

# Holy Mother of God

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As we begin the New Year the Church celebrates the beginning of our salvation with the Solemnity of the Holy Mother of God.

Outside of the Mass, in the Church's Liturgy of the Hours there is an antiphon for this day that proclaims in amazement: "In the bush that Moses saw burning without being consumed, we recognize your wondrous and intact virginity. Pray for us, O Mother of God." (Vespers Antiphon – Note the ICEL translation omits the emphasis on Mary's 'intact' virginity)

Now motherhood is a very physical thing. It is more than just physical, but it can scarcely be separated from its physicality. As a man I marvel at the amazing reality of a woman carrying a living human child in her womb for nine months. I am also able to observe from the outside that the very physical nature of the bond established between mother and child is such that the mother feels in her body the pain even of her adult child. We can think of this when we consider Mary standing beneath the foot of the Cross.

In any case, when we honor the miraculous motherhood of Mary we likewise honor a very physical thing, which has become a vehicle of the divine. Mary's motherhood, however, is bound up with another very physical reality that normally contradicts motherhood, her "wondrous and intact" virginity. In this way, Mary's motherhood bears witness at one and the same time to the divine origin of her Son and his very physical human reality.

Mary's motherhood is evident, while her virginity is hidden. Nevertheless, her virginity is the permanent physical sign of the miraculous nature of her motherhood. Her physical virginity is the sign that she belongs completely to God and that the child to whom she gave birth comes from God. The very physical male child who comes from her womb is the very *Word made flesh*; as St. Paul writes, *in him the whole fullness of the godhead dwells in bodily fashion*. (Col 2:9)

Mary's motherhood is miraculous because her child is the very Son of God; not only does she conceive her Son by the power of the Holy Spirit, without the help of a man, she also gives birth in a miraculous fashion, in pure joy and not in pain, with the physical integrity of her womb remaining intact. If we want to speak of her "labor pains" we have to refer to her labor pains on our behalf as she stood beneath the foot of the Cross.

In any case, we can make a comparison made already by the ancient fathers of the Church: Just as after his resurrection, Jesus entered the room where the Apostles

were gathered, while the doors remained locked, so at his birth he left his mother's womb, which remained closed. (cf. Jn 20:19)

We must not ask *how* this can be; we must rather trust the words of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin, *Nothing is impossible for God.* (Lk 1:37)

Now let us turn our attention to the burning bush that Moses saw, which the Church compares to Mary's virginal motherhood. (cf. Ex 3:4-17) The flame represents God – whom no man can see and live (cf. Ex 33:20) - while the bush, with its green foliage, represents the Virgin Mary. Just as it seems impossible – and is impossible to created nature – that a virgin should conceive and give birth, so it seems impossible that God, the transcendent Creator, should live in intimate union with a human being, without destroying that human being.

Further, the vision of the burning bush is the single most important revelation of God in the whole Old Testament. This is where God first appears to Moses, calls him, reveals to him his name, and sends him to deliver his people Israel from their slavery in Egypt. We could almost say that the people of Israel was conceived in the vision of the burning bush and then brought to birth later in the crossing of the Red Sea. So also Jesus Christ, the Son of God is born from the marvelous virginity of Mary, and from him comes the whole Christian people, the body of which he is the head.

As the pattern of the burning bush is repeated in the birth of Jesus Christ from the Virgin Mary, so also it is repeated in the very reality of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, in which the human nature is not consumed by the flame of the divine person; so also it is repeated in every Christian, living in a state of grace, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells as in a temple; so also it is repeated in the visible signs of the sacraments by which God gives us the life of grace in the Holy Spirit.

Salvation come to us through the Body of Christ, born of the Virgin Mary.

When we celebrate the miracle of Mary's motherhood, we celebrate also the miracle of Jesus' birth, and the miracle of grace in our own lives, and the miracle salvation. What is impossible to created nature is possible for God.

God wants to work wonders in the life of each one of us. For our part we need to cooperate with grace, but that means that like Mary we must say 'yes' to God and allow him to work freely within us. To that end, let us entrust ourselves with complete confidence to the care of the Virgin Mother of God and Mediatrix of Grace, just as the very Son of God entrusted himself to her care, as a poor, helpless infant.