

Mary, Mother of God

I only know this from hearsay, but new mothers have told me that one of the things that happens when your first baby is born is that you lose track of time.

One of my good friends from college wrote to me after she had had her first baby and said that she had all these things that she planned to do, but time always got away from her because she just couldn't put her baby down. She couldn't quit looking at him, wondering at him, loving him.

It's not hard to imagine Mary in that position, even before we take into account the facts of Jesus' birth and the obstacles that had to be overcome before he was born.

She would have been reflecting on all that happened in the course of his being born even if his birth didn't entail things like having to travel to Bethlehem at 8 and a half months pregnant, or having to give birth in a stable, or shepherds arriving on the scene and telling stories of angels appearing.

That seems to be in the nature of things when you become a mom for the first time.

We can't really allow this feast to be reduced to a celebration of motherhood, though, because there's a lot more going on than even all that went on when Jesus was born.

Today's feast arose because of the question "What is the appropriate title to use when referring to Mary? How far can we go?"

We know from Scripture that Mary was a part of the

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Jerusalem community after Jesus was raised from the dead. She was in the upper room with his disciples when the Holy Spirit descended upon them. She had been placed in the care of John, the Beloved disciple, and so it was always the case that she was present in a Christian community somewhere, even after the disciples were dispersed from Jerusalem.

It's impossible to think that such a community would not have been honored to have her in their midst and to take special care of her. What did they call her? How did they refer to her? Was she just the mother of Jesus, or did they already refer to her as the Mother of Our Lord?

The issue did not become a problem as long as the church remained a small group of disciples with personal ties to the first generation. But the emperor Constantine decreed Christianity to be the official religion of the empire 300 years later, all of a sudden the question took on greater urgency: "Could you really call a human person the mother of God? Isn't God eternal?"

To answer the question took the whole Church together to parse out the issues. If we decided to say that Mary should be known as the mother of Christ, or the mother of Jesus, then we would be selling short what God had really done by becoming one of us. Only the title "Mother of God" protects the unity of God and man in the Incarnation.

From the perspective of 2000 years we might be inclined to think, "What's the big deal? Anybody should be able to see

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that.” We have gotten used to honoring Mary with the title “Mother of God.” It’s a part of the Hail Mary!

But what we have to be on the lookout, even in our day and age, is whether we have fallen prey to our own forms of selling God short.

Jesus is God and Mary is his mother. That’s beyond argument. But what happens when we start to think of Jesus as our brother, as the first-born from the dead and the one who opens for us the way to sharing in divine life?

Practically speaking, that is, in the way we live out our spirituality in the everyday, a lot of us would shy away from such impossible speech. For many of us, the most we really hope for is that we don’t go to hell or that purgatory doesn’t cause us too much pain.

Whatever the truth of our lives is, we don’t expect to know until we pass over from this world into whatever reality awaits us.

We sell God short. God has designed it so that sharing divine life with us is available in the here and now.

Before we shake our heads in wonder about how anybody could argue about whether Mary is the Mother of God, we do well to check our own expectations. Do we really believe, in a way that filters down to how we live out our everyday existence, that we have been made co-heirs with Christ, that the Mother of no one less than God could be our mother, too?

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Today is a day of great rejoicing, if we dare. Mary, the Mother of God, is our mother, too, because we have been adopted into God's own family as brothers and sisters of his only begotten Son.

That's a reality worth pondering as part of our everyday practice of the faith.