

The Marian Apostolate

"Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it. Not only is the Virgin blessed, but all who follow Her as well. And who are these? All who hear the word of God and fulfill it." St. Bonaventure



St. Anthony & Immaculate Conception Provinces

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"Spiritual Motherhood"

'Mary is the mother and model of the Church, who receives the divine Word in faith and offers herself to God as the "good soil" in which he can continue to accomplish his mystery of salvation. The Church also participates in the mystery of divine motherhood, through preaching, which sows the seed of the Gospel throughout the world, and through the sacraments, which communicate grace and divine life to men. The Church exercises her motherhood especially in the sacrament of Baptism, when she generates God's children from water and the Holy Spirit, who cries out in each of them: "Abba, Father!" (Gal 4:6). Like Mary, the Church is the mediator of God's blessing for the world: she receives it in receiving Jesus and she transmits it in bearing Jesus. He is the mercy and the peace that the world, of itself, cannot give, and which it needs always, at least as much as bread.' This excerpt from the homily of Pope Benedict on the Solemnity of the Mother of God is reminiscent of St. Francis' *Letter to the Faithful*, in a sense calling us all to "Spiritual Motherhood".

The concept of Spiritual Motherhood goes back to the Old Testament. We read that God is like a loving father, a courageous warrior, a good shepherd, a mighty king, a passionate lover. But God is also like a mother eagle, a woman in labour, a midwife delivering a baby, a nurturing mother feeding her infant at the breast. It is used by St. Paul as well as the Fathers of the Church. After St. Francis' *Letter to the Faithful*, St. Bonaventure develops this theme much further in his meditations on the *Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*.

Eric Doyle, OFM, who translated the *Five Feasts* and wrote the introduction, says that St. Francis achieved a fine balance between the masculine and feminine elements in his nature, particularly between spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. Doyle states that every disciple is called to do the will of the heavenly Father and to pronounce the *Fiat* to his Word. By doing so each becomes a mother of Christ, and as members of the Body of Christ to assist one another to be mothers of the Word of God. This concept of spiritual motherhood is a doctrine concerning the mystical birth of God's Word in the soul and the vocation of every Christian to become a mother of Christ. Andre Cirino, OFM wrote an interesting article based on this and explains how he applied this to his own life. For example, one grace that he conceived was his vocation as a friar, which was carried, nourished, given birth to and continues to grow by the grace of God. If you are interested, the attachment with this is the article by Andre Cirino.

"And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of His Father Who is in heaven; mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example."



Marian happenings around the Provinces

The Assumption Village of the Immaculate

Convinced of St. Maximilian Kolbe's evangelical insight "to win the whole world; to win it in the shortest possible time, as quickly as possible" for God through the Immaculata, Friar Eric de la Pena gathered a small band of devoted parishioners from the **Assumption Church of Syracuse to form a prayer group of the Militia Immaculata**. The group began with 7 members who made their consecration to Our Lady during the First Saturday Mass in June of 2011. Interestingly enough, as Maximilian had foretold, the group quickly doubled in membership within a span of 5 months to more than 20 members. To date, they continue to receive new inquiries from other parishioners who wish to learn about the total consecration to Our Lady. As a result, the group has petitioned Marytown to establish our own village, the Assumption Village of the Immaculate in Syracuse.

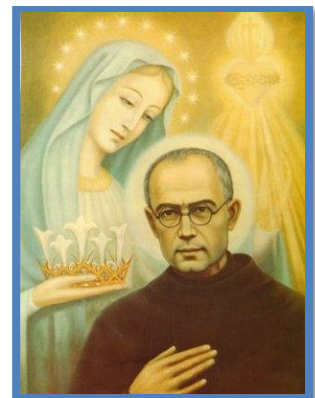
This new MI village has been meeting weekly since it began in June with varied spiritual activities with the objective of deepening the faith of its members and promoting their apostolic life. On the first week of every month, they celebrate the First Saturday Devotion to our Lady by praying the rosary and celebrating the Eucharist; new members also make their total consecration on this day. The second week of the month is dedicated to formation through conferences and video presentation; the group welcomes non-members as well to sit in with them as way of evangelizing others and promoting the movement. The third week is a prayerful adoration before the Blessed Sacrament; it is an intercessory time where each member can remember not just their personal intentions but those of others as well. The fourth week is spent as a fraternal meeting which reviews past events and plans for future projects. The next phase for the MI Village of Assumption is to incarnate their love for Jesus as Mary exemplified in her life by doing the apostolic work of using their gifts to serve the needy of the community.

From hindsight, it does not seem difficult at all to initiate and sustain the work of the Militia, for it is evident that it is by the hands of our Lady that the group has been guided since its beginning. They quickly learned from St. Maximilian's experience how to still make greater progress in this work : "to seek to become more and more and more hers to such a degree that we will enlighten, warm, and inflame other persons, make them like ourselves, acquire them for the Immaculata, so that they also become emphatically hers."

In **Ellicott City** the **postulants** and several of our faithful laity made their **Total Concecration** on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.

The **novices** will be attending a class on St. Maximilian Kolbe, authentic Franciscan at Kenmore on January 21st. The presenter will be Fr. Anthony Lajato, OFM Conv.

"Let us remember that love lives through sacrifice and is nourished by giving. Let's remember that not everything which is good and beautiful pertains to genuine, essential love, because even without those other things love can be present, indeed a perfected love. Without sacrifice there is no love. Sacrifice the senses, taste, hearing, and above all, the mind and the will in holy obedience. I wish for you and for myself the best appreciation of sacrifice which is the unconditional willingness to sacrifice" (Letter of St. Maximilian to Fr. Konstanty)



Spiritual Motherhood
by André R. Cirino OFM

Right before Advent in the year 1259, St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio had just completed an extended period of intense prayer and reflection on Mount LaVerna in Tuscany, from which experience he composed his renowned masterpiece—The Journey of the Human Person into God. Soon after this, he realized he had some free time to himself before Advent would begin and wanted to spend it on another meditative pursuit. So he decided through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to focus on the incarnation of Jesus Christ, choosing a most unique approach by reflecting on the liturgical feasts that highlight Jesus' childhood—Annunciation, Nativity, Holy Name, Epiphany and Presentation. It occurred to him that like Mary, a human person can also conceive, birth, name, search for Jesus with the Magi and present the Child Jesus back to God.

Eric Doyle OFM, in the introduction to his translation of this little meditative work, noted that the entire reflection deals with what is called “spiritual motherhood,” whereby every Christian - male and female - would be able to do what Mary herself did as his Mother. After using this writing for many retreats over the last several years, I have come to realize that St. Bonaventure is attempting to help us deal with the reality of grace in our lives. Let me explain by taking a look at the five liturgical feasts and the meaning they each convey.

In the first feast of the Annunciation (25 March—notice, 9 months exactly to Christmas), Bonaventure remarks that Mary said her “yes” to God and became pregnant with the Child. She didn't know fully what it all would mean, but had the strength to give her consent to God. What is this conception? It is what we Franciscans call the highest good come from heaven, the grace of God present in Mary's womb. With this conception Mary was literally “full of grace.” So each time the Holy Spirit overshadows us, we too conceive a grace of God. And just as conception is precious and unique for any woman, so too is the conception of a grace from God a unique, mystical moment. Bonaventure notes that Mary goes up to the hill country to be with her pregnant cousin Elizabeth perhaps to seek advice and learn from her. So too does a person who conceives a grace from God need to seek the advice of good people—spiritual obstetricians such as spiritual directors. He even cautions one to avoid those who might kill the new conception—a type of spiritual abortion.

How many times have we conceived a grace from God? When we received this grace, did we feel it stirring within us? Perhaps an example would help us here. As a religious myself, I remember almost precisely to the moment in my life when God called me to consider becoming a member of the Franciscan family. I conceived a grace and was pregnant with this call. I'll continue with this example as we go through the rest of the liturgical feasts.

In the second feast of the Nativity (25 December)—we all know the story so well—Mary birthed her child in Bethlehem. Bonaventure comments here that after a person has conceived a grace, one brings this grace to birth by doing that for which the grace was intended. He adds two synonyms for the word grace—gift and good. St. Francis in his Letter to the Faithful writes that all of us are mothers of Jesus Christ, and that we birth him by doing good. Perhaps Bonaventure's use of the word “good” is an allusion to Francis' letter.

A physical pregnancy is usually brought to birth when the fetus has matured or by Cesarean surgery. While the analogy of physical to spiritual pregnancy/birth may seem to limp a bit here, nevertheless a grace is brought to birth when we feel it is ripe/mature, or like a woman who schedules and goes through with Cesarean surgery. So to continue with the example of my call to religious life, this grace was birthed in my life when I did what the grace intended, namely, rang the doorbell of St. Francis Seraphic Seminary and entered the Franciscan formation program. What graces have you put into practice or birthed in your life?

In the third feast of the Holy Name (3 January), St. Bonaventure notes that his parents gave the Child the name Jesus meaning “one who saves.” So too when we conceive and birth a grace, then we

must also name the grace for ourselves. And just like a mother may birth more than one child giving each of them their own name, so too do we conceive many graces and possibly birth them. But do we come to the point of naming these graces, these “children” if you will?

My call to the Franciscan way of life was a grace conceived and birthed that has the name “vocation.” My “child—vocation” was an “infant” when I entered the formation program of the Franciscans. As I met with different challenges and obstacles in the various stages of formation, I realized that I conceived and birthed another grace—a “sister” to the grace “vocation” whom I was able to name “perseverance.”

In the fourth feast of the Epiphany (traditionally 6 January) Matthew’s gospel [2:1-12] recounts the story of the Magi or Kings who seek out the Child, adore him and bring him gifts as well. St. Bonaventure sees the three faculties of the human person—memory, intellect, will—as the three “Magi/Kings” within us who go in search of our children. Perhaps this is better illustrated by continuing with my example above. Whenever I encountered problems or obstacles on my Franciscan journey, I needed the grace of perseverance to operate within me to strengthen me to face the problems or overcome the obstacles that threatened my child “vocation.” My King—memory helped me recall that I had a “child” called “perseverance”; my King—intellect helped me understand why I needed this “child’s” assistance; and my King—will helped me make the decision to go and search for this “child—perseverance.” Once the problem or obstacle had been resolutely dealt with, I was in adoration of these “children/graces” functioning in my life and offered God gifts of thanks, praise, glory.

In the fifth feast of the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple (2 February), Jesus was brought to the Temple to be offered up to God, returning to God this highest good of all creation. St. Bonaventure describes our Trinitarian God as “overflowing goodness,” a goodness that is constantly being exchanged among the Three Persons as well as with creation, for God remarked at the end of each of the six days of creation in Genesis [1: 3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25] that it is good, the creation of humanity being very good [1:31]. And we know from Matthew 19:17 that “only God is good.” If “only God is good,” then each time we experience goodness—simply as Matthew 10:42 notes, sharing a cup of cold water or our table, or caring for the sick—we experience God. And within the Trinity, goodness is constantly being exchanged, overflowing from one Person to the Other. Then in imitation of the Trinity, we must let this goodness overflow to others from us. Gerald Manley Hopkins, aware of St. Bonaventure’s description of God, wrote in poem 155:

Thee, God, I come from, to thee go,
All day long I like fountain flow.

To hold on to any good would short-circuit the Trinitarian process. To let goodness flow from us in our daily lives makes God present. Moreover, Matthew 10:23 tells us that if we plant one seed, we’ll receive a hundredfold. And whenever we let some good overflow from us, goodness gets replenished and stronger in our lives! My “child—vocation” is more than fifty years old, a mature adult. At each quarter century mark, a celebration was had with family, friars and friends. They were moments to enter God’s temple gratefully to present this “child—vocation” to God. And God has blessed me abundantly with graces—many “children” to continue living my Franciscan life.

St. Bonaventure’s meditation on these five feasts from Mary’s perspective as mother can become the tool that helps us realize how blessed we are, how many graces we’ve conceived, birthed, named, sought out and returned to God. Whenever we are gentle, kind, peaceful, generous, believing, hoping, loving, we are birthing the child Jesus because we make goodness present and this goodness is God!

Copies of the booklet of this precious meditation by St. Bonaventure—Five Feasts of the Child Jesus: Bringing Forth Christ along with Eric Doyle’s helpful introduction—can be obtained from:

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