

What are we celebrating today (tomorrow) and why do we celebrate it on January 1? January 1 is the eighth day of Christmas and it was the day on which Jesus was named and circumcised according to Jewish law. There has been a feast in honor of the Maternity of Mary celebrated on January 1 in the Latin (Roman) church since at least the seventh century. For a brief period of time in the twentieth century the Maternity of Mary was celebrated separately in October but Saint Paul VI moved it back to January 1 in 1969. I will come back to the January connection in a while.

When we celebrate the motherhood of Mary, what is it we are celebrating? In 431, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Council of Ephesus definitively declared that from the moment of his conception in Mary's womb, Jesus was fully human and fully divine, making Mary the Mother of God or the "theotokos", the God-bearer. When we celebrate Mary according to this title, we are acknowledging who Jesus is—God incarnate.

As I mentioned, for a while (fifty-five years), the Motherhood of Mary was celebrated outside of the Christmas season until Paul VI moved it back. The celebration of the motherhood of Mary on the octave day of Christmas along with Jesus' circumcision and naming emphasizes the role Mary played in God's plan for our salvation. Had Mary said "no" to the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation, salvation history would have looked very different; so while we are really focusing on Jesus' identity as the divine son of God who freely chose to become man and save us, we are at the same time honoring Mary for her participation in God's plan for our salvation.

There is a little bit more to January 1 though. The tradition of setting aside a day to give thanks to God for the blessings in our lives at the beginning of the year is very ancient. We could probably argue it goes back to the seventh day in the book of Genesis but there are more specific details about this in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. This is not just a Judeo-Christian practice though. There are records that the pre-Christian ancient Romans set aside the first day of the year to give thanks to their god Janus—from which the month January takes its name. Janus was the god of new beginnings.

Aren't Mary and Jesus also new beginnings? Mary is the new Eve who gave birth to the new Adam. The original Adam and Eve participated in the downfall of the human race into sin. Jesus, with the willing cooperation of his mother Mary, gives us a fresh start. Jesus redeemed and saved us and reopened the gates of heaven for us. Mary was the instrument through which God chose to put this rescue mission into motion.

Isn't that worth setting aside some time at the beginning of the new year to thank Jesus and his mother for the sacrifices they both made on our behalf?