

## Mary, Mother of God

On Christmas Day, in the year 428, in the Cathedral of Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, the Patriarch of Constantinople, a bishop named Nestorius, was preaching and he really upset his congregation. For Nestorius told them that, 'Mary did not bear God. The creature did not bear the Creator, but the man...'. Nestorius' point was that Jesus, yes, was human because Mary was his mother but His divine part, His divine nature, was entirely from God. Therefore, Nestorius argued, we should not honour Mary with the title, Mother of God or, as he would have said in Greek, *Theotokos*, which translates literally as God-Bearer. Now, I don't know how many in the congregation were following Nestorius' thinking but they certainly didn't like any seeming attack upon Our Lady and quite quickly Nestorius was being corrected and shouted at by the congregation. And they were right to do so.

Mary, of course, did not create God or Christ's divine nature but the child she bore in her womb was as fully divine as human and so Mary was the *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer. The title Mother of God is a defence of the integrity and wholeness of the person of Christ. If you try to divide Christ's divinity from his humanity you undermine the wholeness and integrity of His person and make Christ, as it were, an existential schizophrenic. But Christ was a complete person and so in the year 431, three years after Nestorius' Christmas Sermon, many of the bishops of the Christian world, with the blessing of the pope, gathered at Ephesus and formally condemned Nestorius and celebrated Mary's greatest title, Mother of God. And now for well-over a thousand years, since the practice began in Rome, we dedicate the first day of the New Year, the eighth day since Christ's birth, to the woman who bore God-made-man.

Greccio is a small, ancient hill-town, about an hour north of Rome. It's quite beautiful but nothing remarkable yet we remember Greccio every Christmas in this church because it was in that little town, at Christmas, in 1223, that St Francis of Assisi carried out an idea he had had and celebrated what he called the 'Feast of Feasts' with an ox, a donkey and a manger full of hay - *i.e.* the first Christmas crib in history. And St Francis didn't do this to make the church look nice for Christmas; the manger was not a decoration. St Francis wanted to remind the people of Greccio that God was not far away from them. To call Mary *Theotokos*, God-bearer, is to beg the question to where has she borne God. Into our world and our lives, St Francis taught, and God has never left us.

And neither is our crib in St Monica's a decoration but a help to our faith. Look where the baby Jesus lies and see the Son of God who Mary, the Mother of God, bore, carried, into our lives. And though we do not know what 2012 will bring, whatever may be its joys and sorrows, this thing is certain, God will be with us. This is our faith; this is the promise of Christmas. And we shall

follow the Roman practice: our crib will remain for forty days until 2 February, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. So allow yourselves, during the month of January, before Mass, after Mass, to come to the crib, look in and pray. And the Mother of God will be praying with you.