her son, the birth of the Christ child, the birth of the Savior.

And after the shepherds returned, they glorify God for all that they had heard and seen. And then it says that on the day Jesus was circumcised, on this eighth day, it wasn’t just the day he was circumcised, it was the day that they gave him the name, the name Jesus. In ancient Judaism, again, you didn’t name the child before they were born, you didn’t do a reveal on Facebook, a gender reveal or a name reveal, you would wait. The child would not have the formal name until it was given to them at their circumcision on the eighth day after birth. So that’s what happening here, and there they gave him the name Jesus when he is circumcised.

That's very important too because the name Jesus goes back to the Hebrew name Joshua or *Yehoshua* or *Yeshua*—you can get different forms of it—and that Hebrew name *Yeshua* means, “the Lord saves” (cf. Mt 1:21). So it's a revelation of the giving of the name of Jesus and it is also the revelation of his identity and his mission. Who is he? He is the Lord. What has he come to do? He has come to save, he's the Savior of the world. And that's the mystery that Mary is pondering as the mother of the Savior, as the mother of the Christ, as the mother of the Lord. So that's the Gospel in a nutshell.

If you go back now to the Old Testament reading for the day, it's a little trickier to try to discern the exact reasoning here. The Old Testament reading for this day is from Numbers 6:22–27 and this passage is a very famous passage in Jewish tradition. It's the traditional high priestly blessing. It is a very common blessing in Jewish circles. You would take these words and use them to bless others, so this is what the passage says:

The LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron and his sons, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you: The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

Two things here. First, it is, I think, not a coincidence that the new year—because this feast always falls on January 1st—opens with a blessing. It opens with the blessing of the people of God. So the very first reading for the beginning of the new year is that the Lord would bless his people. But there is another connection here that I think links it with the New Testament, which is that focus on the name. Through the blessing, he puts his name upon the people of Israel. Well as we saw in the Gospel, the eighth day was the day on which Jesus was named. He was given the name *Yeshua*, he was given the name Jesus which means “the Lord saves” (cf. Mt 1:21). So the connection here is that in the Old Testament the name of the Lord comes upon the people, in a kind of spiritual way, when he's blessing them, and in the New Testament on the eighth day, on the octave, on the day of Jesus' circumcision, the name of the Lord doesn't just come on the people in the form of a blessing, the name of the Lord comes to the people in person. He is the blessing of God incarnate. He is the name of God made flesh. He is the word made flesh, and that is what we are celebrating on this very special day.

The Psalm here, as usual, acts as a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The responsorial Psalm for this day is Psalm 67, and the theme of the Psalm is “May God bless us in his mercy.” So it is a prayer for God to bless his people, and it begins:

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us, [Selah]
that thy way may be known upon earth,
thy saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise thee, O God;
let all the peoples praise thee!
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for thou dost judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth. [Selah]
Let the peoples praise thee, O God;
let all the peoples praise thee!
The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
God has blessed us;
let all the ends of the earth fear him!

In its Old Testament context, what does that mean? The expression “may the Lord bless us and make his face shine upon us” (Ps 67:1) is a metaphor for God being gracious toward us, looking toward us and willing the good for us, giving his blessing. But when we look at the New Testament, when we read that psalm through the eyes of the New Testament fulfillment, we see that God, again, has not just given us his name through a spiritual blessing, and he has not just made his face shine upon us through looking kindly toward us, he has made his face shine upon us in the incarnation, by actually taking human flesh and having a human face, so that he looks upon humanity with a human face in the face of the Christ child. Which, you can only imagine, would be exactly what Mary would be contemplating and pondering in her heart. What mother doesn’t gaze upon the face of their newborn child? It is a very natural thing to just sit there and look at the face of your newborn child, to take in the mystery of that person. Well that’s what’s being commemorated here. The prayer in this psalm is being answered in a way that far surpasses anything even the people in the Old Testament could’ve hoped for or dream for, that God has made his face shine upon us in the face of the Christ child.

And then finally, because this is a solemnity, the second reading, the reading from St. Paul, is thematically chosen. It goes with the theme of the day, and in this case it is a very special text from Galatians 4:4–7. This is Paul’s sole mention of the Virgin Mary. Paul never talks about Mary, never names Mary in person, but he does mention her as mother on one key occasion, and that is in Galatians 4 when he writes these words. It 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.

So you’ll see there a very fleeting reference to Mary, but it is important. “God sent forth his Son, born of woman” (Gal 4:4). If you look at that verse you will see right there, the mystery both of Jesus’ divinity and of his humanity. On the one hand, Jesus is the eternal Son of God sent by God from heaven to come and take on a mortal human nature, human flesh; but at the same time, because he is born of woman, he really is also the son of man. He’s the son of woman, and not just any woman, he is the son of Mary. That truth was actually the truth of the fullness of the incarnation, that the Jesus is fully human and fully divine. That he is the eternal Son of the Father and he is truly the son of Mary. Those truths together were what had to be fought over in the early centuries the Church, which ultimately led to the Church having a Council, called the Council of Ephesus. At the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Church defined and confessed the truth that Mary is not just “mother of the Christ,” as some people were saying—who were denying the fullness of Jesus’ humanity or denying that Mary could be the mother of the Son, of the divine Son of God. The Church says no. Mary is not just the mother of the Messiah, she is the Mother of God. And so at the Council of Ephesus, the Church defined that term and called Mary, *Theotokos*. It is tricky to translate in English. *Theos*—we get the word Theology—means God and *tokos*—from the Greek word *tiktó*—means “to bear” or “to give birth.” So literally you can translate this term as the “God-bearer,” Mary is the God-bearer, or as we usually translate it in English, she’s the Mother of God. In that way, by calling Mary the Mother of God, the Church safeguarded the fact that Christ was divine from the moment of his conception. In other words, he wasn’t made divine when he was resurrected, he wasn’t made divine when he ascended, he wasn’t made divine when he was adopted. He was God from his conception and he was born fully human and fully

divine. That's what we are celebrating on this great feast of Mary, the Mother of God.

You'll see this in the Gospels—it's important to point out—because sometimes there will be Christians who object to calling Mary the Mother of God. I have met a number of non-Catholic Christians in my life who say you should not call Mary the Mother of God, and they will give different reasons for it. Sometimes people think that when Catholics call Mary Mother of God, they think that we are saying that she's greater than God, or that she is somehow divine. We are not saying that. Mary is a creature and calling her Mother of God is certainly not in any way saying that she's greater than God. Other Christians will say that when we say Mary is the Mother of God, we mean she's the mother of the Trinity, or that we are implying that she's the mother of the Trinity, which would make her, in a sense, pre-existent to God himself. That is not what we are saying either. The Church has never said that Mary is the mother of the Father. The Church never said that Mary is the mother of the Holy Spirit. Mary is only the mother of the second person of the Trinity and that second person of the Trinity is the Son of God and that Son of God became fully man in the incarnation. So that when Mary bore Christ, she didn't just become the mother of his body, she became the mother of a person, and that person is a divine person, the eternal Son of the Father.

So the *Catechism* actually gives two points in favor of this that we might reflect on in closing. First, when we use the language of “Mother of God,” it's actually coming from Scripture, it is rooted in Scripture, because in Luke 1:43—as I already mentioned—inspired by the Holy Spirit, when Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, she calls her “mother of my Lord.” And the Greek word there *Kyrios*, in the Old Testament over 1000 times, is used to refer to God. And in the Gospel of Luke you can make a very strong case that again the word *Kyrios* here is specifically referencing the Lord of Israel, the Lord of the universe, who has now become man. So when we call Mary, Mother of God, we're in a sense taking the language of Elizabeth and just adapting it slightly to make clear that it is the God of the universe who has become man in Christ. The other thing is that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes this clear in paragraph 495. It says that when we confess Mary as Mother of God, what we are saying is this, that Mary is the mother of the “eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity” and that that second person of the Trinity is “truly her Son according to the flesh.”² So he is fully human and fully divine. And as you will see, if you study the teachings about

² Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed.; Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 125.

Mary in the Church and feast days like this, they always function this way. Anytime the Church says something about Mary, the reason she says it about Mary is in order to shed light on some truth about Christ or to protect some truth about Christ that is in danger of being distorted. And in this case the danger was that some Christians were denying the fullness of Jesus' humanity and the fullness of his divinity, and so the Church confesses Mary as Mother of God in order to safeguard the mystery of the incarnation. And that is what we are really celebrating on the day of Mary, the Holy Mother of God.