

Episcopalians are frequently a little skittish about Mary, the mother of Jesus. In the U.S., the Episcopal Church calls this evening the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin and it is often celebrated as a general feast day in her honor. Some parts of the church acknowledge her supporting role in the nativity and still others seem to just ignore her. Many of us want an asterisk by the word “virgin” as if we want the world to know that we are aware that the word refers to a young girl who may or may not have been sexually active, or that Jesus could only have inherited his Y-chromosome from a biological father.

Frankly, the whole conversation about Mary’s virginity is misleading. I tend to prefer the Orthodox church’s focus on Mary’s role. The image on the front of your bulletin is from an icon for this day that the Orthodox call the feast of “The Dormition of the Theotokos.” (There’s two words you can add to your vocabulary!)

Scottish Anglicans have long celebrated this day as “The Feast of the Dormition.” “Dormition” means “falling asleep,” a scriptural reference to death. There is a gorgeous Benedictine abbey just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem built on the site where tradition says that Mary died and where, not without some controversy, her mortal remains are said to be entombed. Two spiral staircases lead down to her crypt, where a sculpture of Mary “asleep” lies on top of a tomb under a pillared dome. On the ceiling of the dome above her is the figure of Jesus, surrounded by some of the great women of Hebrew scripture as if they are watching over her: Eve, Miriam, Yael, Ruth, Esther and Judith.

The other word, “Theotokos,” means “God-bearer.” And that’s the word that brings Mary’s earthly role into sharp clarity. “Theotokos” names the astonishing function that Mary played in the incarnation of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

What Mary gave Jesus was his humanness. On the back of your bulletin, there is a reproduction of the icon in our own Marian shrine: “Our Lady of Perpetual Help” or “The Theotokos of the Passion.” You see the Archangels Michael and Gabriel hovering with the instruments of his crucifixion and death. St. Michael, on the left, holds the spear and the wine-soaked sponge on a hyssop branch. St. Gabriel on the right, holds the cross and nails and yet gazes at the child

with adoration, as if to recognize the eternally life-affirming resurrection and ascension that lay beyond the temporary horrors of the crucifixion; a future affirmed by the golden glow that surrounds them.

The child Jesus has been frightened by the vision of his future passion and has run to his mother for consolation, losing a sandal in the process. Even so, Mary looks to us, her adopted children, with calm eyes filled with both sorrow and compassion, as if seeking to comfort to us in our own sorrows.

Even as she looks to us, Mary gently holds her son in her arms, pointing to him as he holds her thumb calmly with both of his tiny hands. Her hands both *calm* the child Jesus, who looks like a small adult, and at the same time *presents* him to us to convey the reality of the incarnation; Jesus the Anointed, true God and true man.

Now, the icon on the front of your bulletin that portrays what we celebrate this evening, is almost an exact reversal. In this image, Jesus holds the soul of Mary in *his* tender embrace and they are again surrounded by not just Michael and Gabriel, but by all the company of heaven, even as the church on earth mourns her death.

And that is a reminder of the promise made to each one of us. The promise that we, too, will be welcomed into the fullness of God's heavenly realm through our adoption in baptism. At our own "dormition," we will be received into the loving arms of Christ, held and loved and comforted.

Every icon and image of Mary, the Theotokos, the God-bearer holding her son in tenderness and love can remind us that there is a cycle to the incarnation. Mary is the way that Jesus Christ came into human lives. And the joining of human and Divine natures in her is the prime example of the way that *our* humanness is joined with the Divine at our baptisms, and in fullness at the coming of God's heavenly realm.

There is, of course, another implication to consider. In the incarnation, Jesus received his humanity from Mary – maybe from Joseph also, but without question from Mary, his mother. And she was perfect in the sense that she granted her consent to the Holy Spirit and was obedient to God. "May it happen to me as you have said," Mary said to St. Gabriel.

And so, in taking on humanness from his mother, Jesus inherited her willingness to be obedient, to give his own body for God's purposes and to serve.

Mary is impregnated by the Holy Spirit and when she discovers this reality, she sings. And here's a little of that same reality for each of us: On the day we were baptized, the Holy Spirit also impregnated each one of us with the presence of Christ! God is present in each one of us that is unique some ways and yet all of us manifest the Holy One for the good of the world and the inbreaking of heaven to earth.

Some of us bring new hope into the world for others, some give the world new moments of kindness or compassion or patience. All of us are capable of being generative in one way or another. God has given each of us gifts to give the world. Some may appear to be small gestures and others larger, but every single one of us carries within us expressions that bring more of the Divine into this world.

In the Eucharist, God feeds and refreshes the bodies and the lives that we have already granted God permission to use. That means we, too, are God-bearers and can rightfully sing with Mary: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" until we are exhausted, spent and ready to sleep in the arms of Christ who waits to receive us with the all tenderness of a loving mother.