



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, August 18, 2013

The Feast of Saint Mary the Virgin

*Festal Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon John Andrew, *Rector Emeritus*

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OUR LADY OF FIFTH AVENUE

Today we remember our manners. We pay our dues. We thank God for the gift to the world of the Mother of Christ whose departure for God we celebrate. After a life-time of gentle nurturing of her son our Lord and hers, with obedience to suffering and misunderstanding from the beginning, Christ took her home to his Father and hers, body and soul.

Is it part of the Christian experience to consider her? I frankly believe it is and I commend the process to you. You can't deny that you will have history on your side.

Look at the earliest churches ever built. They were built in the basilica pattern, a building they were familiar with. The Romans were in the habit of building a large meeting room with a rounded apse at the end, for the throne or chair of the dignitary, or Caesar. That's why it's called a basilica: a place used by a king. The first churches were built this way. In the top of the apse they put a portrait of Christ, the King of kings, *Pantocrator*, usually a head and shoulders, holding the Gospels. Below him they portrayed his Mother, seated on a throne. Individual saints stood beside her; all were placed below the great picture of the victorious Christ. Inescapably the moral of the story makes itself plain. The Mother of God they named *Meter Theou*. She has the place of honor under her Divine Son. She gave Christ birth, and bore him into the world of you and me. She taught him to talk. She taught him to say his prayers. I wonder if it was she who first taught him the Our Father? There was no thought in the early Church that by honoring Mary, despite would be done to her Son and Savior. Christ would lose no iota of worship for having his Mother honored in this way and it a gross begrudging to think otherwise. What can make you uncomfortable and rightly so are the sentimental flights of fancy and the sugarcoating of the enthusiasts who took her role out of all proportion to her human state of creatureliness, and tinsel her with quasi-divinity. She must shudder at the attempt. All we celebrate today is Heaven's welcome of her when her earthly life was over. In the 17th century icon in my house, you would notice that above her body on its deathbed Christ her Son is holding her soul like a small child and taking her into Heaven where all the apostle-saints, who knew her, are waiting with the angels to welcome her. It is a magnificent poem of a picture; a loving, unsentimental, generous attempt at portraying what the Church has always thought about her departure from this earthly life.

Generous. If you were to ask me for a qualifying adjective, for a word which would encapsulate the concept of Catholicism, of which we as Episcopalians claim a legitimate and ancient part, it would be generous. Show me stingy Catholicism and we could find that it's not authentic,

somewhere. Have you never realized that we are Eucharist-centered in our church life because we can't help retailing divine hospitality—the foretaste of the Heavenly banquet, with our ever-giving, ever-living Divine host wanting to feed and strengthen us? With Him?

We welcome her place in the Divine scheme of things. If ever a person deserved our gratitude for what she has given to us all, this is the person, *Theotokos*, the God-bearer. Of course you can do without her. She would be the first person to agree, because she is the soul of unselfishness, of reticence. And she has been treated like that by people who profess and call themselves Christians since the Reformation. But look at those who never spare her a thought, or who are frightened, or inhibited at the thought of welcoming her, talking about her, asking her to pray for them. Not very impressive, always, are they? Quick to split up into quarreling fragments, which is the misery and the curse of a lot of Protestantism, cutting off its nose to spite its face. She makes no claims for herself; never did. She employs no PR firm. The hearts of people who are grateful for her gift to us of the world's Savior – hers as well – are the earthly home she has. And the quiet insistence of people who own the faith of Jesus who are committed to him, who know and love him, that quiet insistence on asking his Mother's prayers is showing in places like Walsingham, where now hundreds of thousands of pilgrims annually wend their way to her shrine in Britain.

Our task here on noisy Fifth Avenue is to see that a widely-balanced, full-blooded, whole-hearted, generous and Biblical faith is taught and practiced, stretching the intellect, demanding upon the time and the minds and the self-giving of those who love Jesus, in worship, in praise, in sacrificial outreach to those who need our help. We need all the help we can get. New York needs shrines; this crazy city needs such meeting places, silent and hidden from the heat and burden of the New York day. Well, thanks to your generosity, we have such a one here, the Shrine of Our Lady of Fifth Avenue at the back of the Nave and the same little enclosed Benedictine nun, Mother Concordia, whose statues of Our Lady are in Canterbury Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Paddington Green in London and in Westminster Cathedral, has created a wonder for us; has adorned her crown with a jewel left at the feet of the nun's statue of Our Lady in her own priory in Kent. Go and look at her. Her beauty is becoming a legend. People have told me that their prayers are being answered in a remarkable way. Better still say the prayer on the kneeling desk to her Savior and ours, and ask her powerful prayers for the ills of this city to be healed, for people to be reconciled to God, for the Church her Son came to build to be united in truth and holiness, and for yourselves:

I came to you Holy Mother
To ask your prayers for _____

You give us all encouragement to approach
You as your children, whose brother your
Son, Jesus Christ we claim, as our blessed
Savior and yours.

Help me now I ask you with a prayer to Him
On my behalf and for His sake.