

December 6, 2009

Advent is a season of joyous hope. With much enthusiasm, we anticipate and prepare for the celebration of Christ's first coming at Christmas and we prepare ourselves as well for His final coming in glory.

How natural it is for us to turn our thoughts to Mary, Star of Hope, whose every word and action points the way to Jesus, her Son.

In his second encyclical, "Saved by Hope," Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "With her yes, Mary opened the door of our world to God Himself; she became the living ark of the covenant in whom God took flesh, became one of us and pitched His tent among us" (#49).

We so naturally turn our thoughts to Mary because Jesus gave her to us as our mother when He said to St. John as He hung upon the cross: "Behold your mother" (Jn 19:27).

Just as Mary's maternal care for the Church was evident from the very beginning when she prayed with the apostles as they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost, so does she claim each one of us as her son or daughter and help us keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus.

Some people wrongly claim that Catholics "worship" Mary. We worship only the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, we have a special veneration for Mary because of the role Jesus gave her in our behalf. She is mentioned in the Eucharistic Prayer at every Mass. We invoke her intercession daily in the beautiful biblical prayer, the Hail Mary. We reflect upon the mysteries of her Son as we pray the rosary.

We invoke Mary's intercession and seek her inspiration in the beautiful Marian liturgical feasts throughout the year. During this second week of Advent,

we celebrate two important feasts of our Blessed Mother. On Tuesday, we celebrate a feast in honor of Mary's Immaculate Conception. This is a holy day of obligation because it is under this title that Mary is venerated as patroness of the United States.

On this feast, we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary because she was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God and by virtue of the anticipated merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved free from all stain of original sin. Thus, the Archangel Gabriel greeted Mary at the Annunciation as "full of grace" (Lk 1:28).

Mary was the first to know the power of Christ's saving work. From her conception, she shared in the salvation Christ would bring by His death. Filled with extraordinary faith and love, she was able to give her free assent to God's call to her to be the mother of the Savior. As a child, I learned to invoke Mary's help in this way: "O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee."

On Saturday, we celebrate Our Lady of Guadalupe, the title under which Pope John Paul II named Mary the patroness of all the Americas. Mary appeared to St. Juan Diego, a poor, indigenous convert, on a hilltop outside what is now Mexico City between December 9 and December 12, 1531. Her message of love replaced the institutionalized violence of the Aztec culture and has been instrumental in rooting many cultures deeply in the faith.

The shrine which Mary instructed St. Juan Diego to have built is one of the most visited shrines in the world. Mary revealed herself as a Merciful Mother to all who love her, trust her, and invoke her help. She promised to lead all who would come to her to her Son.

Mary's first miracle at this site was to cure St. Juan Diego's uncle, to produce fresh roses on the frosty summit of the rocky and barren hill at Tepeyac, and to produce her own image on Juan's mantle. It is this image that persuaded the bishop of the genuineness of Mary's appearance and it is this image which is honored to this day over the high altar in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and in churches and homes across the Americas.

These Marian feasts, which we celebrate this week, are a reminder that Mary is God's gift to us. In God's plan, she is the mother of God, Love Incarnate, and the mother whom God chose to give to us. She is a continuing sign of the nearness of Jesus and the Father. She is the compassionate mother who leads us into deeper communion with Jesus and deeper communion and solidarity with one another. When the powers of darkness seem overwhelming, she remains the Star of Hope pointing us to Christ who is our Light and the sure way to peace.