

VESPERS HOMILY
14 AUGUST 2016
FEAST OF SAINT MARY THE VIRGIN

LUKE 1: 46 – 55

PSALM 34: 1 – 9

There is a story about a Nashotah seminarian who died and went to heaven, naturally. On his first day in heaven, wearing his new halo and white robe, he was walking on one of the golden streets when he encountered Jesus. There, walking toward him was Jesus himself. The seminarian was astounded, awestruck, as Jesus, smiling, approached him, stuck out His hand and said, “Hello, I’m Jesus. Welcome to heaven.” The seminarian, struck speechless, finally blurted out his name and said, “I was in seminary at Nashotah House in Wisconsin.” Jesus smiled and said, “Of course, you must be a friend of Mother.”

Perhaps that has something to do with the fact that the chapel at Nashotah is the “Chapel of Saint Mary the Virgin.” Nashotah was founded as a mission to the Indians in the 1840s. The Indians promptly left. The founders were three seminarians from General Theological Seminary in New York City. At that time General Seminary was the cutting edge of the Anglo Catholic revival in this country. Actually, revival is a misnomer; it was the introduction of Anglo Catholicism. The three founders were, in liturgical practice and theology, a bit more catholic than the Catholics. Hence, a practice of Marian devotions.

The chapel they built, after a few years of worship in a small frame building called the Blue Chapel, is of heavy stone. The walls are pierced with tall, very old stained glass windows of saints and archangels. The rood screen and the reredos are 19th century wood carvings from Oberammergau in Germany, including tall statues of saints and martyrs. The chapel has the scent of a century and a half of the very liberal use of incense.

The chapel was, and I imagine still is, the center of life at Nashotah House. Each day began with a service of the Holy Eucharist followed by breakfast in the Refectory. The day closed with Evensong. On occasion services were held at noon. On Holy Days, Evensong would give place to sung Solemn High Mass. At all services prayers were offered in accord with the Book of Common Prayer with an

additional “Prayer for The House.” The prayer for the saints always included a prayer for “The ever-blessed Virgin Mary,” except on occasions when prayers were led by Silas Ng, a seminarian from Hong Kong. On those occasions we prayed for “The ever-blessed Virgin Melly.”

The Virgin Mary also made an appearance at Nashotah House football games. Actually, there was only one game each year, played against the Episcopal seminary in Evanston, Illinois, now defunct. The game was named The Lavabo Bowl. The game had a certain notoriety, at least in Wisconsin religious circles. The sisters would come from the very conservative convent in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, one of whom played the saxophone in the Nashotah House marching band, a small but elite half-time offering.

During the game an icon of the Blessed Virgin, the Theotokos, was carried on the sidelines, often by one of the sisters. It was covered with a decorative cloth when the visitors had the ball, exposed to look with favor on the action when Nashotah had the ball. At half-time she was carried to the opposing stands to gaze upon them in silent sadness. Had Evanston been at all Anglo-catholic they might have been intimidated.

Speaking of icons, it is interesting, at least it is to me, that icons of The Virgin Mary are written far more often than any other, including those portraying Jesus. The oldest icon of the Theotokos, at least it is supposed to be the oldest, is one according to legend written by Luke, writer of the Gospel of the same name. Icons of the Virgin Mary are done in a number of traditional poses. It’s probably important to know that real icons always follow a number of conventions that have been passed down for centuries; there is no such thing as a genuine “new” icon.

An icon in which Mary, who is called the “Theotokos,” the God-Bearer, holds the infant Jesus, who is always written as a very small adult, on her lap, both of them facing the viewer is called “Panagia,” All Holy. An icon in which the infant’s cheek is touching that of Mary is called “Glykophilousa” which means Sweet Kissing; the most common icon is the “Theotokos Hodegetria,” Pointing the Way. In it Mary’s hand is pointing to the infant Jesus. It is the most common because it speaks to us of the role Mary played in the life and presence of Our Lord.

If you were to ask most people, with the probable exception of Roman Catholics, about Mary's place in the life and ministry of Jesus, what would they say; what would come to mind? It would probably be the Nativity, Mary kneeling by the manger, sweetly smiling at the Baby Jesus. Perhaps it might be The Annunciation, the Archangel Gabriel speaking to a frightened Jewish teen-aged girl in a small town about what was to come. Beyond that, many people would be blank.

They would miss a great deal. They would miss The Visitation, Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and the setting for the Magnificat. They would miss The Presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem at the age of 40 days. They would miss the Flight to Egypt to flee the death of the innocents ordered by Herod. They would miss the Passover visit to the Temple when Jesus was 12. They would miss The Wedding at Cana, the occasion of Jesus' first miracle in response to Mary's call to avert a crisis, a lack of wine. They would miss the occasion when Mary and Jesus' brothers and sisters came to hear Him preaching at the synagogue in Capernaum. They would miss her presence at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified, when Jesus commends her to the care of the Beloved Disciple. They would miss Mary's presence with the disciples in the upper room in the anxious day following Jesus' Ascension, waiting for the promised Spirit. Mary is present at the chief events of her son's life.

In her presence throughout Jesus' life and ministry Mary is living proof of Jesus' human nature. In her virginity at the time of His Incarnation Mary is the living proof of Jesus' divine nature.

Why is Mary pointing at Jesus? What is the summation of Mary's message to the world? What does her presence and silent witness tell us? Mary is saying "Listen to Him. Listen to my Son. Do what He tells you." At every moment she is pointing to Jesus, turning our attention from her to the Incarnate, the Word made Flesh.