

Immaculate Conception of Mary: December 08, 2017

Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38

On the 8th of December the Church celebrates the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. In teaching that Mary was immaculately conceived, the Catholic Church teaches us that from the very moment of her conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was free from all stain of original sin. This simply means that from the very beginning, she was in a state of grace, sharing in God's own life, and hence she was free from the sinful inclinations which have beset human nature after the fall. The Feast of Mary's Conception is clearly known, as early as the 7th century in the East, and may even date to as early as the 5th century in the Churches of Syria. The feast spread to the West, at least by the 9th century. In the eleventh century it received its present name, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Pope Sixtus IV in the fifteenth century while promoting the festival explicitly described it as the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1476, to be celebrated on the 8th of December. The feast tells us that the Blessed Virgin Mary was created by God immaculate in nature for the sake of his Son. Mary was the only new and second Eve who was created in an immaculate state which was equal to the state of holiness that the first Eve enjoyed prior to her having disobeyed the Lord God in the Garden of Eden. There can be some confusion about what we are celebrating in this feast. What we are not celebrating, although it is part of the faith of the Church, is that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus. What we are celebrating is that Mary, from the very first moment of her existence, was free from any taint of original sin, that tendency to evil with which we are all born into this world.

The feast tells us that the whole being of the Blessed Virgin Mary was created by God immaculate in nature. Mary was the only new and second Eve who was created in an immaculate state which was equal to the state of holiness that the first Eve enjoyed prior to her having disobeyed the Lord God in the Garden of Eden. What we are celebrating today is that Mary, from the very first moment of her existence, was free from any taint of original sin, that tendency to evil with which we are all born into this world. In 1854 Pius IX gave the infallible statement after consulting the Bishops and the theologians: "The most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin." The "splendour of an entirely unique holiness" by which Mary is "enriched from the first instant of her conception" comes wholly from Christ: she is "redeemed, in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son." The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places and chose her in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love. In simple terms, this dogma proclaims that: first and foremost the entire being of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her physical and spiritual natures, were created by God Himself at her conception; and, second, she who was to become the tabernacle of the incarnation, was never subject to original sin, but was completely preserved from all the effects of the sin of Adam. In other words, the whole being of the Blessed Virgin Mary was created by God immaculate in nature.

The Gospel of today narrates the account of the Annunciation from Luke. As the angel comes into the little house at Nazareth, he greets Mary. He tells her: "Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you". The older translation with which we are familiar in the prayer is, "Hail, Mary, full of grace." It is this term, 'full of grace' which led theologians to asserting that Mary, not only at the moment of Jesus' conception, but at every moment of

her existence was totally free from any kind of sin. From these words, the angel Gabriel was expressing that the Blessed Virgin Mary enjoyed a unique state of grace that far surpassed the creation of all men and the angels. Her soul, spirit and body were immaculate because of her immaculate conception. Not only was the Blessed Virgin Mary immaculate in her conception, but she remained faithful and immaculate to God to the end of her earthly life. During the annunciation Angel Gabriel tells Mary what is going to take place in her life. The message he gave was very clear but the way it would take place was not at all clear. She would become pregnant and have a child of the line of David who will be called Messiah was indeed a privilege. This is a miracle as the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and she would be with child who in fact is the son of God. The Angel tells her how God works miracles in the life of people as he has done in the life of Elizabeth and he can do anything without any hindrance. Nothing is impossible for God and Mary accepts his word and says God your will be done.

We read in the Book of Genesis that God created the first woman who was called Eve. They were created immaculate in their physical and spiritual natures for the Divine purpose. But the woman allowing her to be tricked by the evil one lost the glory and beatific vision that they enjoyed in the Garden of Eden along with her Adam. This blessing that they had enjoyed was a conditional gift from God. In the new Eve, the Blessed Virgin Mary, God planned to reclaim His Kingdom and save His people from death. In today's Second Reading, Paul praises God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us through Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Through our living faith in Christ and the Church Sacraments, we now qualify to receive the blessed hope of enjoying our rightful inheritance that was taken from us. Through our living faith in Jesus Christ and the Sacrament of Baptism, we now have the opportunity to once more become holy and blameless children before God in perfect love. We now qualify to be raised to the blameless and immaculate state of grace that the Blessed Virgin Mary enjoyed throughout her life and continues to enjoy to this date.

The papal definition of the dogma declares with absolute certainty and authority that Mary possessed sanctifying grace from the first instant of her existence and was free from the lack of grace caused by the original sin at the beginning of human history. Mary's salvation was won by her son Jesus Christ through his passion, death, and resurrection and was not due to her own merits. For the Roman Catholic Church the dogma of the Immaculate Conception gained additional significance from the apparitions of Our Lady of Lourdes in 1858. At Lourdes a 14-year-old girl, Bernadette Soubirous, claimed a beautiful lady appeared to her. The lady said, "I am the Immaculate Conception", and the faithful believe her to be the Blessed Virgin Mary. In fact, the doctrine had only been infallibly declared a doctrine of faith four years previously in 1854. It was most unlikely that a girl from an impoverished family without access to the "media" of the day would have been familiar with such a theological expression, still less that she could have made it up. In spite of much scepticism on the part of both civil and church authorities, Bernadette won through and Lourdes became a place of pilgrimage. Today millions of people go there to find healing in body and soul.

Speaking in Rome on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Benedict XVI said that Mary Immaculate helps us rediscover and defend what is inside people, because in her there is perfect transparency of soul and body. She is purity in person in the sense that the spirit, soul and body are fully coherent in her and with God's will. Our Lady teaches us said the Holy Father to open up to God's action and to look at others as he does, starting with

the heart, to look upon them with mercy, love, infinite tenderness, especially those who are lonely, scorned or exploited. Where sins increased, grace overflows all the more. Further the Pope said that he wants to pay tribute publicly to all those who in silence, in deeds not in words, strive to practice the Evangelical law of love which drives the world forward. There are so many of them even here in Rome. They do not make the headlines. They are men and women of all ages, who realise that it is not worth condemning, complaining or recriminating; that it is better to respond to evil doing good; to change things; or better, to change people, hence improve society."

Giving his reflections on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the Holy Father commented on the title of "Immaculate" by referring to the book of Genesis and the account of the Annunciation in the Gospel of St. Luke. He said that it is through woman that God Himself will triumph. That woman is the Virgin Mary from whom was born Jesus Christ who, with His sacrifice, defeated the ancient tempter once and for all. For this reason, in so many paintings and statues of the Immaculate, she is shown in the act of crushing a serpent under her foot. He further added that the Evangelist Luke shows us the Virgin Mary receiving the announcement from the heavenly messenger. She appears as the humble and authentic daughter of Israel, the true Zion in which God wishes to establish His dwelling. She is the branch from which the Messiah, the just and merciful King, will grow. ... Unlike Adam and Eve, Mary remains obedient to the Lord's will. With all of herself she pronounces her 'yes' and fully places herself at the disposal of the divine plan. She is the new Eve, the true 'mother of all creatures'; that is, of everyone who, through faith in Christ, receives eternal life. The Pope concluded by rendering thanks unto God "for this marvellous sign of His goodness", and by entrusting to the Virgin Immaculate "each one of us, our families and communities, the whole Church and the world entire".

In the Immaculate Conception we can see the redemption fully at work. We can say that through this gift Mary is the fully healed one: she never had the spiritual flaws that hold us back from total love of God. Thus the Immaculate Conception allowed Mary's yes at the Annunciation to be limitless, without any unconscious restriction. In several places the liturgy speaks of Mary as the beginning of the Church. She is also where the grace of redemption reaches its highest expression. What the whole church will one day become is already perfect in Mary through her Immaculate Conception and Assumption. These are consoling mysteries since they are the real pledge and guarantee that God's grace is more powerful than our guilt. So the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin reveals that God loves humanity as such. The Immaculate Conception also means that God surrounds this life of humanity with loving fidelity.

On this great feast day we can say that by the grace of God, we have received a new heart, a new spirit and the indwelling Holy Spirit to raise us to the level of holiness that the Blessed Virgin Mary enjoyed during her earthly life. Through faith in Jesus and the Sacrament of Baptism, having been born again of water and Spirit, we have been adopted into the Body of Christ in the living hope of receiving our salvation. Through our living faith, including the reception of the Sacrament of Confession, we receive the righteousness of our souls. Today we thank God for all the blessings and graces he showered on the Mother of his Son. We ourselves have been far from immaculately conceived and are aware of both the sins we have committed and of all the tendencies, appetites and urges which drive us away from God and into conflict with our brothers and sisters. Let us pray today to Mary our Mother to be with us, to guide us, to protect us through her prayers of intercession with her Son.

Above all, let us ask her to respond as generously to God's call as she did and to be as faithful a disciple of her Son as she was. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us be thankful to the Immaculate Conception for answering her special calling that was instrumental to our salvation.

Not only was the Blessed Virgin Mary immaculate in her conception, but she remained faithful and immaculate to God to the end of her earthly life. Through the Immaculate Conception of Mary who fully cooperated with the Divine Plan of God, we are led to Jesus. The glorious Feast of the Immaculate Conception is a reminder that the Blessed Virgin Mary is the new Eve, our spiritual Mother, she who has become co-redeemer with Christ in our salvation by allowing her womb to become the humble instrument and Sacred Temple of the Living God. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us be thankful to the Immaculate Conception for answering her special calling that was instrumental to our salvation. Let us praise her for having remained immaculate to the end. Let us look up to her, a precious gem of the Holy Catholic Church, as a perfect model of virtues. Let us always remember that, by the grace of God, when we will be glorified to the fullness of our beings, we also will become immaculate in nature.

Do you know the legend of the Cherokee Indian Youth's Rite of Passage? His father takes him into the forest, blindfolds him and leaves him alone. He is required to sit on a stump the whole night and not remove the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shine through it. He cannot cry out for help to anyone. Once he survives the night, he is a MAN. He cannot tell the other boys of this experience, because each lad must come into manhood on his own. The boy is naturally terrified. He can hear all kinds of noises. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. Maybe even some human might do him harm. The wind blew the grass and earth, and shook his stump, but he sat stoically, never removing the blindfold. It would be the only way he could become a man! Finally, after a horrific night the sun appeared and he removed his blindfold. It was then that he discovered his father sitting on the stump next to him. He had been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm. We, too, are never alone. Even when we don't know it, God through Mary, is watching over us, sitting on the stump beside us. When trouble comes, all we have to do is reach out to Him.

Fr. Eugene Lobo SJ, Bangalore, India