

Immaculate Conception “Battling Dragons”

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I love that many statues of Mary depict her with a serpent squashed under her foot. Have you seen these statues? It is a great way of celebrating her identity as the Immaculate Conception. This feast day celebrates that Mary was preserved from sin from the moment of her conception by the future merits of her son Jesus. And so, if you are wondering why there is a serpent under her foot in a number of traditional paintings and statues of her, it is linked to the story in Genesis from our first reading. Eve was conquered by the cunning of the serpent. Mary was triumphant over the power of sin in this world and so the serpent is forever squished under her foot. In our first reading, Eve said “no” to God and was thus conquered by the serpent. In our Gospel reading, Mary filled with grace says “yes” to the angel Gabriel, and the ancient foe is defeated as a result. By accepting her role as the mother of our Lord, Mary sets the stage by which Jesus unites our humanity to his divinity, making us his brothers and sisters by grace. This makes Mary our mother too by grace. And what is the best advice our mother in faith gives us in all of the Gospels? The best words of advice are the last words we hear from her in the New Testament found in the Gospel of St. John, where she tells the servants at the marriage at Cana to, “Do whatever Jesus tells you”. Good advice! Again, everything about Mary points to Jesus.

However, I want to focus on that traditional image of the Immaculate Conception crushing the serpent because I think Mary gives anyone who has struggled with the powers of evil in this world real hope. You see, I think the little snake you see in these statues do not do the serpent justice. I am a big Tolkien fan. One of my favorite books as a boy was “the Hobbit”. Tolkien was a faithful Catholic and loved to weave Catholic ideas into his stories. And so, the elves appear to look a lot like angels. The orcs are described as fallen elves, just like demons

can be thought of as fallen angels. Gandalf is fashioned after the prophet Samuel in the Book of Kings. Remember it was Samuel who visited Bethlehem to ask Jesse to line up his sons to determine who should be king. It was the youngest and smallest of them that he anointed king, the shepherd David. David of course was given the impossible task of facing Goliath and this imagery isn't lost on you when Bilbo converses politely with the dragon Smaug, quietly identifying the flaw in the dragon's armor in the process. You see, from Tolkien's point of view, the serpent spoken about in the bible is more like the dragon Smaug than the little snake we see in these statues of Mary squishing the snake. I think anyone who has battled with the power of sin or addiction or just to develop better habits in life gets this. The power of sin is more like a fire breathing dragon than a garter snake. The question becomes, how best to overcome evil when we find ourselves battling dragons in the spirit life?

Back to Tolkien, I really love the movies Peter Jackson made celebrating the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings a number of years back. I think the best line from the Hobbit movies is probably in the first movie, "An Unexpected Journey." When asked by Lady Galadriel as to why he recruited Bilbo for this adventure, Gandalf says something profound which, although is not in the book, is actually a direct quote from J.R.R. Tolkien himself when asked in an interview why he picked Bilbo as the hero. Tolkien reportedly responded in that interview, "Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love. Why Bilbo Baggins? I don't know. Perhaps because I am afraid, and he gives me courage." I think Tolkien's insight here is very profound.

What is the best way to deal with dragons in the spirit life? Humility, simple acts of kindness, and love, these are what keep the darkness at bay. And this is why I think the statues of Mary squashing the serpent's head are provocative. This image reminds us the best way to confront the power of sin and death in the world is to follow the example of Mary who, when the future of the universe was set upon her

shoulders, said “yes” to God’s will for her rather than “no”. When faced with our own challenges in life, especially the ones that seem impossible, I think it is helpful to look upon Mary, the Immaculate Conception and our mother in faith. When we find ourselves confronted with our own dragons, we only need to turn to Mary and her son Jesus. They give us courage.