Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, 2012
St. Mary Magdalene Parish

"The Lord said to Moses: 'Speak to Aaron and his sons and tell them: This is how you shall bless the Israelites. Say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace." (Numbers 6:22-27)

In the former English translation of Eucharistic Prayer II, where we remember those who have died, the priest prayed, "Remember our brothers and sisters who have gone to their rest in the hope of rising again; bring them and all the departed into the light of your presence."

In the revised English translation of that same prayer, the priest prays, "Remember also our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and who have died in your mercy: welcome them into the light of your face."

You are meant to hear in that expression, "the light of your face," a reference to the Book of Numbers, where it reads, "The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace."

On this feast of Mary, the Mother of God, I want to meditate on the beautiful blessing from the Book of Numbers, where the Lord wants us to look into his face and be blessed.

What is your favorite image of Mary, the mother of God? How do you envision her when you pray to her and ask her intercession?

We Marists favor the image of holding the infant Jesus. Sometimes, she is cradling Jesus in her arms. Sometimes, she holds the baby Jesus so that he faces us with his arms outstretched. In that image, Mary presents her son, who is reaching out for us to take him into our arms. In both images, Mary is like any mother who walks into a room filled with family and friends and presents her newborn baby for them to see and enjoy.

We Marists do not have any problem with images of Mary standing alone. We have such an image of Mary at the very entrance to Marist School. She is standing alone with her arms outstretched at her side and her palms up. That is a gesture of welcome and peace. Since the Society of Mary understands itself as being founded by Mary, the works or ministries we engage in will be her works and done in her spirit. So it is appropriate that as you enter the Marist School campus, you be greeted and welcomed by her. We Marists see the work of educating high school students as being the work of Mary.

But as I said, we Marists favor those images of Mary that show her holding the infant Jesus. We have two such statues on our school campus. On this feast of Mary, the Mother of God, I want to meditate on this image of Jesus as an infant Mary holds in her arms, especially the one that shows him facing us with his arms outstretched, and you are going to help me do this.

Parents, recall how you felt when you held your infant son or daughter in your arms for the first time. Everyone else, I want you to remember how you react when a mother brings her newborn baby into the room for everyone to see, especially if it is the first time that you will have seen the new baby. I don't care if you believe yourself to be the holiest of saints or the greatest sinners; everyone will react the same way. And how is that? Everyone will turn in the baby's direction; they may even get up and approach the mother, looking down and into the baby's face. Adults sometimes begin to talk funny and do silly things because they delight in seeing the face of the baby smile and laugh.

Now, parents, recall those moments when you gazed upon your infant son or daughter with eyes that were probing, discerning, and kind. Think of how someone who loves you will gaze into your face with eyes that are penetrating, knowing, and benign. That is a beautiful way of describing the face of God and how God looks upon us. Each one of us, without exception, was loved into existence by the Creator of the universe, who looks at us with eyes that are penetrating, perceptive, and caring. And we are made to gaze into this face of God. It is there that we will find our ultimate happiness and peace.

I want you to imagine being among Mary and Joseph's family and friends when Mary, holding the infant Jesus, brings him into their midst for the first time. All of us, from the holiest saint to the greatest sinner, would join the others in getting up, approaching Mary to look at the infant Jesus, peer into his face, and gaze into his eyes. Do you see the genius of God at work? Let me explain.

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What do we do when we offend someone? We turn our faces away from them. When children do something wrong and offend their parents, the last thing they want to do is to look them in the face. If a husband or a wife has hurt their spouse, the last thing either one wants to do is to look the other in the face. What did Adam and Eve do when they disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden? They hid among the trees of the Garden. Why? They hid because they could no longer look into the face of God. The one face that looked at them with eyes that bathed them with peace and love now became the one face they turned away from.

That is why, in the Old Testament, people were afraid to look into the face of God. They feared that it would destroy them. It is not because after Adam and Eve had sinned, the face of God had turned into a face filled with rage and vengeance. It is because they could not bear to look at the loving face of God. To do so would only intensify the hurt and pain their sins had caused themselves and the damage they had done to their relationship with God.

We see that very dynamic at work when Peter denied Jesus three times. After the third denial, the Gospel of Luke states, "The Lord turned around and looked at Peter." There is no description of Jesus looking at Peter with anger and disgust. Jesus turned and looked at Peter. The gospel reports that Peter "…went out and wept bitterly." In our sinfulness, we do not want to look into the benign face of God. So, instinctively, we turn away and hide. Consequently, we are left alone in our pain and sorrow. Sadly, it is only by gazing into the probing, knowing, and benign face of God that can bring the joy and peace we so desperately crave.

In our first reading, we have that beautiful blessing given to Moses by God. Listen carefully to those words. "This is how you shall bless the Israelites. Say to them: The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!" Who at that time could have foreseen that the face of God would one day become the face of an innocent baby gazing up at us and compelling us to gaze back at him? Again, do you see the genius of God at work? God is making it easy for us to turn back to him, to look upon his face, and once again enjoy being seen by God whose eyes want to bathe us in peace, love, and joy.

I note that Jesus took his flesh from his mother, Mary. It is safe to say that when looking at Jesus's face, we can imagine her features reflected in his. That may shed some light on the devotional phrase Catholics often say, “To Jesus through Mary.” Hurting or wayward toddlers instinctively run to their mom, whom they know will soothe their hurt feelings or comfort their "owies." From the earliest centuries, the Church has run to Mary, seeking her aid and consolation. In running to her in their hour of need, believers seek to look into her maternal face, which effortlessly blends into her son's.

Here is a spiritual practice that may help you. I suggest you find a statue or a holy card of Mary holding the infant Jesus in her arms. Focus on the face of the infant Jesus. Remember that this face of a baby is the face of the living God. Remember that this is God's way of making it easy for us to look him in the face and to gaze into his eyes that long to bathe us with divine mercy, love, and joy. Mary gazed upon this face. As Marists, should we not do likewise? Our response is to happily repent and make amends so that our loving Father may see in us what he sees and loves in his son. In this way, our face blends into his.

Let me conclude by anticipating the final blessing that will send us into the world at the conclusion of this Mass. Perhaps you will hear them differently in light of what I have just said.

> May the Lord bless you and keep you!
> May the Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
> May the Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace.
> Amen.