

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

December 8, 2012

There is a good reason why we honor Mary as the patroness of the Americas. Thousands of churches in this country have been dedicated to Mary, a sure sign of a people's devotion to the one who stands alone among all Christian disciples.

The Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, which I visit every fall during an annual conference at the Catholic University of America, is nothing less than huge. You can see the dome and spire from miles around. Countless women and men from every walk of life file through the doors of the basilica each day. To celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is to encounter what it means to be catholic – universal, global, endlessly diverse.

One morning last fall, a tour group of Cherokee Indians from an Oklahoma high school spontaneously offered a chant in their native tongue, while a group of Vietnamese pilgrims made their way through the various individual chapels scattered throughout the basilica. A sense of extraordinary diversity inhabits the shrine. Like the patron for whom it is named, the shrine refuses no one, an ongoing witness that there are no boundaries in God's house.

On the sides of the great upper church and in the crypt, there are numerous representations of Mary: Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Mother of Africa, Our Lady of China, and many, many more. All of these are encompassed by the Immaculate Conception itself, God's first loving and bountiful gift to the church.

It is a promise that would come full circle: the Spirit that came upon Mary at the annunciation of that good news would be the same Spirit that would encounter her at the Pentecost event. She is twice mother: in Nazareth, mother of God and in the upper room at Pentecost she would again become mother – the mother of multitudes. Mary was full of grace because God willed her to be mother of God and mother of the church.

This Advent season is a time to remember just how much our waiting for the coming of the Lord rests in the company of the mother of God. We are all of us longing for the Word to come and save us. We say with the Psalmist, "Sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done wondrous deeds." That wondrous canticle of freedom began with Mary and continues in the church which nurtures all the baptized.

So it was done and accomplished by God in the work of Jesus, from the beginning of the ages until they are brought to an end. And when that last day comes, the multitude will be there because of the woman who made true salvation possible by her faith, a shining Magnificat, through the God who still wills us into life even now.

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