

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God  
January 1, 2023

*Blessed is the virgin whose womb is worthy*

Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5; Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; Matt. 1:18-25

It is so good to be together as we begin the new year in prayer and worship, closing out the Christmas Octave with this beautiful solemnity. Harkening back to Midnight Mass, there is an ancient liturgical text that has profoundly touched me, one that is most appropriate both for Christmas Eve as well as the close of the Octave in today's solemnity.

O magnum mysterium  
et admirabile sacramentum  
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum<sup>1</sup>  
iacentem in praesepe!  
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera  
meruerunt portare  
Dominum Christum. Alleluia!

O great mystery,  
and wonderful sacrament,  
that animals should see the newborn Lord,  
lying in a manger!  
Blessed is the virgin whose womb  
was worthy to bear  
the Lord, Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

During mediaeval times, this text was incorporated into the Divine Office as the fourth of the nine Responsories for Matins on Christmas. Matins was an extended vigil of prayer beginning around midnight, though even its origin is mired in mystery.<sup>2</sup> In Matins, this responsory was appropriately followed by the opening words of the Hail Mary...

In the choral version that you will hear later at the conclusion of Holy Communion, those words are absent. Instead, the Blessed Virgin Mary is given special attention by means of a single note, the only accidental in the score. It is assigned to the altos halfway through the score at the phrase "beata Virgo." The composer said that hauntingly beautiful half-note symbolizes Mary's suffering, she who bore the Redeemer of the world and who later suffers the seven sorrows. In musical parlance, this technique is known as suspension, a moment of dissonance that resolves quickly. Mary's sorrow is never the last word.

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<sup>1</sup> "nascor, nasci, natus" ("to be born") Thus, here, natus is deponent in form, but it also is interestingly intransitive and passive in its meaning (i.e., it does not mean "bear" but rather "to be born").

<sup>2</sup> One source maintains it dates to the liturgical reforms of Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century or less possibly the Carolingian reforms of the eighth-ninth centuries.

It is fitting that this antiphon invokes both our newborn Savior and his mother. How can we think of one absent the other, especially at Christmas? The divine Light appearing under the cover of dark and cold rises like the morning sun, its rays dispelling the chill, giving us hope.

The entire Christmas season is a celebration that the light of Christ has come to dispel the darkness of sin and death. Our Savior was brought into this world through blessed Virgin Mary. While some Marian dogmas are theologically more challenging to comprehend than others, invoking Mary under the title of “Mother of God” is not among them.

Encompassed by the grace of God which marked her out in advance to be the mother of the redeemer, today’s solemnity adds a piece to the puzzle, one that is deeper even than a title. As the Church grew in her understanding of Jesus Christ—that he is one divine person possessing both a human and divine nature— it flowed naturally that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was at the same time mother of God.

Our celebration today is not merely about a physical occurrence. More directly, it concerns a relationship with Jesus and with us.<sup>3</sup> Mary is mother and nurturer, possessing a closeness unmatched by any other.

By means of her “Yes” the Word was made flesh. By a singular grace, God chose her to be the mother of our redeemer. Mary thus appears as a figure in sacred history who fulfilled a unique and indispensable role by the consent of her free will. Always and unreservedly, she said yes to God by her free and personal act of faith.

As we embark upon a new year, Mary stands as a beacon of hope to us, so that we too will offer a resounding “Yes” to doing the Lord’s will. In truth, we have no idea what is in store for us in 2023.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord*: (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), page 55-56

What joys await us, what life moments to treasure. But equally, what sorrows may be in store this year? What will God ask of us in 2023? But we do know that if we display a trusting faith like hers, God will sustain us through all the changes of our lives.

As St. Ambrose wrote so many centuries ago: “Let Mary’s soul be in each of you to proclaim the greatness of the Lord. Let her spirit be in each to rejoice in the Lord. Christ has only one mother in the flesh, but we all bring forth Christ in faith.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From a commentary on Luke by Saint Ambrose, bishop (Lib 2, 19.22-23, 26-27: CCL 14, 39-42)