

## Birthing and Mothering a New Year & a New World

**Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God & World Day of Peace – Year B** Jan 1, 2021

**Readings:** Num 6:22-27; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 2:15-21

*“God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (Gal 4:4-5)*

Prologue: At the start of this most unusual ‘Pandemic New Year 2021’ we could reflect on the theme ‘birthing and mothering’ with Mary as our model. Mary’s conceiving, birthing and mothering can be seen in three dimensions: (a) of God’s Son, Jesus; (b) of Christ’s Mystical Body, the Church; and, (c) of a New Creation or a New World.

### **Three Signposts from Scripture:**

**1. Mary, Mother of God-man, Jesus:** The Book of Numbers records historical narratives and divine directives of the Exodus from slavery to freedom, when God’s people were led to a deeper awareness that God was accompanying them and taking care of them in wondrous ways. Today’s first reading—which is very apt at the dawn of the New Year—has the words of a blessing that Yahweh tells Moses to impart to Aaron and his kinsfolk. This Aaronic blessing is a remarkable Old Testament anticipation of the Church’s Trinitarian faith (see threefold ‘Holy’ of Isa 6:3). The last line of the blessing is significant: “So shall they put *my name* upon the people of Israel and I will *bless them*.” Name, in the Biblical tradition – whether of God or of a human being – is very important. The name of God signifies God’s Being and all that God has done in salvation history. Thus, to bless in God’s name is to publicly profess that God *Is* and God *Acts* on behalf of God’s people. Thus, in the very act of blessing, God’s name is relayed from one generation to the next, so to say. While God is formless and nameless in the First Testament, God assumes flesh in the Second Testament and “was called Jesus” (Lk 2:21), as we hear in today’s gospel passage. Early in the Christian tradition, Church Father Origen (approx. 185–254 A.D.) gave Mary the title *Theotokos* (Greek, literally, ‘God-bearer’) that was upheld by the Council of Ephesus (431). Thus, we see Scripture and Church Tradition upholding the belief that being the mother of Jesus, Mary is also venerated as the Mother of God.

**2. Mary, Mother of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church:** Just as Mary consents to be the Mother of Jesus/God through the working of the Holy Spirit, so does she conceive of the new Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. After Jesus’ resurrection and at the Pentecost, Mary is present with Jesus’ apostles in the upper room “constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women” (Acts 2:13-14)—all awaiting the birth of a new community: The Church. Paul mentions succinctly in the second reading: “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (v.4). He adds, “because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘*Abba!* Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child” (v.7). We can think of the Church as God’s Family anointed in the Spirit with Mary as our Mother (see *Lumen Gentium* of VC II, esp. chapter VIII, nn.52-54). She who bore God’s Son in the flesh, now mothers and cares for the Church, the Mystical Body of Her Son, Jesus.

**3. Mary, Mother of a New Creation and New World:** Beyond the confines of the Church, Mary is also seen as the Mother of a New Creation: The New Eve. At the Fall of humankind, which is a result of the ego, pride and disobedience of Adam and Eve, the serpent is cursed with the words: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15). In his *Against Heresies* (5.21.1) Irenaeus of Lyons, followed by several other Fathers of the Church, interpreted the verse as referring to Christ, who is the New Adam (see Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22) and Mary, the New Eve. One could highlight the universality of the Good News of the birth of Christ by pointing out to a couple of details in today’s readings: (a) The giving of the name ‘Jesus’—which literally means ‘Yahweh saves’—could be interpreted as the salvation which Jesus offers to the whole world; and (b) The shepherds being the very first visitors to the crib of Christ indicates that God manifests Godself and is encountered not at the so-called ‘centres’ of temple or palace but at the margins of the manger among simple folk who become the first evangelists. As for Mary, she “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (v.19). Mary is ever the mother of faith, quietly reflecting upon her role in salvation history, while generously responding to God despite the uncertainty and often times, darkness.

### **Three Texts from the Popes:**

- In his 1854 Apostolic Constitution ‘*Ineffabilis Deus*’, promulgating the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, **Pope Pius IX** wrote: “*Let all the children of the Catholic Church ... continue to venerate, invoke and pray to the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, conceived without original sin. Let them fly with utter confidence to this most sweet Mother of mercy and grace in all dangers, difficulties, needs, doubts and fears. ... while bearing toward us a truly motherly affection and having in her care the work of our salvation, she is solicitous about the whole human race.*”
- In his 1974 Apostolic Exhortation entitled ‘*Marialis Cultus*’ **Pope Paul VI** wrote: “*In the revised ordering of the Christmas period it seems to us that the attention of all should be directed towards the restored Solemnity of Mary the holy Mother of God. This celebration, placed on January 1, is meant to commemorate the part played by Mary in this mystery of salvation. It is meant also to exalt the singular dignity which this mystery brings to the “holy Mother...through whom we were found worthy to receive the Author of life.” It is likewise a fitting occasion for renewing adoration of the newborn Prince of Peace, for listening once more to the glad tidings of the angels (cf. Lk. 2:14), and for imploring from God, through the Queen of Peace, the supreme gift of peace. It is for this reason that, in the happy concurrence of the Octave of Christmas and the first day of the year, we have instituted the World Day of Peace.*”
- In his Message for the 54<sup>th</sup> World Day of Peace, January 1, 2021, **Pope Francis** writes: “*At a time like this, when the barque of humanity, tossed by the storm of the current crisis [Covid-19], struggles to advance towards a calmer and more serene horizon, the ‘rudder’ of human dignity and the ‘compass’ of fundamental social principles can enable us together to steer a sure course. As Christians, we should always look to Our Lady, Star of the Sea and Mother of Hope. May we work together to advance towards a new horizon of love and peace, of fraternity and solidarity, of mutual support and acceptance. May we never yield to the temptation to disregard others, especially those in greatest need, and to look the other way; instead, may we strive daily, in concrete and practical ways, to form a community composed of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another.*”

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