

Feast of Our Lady of Walsingham

Preached at the Walsingham Proto-Shrine Festival at
Our Lady of Grace Church, Sheboygan, Wisconsin
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by

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✠ *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

I. I am not going to stand here and rehearse for you the history of this feast. As important as Walsingham is to our Anglo-Catholic tradition, it would be as they say, “preaching to the choir”. I think if you are here for this feast on a Saturday in October you already know its history and importance to our Anglican heritage. Neither do I feel a homiletical call to speak to you in proofs texts from Holy Scripture, nor of some sweet spiritual ‘by & by’ notion of the Holy House of Nazareth, seen by Lady Richeldis, now being built in our hearts. I may wear lace on my cotta, but my style is not saccharine and lace! (Although some might call it vinegar and lace!) And as tempted as I was, I decided not to preach on Confession. Oh, I could. The old Anglo-Catholic priests that raised me said; you can always find a way to preach on Confession. For example on Palm Sunday- Father said “Palms come from trees, trees are made of wood; Confessionals are made of wood, this sermon’s about Confession”. Or even on Christmas- “St. Joseph was a carpenter, Carpenters work with wood; Confessionals are built of wood, this sermon’s about Confession”. And easily for Walsingham- “the Holy House was made of wood, Confessionals are made of wood”...well you get the idea. But that old priestly advice led me to think that in the present situation and climate of The Episcopal Church, what we all need & seem to be lacking is real

teaching & real knowledge of Christian Doctrine. Just what are the beliefs of our Church? Many seem confused, even those in high places who use titles like “The Most Reverend”.

We use to say they were the same as the beliefs of Christ’s One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Yet this summer when I received a Newsletter from a prominent Anglo-Catholic Cathedral (don’t worry bishop, it wasn’t yours), I noticed an article listing the Holy Days of August. I was amazed to read these words, from a cathedral staff priest, about August 15th: “We honor the Lord’s mother in her human role, knowing that some other Christian bodies are more extravagant. Roman Catholic devotion to her declares that she was conceived free of original sin and that she was assumed into heaven without undergoing the death of the body. Both notions are unsupported by authentic tradition, and have the unfortunate effect of denigrating the Incarnation by defining Jesus’ mother as not fully human.”

II. Well I hit the ceiling like a thurible released from its chains and immediately typed off a short response to the Cathedral priest who wrote the article. I think it ended up 2 pages; I’m sure more than he wanted to hear. So instead of preaching on the Doctrine of the Sacrament of Holy Penance, I propose to you that we seek to understand what the Catholic Faith teaches about Our Lady’s Conception and Death. For they really are essential in resolving the chaos of our present situation in The Episcopal Church. First then, her Immaculate Conception. This doctrine teaches quite simply that at the moment of her conception, which was a normal human conception, God preserved or removed from Our lady’s soul the stain of Original Sin. Now there are 2 reasons why this is

essential for Catholic Christians. But first let me say that it does not, as the priest in the cathedral newsletter claimed, make her less than fully human. Think of it for a moment. Even our Lord was fully human and He was conceived by the Holy Ghost. That doctrine we call the Incarnation. And let's not pretend by celebrating only her Conception and not her Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8th. I've seen this in several parishes which is redundant, because if it was not immaculate, there is no point of celebrating it at all. This misunderstanding should not surprise us. A recent survey showed that 65% of Roman Catholics thought the Immaculate Conception referred to Jesus' conception, not Our Lady's.

III. So why do I say this is essential to our beliefs as Catholics? First, and this is so apropos of today's Episcopal Church, because the Immaculate Conception preserves the very balance of Creation God intended from the beginning, with the creation of Adam and Eve. They were created without original sin. They had free will, but it was not yet corrupted by evil. So for God to undo what the first Adam & Eve brought upon us, the sin of rebelling against His Will, He planned salvation to be reflective of the first creation; it would again balance the male and female. No Adam & Steve in this plan. In the first creation he started with the male, now in salvation's plan he starts with the female, who would undo what Eve would bare, children of Original Sin. Now a new woman would bare the Eternal & Living Word, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. So the plan is a reflection, as the first Adam brings forth the first Eve, so the New Eve bares the Second Adam. Are you beginning to see why we as Catholics cannot go along with the changes they propose for the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony? It would cease to be reflective not

only of creation, but of our Salvation in Jesus. He is born of a woman. He is conceived without Original Sin being present. He can and does correct the Fall. He is also espoused to a woman. His bride is the Church, who is freed from Original Sin by Baptism. And so His Mother is ours, Mother of the Church. This doctrine is also essential for it has to do with Holy Baptism and even our current fight over the necessity of baptism to receive Holy Communion. St. Paul adheres to the holiness code of the Old Testament, that the unholy may not touch the holy without first being made holy. You can see this in the Old Testament, when the unholy try to touch the Ark they are zapped dead. St. Paul teaches the same about the Holy Eucharist. In First Corinthians he even says- “that is why some of you are sick and dying”. We first need to be made holy. Baptism does that for us because it takes away the stain of Original Sin. As this applies to the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, God first made Holy, Pure and free from Original Sin the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary in order to receive the Holy, Eternal Word. Otherwise the Incarnation would have utterly destroyed Our Lady when the Holy Spirit conceived the Son of God in her womb. That feast we call the Annunciation. It was a nun, who some 40 years ago, first explained to me that the Immaculate Conception was quite simple: God did for the Blessed Virgin Mary at the moment of her conception, what he does for each of us at the moment of our Baptism. And as Our Lady needed that particular & singular grace to receive the Incarnate Lord into her womb, so we need that same grace of Holy Baptism to receive Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist.

IV. Finally, this same principle applies to the second doctrine we need to know and believe as practicing Catholic Christians. The Doctrine of Our Lady’s Assumption. Let

us be clear, it is not an Ascension like Our Lord's. Our Lord ascended after His Resurrection. His resurrected, alive and glorified body physically rose to the throne of God's Glory in heaven. By 'assumption' we believe that Our Lady died in a perfect state of Grace and that God took her dead body into heaven. Again the cathedral priest was quite wrong. The Orthodox refer to this as the falling asleep or Dormition of Our Lady- God taking to Himself the Icon of her soul, which is her body. We do not believe this is an ascension like Our Lord's. For Our Lady has not yet been resurrected, but has gone up to heaven until the Day of Resurrection, as we can if we strive to live holy lives and die in the state of grace. This is why we pray for a holy death, or as the Great Litany says "save us from dying suddenly and unaware". The reason why we must hold our Lady's Assumption as essential is again because God made her body the new Eve, without original sin, pure and holy to be His mother. Yes God has a mother- we therefore call Mary the Theotokos, the Greek word for 'Mother of God'. This is a far more exalted place of honor in the hierarchy of the Church than priests or bishops or even presiding bishops! A priest's body is an Icon of the physical Incarnate Jesus, the Second Adam. A woman finds her iconography in the Blessed Virgin Mary the second Eve, who is Mother of God and Mother of the Church. Thus even in this doctrine the complementarity of Creation is maintained: Adam & Eve, Jesus and His Bride the Church. If the priest is not an icon of the Incarnate Body of Jesus, the relationship fails to be complimentary, it would be same-sexed, not God's plan of Salvation, not a reflection of creation. So the Doctrine of Our Lady, held rightly & taught faithfully prevents Anglo-Catholics from going down those dangerous paths that have unilaterally changed Holy Orders and now propose to

change Holy Matrimony. We are witnessing in our own lifetime, that if these paths are pursued, they will corrupt the whole system of God's Grace & Salvation. Yet if we will boldly confess the clear Catholic doctrine of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception and Her Glorious Assumption the work of redemption will continue to bring souls to Holy Baptism & Holy Communion, & into the blessed company of all faithful people.

Let this be our Walsingham witness, that renewed in the waters from the well of that Holy House, we are made mindful of our Baptism and its necessity for Salvation's New Creation. In celebrating this Feast of Our Lady of Walsingham we call our church back to the simple & clear teaching of Mary's Immaculate Conception & her Glorious Assumption. And with the grace of regularly receiving Our Lord's Body & Blood in Holy Communion, we know even more grace awaits those who seek a Holy & Saintly life like Our Lady's. So yes, by all means, get yourself to Confession. And dare I say- because this pulpit is made of wood!

✠ *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*