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Advent: Mary's Hour

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 1, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Advent is the season in which the attention of the Church focuses most naturally on the Blessed Virgin Mary. In our own country, the seasonal focus on Mary is furthered by the coincidence of our nation?s patronal feast, the Immaculate Conception, falling within the Advent season. As well as the most observed feast of the year in the United States, Our Lady of Guadalupe, lands in Advent too: In my neighborhood, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe is the only feast commemorated with fireworks and they go on for a good fifteen minutes after the close of Mass.

Advent is the season of expectancy as the Holy Father said during his Angelus talk Sunday, and we all await the birth of the Savior, but Mary was the only one who was ?expecting.? She was free from the stain of original sin, but not from the emotional or the hormonal or the social or the psychological anxieties that attend childbirth, and hers was an age when childbirth was a dangerous moment for both mother and child. This act in the human drama that we call Christmas can be seen in many ways, but it must always be seen first in a very practical, historical way, as a recollection of the birth of that child by that woman.

Catholic devotion to the Blessed Mother is one of our most distinctive characteristics. Why is that? Mary evidences what it means to be a disciple from the first moment of her conception. Mary puts herself entirely at the Lord?s disposal: ?Let it be done to me according to thy word.? The Magnificat, uttered by Mary when she visits her kinswoman Elizabeth, is one of the greatest of Christian prayers combining as it does the humility appropriate to a disciple with the revolutionary implications of discipleship. She repeats her belief that this great event of her pregnancy has been accomplished by God: ?The Almighty has done great things for me.? But, she then describes the consequences of this great event: ?He has scattered the proud in their conceit, he has cast the mighty from their thrones, he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty.? She is the vehicle for these events, precisely in her lowliness. The ?preferential option for the poor? is not something a group of Latin American theologians happened upon in the 1960s. The preferential option for the poor is ordained by God in his choice of Mary as the critical instrument in his divine plan.

There is another reason Mary plays such a central role in Catholic devotion. We first come to understand ? no, not understand, for its exceeds our poor attempts at understanding ? to appreciate, to acknowledge, that love is at the center of our own existence when we are held in our mother?s arms. In that motherly embrace we first encounter the closest human approximation of the unconditional love of God. There we first experience the dignity of dependence. There we encounter what we mean when we say ?the Kingdom.? The God who created us knows from all eternity that we humans are stubborn folk, that we are reluctant to bend our wills to His, and so he introduces us to our own salvation, which is His work not ours, by means of a mother?s love. Mary brings the savior into the world, into our world, just as our own mothers brought us into the world. ?To Jesus, Through Mary? is not mere piety. It is how salvation worked then. It is how salvation works still.

In the seminary, I recall a classmate suggesting that the priest?s vestments should be blue in Advent. Of course, we can?t just make things up as we go along. The penitential color of purple is entirely appropriate for the season: Only a sinner knows he needs a savior. But, that seminarian was on to something. Advent is a time to

turn our hearts and minds to Mary, the Mother of God. It is a time to consider the homely way God accomplishes His designs. It is a time to wait with Mary for the birth of Jesus.

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