

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS    MARY MOTHER OF GOD**  
Numbers 6: 22-27    Psalm 67    Galatians 4: 4-7    Luke 2: 16-21  
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

It is New Year's Day. I hope it has been a good year for each of you. But for ALL of us, I don't think it has been. Don't we feel and share the pain of the suffering so many people have experienced over this past year? We say, "The year went by so quickly! Where did the time go?" In some ways we are lucky to be able to say that since, for those who have suffered the death of a loved one, extreme poverty, the destruction and displacement of war, terrorist bombings and loss of health, the year has dragged by. These people are glad to be rid of 2006 and they hope for a better 2007.

For them and for our loved ones----we not only read and listen to the text from Numbers, we make it our prayer for 2007. We pray it for people whose names we know and who are close to our hearts. We also pray it for the anonymous ones whose names only God knows, remembers and cherishes. May God, "...bless you and keep you!...be gracious to you...look upon you kindly and give you peace." We ask a blessing from God as we pray this reading. And more. We pray we might be an instrument God uses to put flesh and blood on the blessing, so that others will experience God blessing them because of our presence in their lives.

Today is also the solemnity of "Mary, Mother of God." Our church's veneration of Mary goes back to our beginnings. At Christmas we celebrate the Word of God made flesh. Today we celebrate God blessing us through Mary, who was the means by which that Word took flesh among us. Through Mary we came to experience the Numbers blessing, for in Christ, her son, God's face shines on us, is gracious to us and our kind God gives us peace. The Numbers blessing has been made flesh for us through Mary's response to God.

The shepherds respond obediently to the message they heard from the angels (Luke 2: 15-20). They went in haste to Bethlehem to "see this event that has taken place which the Lord has made known to us" (2:15). But the focus of the gospel reading is less on the shepherds and more on Mary who listens to the message the angels gave the shepherds about her son. Mary reflects on what she heard "in her heart."

Mary's manner suggests a new year's resolution for us today. Many of us make resolutions about eating less, exercising more, stopping smoking, etc. All well and good. But we who worship have another resolution to make as we observe Mary's way in the gospel today. We can use her as our model; she is one who pays attention to what she hears and reflects things over in her heart. She demonstrates throughout Luke's gospel a docility to the Word. She is the model believer who hears the Word of God and acts on it. Reflecting on today's gospel passage I might resolve that: throughout this new year I will practice being a better listener. I will allow myself more time to reflect and respond with deliberation to the events of my life. My first listening post will be the scriptures themselves, determined to go to them for spiritual nourishment, communion with God and direction for my life.

Listening to today's gospel text I note that Mary pondered a message she heard from lowly shepherds. In those times shepherds were considered ritually unclean and their testimony was suspect in a court of law. The reputation and ill regard her contemporaries had for shepherds did not stop Mary from paying attention to them and seriously reflecting on their message. She was a listener to the voices of the lowly and there she heard good news. We never know how God might speak in our daily lives.

Sometimes God speaks a word and the message is delivered to us: through the response of an angry child; the encouragement of a sympathetic friend; the consolation of one who sits with us in our grief; the vivid images on the evening news; the preaching of our least favorite preacher; the results of a statistical survey or a photograph at an exhibit. For example, during the Depression in this country photographers were hired and sent to document poverty in the land. The pictures they brought back deeply touched the nation and its leaders and helped promote social legislation to help the poor, unemployed and elderly. People heard a "word" in those images of unemployed people, hungry children and strained families. They pondered what they "heard" and they responded by trying to alleviate the pain through legislation. It was far from perfect or adequate, but the "social net" has helped countless needy people keep from sinking.

A good new year's resolution: to try to be a better listener, regardless of the one or group who is speaking; to give what we hear a serious "pondering" by not jumping too quickly to our usual conclusions. Then to pray for the wisdom to know how to respond to what we hear. That's a bit lengthy, but you get the idea.

If we were better listeners we would experience that Jesus continues to be born in our midst. We would experience the same reaction as those who first heard the message from the shepherds: we too would be “amazed.” Amazed to hear the good news God still proclaims to us in the very midst of our busy and diverse lives. A closer listening to that Word in daily life would reveal God’s blessing us: encouraging us in the good we try to do for others, despite the naysayers; giving us words of forgiveness for our sins; healing us of past hurts and current brokenness.

There is a lot else our ears are exposed to—at work, school, home and the other places that make up our days. All we hear does not build us up, heal or strengthen us. All is not God’s Word, no matter how hard we listen. That is why we need to give a disciplined hearing to the scriptural word. It will serve as our lens to help us discover and focus on God’s speaking in the many other ways God does. Those who practice a prayerful listening to the Word, a “Lectio Divina,” will do as Mary teaches us today: listen to the Word and ponder it in our hearts. The more we develop the ears of our heart, the more we will recognize and celebrate the daily incarnations of the Word. For God still takes flesh in our world in many and diverse ways.

The more we are tuned to the Word, the better we will be able to turn away from false prophets who claim to speak the truth but whose intentions are to deceive. Many are the voices that encourage us to put our priorities on the top of our “to do list.” They seduce us by promises of profit, power and prestige even when it is at the expense of others. Those who ponder and treasure the Word in their hearts will know where and when God is speaking, even when the Word comes to us from the most unlikely sources: like the dirty and breathless shepherds straight from the fields who can’t wait to tell Mary and Joseph the good news they, of all people, heard from the angel.

## **QUOTABLE**

### **NEVER HIDE THE BOOK OF GOD'S WRITTEN WORD.**

The Lectionary is the “chalice” of God’s Written Word, and should be handled as such. Just as the chalice and patten are held high at the end of the eucharistic prayer, so the Lectionary and Gospel Book should be held so that the congregation sees them and accepts them as the symbols of what they contain--God’s nourishment for a Holy People. In particular, it better to hold the

Lectionary or Gospel Book when reading from it at the lectern so that it may be seen by the assembly, rather than leaving it semi-hidden on the lectern. It may rest on the lectern when not actively being used, but when it is used for the proclamation, it should be visible as the Sacrament of God's Presence.

---Excerpt pertaining to the Word of God in eucharistic liturgical practice, taken from:

HOW NOT TO SAY MASS: A GUIDEBOOK FOR ALL CONCERNED ABOUT AUTHENTIC

WORSHIP, by Dennis C. Smolarski, S. J. New York: Paulist Press 1986, page 48.]

## JUSTICE NOTES

Jesus was born away from his parent's village because of a governmental decree. Mary and Joseph had to flee with their new born from the terror of Roman oppression and threats to their lives. It is appropriate then during this Advent-Christmas season that we reflect on the issues related to immigrants and what our church has said about immigration.

--- "*Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration From the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States.*"

[from JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS: A JOURNEY OF HOPE webpage.  
(<http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/>)]

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

***"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.***

----- ( "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each

week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."  
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Jeremy Dushane Murrell #T326989 (On death row since 2/17/06)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

Patricia Jennings #0207779 (11/5/90)

Blanceh Moore #288088 (11/16/90)

---North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women 1034 Bragg Street,  
Raleigh, NC 27610

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions",

“Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

### **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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