

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 5, 2012 at 12:06pm

With Mary's example, bring Jesus into the world

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

In this liturgy, we celebrate three separate things, really. First, we celebrate together with the whole human family the turning of a new year. We have the same calendar throughout the world. It's perhaps the one thing that does unite the whole human family. We all have this celebration of the beginning of a new year of human history, but then we also celebrate Mary, the mother of God. That's in fact what we call the feast today, the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God.

Finally, we celebrate what we just heard in the Gospel: Jesus, abiding by the Jewish law, being circumcised, and at the time of circumcision, being given the name that the angel had told Mary when he first announced to her she was to be the mother of God, "You are to name Him Jesus, which means, 'God saves,' because Jesus will save His people from their sins." If we listen carefully to the Scripture lesson today, I think we are instructed on each of these things that we

The Octave
Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God

Numbers 6:22-27

Psalm 67:2, 3, 5, 6, 8

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

First of all, the fact that the whole world, the whole human family is celebrating the turning of a new year -- the end of a year and the beginning of a new year. At this time of celebration throughout the whole world, isn't it very appropriate that we hear that blessing that God instructed Moses to tell Aaron to use when Aaron was blessing the people? It's an important blessing for the human family at the beginning of a new year: "May God bless you and keep you. May God let God's face shine on you and be gracious to you. May God look kindly on you and give you peace."

Full text of the readings

Aren't these the blessings that we need, the whole human family, especially that blessing of peace? We live in a world where there is so much violence. War is still going on. Thank God we have ended one war after being involved in it for almost nine years, but we're still engaged in war in Afghanistan, and there are so many people suffering from these wars. So we need God to give us that blessing of God's peace.

I remember in May of the year before Pope John Paul died, he was suffering very greatly, and you could tell he was in very poor health. He was struggling, but he made one last trip at that time to go to Spain. I remember very clearly the words that he spoke to young people that had gathered together. As you remember, on his trips he always had a special event for young people, and on that occasion, he pleaded with them, these hundreds of thousands of young people in Spain. He said, "Turn against all violence. Reject violence and instead respond to violence and hatred with love."

He pleaded with them, "Be artisans of peace." That is a beautiful calling, to be an artisan of peace, one who dreams of peace and makes peace happen. John Paul begged these young people, and this is what we should be doing, too, is trying to instruct and teach our young people to grow up as people who build peace. In fact, the Peace Day statement that Pope Benedict XVI has released for today, because every Jan. 1 now is celebrated as a day of prayer for world peace, has the theme, "Educating young people in justice and peace."

Isn't that something we should be engaged in, and maybe make a special attempt this new year to instruct our young people how to work for justice and through justice, how to bring peace into our world? That's the first thing we learn from today's lessons. Secondly, now, is what Paul says to the church at Galatia about Mary -- that Jesus came, sent by God, born of a woman and subject to the law -- but it's the son of God that is sent to be born of woman. It took over four centuries for the church to really come to an understanding and a full acceptance of the fact that Mary was indeed the mother of God as well as the mother of Jesus in his humanness.

It wasn't until the Council of Ephesus in 431 that we really -- you can't say understand it -- but the mystery of the Incarnation, the coming of God in human flesh, was articulated in a way that makes it so clear. Before that, some people were saying, "Jesus was not God when He was born, but He became the Son of God." There were other ways of trying to explain who Jesus was, but finally it becomes very clear within the church. Jesus is the son of God and the son of Mary, so she is in fact mother of God, not just mother of a human person, but mother of God.

That is why we have in our church such a special veneration for Mary, because when you begin to think of it in these terms, truly she is the only unique person in all of human history who was the mother of God and the mother of the human Jesus. No other person could ever claim such an honor. So we honor Mary today. Jesus was born of Mary, under the law, one like us in every way except sin, son of God and son of Mary. Mary receives special honors in our devotions today.

Finally, the Gospel reminds us, and this is an important thing, too, that Jesus, when He came into this world, came into this world as a devout Jew. In our history as a Christian community, we've had times of extreme anti-Semitism. If you go back to World War II and the Holocaust, there was an attempt to totally destroy the whole Jewish race, and this was done by a nation that claimed to be Christian.

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Jesus was a Jew. His circumcision was a ritual that bound Him under the covenant that had been made

between God and the chosen people. So He was a covenant person, and then Jesus, throughout His life, you remember in the Gospel of Luke, it talks about how it was His custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. When He was a youngster, He was there in the temple interacting with the Jewish leaders. When Jesus was teaching, He always drew from the Hebrew Scriptures.

When He wanted to impress upon us what is the greatest commandment of the law, He goes to the Book of Deuteronomy. "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with thy whole heart and mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself." That's out of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus knew those Scriptures. When He wanted to explain His whole mission, "The Spirit of God is upon Me. God sends Me to proclaim good news to the poor," and that whole passage in Luke's Gospel was taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

Jesus was a Jew first of all, and always in His life. In fact, He came to reform the Jewish religion, not to replace it. You hear in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but I say to you, 'Don't even be angry with your brother or sister.'" In other words, not just don't kill, but get rid of anything that would lead you to kill. Jesus is fulfilling the law. That's what He says: "I come to fulfill the law, not to replace it or destroy it." So I think it's just a good reminder for us to reflect on the fact that Jesus first of all was a Jewish person when He came into this world.

Maybe that will help us to deepen our respect for the Jewish people in our world and try to work hard for peace in the Holy Land, which is so disrupted with violence and clashes between Christians and Jews.

Finally, I came across a quote from St. Ambrose that brings a good lesson for what Paul says at the end of the second lesson today: "You are yourselves, no longer slaves, but sons or daughters, and yours is the inheritance by God's grace." So Mary is the mother of God because she's the mother of Jesus who is son of God and her son, but then God passes that life onto us. "You yourselves are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters of God."

Ambrose back in the fourth century said, "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. On this feast," Ambrose says, "recall we all have conceived Christ in our hearts and are called to bring Him forth to a suffering world."

This gives us inspiration, I hope, and incentive to bring that life of Jesus, which we share -- we become sons and daughters of God -- bring that life of Jesus into our world, most of all because we use this day as a day of prayer for peace. Work for peace. Instruct our young people in the ways of justice and peace. If each of us does our part in living out this aspect of our faith, we can begin this new year with the hope that we can bring tremendous changes in our world and move our human family towards peace and fullness of life for every person.

[Homily given at St. Ann, Frankfort, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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