

No, you have not walked into a parish of the Archdiocese of Omaha. We do not observe this day as our Roman Catholic friends do with the Feast of the Assumption, that is, without experiencing death, Mary was taken bodily into heaven and set her at her Son's right hand. Our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters speak of this day as Mary's Dormition, her falling asleep in death. They also have a strong tradition of Mary then being taken into heaven in both body and soul. And in both of these communions, Mary rather early on became the one to whom you could go in prayer and receive help and aid. Indeed, by the Middle Ages in the western church, Mary was sought in prayer and devotion because her Son was so often seen as an unapproachable and stern Judge.

The solution to such unbiblical abuses is not what has so often happened; to cast Mary aside save the necessary role in our nativity plays and appearance in the creche at Holy Christmas. It is rather unfortunate that the mother of our Lord has been reduced in this way. Fear of all things Roman Catholic in this case leads us to miss the fact that Mary teaches us quite a lot on the basis of what we read in God's own Word. We often hear the quip "Mary was just like us." We are quick to avoid any undue exaltation. And yet there stand Mary's words: "**For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed**" (Lk 1:48). Her cousin Elizabeth having been "**filled with the Holy Spirit**" had just cried out "**Blessed are you among women**" (Lk 1:41, 42).

Why do we rightly call Mary the blessed virgin? Elizabeth tells us: she is "**the mother of [the] Lord.**" "Lord" is the common title for the God of Israel. Elizabeth confesses that Mary is the mother of the Lord. And so Mary is most assuredly *not* just like us. She is the one by whom the God of Israel became man. We don't have Jesus as He is, true Man, descended from Abraham and David, without her. St. Paul cannot write what he does in today's epistle without her: "**God sent forth His Son, born of woman.**" Wrapped in human flesh just like ours, for her flesh is just like ours, descended from our first parents, subject to sin, weakness, and death, comes the Most High God to be our Savior, Mary's and yours.

Mary is blessed. She says herself that she is chosen not at all out of her own merit or worthiness, but solely out of God's mercy and grace for this purpose. She is the Mother of God. It's a title that makes some skittish. But to call Mary the Mother of God really tells us more about who she gave birth to than about herself. She is, as our hymn of the day puts it, *the bearer of the eternal Word*. The title points us to the God she bore. Mary is the holy vessel of God in human flesh, a new Ark of the Covenant as she bore God's presence on earth for nine months.

She is also the best model for us of Christian faith. She is blessed because "**she ... believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord**" (Lk 1:45). Here again we see how Mary really is *not* just like us. An angel appears to you one day and tells you that you're to become a mother, not just of any ordinary child, but the Son of God, and you believe it? No, I suspect that we would be more like stubborn Zechariah than like Mary. But no matter how wild and crazy this word of the angel seems, how impossible it must be for a virgin to be a mother, Mary hears the promise of God, meekly bows her head before the word of God, and says: "**Let it be to me according to your word**" (Lk 1:38).

She does not understand, but she believes God's Word. She entrusts herself to the will and purpose of God. We see this over and over again. We see it when Gabriel brings that wondrous announcement to her in Nazareth. We see it as she struggles to understand why her twelve-year-old Son remained behind in the temple, discussing the very Scriptures which testified of Him and which He must fulfill, surrounded by the sacrifices which foreshowed His bloody death. We see it as she boldly brings the need for more wine to Him at the wedding in Cana, and He must remind her that His hour had not yet come. Though corrected, reminded of His true purpose, she trusts in Him, that having brought the need before Him, He knows what is best, and will see to it. There you see the essence of Christian prayer. There you see mighty faith confessed in her last recorded words in Holy Scripture as she directs the servants (and us): "**Do whatever He tells you**" (Jn 2:5).

Mary is, indeed, the model for every Christian. She trusts the Word of God even when she fails to perfectly understand. She ponders all that she sees and hears in her heart, does not set aside what is difficult or beyond her, but turns them over again and again to better understand. She clings to her Son, and so in the best of artwork depicting her, the blessed Virgin directs us to her Son, either by following her gaze that is fixed on Him, or by the gesture of her hand. Follow her eyes, follow her hand, follow her path as she leads you to stand at the very foot of the cross where her heart is pierced by the sword.

Here, in the scene of Mary at the foot of the cross to which her Son is nailed, you see, to be sure, the terrible sorrow of a parent who must bury her child. But you also see also the unique agony of seeing her boy who never had to be told to do anything

twice, the spotless lamb clothed in the weakness of our flesh, the beloved Son of the Father, placed under the full burden of the Law, suffering its condemnation in order to redeem us, but also bringing us into His holy family as sons of the Father, and therefore His brother.

Here you see fulfilled all that Mary sings about.

Here you see the strength of God's arm as He works salvation for us through the weakness of the apparent ordinary flesh of Mary's Son.

Here you see the foolishness of the proud put to shame as it is God Himself who wins salvation for us, giving it freely in His Son to be received by faith.

Here you see the weak and lowly, forgettable maidens from Nazareth, poor despised Christians, terrified sinners, lifted up as they gaze upon the Savior.

Here you see the source of every good thing that satisfies your needs.

Here you see the answer, the fulfillment of all those promises that were made to Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Seed of the Woman has crushed Satan's head. The Offspring of Abraham has won the promised land of heaven for those numerous descendants by faith in Him. The Son has been born of the Virgin, and upon her lap we see Immanuel; God-with-us.

In seeing this Jesus, something quite like that miracle that took place in Mary's womb takes place in us. By His Word going into our ears and the work of the Holy Spirit through that Word in our hearts we speak our "yes," our "let it be," our "Amen," to the promises of God, to what He has done for us. We hold His Word and promise tight and into us comes Mary's Son with all His divine life, giving that life to us as He dwells within us by faith. He imparts His life to us as we receive that body born of Mary and given into death. He binds us to Himself and to one another, all the family of God, as we drink of the chalice that holds the very blood descended from David. And so it is that even as Mary is blessed, so also are you who hear the word of God and keep it. You receive it, you believe it, you lay hold of what it gives.

Learn to call Mary blessed together with Elizabeth and all the Church. Blessed in the holy Child she bore. Blessed among women in alone being the Mother of our God and Savior Jesus Christ. Blessed above all in her faith and trust in God's Word. And we pray our Lord, though Mary is not much like us, that He would make us more like her, His promise-believing Mother, that He would increase our faith in all that He promises so that we might be blessed and come finally to the joys of heaven and share with the blessed virgin Mary, and all the angels and saints in the blessedness that never ends.