

## REFLECTION FOR THE FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Virginia M. Ryan, Ph.D.\*

Associate Professor, Division of Liberal Arts (Religious Studies), Rivier College

I'm offering this reflection because I bantered with Brother Paul a couple of days ago. I told him that since this was my baptismal day, I only wanted something simple, a cake, perhaps, after Mass. Then he asked if I would like to offer the reflection. I said "no" (just like Mary would and as if I don't have enough to do right now). But then I said yes – to challenge myself to work with my own family inheritance of "specialness" on account of Mary and also because we Catholics have a rich inheritance of feasts, doctrines, documents, practices and beliefs that we have to make sense of and find meaning in.

The college has encouraged certain confusion about Mary and me. I was born November 21st, the feast of the Presentation of Mary in 1950, the year the Assumption of Mary was proclaimed an official church dogma. Each November 21st I have to remind myself that the celebrations aren't for me!

I was baptized Virginia Maria Assumpta and December 8th was intentionally chosen for my baptismal date. And, if that wasn't enough, my mother and father adopted two children, my brother and sister, and seventeen years after their wedding, when my mother was 39 and my father 48, I was born. (Remember that Elizabeth's pregnancy at a ripe old age was meant to be a sign to Mary that Gabriel was legit!)

The feast could be called the Immaculate Misperception in that many Catholics don't know what the feast celebrates. This is Mary's feast, and, at least in its literal meaning, has nothing to do with her son. *Time* reported with irony that Keisha Castle-Hughes, the 16-year-old actress who plays Mary in "The Nativity," is unmarried and pregnant. The headline read: "A Not-Quite Immaculate Conception," clearly merging the Virgin Birth with the Immaculate Conception. So, to get the record straight...

The Immaculate Conception is a relative latecomer in terms of feasts, being defined by Pius IX on December 8, 1854 as "the Virgin Mary, at the moment of conception, was preserved from all defilement of original sin by a unique privilege of grace in view of the merits of Jesus Christ." This was, as Ann Riggs reminded me, something of a countercultural gesture on several levels, including an "in your face" nod to a world of optimism and promise in the ability of humankind to lift itself up by its bootstraps and perfect itself and the world.

But I've never been comfortable with the designation for this feast. It seems to indicate that conception itself is defiling. It seems to give too much attention to purity, yes, sexual purity. Again, Ann and I were talking about this yesterday and I said:

"I was not 'conceived in sin' was I?" Ann asked: "But you weren't conceived in full holiness, were you?"

I was conceived in love as so many of us are. But it was an imperfect love between two imperfect people. And this is true of my brother and sister's biological parents as well as all of us here. OK, I'll grant that I was conceived in sin as well. But the sin is not sexual intercourse; it is the inheritance that all parents offer their children as they offer them the precious gift of life. They, we, are all born into a world that is graced and sinful. I think Gerard Manley Hopkins conveys this sinfulness so well.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; Bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Why do we then not reckon his rod? Why do we turn from love, from graceful and graced living? I listened on NPR to a man tell of an incident in his life when he was six years old. He and his friend were crossing traffic on their bicycles and he made it but his friend did not. He looked back to see his friend get out from under a car and stand up, his leg looking like an accordion. His friend looked him in the eye, and he got on his bicycle and rode away, not even telling his parents. This tug toward death, destruction, meanness, callousness, hypocrisy, and oppression is the original sin from which Mary was spared; at least I think this is true. But she surely wasn't spared from its effects. And I don't believe that she was spared from hard choices and the everyday, subtler temptations to say no to love.

It seems to me that the Church claims that God was with Mary, that God had always been with Mary, and that God would always be with Mary. The readings cannot literally reflect this feast because it is not scripturally based. It is a feast that looks back into the church's own history and the way that the people of God grew to know Mary in their own personal prayer life and the communal life together. But the readings do help me understand what this feast proclaims. FYS Religion students will know that, according to Michael Himes, grace is "the love of God outside the Trinity."

Hail Mary, you are full of love, God is with you, God has always been with you and God will always be with you. You are blessed among all of us and the child you will bear is blessed as well. God was and is with Mary from the top of her head, to the tip of her toes, to the child growing in her womb. She was chosen to be special. (No, I'll have to admit that whatever specialness I might have felt when my own birth story was told, pales in comparison to this story!). Mary's specialness is her openness to the fullness of grace, the fullness of God. And this living in the fullness of God's love, being destined to live fully in God's love is what we celebrate today.

As Brother Paul told us in his email, Mary, under the title of the Immaculate Conception became the patron of the United States in 1884. I think about our world, so bleared, smeared and smudged with our collective and personal sins and know that this feast will always help me remember the rest of Hopkins's poem:

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And for all this, nature is never spent;  
    There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
    Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
    World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

And so, we look for, we hope for a chance to find “the dearest freshness deep down things.”

December 8, 2006

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\* **Dr. Virginia M. Ryan** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Rivier College since 1999. She earned a Ph.D. from Boston College in 1998 (Dissertation: “Physician-Assisted Suicide from a Social Justice Perspective”), M.A. in Special Education from Assumption College (1989), M. Div. from Andover Newton Theological School (1977), and B.A. from Boston College (1974). Dr. Ryan teaches courses in Bioethics, Christian Ethics, Environmental Theology, Biblical Theology, and Feminist Theology & Spirituality. Before becoming a college professor, Virginia was a hospital chaplain, patient representative, and youth minister. She is a Board Member and Section Convener (Theology, Ecology and Natural Science) of the College Theological Society and an active member in the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Society of Christian Ethics. She is on the Advisory Board and Ethics Committee of Notre Dame Health Care Center in Worcester, MA. Dr. Ryan has spoken to various groups on such topics as ecotheology, justice in the Church, spirituality and sexuality, and bioethics. She lives in Worcester, Massachusetts, married to Neil Castronovo. They have two daughters, Elizabeth, 21 and Annie, 15.