

“The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!” These words from the Book of Numbers stood out as I reflected on today’s readings. It is both theologically suspect and humanly inconsistent to attribute human qualities to inanimate objects or human constructs. Nevertheless, I’ll go out on a limb to say that 2020 has not been kind to us and despite its catchy ring, few will be sad to have seen its exit. What ought we do?

It is Cistercian abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153 A.D.), to whom we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude for his reflections on the role of Mary in salvation history. It is safe to say that in the 12th century, he dominated the field of Marian thought, and wrote about her so uniquely that the poet Dante entrusted to him the prayer of praise to Mary found in his *Divine Comedy*. He entrusted his monastery to Mary’s protection.

Bernard was wise. Popes and princes alike turned to him for counsel and we should follow their lead. At the end of a very tough year, the Blessed Mother can teach us valuable lessons about trust and yes, even suffering. Recall, in Luke’s Gospel, Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph, saying, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”¹

In one work Bernard commented on the sword of sorrow that pierced Mary, indicating a type of martyrdom of the soul. He noted: “How could the hearing of these words not pierce your most affectionate soul, when the mere recollection of them breaks our hearts, though they be made of stone or iron?”² Yet, he does not merely note this. The saint also in his reflections reminds us of the recourse we ought to have for her.

¹ Cf. Gospel of St. Luke, 2:34b-35

² St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo infra Octavam Assumptionis* 14-15

We are reminded in difficult times to go to Mary because she above all understands. “In danger, in distress, in uncertainty”, he says, “think of Mary, call upon Mary. She never leaves your lips, she never departs from your heart; and so that you may obtain the help of her prayers, never forget the example of her life. If you follow her, you cannot falter; if you pray to her, you cannot despair; if you think of her, you cannot err.”³

I cannot think of a more appropriate time in which to call upon our Blessed Mother than right now. She understands the sword of sorrow; she understands the pain and isolation so many of our parishioners feel as they await the day when they will be able to return to church. Our disappointments in the year just passed must give way to a vision for the future in which our restless hearts find fulfillment in the Lord.

Invoking Mary as Mother of God, naturally flows from acknowledging the divine sonship of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, a divine person with a human and divine nature. She is mother of Jesus, but her motherhood is more than a physical one. As a theologian of last century wrote, her motherhood was “a free, personal act of her faith, within the context of sacred history.”⁴

She is equally our mother, the one to whom we turn for comfort when all seems lost. We trust her because when the angel came to her, she answers simply and unreservedly “Be it done to me according to thy will.” And what was God’s will, but that she would give birth to our King. As we heard beautifully sing in the Introit, “*Salve sancta Parens...*” The words of a 5th century Latin poet have found their place in the sacred liturgy. “Hail holy Mother, the Child-Bearer who has brought forth the King, the ruler of heaven and earth forever.”⁵ This is what gives us hope; this is the cause of our joy.

³ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Homily II *Super Missus est*, 17 quoted in Pope Benedict XVI General Audience 21 October 2009

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Mary: Mother of the Lord*, p. 63 (Anthony Clarke, Wheathampstead | Hertfordshire, 1963)

⁵ “*Salve sancta Parens, enixa puérpera Regem, qui cælum terrámque regit in sæcula sæculórum.*”

Sedulius' text, opening lines:

Salve, sancta parens, enixa puerpera regem,

Qui caelum terramque tenet per saecula,

Hail, O holy mother; a woman has given birth to the King

Who holds heaven and earth through the ages

Few people desire to look back at the year past; we all want to look ahead. The year 2020 has been challenging for all; judged from a strictly worldly perspective, it was a horrible year. But if we ask ourselves whether **we have remained faithful** then we can judge the year to be more blessed. The Church rightly esteems history and remembers the past. Yet, she still focuses more attention on the future than on the past. Above all, we entrust the passage of time to the providence of God and His will for us.

One time-tested way to pursue holiness is through self-denial. This is a dangerous word for a world captivated by gratification, but I cannot think of a more effective way to holiness. St. Paul teaches in today's epistle that we are not slaves, but sons, and if sons, then heirs. Slaves to what?

New Year's is the perfect time for some resolutions, not only spiritually related ones, as important as those are. At times we have become slaves to our appetites. Today gives us pause to consider how we might address this in a healthy way. Our physical health affects our spiritual life.

When we live temperately in God's eyes, we are much happier, healthier and better able to manifest to others the joy of the Gospel. Do not be afraid to look into your own heart and see what changes or adjustments might be of benefit, not only to you, but to your family.

May the Year of our Lord 2021 be one of immense blessing to you, a year of grace and consolation from the Lord. Now is the acceptable time to once again commend our lives to the intercession of the Holy Mother, she who is spiritual mother of all of our homes. The light has overcome the darkness in our world. A child is born, a Savior given to us. Let us remain always grateful and joyful in that saving knowledge.