

Assumption

August 15, 2010

Cathedral

5:00 p.m. (with a baptism) and 10:00 a.m.

Elizabeth said to Mary with a loud voice: **“The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby stirred in my womb for joy.”**

Ah, contagious joy! Mary and Elizabeth meet, and Mary’s joy becomes Elizabeth’s joy, which becomes...well, even the baby in her womb caught the joy.

Can’t the joy of our faith become contagious?

I suggest that a good number of Catholics don’t even know what we celebrate on the Assumption: at the end of her earthly life, Mary enters the joy of God in heaven, and by the favor of her Son’s redemption of all of us, herself included—yes, Mary is in heaven, both body and soul.

And, frankly, I confess that this feast of Mary—her Assumption—didn’t mean much to me for the longest time. All that changed on another August 15th, exactly thirty years ago, on top of a lovely mountain in Italy.

In 1980 I was finishing my graduate work in Rome. Earlier in the year I had learned that the residence for American priests studying in Rome would close during that month of August. It was my final few months in school, and the month of August would be pivotal. I had to write the final chapter of my thesis, my dissertation, and then get back to Tennessee by Christmas time. I needed to find a place to live, and work, for that month of August.

About 60 miles from Rome there is Benedictine monastery for sisters (about twenty of them) on top of a mountain named “Montefiore,” that is, mountain of flowers. Centuries old, the monastery hid Jews there during the World War II occupation of that area. That monastery needed a “cappelano,” that is, a chaplain, for the month of August, and I needed a place to live. It was an ideal fit! Each morning I presided at Mass in Italian, preaching a brief homily (with one of the nuns reviewing the homily for the next day the evening before). I lived in the chaplain’s quarters—with a large window opening out into the exquisite Italian countryside, with mountains in the

distance and six or seven towns sprinkled over the vista. My desk looked out over the countryside. It couldn't have been a better setting for work.

The month of August went smoothly, quietly—until the morning of August 15th. In the early hours of the morning townspeople walked up the mountain to join in the celebrations for Mary through the day. Everyone brought garden-grown flowers for the festivities. Throughout the day *everyone* was singing, and the sisters prepared a wonderful feast—albeit simple—with homemade red sauce for the pasta, fresh bread, and varied cheeses. As I celebrated Mass that morning, from the altar I could look out the front doors of the chapel—the doors open—and fir trees lined the walkway down the mountain. That evening the sisters invited me to join them on their outside patio overlooking the countryside. We ate ice cream on the stick, and in the night we watched as each of the small towns in the far distance was having a procession through the streets of the town in honor of Mary, carrying her statue. Fireworks lit up the sky in each of the towns.

Ah, contagious joy! Those Italians—few of them knew the details of what we are celebrating specifically on this feast. But, as the church's prayer says today, they *experienced* that Mary **“is a sign of hope and comfort for your people on their pilgrim way.”**

We heard in the Gospel Mary's song—called the *“Magnificat”*—and she rejoices in God's plan. As one parishioner here put it, it's like a Ferris Wheel, in which those who are truly poor, and lowly, and hungry end up on the top of the wheel, filled with good things and blessings. Mary saw her life like that, and we celebrate that now she enjoys the glory of heaven.

“Blessed is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled.”

Yes, joy can be contagious! Thirty years ago I saw that those Italians knew how to celebrate this feast, and they did so with joy. May we catch that joy in our faith, and live it on our pilgrimage!