

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Dec. 7 & 8, 2019**

**All Saints Parish, Syr., NY  
Peter Daino**

### **ELDERS OF HOPE**

In the Gospel reading you can feel the excitement and Hope in the cry of the Baptist about changes soon coming into the world: Make Way! Make Way!

In the beautiful vision of Isaiah of how the Messianic Age will look, again we hear a voice of Hope rise up.

Today is December 8<sup>th</sup>, traditionally the day we celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It too was meant to signal the dawn about to break in Jesus Christ the Light of the World, who redeems the world, and ends the dominion of night, so that, as we sing at Christmas: "The weary world will rejoice for yonder breaks a new and glorious dawn."

Dec. 8 is when we celebrate Mary free of Original Sin. So how would Mary or anybody be marked by Original Sin? An old way of answering that question explains that Original Sin was sexually transmitted from generation to generation, from Adam and Eve, up to the present. That explanation is wrong, very wrong. It is bad science, bad biology, and it is bad theology.

Today theologians and spiritual writers describe the transition of sin from one generation to another more as a social or cultural transition of prejudice, and fear, and lack of self-esteem.

So, if we are to talk about a Special Grace in Mary's Life – as the Angel recognized in addressing her "Hail, Full of Grace" – then I suggest we look at the generation that generated Mary, Daughter Full of Grace, namely her parents whom we traditionally call: Anne and Jacob. Somehow that family was touched by a special grace, a dispensation from the prejudices inherent in every culture. And growing up in a Freed Up Family – free of racism, sexism, tribalism – Mary indeed became the Freest Human Being to have ever lived. That in my opinion, is what we celebrate on the Feast of Mary.

Why did Mary need to be the Freest Person who ever lived? So that God could ask her a question and her YES or NO would be Complete, so that, representing the whole Human Race, Mary could Freely Give a Robust Yes to God's question to the Human Race – Do You Want to Be Restored to Original Wholeness?

Thus Mary, daughter of Anne and Jacob, was visited by the Angel Bearing the Question. And Mary answered Gabriel with an Exuberant YES! Her enthusiasm for the Project of Redemption, in our parlance, "Knocked his Socks Off." Though angels probably don't wear socks. This brave, self-confident, young woman said YES to a New World free of racism, sexism, nationalism, free of all the isms and sins transmitted by the old social order.

Today we're taking a closer look at the Champions of the so-called Immaculate Conception, Jacob and Anne. Imagine these two kind and holy people. Imagine the love in that Holy Family where Mary was loved into her own Wholeness. Imagine as Grandparents to Jesus, how they loved Jesus into his own Wholeness. This suggests we re-imagine Holy Family beyond the nuclear family, and consider an Extended Holy Family.

I've entitled my talk Elders of Hope. I must admit however that as a young man I did not appreciate the Hopefulness and Happiness I saw in my own Elders. In fact, I thought they laughed too much. I wondered why so-called wise elders were always joking around and making wise cracks. Why aren't they more serious? My Sicilian grandmother tried to tell me, "Without Humor, Nothing is Serious." But I thought she was just making excuses for laughing all the time.

Charles Dickens wrote Christmas stories about such Merry Elders. We are familiar with A Christmas Carole about Ebenezer Scrooge and the efforts that went into making him Merry. We might not know that Charles Dickens had a new Christmas story published in the London Times every December. G.K. Chesterton noted these happy, hopeful elders and wrote an essay about this quirk of Dickens.

“It is currently said that hope goes with youth, and lends youth its wings of a butterfly: but I fancy that hope is the last gift given to us in old age, and it’s the only gift not given to youth. Youth is pre-eminently the period in which one can be lyrical, fanatical, poetic; but youth is the period in which one can feel hopeless. The end of every episode is the end of the world. But the power of hoping through everything, the knowledge that the soul survives its adventures, this great inspiration comes to the elderly. God has kept this good wine, until then. It is from the back of the elderly woman or man that the wings of the butterfly should burst. There is nothing that so mystifies the young as the consistent frivolity of the old. They have discovered their own indestructibility. They are in their second childhood, and there is meaning in the merriment of their eyes. They have seen the End of the End of the World.”

I used this Chesterton quote in our recent parish retreat, but since then I have realized it is not entirely true that the wings of the butterfly only burst from the back of elders. I would put it this way: If you have experienced disappointment, especially if you have experienced many disappointments, you have exercised your hope muscles. And if you keep rising up each time life knocks you down, then you have had lots of workouts with your hope muscles.

In 1999 the Marianists transferred me from Kenya to Malawi to build, open and administer a technical school for older orphans. With my fellow Brothers we started MIRACLE – Marianist Institute of Rural Artisans for Christian Life Education. When we asked the students for a school logo, they drew Butterflies.

Most of our students then were Double Orphans. When one loses one parent, that makes him or her an Orphan. Losing two parents makes one a Double Orphan. How I wondered did these young people recover first from the loss of a father, then from the loss of a mother? These were major disappointments, and certainly they had to learn to use their hope muscles. When I asked about this, nine times out of ten the young person told me: “My Grandparents. Because of my grandma and my grandpa, I learned that the end of my world was not the end of the world. From my elders I learned the power of hope.” That’s what the young folk would say, and anyone who has worked in Eastern Africa would agree: the heroes of the Orphan Crisis are the grandparents.

On December 13<sup>th</sup> Miracle will be 20 years old. More than 2,000 young people now have jobs, and are supporting younger siblings in their parentless families. Hoping through everything got these students to this Miracle, from seeming death, to new life, graduating, unfurling their wings like a freed up butterfly.

The pre-eminent figure in Advent is Mary, and this Giant of Hope is a teen-ager. In Young Mary is summed up all the hopes of Israel that the hungry will be fed, the lowly will be uplifted. The YES of Young Mary was for all of us, that **we** embody Christ, that **we** be a New Creation. This Advent listen to that Robust Yes of this young lady, our lady; listen in your heart, in your soul, however you can, and say Yes, with her, to change everything, to good, forever, and ever, for everybody.