

The Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Friday, December 8, 2023
The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square
by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:3–6).

If you walked through the central doors of the church on Forty-sixth Street just now, you passed a statue of the Mary, Queen of Heaven, holding the Child Jesus. She wears a crown because she was destined to bear that Child. Above the statue, in the arched space just above the doors, there is another image of Mary, again with her Infant Son. He is receiving the worship of the Magi. Underneath that image there is a row of ten figures, ancient Israel's patriarchs, prophets, and kings. And as you entered the church, you might have noticed that those doors have brought you to an aisle which leads to the High Altar, where Mary's Son, our crucified and risen Lord, will soon be made present for us, not through our own power or skill, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, just as he has been made present to us and to our forebears thousands upon thousands of times, ever since the first Eucharist was celebrated in this building on December 8, 1895.

And so the designers of this building are saying that Mary's story—Mary who is the Second Eve, Isaiah's Young Maiden, *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer, the Mother of God—that *her* story is inextricably woven into the story of her Son, the sacred story of the Scriptures, that beautiful, sad and hopeful story of God's passionate love for us and for the whole Creation; that story

that insists on reminding us that God has embedded in us the fire of his beauty, holiness, and goodness. “God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image according to our likeness...and God blessed them’” (Genesis 1:26a, 28a).

Many Christians have made poetry, art, and ritual out of the belief that Mary is special. Go to the Met and look at the paintings of Mary. Listen to the music and sing the hymns. Read the poetry and pray the litany: “Virgin most merciful, Virgin most faithful, Mirror of Justice, Seat of Wisdom, Mystical Rose, House of Gold, Ark of the Covenant. Read the newspapers: Four days from now in Mexico thousands upon thousands will honor the Virgin Mother of God by trying to get close to her image, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, so they can pray for themselves, their people, their nation, for those in need, and for those they love.

Mary is undeniably special.

The late Herbert McCabe, a British Dominican, once wrote, “What we celebrate on the 8th of December is not, of course, a feast of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception; we do not have feasts of doctrines, we celebrate the gift of God where it is to be found, in people. On this feast we celebrate Mary as conceived without sin . . . It is part of the Catholic faith that Mary was conceived without stain of original sin. The first thing to say about this is that it is not a teaching about the mechanics of Mary’s generation; it is not about a process that went on in the womb of her mother. It says that she was and is *radically* holy” (“The Immaculate Conception,” in *God Matters* [Mowbray, 1987], p. 210).

Holy. Now, *there’s* an adjective.

But the first thing to say—and it’s a very *Anglican* thing to say—you don’t have to believe that Mary was conceived without original sin, but it’s just fine if you do. You don’t even have to believe in the doctrine of original sin, at least in the way that Saint Augustine or Father McCabe means it. As Archbishop Rowan Williams once put it, when Anglicans and Roman Catholics get together to talk about theology, Anglicans are afraid that

Roman Catholics will ask us to believe too much and Roman Catholics are afraid that we are going to ask *them* to believe too little.¹ (I sometimes think that it is this parish's vocation to believe *more rather than less*, while not insisting that anyone else do the same.) But, still, in the end, I agree with Father McCabe: this feast is less about getting a doctrine right than it is about *holiness*.

I have been reminded recently that *holy* does not just mean virtuous. It certainly does not mean what we often want it to mean, namely that Mary was God's best pupil, demure, gentle, meek, the pride of her parents, possessed of good manners, and known for her kindness. She may or may not have been some or all those things—and the tradition, and the sense of the faithful down through the ages, would maintain that Mary was pure, virtuous to a remarkable degree, even sinless. But the gospels, the poetry, the art, the litanies, and the deeply felt prayers of the faithful down through the centuries are inspired by the belief—and it is a very ancient belief—that Mary is something more, something else. It is the belief that she is the Mother of God, not *just* the Mother of Jesus of Nazareth—though she is surely that—but the fully human mother of the Incarnate One, Jesus the Christ, One Person, but simultaneously and indivisibly both Human and Divine.² That is who Mary *is*. And the ancient church was more conscious of the paradox in that statement than we are. We'll hear the following words in the Communion motet tonight, "*Tu quae genuisti tuum sanctum Genitorem / O Thou who begot thy holy Creator*" (*Alma redemptoris mater*).

But this is surely an amazing thing. What can it mean for a human being to be the *Mother of the Light of the World*? And this wonder and awe are the reasons people write poetry about the Virgin because she is deeply paradoxical and utterly true. And all this because she is holy.

Holy, a better word than *special*.

¹ Williams, Rowan, *The Malines Conversations: The Beginnings of Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 2021)

² Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ: Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451, Act V (Book of Common Prayer 1979, p. 864)

A bit more Herbert McCabe:

In our case, Christ freed us from original sin through our faith and by baptism which is the sacrament of faith. It is because of this that we have ceased to be subject to the prince of this present world and become citizens of the future kingdom. Through faith and baptism, we have been rescued from identification with this doomed society; we have become aliens, subversive, challenging this dehumanized world and its prince. I speak of the “world,” of course in St John’s sense: it does not mean the material bodily world of nature, but human society as we have made it with its self-righteousness, hypocrisy, cruelty, greed, and violence. The state of original sin is the state of being so enmeshed in this society that we do not merely *suffer* from it but are *identified* with it. In our baptism, our first definitive sign of protest, Christ begins to liberate us, redeem us from this world (“The Immaculate Conception,” in *God Matters* [Mowbray, 1987], p. 210).

To be *holy* is to stand apart, or, better, to be *set apart* by God’s loving hand, not because we deserve it, but only because of God’s great mercy. We are human beings—created, lost, found, forgiven, and saved—but our holiness, such as it is, is not a one-time thing. It would be better to say that God draws us close to him, over and over again, reminding us that from the beginning he set us apart, made us for holiness, made us for love, created us to know that love, not being special, is at the heart of things. Again, Ephesians:

He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

To be *holy* is not to be superior. To be *holy* is to acknowledge that we are not perfect and are often sinful. To be holy is sometimes to be so enmeshed in the world that we become identified with its sometimes unholy ways. To be holy is to know that we need forgiveness and have been forgiven. And this *becoming* holy is to know that God does not give up on us, that God has given us a Son to forgive, redeem, forgive us again, and heal us. And it is his holy Mother that we honor today. May her holiness remind us of the divine image embedded in our hearts. May her holiness remind us of who we are and who we are meant to be.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, who, when we most need it, takes us by the hand and leads us to her Son.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

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