DECEMBER 8, 2016

READINGS: GENESIS 3: 9-15, 20; EPHESIANS 1:3-6, 11-12; LUKE 1:26-38

Deep underground a non-descript looking convent on an ancient street known as the Via Salaria, a building easy to mistakenly pass by, lies a hidden treasure. And yet the Catacombs of Priscilla are mentioned in all of the most ancient documents on Christian topography and liturgy in Rome. This noblewoman, a benefactor of the Christian community in Rome, granted the Church use of this property as an underground burial site for Christians. Most pilgrims and tourists visit other, much more famous catacombs. But this one is special because it contains a fresco believed by scholars to be the most ancient image of Mary and Jesus still in existence.

Like the others, it was sealed up to prevent thieves from stealing, but was also one of the first to be rediscovered in the sixteenth-century. In that space is preserved an image of the Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus on her knee; a prophet stands next to her, holding a scroll in his left hand, and pointing to a star with his right. This may refer to the prophecy of Balaam, “A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a scepter shall spring up from Israel” (Numbers 24, 15-17).

The presence of the prophet indicates that the Child is the Messiah awaited for many ages. This image dates from the early 3rd century, and you may see a photo of it after Mass on the Communion Rail or at the cross aisle. The image is even reproduced in some of the larger bound versions of the Catechism. The image is truly a treasure, even if it has deteriorated over the many centuries.

On December 8, 1854, in the presence of more than 200 Cardinals and bishops, Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of faith that we call the Immaculate Conception.
The pope himself said expressly that, from his earliest years, he had a special devotion to the Virgin. Well, as our ancient Catholic tradition attests, he was not alone.

The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception traces itself back to the very beginning of Mary’s life. Mary was preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception through the prevenient grace of God. She did not merit this; she could not merit this. Through the singular privilege of the Immaculate Conception, Mary was enveloped from the beginning of her life in the redemptive and saving love of God, just as she envelops Jesus lovingly in her arms in the 1700 year-old wall painting just referenced.

An early Church writer beautifully captured this sense in which Mary remains relevant for all times and for all peoples:

What came about in bodily form in Mary, the fullness of the godhead shining through Christ in the Blessed Virgin, takes place in a similar way in every soul that has been made pure. The Lord does not come in bodily form, for 'we no longer know Christ according to the flesh,' but He dwells in us spiritually and the Father takes up His abode with Him, the Gospel tells us. In this way the child Jesus is born in each of us. ¹

What a marvelous thought—that in a real sense Jesus is also born in us, we believers who seek to live our lives like Mary did. Quite rightly, the Church sees Mary as the new Eve. Like Eve, Mary was created full of grace. But unlike Eve, Mary remained obedient to God, just as Christ, unlike Adam, remained obedient to God. In cooperation with God, Mary became Mother of the Redeemer and, in cooperation with Christ, she became Mother of the redeemed.

God had planned a merciful remedy to this problem of sin, one that would provide for the regeneration of humanity. The Blessed Mother was an integral part of this plan.

The portion of Genesis read today is called the “Protoevangelium,” namely the first hint that God will send Christ, born of a virgin, to crush Satan and end his reign of sin. The Church Fathers saw in these verses a first hint that God would send His Son, the child of a virgin, to do battle with Satan and defeat him.

The Immaculate Conception signals that God surrounded Mary’s life with redemptive love; he envelops her with love. We begin our lives from the starting point that the beginning of life is important, not superfluous. Our lives do not gain dignity and meaning depending on how we lead our lives; they have it from the beginning, even despite our own original sin. The Immaculate Conception, in fact, is the ultimate celebration of pro-life, but one that comes with a cost.

Today we celebrate the arrival of God’s grace in the person of the mother of our Savior. In so doing, God has surrounded all of humanity with loving fidelity. The gift given to Mary is a gift whose effects are of benefit to all of us. God is faithful. Having given us the beginning; he will bring it to its end. We cannot escape from His fidelity; it has enveloped us. Indeed, our souls proclaim the greatness of God.