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A Warm Welcome

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“A warm welcome requires humility, generosity and hard work,” Father Chris Wittmann, S.M., director of campus ministry, told thousands at the Frericks Center Mass concluding Christmas on Campus Dec. 7. Here's the full text of his Immaculate Conception vigil homily.

Scriptures: Genesis 3:9-15,20; Psalm 98; Ephesians 1:3-6,9-12; Luke 1:26-38

"In Mary is summed up among those who believe in Jesus Christ

and the first to be saved from evil and death."

So says article 7 of the Rule of Life of the Society of Mary – the document which describes and prescribes the life of Marianist Brothers and priests around the world. This one sentence contains what is perhaps the briefest possible summary of the two great Marian dogmas of the Catholic church, one of which we celebrate today. "She is the first to be saved from evil" (that's the Immaculate Conception: that Mary was preserved by God from original sin at her conception, in order to be able to become the Mother of God) and "the first to be saved from death" (that's the Assumption; that at the end of her life, Mary was taken up to heaven in bodily form.)

However, what really gets my attention today is the first part of that sentence that I started with: "In Mary is summed up the longing and searching of the whole human race for God." Are we not still longing and searching for God? Especially in this season of Advent, we are longing and searching — waiting in joyful hope — for God's saving action to be accomplished and completed in our lives. And I maintain that our annual Christmas on Campus celebration is an expression of that ongoing longing and searching for God. We are longing and searching for the day when the children of the city of Dayton will be as privileged as children in today's wealthiest suburbs; and when all children around the world will have abundant food, shelter, clothing, health care, safety, freedom, love, peace and the chance to live fully according to their God-given human dignity. We long for the day when our own personal sins, addictions and fears do not keep us from loving ourselves and others; and when we know genuine peace and harmony in our families and with our neighbors. We long and search for the day when race doesn't divide cities, churches and nations; when people do not lose their homes to unfair lending practices; when swords will be beaten into plowshares and nations shall not train for war again; when "the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;" when "the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to lead them."

Is not our Christmas on Campus celebration, with little children to lead us, one expression of that longing and searching for God's reign of love in our lives? Is our longing not summed up in Mary, whose longing and searching, through the action of the Holy Spirit, gave birth to Jesus, formed him in the faith, followed him as his first disciple, told us to do whatever he tells us, stood by his cross when he died, and prayed with his friends in upper room when they encountered him risen from the dead?

I believe it is. I believe it is just possible that Mary has a lot more to do with our annual celebration than we might think at first glance. I believe the Marianist way of dedication to Mary has shaped us, and still has a lot in store for us, if we dare, like Mary, to ponder these truths in our heart, and to believe that nothing will be impossible for God.

Article 8 of the Rule of Life gives us more to ponder:

[Mary] shows us the way of true Christian life.

Following her example of faith, poverty of spirit,
and attentiveness to the Lord,

we hope to reflect to those around us
Mary's warmth of welcome to God and to others.

Like her, we wholly commit ourselves
to the mystery of our vocation.

"We hope to reflect to those around us Mary's warmth of welcome to God and to others." Isn't this exactly what we are doing with the young people we bring to Christmas on Campus: offering them a welcome in God's name? And, doesn't our interaction with them open up a little more space in our hearts and lives to welcome God and others? But it is not all warm fuzzies: perhaps we don't appreciate how much a warm welcome requires of us; how much it stretches us. A warm welcome requires humility, generosity and hard work. I imagine that more than a few of us learned tonight that it requires great patience. It requires really listening to and respecting a person who may have a very different view of the world, of life, faith, love, family, meaning and hope. A genuine warm welcome means putting ourselves in the other person's shoes, being willing to leave your own world-view to see things from their perspective. This changes us.

The Biblical tradition of hospitality says that a warm welcome comes with great responsibility. It means providing a place that is just, safe and peaceful. It means caring for the visitor's health and responding to anything that would threaten the well-being of your guest, be it illness, bad weather, injustice or violence. A warm welcome demands much of the host; it can transform us. In that respect, a genuine warm welcome invites us into the paschal mystery of dying and rising with Jesus. Were we, like Mary, a little bit changed by the welcome we offered to God and others tonight? I hope we were; that is the point.

I also need to tell you this: At the General Chapter of the Society of Mary held in Rome in 1981, when this Rule of Life I have been quoting was written, those words, "Mary's warmth of welcome," were proposed by Father Vincent Vasey, who at the time was a professor in the University of Dayton School of Law. Did Father Vasey ever participate in Christmas on Campus? I don't know. But the fact that those words, "Mary's warmth of welcome to God and to others" originated from a UD person, have literally gone around the world for 26 years, and come back to us today to inspire us and challenge us, seems to me to be nothing less than a small part of "the mystery of our vocation."

The Marianist vocation is following Mary's way of becoming more like Christ. Notice how Article 6 of the Rule, an article about Mary in Our Lives, is centered on Jesus:

Moved by Jesus' love for his Mother,
we dedicate ourselves to her so that the Holy Spirit,
in whose action she cooperates with a mother's love,
may form us more fully to the image of her Son.

By our alliance with Mary,
we seek to assist her in her mission
of forming in faith a multitude of brothers and sisters
for her first-born Son.

We are human beings like Mary, in need of being saved by Christ's death and resurrection just as she was, though in a different order of time. We live in hope and joy because of what happened to her. She was the first to be saved from evil and death. And where she was first, we will be next; we will follow.

Christmas on Campus is not the fullness of the Christian vocation, just as warmth of welcome is not the fullness of discipleship. But it is a start, and it is a characteristically Marianist start. Longing and searching for God; a warmth of welcome offered to God and to others; allowing the Holy Spirit to form us more fully into the image of her Son Jesus: this is Mary's influence in our lives.

Let us pray that the good work that God has begun in us will continue. May our dedication to Mary and our alliance with her shape us into missionaries who do whatever Jesus tells us. And may we live in hope and joy, confident that through living out our baptism we are destined to follow in the footsteps of Mary, who was first — but not the last — the first to be saved from evil and death.