

Feast of the Circumcision

Dearly Beloved, today we celebrate what ecclesial tradition calls the Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord. It is, however, a celebration whose texts are of some historical complexity. We do well, therefore, to consider for a moment the content of the liturgical texts which occur throughout today's celebration.

As you all know, in the reformed rites, today is known as the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. This is certainly not an arbitrary intrusion of a Marian Feast hitherto unknown in the Roman calendar. The circumcision of Our Lord, as such, is mentioned only in the Gospel reading appointed for today's Mass Liturgy. In some instances of distant Christian antiquity, Mass used to be offered in honor of Our Lady on the eighth day following the Nativity.

In the liturgical complex we use, both the Missal and the Breviary call this feast day *In Circumcisione Domini et Octava Nativitatis* – Circumcision of the Lord and Octave of Christmas. But in fact the principal texts found throughout the full liturgy of today's feast bear strong witness to the ancient devotion to the Divine Maternity of Our Lady on this day.

The Mass, for its part, is principally borrowed from the Third Mass of Christmas Day, characterized by the haunting Introit, *Puer natus est nobis* – a child is born to us, a son is given – taken from the Prophet Isaiah. This is particularly fitting since today marks the Octave of Christmas and the final day in which the Nativity of Our Lord and Savior is celebrated with solemn worship.

But this Mass originates in the Papal liturgy celebrated at the station church of Saint Mary Major in Rome. From that source two of the three Mass orations (namely, the opening and closing prayers) were taken into the Votive Mass of the Blessed Virgin for the Christmas season. Both prayers speak of Our Lady as the vehicle by which the world has received its salvation.

In the Divine Office, however, the responses and antiphons all extol Our Lady's privileges and prerogatives in a marvelous way. As an example of the mystical beauty of these less familiar texts, the third antiphon for Lauds and Vespers says "That bush, which Moses saw, unburnt, we acknowledge to be thy praiseworthy and unblemished virginity: O Mother of God, intercede for us." The psalms for Vespers are those appointed for feasts of the Blessed Virgin and the hymns keep her constantly in view.

But it also should be noted that, historically, as paganism passed from the scene in antiquity the religious festival attached to the biblical significance of the Circumcision of Jesus became more conspicuous in the observance of this day. It is in this regard that today's celebration came to be known as the Feast of the Circumcision.

Beloved, in Christ's birth we must know that a marvelous event has taken place before the eyes of faith. The Old Testament and New are placed into focus: The Old prepared the world for its Savior – the New ushers Him into our presence. The Old was the type – the New is the substance.

In Genesis 17:12 and Leviticus 12:3 we read that eight days following the birth of a male child he was to be circumcised. Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews, and though knowing the divine origin of their child, all the same, dutifully brought Jesus to the priests for this opening rite of the old law. For the Jews circumcision was the rite of initiation by which a male was joined to the company of God's chosen people and received his name. It was for them, as it were, a quasi sacramental experience.

In giving Abram, our father in faith, the law of circumcision, God also bestowed on him a new name, *Abraham*. For Jews – from that time forward, then – the giving of a name had a spiritual significance. Obedience to the rites of the Old Law marked every step of the Lord's "doing His Father's will". But more significantly, His obedience to the law of circumcision had the double effect of marking the first shedding of His Blood in atonement for our sins, and, in the reception of His holy Name, the assertion of His mission as Redeemer of the world.

It is as Savior that Christ breathed into the Old Testament *types and shadows* their fulfillment and divine life. The rite of circumcision carried no sanctifying grace – it was only an outward mark on the body, a sign of God's promises. But with the Lord's taking human flesh from the Blessed Virgin Mary, God's promises to His people were fulfilled in reality.

In the circumcision rite of the Old Testament the Church has always seen a prefiguring of the Rite of Holy Baptism which effects, by grace, that which it signifies by outward washing: the cleansing of the soul and infusion of the deifying life of grace, the gateway Sacrament by which a man receives the life of God and is grafted into His Mystical Body, the Church. The effect of Baptism is both physical and spiritual, touching not only the body, as in the old Law, but the very soul – the substance and concern of the New.

And so, Beloved in Christ, we continue this day in celebrating the unfolding of the Mystery of the Incarnation begun on Christmas Day. Jesus, in obedience to the laws of nature, – He who was creator of all that is – deigned to submit to the very laws He fashioned, being born of the humility of gentle Mary. That done, He submitted through the obedience of His earthly parents, to the religious laws of the old Testament. What is more, despite His absolute sovereignty over all, He did not neglect or destroy the old vessels or tools or symbols consecrated by the Law of Moses. Rather, He sanctified them – He renovated them by pouring into them spirit and truth and grace. Already in the Old Testament we had heard the prophets complaining that the children of Abraham were of “uncircumcised lips” (Ex 6, 12) and that “their ears are uncircumcised” (Jer 6, 10). In this same vein Saint Paul warned the Christians at Rome to be of “circumcised hearts”. This is because Christ Our God has called us, not to the emptiness of merely observing ritual forms, things of the flesh, *but to the reality of grace*: deep, heartfelt inward conversion to God, and its concomitant, love of our neighbor for love of God. It is by Jesus’ most Precious Blood that we have received the power to *live* these realities of conversion which divine faith demands.

It is in the light of this grace and conversion then, that we have accompanied the Church in her celebration of the Christmas mysteries. Let us continue in our prayers and rejoicing in today’s festival by doing as Saint Paul admonishes in the epistle reading: let us “deny ungodliness and worldly desires” – to the end that we may live “soberly and justly in this world looking for the blessed hope and coming of the glory of Our Savior Jesus Christ.” For, Beloved, it is by our heartfelt union with the Lord’s atoning Blood first shed as an infant of eight days that we can find the grace and strength to overcome this world’s contradictions and temptations, thus moving on our pilgrimage towards the eternal felicity for which we have been given life at all.

It is through Christ alone that our souls’ thirst for hope and happiness is made possible. We must always remember that God has created us, not for the distractions of this present world, but to see Him forever in the vision of glory. Let us, therefore, in this season of joy, turn to Him yet again with confidence, offering our souls and bodies to God in the reasonable sacrifice of spiritual worship and trusting surrender. For it is through such submission to the Father that the Christmas mystery unfolds its truest secrets – here we may partake of the divine flowering of God in hearts which are humble, and thus able to return love for Love.