

Mary, Mother of God
January 1, 2024

A MATERIAL CELEBRATION

We continue to journey through the Christmas season. A week ago was Christmas Day. Yesterday was the celebration of the Holy Family and today we celebrate the octave, the eighth day of Christmas which is the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.

So often we hear criticism about a material celebration of Christmas but it has been noted that Christmas by its very nature *is* a material celebration. The human person is soul and body. A body without a soul is a corpse and a soul without a body is a spirit. Christmas celebrates God becoming material in the person of Jesus. In the great mystery of the Incarnation, the invisible one becomes visible. In the person of Jesus, God takes on a human, a material body.

But there's an important distinction to make between what is material and what is materialistic. Materialism looks *only* at the material. It elevates the material so much that it neglects the spiritual. Materialism becomes a body without a soul. It concentrates only on the exterior, not the interior, and in extreme circumstances, it becomes an idol. People may rightly criticize materialistic celebrations of Christmas that ignore the spiritual, ignore the true meaning of Christmas but that true meaning also involves not the materialistic but the material. It's not wrong to have decorations, gifts or celebrations unless they become ends in themselves separated from the spiritual.

The Christmas season is a celebration of body and soul. There's an old Christmas song from Spain that says, *Although he was infinite he became finite*. The divine and the human come together in the person of Jesus, and this comes about through Mary. Mary literally gave life to God's plan. She received Jesus into her heart before receiving him into her body. The divine life of the Second Person of the Trinity received human life through Mary.

Mary's title, Mother of God, is very important most of all, because of what it says about Jesus. There's not a human Jesus over here and a divine Jesus over there. There's one Jesus, one Christ, truly God and truly human. To refer to Mary as

Mother of God, doesn't mean that Mary existed before God the way our mothers existed before us, but rather because the one Jesus is truly God as well as human, Jesus is truly God. There is one Jesus and hence Mary can be called Mother of God.

Mary didn't give birth to an idea but to a baby, someone both material and spiritual. Mary not only gave Jesus a human life, she gave him something else—the ability to die, which in turn would allow him to rise from the dead. To speak of Mary as Mother of God preserves both the humanity and the divinity of the one Christ.

Christianity is a historical religion. It exists because something happened. Christianity is also both material and spiritual. We even call it sacramental. In Jesus God entered into our world in a real, physical, material way. While we reject materialism that ignores the spiritual, we embrace the material as a means to the spiritual. Or as one of our Christmas prayers puts it, *So that as we recognize in him God made visible, we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible.* Jesus is the immaterial made visible and Mary allows that visibility to be.

Since 1968 this day has also been World Day of Prayer for Peace. Despite being the Prince of Peace, the life of Jesus was marked by violence, it was framed by violence. As a child, he and his family had to flee violence and Jesus died a violent death. If Jesus life is marked by violence, so too is the life of Mary.

Here in the Eucharist, we embrace what is material, bread and wine and it becomes spiritualized into the Body and Blood of Christ. Through the material, we encounter the one who is spiritual, the one who is eternal. This coming year, inspired by the example of Mary, Mother of God and assisted by her prayers, with lives of intentional faith, may we reject the empty lure of materialism while embracing the possibility of the material. May each of us bear more faithful witness to her Son, the Word made flesh and the Prince of Peace.