

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2009 C

TAKING OFF CLOTHES OF MOURNING AND MISERY

Our first reading begins with the following exhortation:

**“Jerusalem, take off your robe
of mourning and misery.”**

These words from the first reading were originally spoken to a people who were in exile and in mourning for their homeland. But now, the prophet Baruch tells them that they can take off their clothes of mourning and misery because God is going to lead them back to their homeland. They can put on joyful clothes.

Sooner or later in the journey of life, we will find ourselves in a robe of mourning and misery because of a loss of some kind or because of some painful experience. When bad things happen to us, it is appropriate and normal for us to mourn and even feel miserable. But hopefully, the time comes sooner or later for us to remove our robe of mourning and misery. Unfortunately, it seems that some people make the choice of remaining in their sorrow and misery for years and years. I know a woman whose spouse died many years ago but she continues to be in mourning. They obviously had a very good relationship. She told me she doesn't want to let go. I can only assume that she is afraid of the emptiness that may follow. There is, of course, a big difference between that grieving person and one who periodically feels sadness many years after the loss of a loved one. In the latter case, the person has moved on but now and again experiences sadness—a totally normal thing.

Misery. Some people are miserable even though they are blessed with good health (physical and mental), loved ones, and financial security. You want to give them a kick in the butt and tell them to wake up to their blessings.

Moving through a bad experience

It has been well said that we don't get *over* a bad experience. Rather, we get *through* it by doing the tried and tested ways that help us to move through a time of loss and misery. Some of these ways are:

- Expressing feelings connected with the painful experience, e.g., anger, sadness, loneliness, hate, jealousy. If we tend to live in our heads, it may be difficult for us to deal with tough feelings like the above-named ones. We can't get *through* a bad experience without *dealing* with our feelings. Many people, including myself, have found journaling to be an excellent way to *name* and *express* feelings and thoughts.

- Talking to someone who will listen to us and not judge us or give us advice before we ask for it.
- Joining a grief support group if there is one available locally. (At our parish, retired therapist, Carol Gessler, facilitates a support group every Thursday at 1:00 PM in the church library.)
- Taking time to do physical exercise.
- Finding ways to laugh.
- Finding projects that bring meaning and purpose to our lives.
- Being open to new experiences and new relationships.
- Bringing one's pain to the foot of the cross, knowing that we pray to a God who is well acquainted with suffering and pain.

“Learning to value what truly matters”

In our second reading today, Paul prays that his community in Philippi will “discern what is of value.” Translated another way, these words read: “learn to value what truly matters.”

How do we know what *truly* matters to us? One good way is to look at how we spend our time, money and energy. We might *say* that prayer and spirituality are very important to us, but if we don't spend much *time* praying, it would be more accurate to say that we *wish* prayer and spirituality were important to us. We may *say* that material things are not very important to us but our checkbook may say something else.

“The Word of the Lord came to John.”

In our Gospel today, Luke says: “The Word of the Lord came to John.”

Many people think that the Word of the Lord only comes to holy people and they have no *expectation* that God may speak to them. Yet if we desire God to speak to us and are open to his communication, we can be sure that he will communicate with us. It has been said: “The master will speak when the student is ready.” Samuel’s prayer is a simple one-liner: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception

This Tuesday, December 8, our Church celebrates the feast of Mary’s Immaculate Conception—the doctrine that proclaims that Mary, from the first moment of her existence, was preserved free from original sin.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “*The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from the stain of original sin*” (491).

The above dogma of the Church was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854. As we pray on her feast day, “Father, you let her share beforehand in the salvation Christ would bring by his death and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception.” The Catholic Church also believes that Mary, due to her total cooperation with God, remained free of all *personal sin* during her life on earth.

The biblical support for this doctrine is found in the angel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary: “Hail, full of grace” (Lk 1:28). Mary was not just graced like the rest of us; she was “full of grace”—totally free of sin and totally full of God. Her union with God was never spoiled. The Church reasons that it was only fitting that the one who housed the sinless Savior of the world would, by the grace of God, be free of all sin. “In preserving Mary from original sin, God was choosing a perfect door for a perfect God to enter an imperfect world” (Peter Kreeft).

As we reflect on the immaculate conception of Mary, three other things need to be noted:

Even though Mary was conceived free from original sin, and even though she remained sinless throughout her life, this does not mean that she had no need for God’s saving grace. She did. The Catechism states:

“Through the centuries, the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through God, was redeemed from the first moment of her conception” (491). We might say that just as Jesus was conceived in a most unusual way, Mary was saved from original sin in a most unusual way.

Even though Mary did not sin, she could have. She could have said ‘no’ to the angel Gabriel or she could have said ‘no’ to God in other ways.

Even though Mary was conceived free from original sin, she was not preserved from experiencing the effects of original sin, namely, the experience of suffering and death (followed by her assumption into heaven), and living in a world where there is evil and temptation. Just as Jesus was tempted to do evil, we can assume that Mary also experienced temptation.

A striking confirmation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception happened in 1858, four years after the dogma was declared to be infallibly true. It happened when Mary appeared to a young, uneducated girl named Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France. When Bernadette asked the strange lady her name, Mary responded, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Hundreds of medically verified miracles and many other healings have happened in Lourdes. The Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on December 8.

Have a blessed week,

