The Catholic Cathedral of
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IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, MARY MODEL OF FAITH

by Rev. Gregoire Vignola, PME

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God." These are the words the Angel Gabriel addressed to Mary on Annunciation Day. I believe that each one of us, at one or another particular occasion, have also found favour with God, because the plan of God is the same for the whole mankind. It is to be the Saviour, the Redeemer of all, on the condition that we fully and freely accept his plan. But the problem is that we do not always welcome and accept God's plan and God's proposal in our daily life.

At the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, on December 8, two Scripture readings, in a particular way, invite us to reflect on God's two different proposals to mankind, and on their refusal or acceptance by human beings. The first reading, the Book of Genesis (Gen 3, 9-15, 20), recalls, in a highly symbolic way, the disobedience of man to God's plan. Adam and Eve were offered by the devil the possibility to become like God, to take the place of God, and they failed to this temptation.

The terrible consequence of their mistake was that, at that time and until now, everyone put the fault on each other's shoulders, by accusing each other: "It is not my fault, said Adam, it is the fault of the woman you put here with me". Then Eve, on her turn, replied: "It is not my fault either, it is the fault of the snake which tricked me". We should humbly recognize how surprisingly similar our pretext is, our excuse with which to defend ourselves, when problems occur in our family, in our workplace or in the middle of our community life. The conclusion is very clear: each time we are not receptive to God's proposal, each time we do not surrender to God's will by stubbornly and forcibly putting ahead the implementation of our own plan, then we become a "stumbling stone" to each other.

The good news of this sad event is that, even though we are sinful, God never abandons us. God helps us to stand up again, and at the end He promises to destroy the root of the sin in our heart. "I will make you, Satan and the woman, hate each other; her offspring and yours will always be enemies, her offspring will crush your head". This is the promise of our Redeemer, who is be born from a woman, the Virgin Mary. And with that, we are already introduced to the Gospel of this Feast Day, the Gospel of Luke (Lk I, 26-38).

That Gospel recalls the event of the Annunciation of the Lord. Once again, through the angel Gabriel this time, God makes a clear proposal to a young girl, already promised in marriage to a man named Joseph. But this time, despite some early hesitation from Mary, because she did not understand, there was no gap between God's proposal and man's acceptance.

(continued on Pg. 2)

In Mary, the plan of God was not affected by the heaviness of sin, and did not encounter any refusal. Not because this young girl did not have her own plan or her own thinking: (She was preparing herself to get married; so, it could have been sufficient for her to say: *"Sorry, I am not available, I have my own plan. Please, look for someone else").* Let us humbly acknowledge that these are words of excuse that are often ours! But, on the contrary, what happened here, in Mary, was that the plan of God was perfectly accepted and completely implemented. In a very receptive way, Mary surrendered fully to the will of God, replying to the angel: *"I am the Lord's servant. May it happen to me as you have said".*

At the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we celebrate how good God has been to Mary. First God has made her full of grace. Secondly, because God wanted a woman, who would fit to be his Son's mother, He favoured her beautifully by not allowing her to be tarnished by original sin. Sin has no part in Mary, sin that often makes us so ugly, and deforms God's image in us. So God gracefully granted her the special gift of the Immaculate Conception, which was just the advance effect on her of the redemption that would be worked out by Jesus for the whole mankind. We can say that, if Mary was so greatly favoured by the gift of her Immaculate Conception, in the end all of us are the beneficiaries of that gift, because it was granted to her for our own sake, in view of her mission to become the mother of our Redeemer, Jesus-Christ.

As individuals and as a community, let us try to imitate Mary in a constant effort of putting aside our own plan, our own project, which very often does not coincide with God's plan, and in an unending attempt of becoming like her, faithful servant, and perfect instrument of the divine will. But, at the same time, let us not forget that it will be a constant conversion, an inner struggle, a work of refocusing which will be never-ending.

Let us just mention here another faithful servant. We probably still remember how Simon Peter learnt this inner struggle in a bitter way. When answering the question of Jesus: *"What about you? Who do you say I am?",* Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and he was praised for it, but at the same time, he was reminded that his confession of faith was not from his flesh, but a revelation from God. Then, because of that, Peter was able to become the rock on which the Church would be built, and the one who would comfort the faith of his brothers.

But not long after, when Jesus began to speak plainly to his disciples about his suffering and death, Peter took Him aside, and began to rebuke Him, a gesture that forced Jesus to address him sharply and openly calling him Satan, doing the work of the devil, because his thoughts were not from God, but from man. At that time, instead of becoming the rock on which the Church is built, Peter was becoming the rock on which the Church would stumble, a "stumbling stone" for his own brothers.

Because of her faith and her surrendering to the will of God, Mary became our faith model. May our faith also become the rock on which our individual life and the life of our community is built, the grounded stone on which the educational work of the Church always puts its foundation. And may we be able not to fall into temptation, like Adam and Eve, and not to become the stone in the middle of the road on which our brothers and sisters stumble, or the "accusing stone" which is so easily thrown to others; and neither the "cracking stone" nor the "breaking stone" which slowly, but surely destroys a community life.

Scripture Readings for December 2021 (Year C)

Second Sunday of Advent — 5 December 2021

First Reading **(Bar 5:1-9). Jerusalem is told to forget the sufferings of the past because God is going to bring back her exiled children to her.**

Second Reading **(Phil 1:3-6.8-11). Paul urges his fellow Christians to prepare for the second coming of Christ by pure and blameless lives.**

Gospel **(Lk 3:1-6). John the Baptist urges people to prepare a way for the Lord through repentance.**

Third Sunday of Advent — 12 December 2021

First Reading **(Zeph 3:14-18). Jerusalem is urged to rejoice because God stands in her midst.**

Second Reading **(Phil 4:4-7). Paul urges us to rejoice in the Lord, and to let go of anxiety by living in a spirit of prayer and thanksgiving.**

Gospel **(Lk 3:10-18). John the Baptist tells the people what they must do to prepare for the Lord's coming and to escape his searching judgement.**

Fourth Sunday of Advent — 19 December 2021

First Reading **(Mic 5-1-4). The prophet Micah announces to the beleaguered inhabitants of Jerusalem that a Ruler will come from Bethlehem who will bring them peace.**

Second Reading **(Heb 10:5-10). Jesus came, not to offer sacrifices of old law, but to do the will of God.**

Gospel **(Lk 1:39-45). Elizabeth praises Mary, and, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, hints at the uniqueness of the child she has conceived.**

Christmas Midnight Mass — 24 December 2021

First Reading **(Is 9:1-7). This prophecy about the coming of a Savior-child who will rescue his people from oppression, is fulfilled in Jesus.**

Second Reading **(Tit 2:11-14). St Paul reminds us of what is expected of us if we are to enjoy the salvation won for us by Jesus.**

Gospel **(Lk 2:1-14). We hear about the birth of Jesus, and how the news of his birth was brought by angels to shepherds.**

Christmas Day Mass — 25 December 2021

First Reading **(Is 52:7-10). This great hymn of exultation at the return of the exiles from Babylon is also a poem of joy at our redemption.**

Second Reading **(Heb 1:1-6) The whole history of God's dealings with his people in the past was a preparation for the coming of his Son at a particular moment in history.**

Gospel **(Jn 1:1-18). This is a great hymn to the Word of God, the source of all life, whose coming among us makes us children of God.**

Feast of the Holy Family - 26 December 2021

First Reading **(1 Sam 1:20-22,24-28). This deals with the birth of Samuel and his consecration to God.**

Second Reading **(1 Jn 3:1-2. 21-24). We are God's children and should live a life in keeping with this great dignity.**

Gospel **(Lk 2:41-52). The story of how the twelve-year-old Jesus got lost in Jerusalem shows that misunderstandings can occur even in the best of families, and gives us a glimpse of the true identity of Jesus.**

New Year's Eve Thanksgiving Mass - 31 December 2021

First Reading **(Col 3:12-17). Saint Paul asks us to put on love, that is the bond of perfection.**

Gospel **(Lk 12:22-32). Jesus invites us to seek out God's kingship over us, and he says: "The rest will follow in turn. Do not live in fear, little flock. It has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom".**

MEDITATION

HUMAN FAMILY, HOLY RELATIONSHIPS

by : Ragan Sutterfield

When the apostle Paul, frustrated by a contentious and divided Corinthian church, attempted to describe the unity the church should embody he turned to the language of membership: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

It is in this idea of membership that the apostle was able to acknowledge difference and variety while at the same time maintaining unity. This unity is made not through the purity of identity, but in a kind of coherent relationality, a wholeness. It is in such a membership that our lives are made complete by being brought into communion with others.

Wendell Berry, likewise, uses the language of membership to describe the wholeness that is embodied in a place. Rather than the term "resident," which seems too passive, simply holding ground, or "citizen," which is dependent on political identity, "membership" is a term that can include the whole of a place— its people, but also its animals and land, its history and future, its town and country. Membership is the name for the belonging we are a part of in the creation. It is in the membership that health and disease are held in common; where, as St. Paul puts it, "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

The membership to this human family is a reality in which our fates are in common because our life is in common. To save one part, we must save all. As Berry writes, "If we want to save the land, we must save the people who belong to the land. If we want to save the people, we must save the land the people belong to." Our lives are entangled and bound up with each other—people and land and other creatures—so that they can only find their flourishing when the whole flourishes together. In fact, this connection of all things is at our very essence as creatures:

"From the point of view of Genesis 1 or the 104th Psalm, we would say that all are of one kind, one kinship, one nature, because all are creatures."

In one of his most important essays on the subject, "Health Is Membership," Berry explores what it means to be healthy. "To be healthy is literally to be whole," he writes. Noting the word's etymological connection to "holy," he goes on to say that any proper healer should "respect the holiness embodied in all creatures, or that our healing involves the preservation in us of the spirit and the breath of God." To be healthy is then to preserve our givenness and connection, to live into the proper balance of our dependence upon God and the creation of which we are a part.

Membership to the human family is a reality in which our fates are in common because our life is in common. To save one part, we must save all.

To be a member then is to be a part of something God is doing in the world, a gathering together that comes through the incarnation. It is a making right through reconciliation.

With love and givenness as the conditions of our health, the fundamental realities of our being, it makes no sense to treat the health of person as an individual in isolation. For Berry it is "community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures"—that is the smallest unit of health. This is why in the fiction story "Fidelity" Danny breaks his father Burley free from his isolation in the hospital and brings him home. In the hospital, Burley is diseased, disconnected from the membership in which he is healthy. When he is back at home, even though he dies, he dies in health because he does so being connected and in place.

In a similar vein, Berry reflects on the experience of his brother John undergoing bypass surgery after a heart attack. While thankful for the medical treatment his brother received, Berry is struck by the obstacles to care inherent in the hospital system. "In the hospital what I will call the world of love meets the world of efficiency," Berry writes, "the world, that is, of specialization, machinery and abstract procedure." The two worlds run parallel in place, like the city of God and man, but they are not aimed at the same ends—one is driven by the modes of analysis which divide, dissect, and separate while the other works in the modes of affection which link and join. This work of love is rooted in the divine love, but it must live in the realities of mortality, the inescapable limits of "ignorance and partiality."

"Like divine love, earthly love seeks plentitude; it longs for the full membership to be present and to be joined," writes Berry. "Unlike divine love, earthly love does not have the power, the knowledge, or the will to achieve what it longs for." Our mortal love always fails, it is always incomplete, yet guided in its desire to complete itself, it seeks to expand and include more and more in its membership.

This possibility of wholeness is the gift membership offers to us—a gift we cannot accept without it. So long as we refuse to join in the communion of the whole creation, we cannot hope to be anything but partial, damaged, and isolated. But when we link our lives to the membership we begin to join a wholeness that no one of us can even begin to comprehend or imagine.

To be a member of a place, we must be embodied and entangled in it, we must share and learn the lessons of the place. There is no general map for how this might happen. Each place will necessarily have its own way. But to begin, we must go, get "out of your car, off your horse," and belong somewhere.

CHRISTMAS: HE BECAME ONE OF US

by Rev. Gregoire Vignola, PME

At Christmas, we feel that God is very close to us and very loving towards us. At the same time, we feel a closeness to one another. All this happens, because God's son became one of us. He has brought God near us and brought us near one another.

Dear Parishioners, I will be glad once again to celebrate this Christmas in your midst, and every day I thank God to be still in good health. For those among you who know me more closely, it is not a secret anymore that, in spite of my 75 years of age, I use early in the morning to make one hour of physical exercises (fast walking, a bit of jogging and other stretching exercises) in order to keep me in good spirit and shape.

But maybe you do not know that another thing that I enjoy very much, while resting in a city's park, is to sit quietly on a bench and watch the birds. I like particularly the little sparrows, flying here and there, jumping joyfully, getting quite near to me, and always in the middle of a harmonious and beautiful singing. Sometimes it happens that I bring with me some small bits of bread with the purpose of attracting them, coming closer to me, my dream being at the end to succeed in feeding them from my own hand, but I humbly recognise that I have never succeeded. Each time I tried to approach them, each time I made a move towards them, they got nervous and flew away. To the point that I realised, one day, that all my efforts will be always useless, unless I change drastically my tactic of approaching them. Me, such a big creature, how can I get close to such small creatures as birds, without making them afraid? Unless, one day, I succeed myself to become a bird. Then I will be able to approach them without making them afraid.

I know that, in your mind, many among you are now wondering what could be Fr. Greg's intention of sharing with us his approaching birds' experiences, while we are preparing to celebrate Christmas. In fact my purpose is only to make you understand that it is exactly what happened in the history of salvation at the first Christmas.

The Letter to the Hebrews (1:1-6) is very clear about that historical event. It says: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son".

The meaning of this revelation is very clear: in the past, during Old Testament time, God tried to approach man in many different ways (through Angels, earthquake, flood, burning bushes, strong wind, fierce voices of so many prophets), but each time without so much success, because mankind were always afraid to welcome God and get near to him.

To the point that God realised one day that his approach to mankind was not the most appropriated one. So, in order to successfully get near to mankind, he decided to become man, to become one of us. Do we realise that this is, in fact, the Good News and the Mystery of Christmas that we will joyfully celebrate this month? In order to approach us, man and woman, and make us not afraid anymore, God became man, one of us. So, no wonder that night, when the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, watching over their flock in the fields, he said to them: "Do not be afraid again, for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy.

For today, in the city of David, a Savior has been born for you, you will find an infant in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger". Who would be afraid of a new born child? Even children are delighted in presence of a young baby.

"The Son of God became man for our salvation but only in Mary and through Mary."

Once again, the Good News of Christmas is that, in order to reach us, God became man, just like us, humble, modest, weak and poor creature, submitted to suffering, injustice, rejection, persecution and even death. So we are overflow with joy at his coming, but let us be careful, because there is a great danger here waiting for us: in becoming man like us, God became also among us a "hidden God".

Since the first Christmas until now, God continue to be everywhere present in his creation, but nowhere visible. God continue to use the same way to approach us and to reach us. He continue among us to become man, and most often to become the weakest one, the poorest one and the overburdened one. God continue to be a "hidden God".

We can ask ourselves now: are we able to recognize him? Blessed if we are! For He is saying: "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcome me into your house. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to see me". This is there, in our brothers and sisters, where God continue to hide himself. God is hiding himself so successfully in his creation that some people are unable to find and to recognize him.

In the Prologue to his Gospel (1:1-18), John the Evangelist wrote sadly: "He was in the world, that had its being through him, but the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him".

Here is where the celebration of Christmas comes to our help. At Christmas, we are filled with wonder at the nearness of God. In the Incarnation, God is perfectly hidden and perfectly revealed. In Jesus, God comes to us clothed in our humanity. To see and to know God in this way is a cause of great joy. This is the joy announced to the shepherds at the first Christmas; this is the joy that is also announced to us every time we celebrate Christmas. Welcoming this great joy, may each one of us have a Wonderful Christmas!

Praying for the Pope's Monthly Intention (December 2021)

Catechists

Let us pray for the catechists, summoned to announce the Word of God: may they be its witnesses, with courage and creativity and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

REFLECTIONS

ADVENT — Season Of Hope

Advent is a season of hope.
It would be hard to exaggerate the value of hope.
It is said that while there is life there is hope.
This has an even deeper meaning in reverse:
While there is hope there is life.
As long as there is hope, no situation is impossible.
It is the task of Christians to keep hope alive in the world.
Advent summons us to wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
In the final analysis, *HE* is our hope.

The Blessed Virgin Mary in the first instance of her conception

was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin

by a singular privilege and grace granted by God,

in view of the merits of Christ, The Savior of the human race.

Ineffabilis Deus,
Dec 8, 1854, Pius IX

CHRISTMAS Expectations

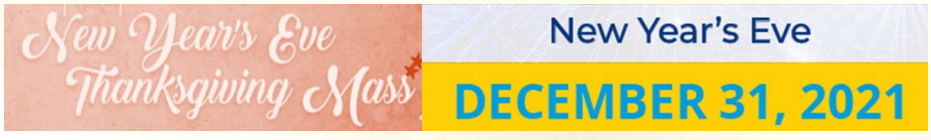
As Christmas approaches, people's hopes soar.
However, the substance of these hopes
is often dictated by commercial interests.
Little wonder, then, that when the sun goes down on Christmas Day, many feel disappointed.
Those who pin their hopes on what the merchants promise will always be disappointed,
not because they promise too little,
but too much — of the wrong thing.
What our hearts long for is a taste of what the angels announced to the shepherds:
'Behold, I bring news of great joy;
today a Savior has been born to you.'
This joy is the real hope of Christmas.
Let us open our hearts to receive it.

8 December
Feast of The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

(The feast on which we celebrate Mary, who from the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother Annie was preserved from sin.)

26 December — Feast of The Holy Family of Jesus

O Jesus, we look to Your guidance and order as pattern of all family life. By following the example of Your Holy Family with Our Blessed Mother Mary and St. Joseph, in mutual love and respect, may we come to the joy of our home in heaven.



Parish info: **SUNDAY MASS in ENGLISH — 9:30 a.m.** **Rev. Gregoire Vignola, PME (Assistant Parish Priest)**
For further details, visit the Cathedral website: **http://cathedral.catholic.org.hk, or call (852) 2522-8212 or by fax: (852) 2521-7957 or email to: cathedral@catholic.org.hk**