

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” (AN EXTRA FOR ROMAN CATHOLIC PREACHERS)
FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION (December 8, 2003)
Genesis 3: 9-15, 20 Ephesians 1: 3-6, 11-12 Luke 1: 26-38

Dear Preachers:

The feast falls in the middle of the week and requires another preaching at several celebrations. I hope these reflections help the preacher, along with those going to Mass on this day. I have decided to focus on the Ephesians reading, its strong baptismal allusions tie into the feast’s celebration of Mary’s freedom from sin and its effects.

Many people do not really know what this feast celebrates. It does not celebrate Jesus’ conception or his virgin birth. According to Pius IX’s definition of this dogma in 1854, it celebrates Mary’s deliverance from sin. The doctrine states that in view of the merits of Jesus, who saved all people, Mary was kept free from sin from the very moment her life began. The teaching was promulgated after Pius’ inquiry of the bishops around the world of the people’s faith (“sensus fidelium”) concerning Mary. The bishops’ response about the people’s beliefs and devotion assured him and so he declared the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Now to the epistle. The central message of Ephesians is unity. It is trying to encourage the unity of the community; both the community in the home and the community of the culturally diverse church gatherings. Today’s section from Ephesians reflects the feast’s celebration of deliverance from sin through God’s gracious choice. Mary was chosen to be Jesus’ mother and because of that choice, God prepared Mary for her role as “theotokos,” bearer of God. In preaching from this passage, I would try to be faithful to its tone, to the kind of genre it is: it is a prayer of praise that blesses God for God’s work among us. Mary is the prime example of what God has and can do in our lives. This feast does not celebrate her goodness, as if it merited God’s favor. It is clear from the doctrinal teaching and from this reading that God, as always, is the prime mover in our salvation. God is the cause of her and our goodness and suitability.

Our selection today is from the very beginning of the epistle. The opening verse addresses, “the holy ones,” or “the saints.” It makes the epistle more general in nature, rather than just being addressed to one community in Ephesus. These lines

also set the tone for the whole epistle. Why not encourage people to use this selection as their personal prayer, praising God for what God has done in our lives? The author seems to have a very specific work of God in mind, for this text seems to have been part of a baptismal liturgy. So, it may have been a prayer said at the “washing” or “cleansing” of adult converts. Baptism has delivered us from sin, incorporating us into union with Christ and the Christian community. God’s good will for us has been carried out through and “in Christ.” Salvation is already present in believers who have been blessed in Christ, “with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.”

The entire epistle shows the effects of baptism; we are in a new relationship with God. Paul expresses this new relationship by reminding the Ephesians that they are “adopted” by God. The reading shows how God plays an active role in our lives, by blessing and choosing us in Christ. We have been adopted, a dignity we did not choose for ourselves, but that has been given us by God. The sound of verses 4 & 5 has been the cause of many heated discussions over the centuries about predestination. It does sound like God has predestined or elected specific ones to be saved. But you cannot draw such an important issue from merely one verse. The New Testament has many other balancing texts which discuss the responsibility of humans to cooperate with the divine plan for us. This verse is not to be an occasion to restrict the gracious activity of God to just some few “elect.”

Paul (the authorship has been a question of debate among biblical scholars) wants to encourage us to cooperate with God’s intended plan for us. He is stressing the present reality of the divine redemption. We have the responsibility to respond to God’s initiative, but at this point in the epistle he is praising God, the first Actor in the drama of our salvation. God has freely acted on our behalf through Christ, who is the source of all unity and community, the One who unites the cosmos, the One through whom God has created a new world. What does salvation look like? In this epistle it is described as our being in God’s family together in which division among us has been broken down and we have begun a new way of being community.

As a result of our baptism, there is a power at work in us that can help us in our struggle against the great evil powers that cause division in the human community—the big evils like, racism, addictions, violence, ethnic conflicts, materialism, etc. Nor are we alone in our struggle against the lesser shadowy forces that cause

divisions in our personal daily lives—our impatience, greed, harsh judgements, insensitivities, etc. These leave us feeling less worthy of God like some kind of “damaged goods.”

My plan for preaching this day is to work around the notion of gifts. With Christmas upon us gift-giving is in the air. When we receive or buy a damaged article, we want to take it back to the store and exchange it for a new one. Similarly, the forces we struggle against in our lives, can make us feel like “damaged goods.” We may feel this way because of traumas from our childhood; neglect, abuse, unfavorable comparisons to our siblings, failures of others to appreciate our uniqueness, etc. We can also feel like damaged goods because of daily failures to measure up to ideals we have for ourselves about how good or successful we should be. We just don’t measure up to the ideal society projects on us.

Ephesians assures us today that God has a good plan for us. This letter invites us to remembrance, to remember our baptismal identity. We are not “damaged goods,” but adopted children of God. We are chosen. We may not always feel this way but we are invited to trust the promise of these words from Ephesians that assure us of God’s favor on us. As adopted children God will not let go of us. God has a plan for us. Look at how wonderful God’s plans for us is; see how it worked out in Mary!

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”
Jude Siciliano, OP

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