

ONE OF US

December 8, 2007, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Fr Paul Jones

One of the major doctrines separating Protestants from Catholics is that of the "Immaculate Conception." Stated simply, from the moment of her conception Mary is declared "to be free from all stains of original sin." As an ex-Protestant I have had to work hard to appreciate the elevated devotion of Mary that runs throughout Catholicism – yet I have come to a deep admiration. I am able to see her as symbolic of the feminine dimension of God, of her being the mother I never truly had, the sister I always wanted to play with, and the lover for whom we all yearn. And so on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception I cry out, "Don't take my Mary away from me!"

One of the monks told me that while Jesus is supposed to know what it is like to be human, he is so far above us; "but Mary understands, she is one of us." And so there is a danger that we might so love her that we elevate into being untouchable, like a "southern Belle" put on a pedestal. If Mary is pure from the beginning, isn't she totally different from those of us who are quite stained? Then how can she be one of us who understands what it is like? Not surprisingly, then, some of the greatest lovers of Mary have opposed the idea of the "immaculate conception" – such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther. Their mantra was the same as mine: "Do not take our Mary away from us."

The motive of Catholics is understandable, for we all tend to elevate our loved ones to the status of being incapable of doing wrong. Even the toughest of red-necked bikers will fight to the death if anyone even suggests their "mom" isn't perfect. And yet I find in Princess Diane the clue I need. Although I don't care for royalty and all that pomp stuff, yet I fell in love with the Princess. I remember pictures of her stooping down to talk eye-to-eye with Mother Teresa, of help victims of floods, and of holding Aids victims in her arms. That it. She never acted like royalty, but was one of us. That's why I love Our Mary, Our Lady. She never acted like the Queen she was.

In Luke's gospel for the day, when Mary hears what the Holy Spirit is about to do with her, she responds, "I am deeply troubled." Yes, yes. She feels as we feel, is troubled as we are! And so let us Catholics elevate her indeed, but let it always be with the clear knowledge that no matter what honors we bestow, she remains always one of us.

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