

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception

Gal 4: 22-31 & Lk 8: 16-21

Father Deacon Howard

Rejoice, O people, and exult, for today there shines for us the morning star of a mystery-laden day. The Virgin Mary is immaculately conceived in the womb of the Wondrous Anna. Today, by the power of the hand of the Most High, a mighty armor is raised against the devil – the most blessed Virgin Mary. Rejoice, for you are only one of mankind, you were not cleansed, but beforehand protected, from original sin. Tropar and Kondak.



"Hail Mary Full of Grace the Lord is with you". These words were spoken 2000 years ago by the angel Gabriel to a young woman from Nazareth. Her name was Mary. Mary had the honor of being "full of grace" from the time she was conceived because she had a special function in God's plan of salvation. She was God's chosen one through whom Jesus is begotten as Son of God. Mary's role in our salvation was already foreshadowed in Old Testament texts such as the one that promised victory by a woman over the cunning deceitful serpent, as told in Genesis (3:14-15), and the one in Isaiah that spoke of a virgin bringing forth a child named Emmanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

Whether the Book of Genesis should be taken literally or metaphorically doesn't alter the underlying narrative of this biblical passage in chapter 3. God willed that the plan for redeeming mankind for their disobedience should proceed by agreement on the part of a woman who was predestined to be the mother of the savior. Just as a woman had a share in bringing death into the world, so also was it ordained by God that a woman should contribute to bring humankind everlasting life.

God's plan of salvation began with the sending of the angel Gabriel to obtain Mary's free consent to conceive and bear a son (Luke 1:26-38). Mary's "yes" is an essential step in God's plan for the salvation of the world, making way for the Incarnation of the Son of God. Mary asked how it is possible for her to get pregnant, since she was a virgin. Gabriel told her it would come about by the power of God with whom everything is possible. When Mary responds with great faith and a wholehearted embrace of God's will, the Divine Mystery of our redemption by God's son by a virgin became a reality (Luke 1:34-38).

In its deliberations at the ecumenical councils of Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople, and more recently in the 2nd Vatican Council document, "Lumen Gentium", the Universal Catholic Church acknowledged and honored Mary as the Mother of God and the Mother of the

Redeemer. Her position as to the redemption was unique. Because of her singular role in God's plan, she was preserved from inheriting the state of original sin. Whereas we are redeemed after the birth of Christ and as a consequence of His death, Mary was redeemed when she was conceived by her mother before the birth of Christ. This was because she was endowed with the grace of Christ, by reason of the anticipated merits of His passion and death. This is why we say she was born immaculate and remained sinless throughout her life.

Mary, indeed, is the new Eve, who by total faith and obedience and complete devotion to the person and work of her Son untied the knot bound by the first Eve's disobedience. The Catholic Church honors her uniqueness by the solemn holy day of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 9. It was originally called the feast of the Conception of Ann, a feast that the Eastern Church Catholics celebrated in the 8th century.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. It says that Mary from the first moment of her conception was enriched with the splendor of an entirely unique holiness. Luke (1:28) says that by divine command, Mary was full of grace. God commanded that she be born without original sin and continue throughout her life, free from personal sin by the grace of God.

Why? Because she committed herself totally to God's saving will, as a handmaid of the Lord. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." St. Germanus of Constantinople, one of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, refers to the Mother of God as all holy and free from every stain of sin as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature. And this is why Mary herself, can say of herself: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has remembered me, his lowly servant! For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed, for He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name (Luke 1:46-49)".

Because of the gift of redemption that Mary received at the moment of her conception she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth. As our preeminent Saint, Mary is given a place of honor among us which is the highest after Christ. This honor is deserving of one so blessed. Pope Paul VI said that because she is the Mother of God, she is also the mother of humankind.

During this advent season let us prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. What better to way to prepare than by removing the stain of personal sins from our soul through the Sacrament of Reconciliation? By this act we can welcome the birth of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, as did Mary, in a state full of grace and divine friendship.

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us now, and at the hour of our death. Amen

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