

Weekly Message from Fr William for Octave Day of Christmas 2022-2023

Dear People of St Mary's,

Christmas Day fell on a Sunday this year, which means that the Octave Day of Christmas falls on a Sunday too. It gives me the opportunity to say a few words about this day, the Octave Day of Christmas ('New Year's Day' in the secular calendar).

Octaves were introduced into the Christian calendar by the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, in the fourth century AD. The first great feast day to be augmented with an octave was, of course, Easter Sunday. Christmas had to wait until the eighth century AD to get its octave in the Christian calendar. During subsequent centuries the Christmas Octave was enriched with specific feast days, each celebrating a specific dimension of Christmas. You've got the protomartyr St Stephen on the Second Day of Christmas, the evangelist St John on the Third Day of Christmas, the Holy Innocents on the Fourth Day of Christmas...

It wasn't until 1969 that the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, was assigned to the Octave Day of Christmas.

However, the title 'Mother of God' is a much more ancient title, one that goes back to the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. There was great argument about this title at the time. Some said 'How can you call a mere human being like Mary – how can you call her mother of God?' The objection was that it seemed to imply Mary pre-existed God. Others argued that it stands to reason: If Jesus is truly God, and Mary is his mother, then she must indeed be the mother of God. At the Council of Ephesus the attribution of this title to Mary prevailed, and she was declared dogmatically to be indeed 'Mother of God'. And as one of the ecumenical councils of the church, we hold this to be an infallible teaching, arrived at under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (The Second Vatican Council is the latest such ecumenical council).

Of course the phrase 'Mother of God' is an English translation of the actual title. The actual title is the greek *Theotokos*. It's a compound of *theos* meaning God, and *tokos* meaning the act of giving birth. The title literally means 'the one who gives birth to God'. *Theotokos* is sometimes translated as 'Godbearer' but as long as you hold on to the idea that 'bearer' here means the actual act of giving birth. There's no neat and exact translation into English. We've settled for 'Mother of God'.

The title serves to nail down an essential truth about the one whose birth we celebrate at this time – that he is true God and true human being, and that these two natures are inseparable. It's a declaration about Christ and the inseparability of his two natures.

Happy Christmas!



Octave Day of Christmas, Mary 'Theotokos' (Mother of God), 1st January 2023