

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God

I. Introduction

A. Every Christmas night, long after gifts were exchanged and the dishes were washed, mom and dad would gather us together to look at old family photographs – some neatly stowed in albums, others waiting patiently to be put in an album. Those photos always brought back memories, along with laughter and tears. They brought to mind treasured remembrances of persons and events near and dear to our hearts.

B. In the Gospel, we read once again of that wondrous night when Mary gave birth to Jesus, our Savior. There were no smart phones with cameras to capture Mary’s loving smile and her tears of joy. No lens caught the tenderness and concern of St. Joseph for Mary and Jesus. There were no videos of the shepherds keeping watch or the angels singing. Indeed, there was no need for a camera. For the Lord’s birth and all the mysterious events surrounding it impressed themselves deeply in Mary’s heart. The Gospel tells us that “Mary treasured all of these things in her heart.”

II. Mary’s Living Memory

A. More than once, when describing events in the life of Jesus, the Gospels observe that “Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” But what does that phrase really mean? Does it simply mean that Mary enjoyed thinking about the past? Does it mean that Mary ruminated about the past?

B. Dear friends, this phrase means much more! Naturally, Mary’s heart cherished memories of the beautiful face of her Son, the loving concern of Joseph, and the amazement of the shepherds. Yet there was much more going on in the depths of Mary’s being. Her heart was unblemished by sin and was completely attuned to God’s plan. In fact, her heart was so filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, that the saving events in the life of Christ remained alive, real, and active in her. As Pope Benedict XVI said of Mary, “Her humble and simple heart was ever pondering the

mystery of Jesus in whom she adored the presence of God and his redeeming love” (Angelus, June 10, 2007).

III. The Church’s Living Memory

A. The Church is modeled on the Blessed Virgin Mary. Like Mary, the Church has a heart and a soul in which she treasures the living presence of Jesus and all that He did to save us. Filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Church doesn’t merely recall what Jesus said and did to save us; rather, whenever we gather to hear God’s Word and to celebrate the Sacraments, we tap into the Church’s living memory in such a way that we can actually encounter Christ and share in all He said and did to save us.

B. So, when the Church celebrates the Eucharist ‘in memory of Jesus’, she is not simply recalling what happened at the Last Supper and on Calvary. Rather, the Church remembers and proclaims those events – and as she does so – those events become present & real – available and real to us in our times (CCC 1362 ff.). We might say that, in the Mass, we become actors in the unfolding drama of our salvation: we become living witnesses to the birth of Jesus; we become the audience to whom He preaches and the subjects of His miracles; we find ourselves standing beneath the Cross and peering into the empty tomb with a reality and a joy that words and memories alone cannot capture. This is why the II Vatican Council calls the Eucharist “the source and summit of the Christian life” – for it makes all Christ has done to save us present, real, and alive – for you and me.

IV. Our Memory

A. What, then, do Mary’s memory & the Church’s memory have to do with our memory? How does the pure heart of Mary pondering Jesus touch our heart? How does the Church’s living memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection affect what is in my heart and yours, in my memory and yours?

B. To answer this question, let me tell you a little bit about my own memory, and then let’s see if this resonates with your experience. I sometimes think my memory is a lot like an Amazon distribution center. It is filled with all kinds of things – some are

beautiful and valuable; others useful; still others are enriching and good-natured; and some, alas, are cheap and tawdry. All day long I am producing things from my storehouse of memories. Sometimes I am surprised by the nobility and goodness of what comes forth but at other times I'm disappointed by the poor quality of what comes from my heart.

C. Now, imagine if you or I had to clean out a huge warehouse singlehandedly of everything that was of poor quality—we couldn't do it by ourselves, could we? For one thing, we'd have a hard time judging what to keep and what to throw away. For another, we'd be overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. Well, our hearts are a lot like that warehouse - there's an awful lot in them - we'd like to clean them out, especially as this New Year begins, but we don't know where to begin ... or do we?

D. ... It seems to me that the right place to begin is Mary's pure and sinless heart which became in turn the model or the exemplar of the Church's heart - filled with the light of the Holy Spirit and alive with the Presence of Jesus. We take part in Holy Mass; we listen to God's Word; we go to Confession, we seek to be an active part of the Church - we do these things because our faith teaches us that the Mass and Sacraments are the means by which our hearts, our memories - like that of Mary and the Church - are filled with the Holy Spirit & it is the Spirit who purifies our hearts so that they come to resemble Christ's heart. Listen again to the words of St. Paul addressed to the Galatians: "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" This is how our hearts are filled with the living presence and goodness of Christ. And we know that the task of clearing out our own hearts is so monumental that we dare not go it alone but rather join together in helping one another as fellow disciples with Mary, seeking to open our hearts to Christ every day. As we pray and work together in the Church, our hearts are indeed changed, and there comes forth words, deeds, decisions, a demeanor that speak of Christ—that speak of the peace, humility, goodness, and charity of the Beatitudes.

V. Conclusion: O Jesus, Living in Mary

There is a beautiful old prayer that captures what I am trying to say, a prayer composed by Fr. Jean Jacques Olier, the founder of the Sulpicians, a religious society that runs St. Mary's Seminary here in Baltimore, and the prayer goes like this:

“O Jesus, living in Mary, come and live in [us] your servants; in the spirit of your holiness, in the fullness of your power; in the perfection of your ways; in the truth of your virtues; in the communion of your mysteries. Overcome every hostile power in your Spirit, for the glory of the Father. Amen.”

May you and your loved ones have a truly blessed New Year! God bless you and keep you in his love!