

Feast of Mary, Mother of God
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
Dec. 31, 2016 and Jan. 1, 2017

An 'icon' is a religious image that is quite different from what we may be accustomed to seeing. Most traditional religious paintings/pictures portray the person, usually Jesus, Mary or a Saint, in very historical terms ... their features are fairly human ... ordinary ... like anyone we may know or meet. The 'icon', on the other hand, pictures the person more mysteriously; the eyes may be enlarged, highlighted, or even to the side of the face. The hands can be larger than what seem proportionate for the rest of the features, and the head can be much larger, or much smaller: again, not proportionate to the other bodily features. This would depend on what qualities the artist was seeking to emphasize about the person.

The 'icon' fits well into the theme of moving from 'history' to 'mystery' that I focused on last weekend as we celebrated Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation. The traditional picture draws us to focus on the picture itself and on the historical person and situation; the 'icon' pulls us beyond the picture and even beyond the historical person ... into the mystery of God that is behind the person, or the doctrine of faith that the artist wants to express. It is the difference between prose and a piece of poetry ... They may both be about winter, or Christmas; they simply approach the topic differently. And because of that they have a different effect on us. Poetry and 'icons' move us to reflection on the theme, not just to looking at a scene of winter, or an aspect of Christmas.

Today's Feast of Mary, the Mother of God, is relatively new to our Latin/Western Church calendar of feasts. Some of you may remember it as The Circumcision of Jesus, or as The Holy Name of Jesus. Mary, the Mother of God, however, is an old, old Feast. It goes as far back as the council of Ephesus, in the year 431. It was the Church's way of asserting that Jesus is God, and that his mother can then be called Mother of God. While Mary physically gave birth to an infant Jewish boy, she also gave birth to God, namely the Son of God. She is known as 'the birth-giver of God'. I have an example of this 'icon' here. The original was painted in 1130 in Constantinople. It is called Theotokos (Mother of God, in Greek). Through wars and other intrigues throughout the ages, the icon ended up in Vladimir Russia. There are small prayer cards featuring a different 'icon' at the entrances to church, if you would like one of the prayer cards.

This mystery of Mary as Mother of God is difficult for us to comprehend. It was no less difficult for Mary herself to comprehend. Recall how she questioned the angel at the time of her conception of this child, and how she then went off to spend time with her cousin Elizabeth to give herself time and space to reflect on what was happening to and within her. These Scripture accounts, as well as the many paintings and icons of Mary help us understand and appreciate Mary, the Mother of God, and see her as a reflective and pondering person: the Scripture story of the Annunciation says clearly, "*Mary*

treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart.” Many of you women here probably did the same when you were pregnant: you reflected on all that was happening to and within you. Mary is a focused and reflective person. And this can be our lesson for this Feast and this week: maybe even for this year!

Of course it will be hard for us to get through some of the culture after all, this is New Years, (last night/tonight is New Year's Eve) and there are some football games on television. And, within the last ten years or so, we have become obsessed with social media. It takes only seconds after sitting down in a waiting room somewhere, before everyone is looking at their phone. It takes only seconds waiting for food to come in a restaurant before many are on their telephone, checking Facebook, etc. Nonetheless, the Church and the gospels remind us that we also need to be reflective. If we were more reflective, we might speak less and listen more, and we might be more apt to wait and actually hear the response of the other person after we do speak with them. There may be a New Year's resolution possible in this regard.

Being reflective would help us

- keep our dreams, our values and priorities more defined
- be more attentive to the needs and feelings of others
- be more in touch with what is going on within our own selves

Where is joy in my life?

Why is sadness a constant in my life?

What are my sins....?

How do I love God, and how do I love others?

What does it mean to be 'mother' 'father'? What is the real essence of being a parent? A brother, a sister?

Mary is a wonderful model for this reflective life. A year given to this kind of centered and focused life would be a wonderful time of growth. It would be a spiritual renewal. Maybe even learn to pray by just being silent in the presence of God, as some of you did during Advent at Night Watch.

One of the gospels for daily Mass during this past week was the story of the old man, Simeon, in the Jerusalem Temple. Simeon spent great chunks of his day in the temple area. Thus he was there when Mary and Joseph brought their baby son to the temple for purification rites. When the young couple came into the temple, Simeon knew them as special, as part of God's plan. I am sure they did not look any different than the hundreds of other couples he saw arrive every day for the same thing. How did he know? He had been pondering the plan of God for much of his life. Simeon was a reflective person ... focused on the things of God. We would all know more of God if we like Mary, Simeon and others gave some time to pondering, thinking about God. Maybe a New Year's resolution could be to allow the mystery of God to envelop you more.