

Father Matthew Jacobson
8 December 2022
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

The Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Genesis 3:8–15, 20
Psalm 98:1–6
Ephesians 1:3–6, 11–12
Luke 1:26–38

In September, the Vergers Guild of the Episcopal Church held their annual conference in New York. While in town, they visited a few churches and chose Saint Mary's as one of the parishes to come and see.

The scaffolding in front of the church had come down a few months earlier, after blocking our façade for years, so I wanted to make sure to include this in the tour.

After giving a little background on the parish, we went outside to have a look. One of the curiosities I pointed out was a closed door that's between a statue of our Lady and another depiction of her just higher up on the façade.

There were some quizzical looks among the group. Then I pointed out how the closed door was a symbol of Mary's perpetual virginity. More quizzical looks. And, well, some giggles.

A 12th century hymn for the Conception of Mary, an older name for today's feast, before an emphasis on the immaculate took hold, connects this symbolism to Jesus:

O Mary, the shut door
That nobody opened,
That prince, who passed through,
Was God and man.¹

Back to the tour. In addition to giggles, others were quick to take out their phones and snap a picture of this depiction of the door. Some stepped off onto 46th Street with such enthusiasm that I had to make sure they didn't get hit by a car.

¹ As translated into English by José María Salvador-González, "The Symbol of Door as Mary in Images of the Annunciation of the 14th -15th centuries," *Fenestella*, II (2021): 99.

Though, nobody in this group, from all across the U.S., got particularly up in arms about the theology of Mary remaining a virgin perpetually after the birth of Christ. Maybe they were just being polite.

I tried to make the point that when the first Solemn Mass was held here, in this our 2nd parish church home, on this day in 1895, the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of New York were very different places than they are now. This was making a striking statement in 1895, right out front, to the rest of the Diocese and to the city about who we are.

Bishop Dietsche, the current Bishop of this Diocese, at least for a little while longer, was recently here for All Saints' Day. As we were walking through the procession beforehand, he noted how comfortable he was since, in his words, we're not the only ones that do this sort of stuff these days.

He's right. In a sense. But, maybe not completely. For example, I don't think he was ready for how many times we were going to ask him to bow at the statue of Our Lady during the procession. If anyone's curious, six. He was a good sport about it all.

Nevertheless, I understand the Bishop's point, at least in some ways. The wider church has caught up to Saint Mary's a bit since the nineteenth century.

And today's feast, even in the more immaculate sense, in which Mary is said to have received a special grace from the moment of her conception that kept her immune from the stain of original sin, well, even it isn't terribly controversial to celebrate, despite most Episcopal parishes not going anywhere near it.

In an agreed statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission in 2004, it's noted how this does create problems for some Anglicans. It isn't in the Bible, that's true. It's why our Gospel Lesson was something else: the Annunciation of Our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

But, the Commission goes on to note that when the Immaculate Conception is "understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of hope and grace, [it] can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures and the ancient common traditions."²

² Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 2, 78.

The Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware also does a good job summing up the issue from an Eastern perspective. Most Eastern theologians tend not to support the “immaculate” understanding, but Bp. Ware says that it falls within the “realm of theological opinion” and therefore individual members of the Orthodox Church would be free to believe in it. At least without the fear of being labeled a heretic.³

The Eastern Church does celebrate the Feast of the Conception. As I mentioned, this is an older name for it, which is based on seeing Mary’s conception as miraculous due the advanced age of Mary’s mother, St. Anne, with obvious parallels to a few biblical stories.

The “immaculate” interpretation, however, really boils down to how one understands original sin, a concept well entrenched in the West since the time of St. Augustine, though not so much in the East.

Simply put, if everyone inherits the stain of guilt from that original sin in Eden, as descendants of Adam and Eve, then such a special grace for Mary, can make some sense. Anyway, find me at the reception to talk more about these nuances over a drink.

It just seems that these days it isn’t the type of thing that many would be willing to go to the mat over. At least, not as many as in 1870, when the first parish church, on the other side of what’s now Times Square, was dedicated on this day.

And, so, some of the things that would have been striking about Saint Mary’s, or even a bit shocking, in the 19th century, maybe just aren’t now. But, perhaps, the fact that we’re here on a Thursday night, with our doors wide open, in the middle of Times Square, has something to do with what is most striking or radical about Saint Mary’s now. It’s almost counter-cultural in this day and age.

Our doors are open every day for anyone to wander in off of the streets and encounter God, by passing through the doors of Saint Mary’s.

So, it’s worth noting that, in addition to the closed door, an open door has also long been used as a symbol for Our Lady. One way of looking at the open-door metaphor can be to see Mary as open to us. Available. Inviting. Waiting to intercede on our behalf.

³ Ware, Timothy, *The Orthodox Church* (New York, Penguin Putnam Inc., 1997), 259-260.

The most important example of Mary's openness, of course, is in today's Gospel lesson, the Annunciation. She was open to what God was asking of her. She said yes. Her fiat: "be it unto me according to thy word."

José María Salvador-González, from Madrid, published a study last year where he looked at the Marian symbolism of doors in 14th-15th century paintings of the Annunciation.⁴

He notes that many of these artists, including Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, and several others, found ways to incorporate both imagery of a closed as well as an open door in their Annunciations.

The paintings all have the angel Gabriel addressing Mary. Often, Mary is either adjacent to or partially in front of a door, making a connection with her proximity to it. Sometimes there are two doors, one open and one closed. But, other times, there's a door that's slightly ajar, and there's also an example of a door shaded in a way where it could be interpreted as closed or, perhaps, open.

The idea of having both the closed door and the open door, at the same time, seems somewhat Anglican to me in that it's finding a way to incorporate both ideas.

For us, I'm thinking about the closed door in terms of some of the older traditions we hold onto here and some teachings, like what's represented by the closed door on our façade or the immaculate conception, that we're flexible enough to incorporate, but in a way that doesn't close the door on anyone either. The door is open too.

The open door: having our doors open, for others to walk through and encounter Jesus; being open to God, following the example that Mary gave us by saying yes; being open to letting God in and listening to where we're being called.

Of course, the open door can also be a reminder of Mary's openness to us.

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

⁴ José María Salvador-González, "The Symbol of Door as Mary in Images of the Annunciation of the 14th -15th centuries," 93-110.