

1 January 2021 Feast of Mary Mother of God
Homily of Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston

For many years now, this Mass on the Feast of Mary Mother of God has been celebrated as a Pro-Life Mass here in the Archdiocese of Boston. Last year we gathered at St. Clement's Shrine with so many young people and look forward to next year when we will be able to bring people together personally for a Holy Hour and a Mass to conclude the old year and ring in the New Year, honoring our Blessed Mother and recommitting ourselves to work for the Gospel of Life.

Sadly, this year-end has seen an expansion of abortion in many states and now in Argentina. We have likewise seen so many executions taking place. Tonight, as we formulate our resolutions for a new year, we want to recommit to defend life in a consistent fashion across the spectrum of existence from conception to natural death. Our commitment to human dignity includes our unwavering opposition to abortion, capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide. We will also continue to defend life by protecting immigrants and refugees seeking our assistance, by serving the poor in our communities and by a constant appeal to others in our society to see the fragile ties which hold us together as a community.

We must strive to be better people, to live our discipleship more coherently, courageously, generously, and joyfully so as to be able to help change people's hearts. Our commitment to the Gospel of Life is to work for just laws in our land and in our world, but most of all, we must work to change people's hearts so that there will always be a place at the table for every child that comes into this world.

We are so grateful to have Marianne Luthin with us tonight for this Mass. She is a true apostle for life and has been involved in every aspect of the Pro-Life activities of the archdiocese. We are particularly grateful for the work that she, her team and volunteers do for the Project Rachel Ministry. I also want to thank the Knights of Columbus for their unwavering commitment and for the ultrasound equipment, which has saved thousands of lives.

Today, as we celebrate Mary's motherhood, which took place under difficult circumstances, we want to pray for all women who are struggling in difficult pregnancies in a whole host of circumstances such as poverty, homelessness, addiction, violence, and all the losses brought about by the pandemic. We pray for women in these dire circumstances and offer to help them in any way we can.

We pray for birthmothers who made the courageous decision of entrusting their child to a loving adoptive family. We pray for those families that joyfully and generously adopt the child and make it one of their own.

We pray too for those couples who have been unable to conceive and long to have children.

We entrust all of these intentions to the loving care of Mary the Mother of God, and our Mother.

In most countries of the world, Mother's Day is observed in the month of May, which happens to be the month of the Blessed Mother. Some Catholic countries celebrate Mother's Day on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. But I would say that the Church's Mother's Day is today, January 1, the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. It takes place one week after our observance of the birth of Christ. We gather to congratulate Mary on the birth of her son, who is both God and man, Christ the Savior of the world.

Mary is Christ's first disciple who says yes to God and, in doing so, changes the course of history. Mother Teresa used to like to say: "Give God permission." At the Annunciation, God sends the Angel Gabriel to tell Mary that she has been chosen to be the Mother of the Messiah, and Mary, without understanding how all of this could happen, with great faith and trust, embraces the will of God and says: "Be it unto me according to thy word." From that moment, she was the Mother of Christ who became incarnate in her womb at Nazareth. In the Basilica of the Annunciation, there is a grotto where the actual Annunciation took place. There they have erected an altar with the Latin inscription: "Hic Verbum caro factum est." "Here the Word of God became flesh."

Nine months later, Mary gives birth to the Christ child in the stable at Bethlehem. After the miraculous conception of this child, Mary could've expected a more glamorous venue for his birth, but Mary is a disciple who walks by faith alone, always trusting in God's loving plan.

We begin this New Year by celebrating her motherhood and faithfulness narrated at the beginning of the Gospel, where she becomes the Mother of God. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus from the cross gives her to us as our mother: "Behold thy Mother." Today we rejoice that Mary is the Mother of Christ and our Mother as well.

The custom was, when I was a young priest, that we would wash the feet of 12 men on Holy Thursday at the Mass of the Lord's Supper. It was never easy to find 12 men willing to have their feet washed in public and in church. In my Hispanic parish, it just wasn't very macho. One year, one of our apostles, that is, a man who was to have his feet washed, had to work or fell sick, and at the last minute, I had to find a volunteer. I went into the church right before the Mass and latched onto an unsuspecting soul and invited them into the sacristy to join the other apostles. He had no idea what he was getting into and was very shocked when he realized what was going to happen. The interesting thing is that the experience of having his feet washed as part of the Holy Thursday Mass and representing one of the apostles at the Last Supper had a profound

effect on this man who, before that, very seldom went to church. That night, he was there because his wife or his girlfriend had dragged him there.

After that, he came every Sunday and became very active in the life of the community. He said that that simple gesture made him realize that God had blessed him, and with God's blessing, he had to live a life of discipleship and service.

It was not that he had not been blessed before, but at that moment, he realized that God was blessing him. When we come to realize how much God has blessed us, then we will begin to live our life differently. We will come to know that we are never alone, that God's love engulfs us and never fails us, even when we failed him. Hopefully, at this Eucharist we will realize that Jesus Christ has come to share our life, to wash our feet, and to invite us to be part of his family.

Each year our New Year's celebration has as the first reading, the first word of God announced at Mass, a passage from the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament. It is a blessing.

It is God's instruction to Moses on how Aaron and the priests were to bless the people of Israel saying: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace. So shall the priest invoke my name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them."

The same blessing was used constantly by St. Francis of Assisi and is sometimes used at the conclusion of Mass, but to me, it is very significant that it is the first word of God proclaimed as we begin a new year. We come to receive a blessing and to ask God to bless this New Year that begins today.

In many countries, the custom is to celebrate a "Te Deum," a hymn of praise, in thanksgiving to God for all the blessings that we have received in the past year. Dag Hammarskjöld once said the prayer: "For all that has been, thanks Lord, thanks. For all that will be yes Lord, yes." That is a beautiful New Year's sentiment.

When we go for an eye examination, we are happy when the optometrist tells us that our vision is 20/20. However, the year 2020 for most of us does not betoken good vision, but rather a challenging year that we are happy to see in the rearview mirror.

Roma Downing has written a book called "Box of Butterflies" in which she tries to discover the unexpected blessings all around us. As we end 2020, we want to count our blessings, even the blessings in disguise.

To me, one of the most interesting figures in the Gospels is Simon of Cyrene. There's not too much information about him, but it can be fun to connect the dots and fill in with a little imagination and literary license. We know that Simon of Cyrene was forced to help Jesus carry the Cross of Calvary. Like many people in Jerusalem on that Good Friday, he was coming home from work or going to the market, and he's suddenly grabbed by the Roman soldiers and forced to help a criminal carry his cross. How humiliating to be thrust into a public spectacle of this nature. I'm sure that he was embarrassed, felt put upon, angry, perhaps frightened. Scholars speculate that being from Cyrene in northern Africa, he was probably Black, and perhaps he felt singled out for that reason.

The curious thing is that what was the worst day in Simon's life turned out to be the best. I feel sure that in his old age Simon gathered his grandchildren and told them again and again about the day that he was chosen to help Jesus carry the cross, the day Simon became part of the Gospel story. The New Testament speaks of two of the leaders in the early Christian community as being Rufus and Alexander, the sons of Simon. Scholars have said that's probably the same Simon who helped carry the cross, was converted to Christianity, and raised his sons in the faith.

All of us have received blessings in disguise that have allowed us to overcome our limitations, have new and greater opportunities, be better people. I have a friend whose wife has Alzheimer's. He told me that this experience has made him a better husband, a better man.

Many of us, like Simon of Cyrene, have been forced to carry the cross that we have not volunteered for. We may have done so begrudgingly and perhaps only later did we discover that in those trying moments we were close to God and his love.

This pandemic has occasioned so much suffering in our world, so much loss, so much death. As we end the year 2020, like Mary, we want to ponder all of these things in our heart to try and discover what God is saying to us and how close He is to us.

We begin this New Year and the Church's Mother's Day, asking Mary our mother to help us be better disciples and more conscious of the many blessings we receive each day, even the blessings in disguise, which are often the ones that are the most powerful and make us grow into better people.

I wish you all a blessed New Year, filled with love and peace.