

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

DECEMBER 8, 2012

READINGS: GENESIS 3: 9-15, 20; EPHESIANS 1:3-6, 11-12; LUKE 1:26-38

On December 8, 1854, in the presence of more than 200 Cardinals and bishops Pope Pius IX proclaimed that a common belief of the Church and her faithful, having matured over the centuries, was now ripe to be formally declared as a dogma of the Catholic Faith. With this declaration the Holy Father solemnized the belief that:

“... the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.”

What we celebrate this morning traces itself back to the very beginning of Mary's life. Mary was preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception through the prevenient grace of God. A prevenient grace refers to a grace from God that precedes any human decision. Thus, Mary neither merited this singular privilege, nor could she merit this. This dogma in no way implies that her coming to be through the conjugal love of her parents was somehow in need of being preserved from any sin, as if conjugal love itself involves any defilement. It refers solely to the stain of original sin from our first parents. As a pure vessel of the Redeemer, Mary was exempted from Original Sin. Why was this?

Here is an image that has worked for me in understanding this beautiful Solemnity. Most people have fond memories of being physically embraced by our parents, of tenderly being held in their arms. This gave to us a sense of safety and an indescribable knowledge that we were unconditionally loved. I frequently see it amongst our families here at Mass, and it is simply beautiful.

Through the singular privilege of the Immaculate Conception, Mary was enveloped from the beginning of her life in the redemptive and saving love of God. What a marvelous thought—that Mary was loved, chosen and enveloped before her own conception to be part of God's divine plan.

Our first reading from Genesis speaks of the enmity placed between the woman and the serpent, between your seed and her seed. God had planned a merciful remedy to this problem of sin, one that would provide for the regeneration of humanity. The Blessed Mother was part of this plan. The very enmity of both Mary and Jesus against the evil one was expressed.

Just as Christ assumed human nature and died on the Cross for our sins, so the most holy Virgin Mary:

united with him [Christ] by a most intimate and indissoluble bond, was, with him and through him, eternally at enmity with the evil serpent, and most completely triumphed over him, and thus crushed his head with her immaculate foot.'

This is one reason why so much of Western art and sculpture portrays Mary with the serpent under her foot, following upon the passage from Genesis. To believe that Mary crushes the serpent is not to imply that she does so independently of the power of Christ. The dogma is crystal clear that this is due solely to her profound union with Christ.

In our second reading, we are reminded that God desires for us to be spotless and without blemish before him. We know intuitively that this is not possible due to sin, but we may indeed be made more perfect through grace. If today's feast does not encourage us to pursue holiness of life to a greater degree, then its effect in our own lives is essentially nullified. It serves only to honor someone else. As important as that is, how disappointing it would be.

The Immaculate Conception signals that God surrounds our life with redemptive love; He envelops us with that love. We have no say in that. We begin our lives from the starting point that the beginning of life is important, not superfluous. Our lives do not gain dignity and meaning depending on how we lead our lives; they have it from the beginning, even despite our own original sin. The Immaculate Conception, in fact, is the ultimate celebration of pro-life, but one that comes with a cost.

We must give our “Yes” unequivocally. We all know the word that sometimes follows our “Yes,” namely, *...but..*” This is a word that if not negating the “Yes,” certainly qualifies it. “I thought I told you to take out the trash.” “Yes, you did, **but** you see right then the phone rang and I had to speak to Jimmy and...” All you mother ever heard was the “but..” Everything else was lost.

“Somewhere on earth there must ring out, in response to God’s word, not a half answer but a whole, not a vague answer but an exact one.” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, p. 267 *Sermons Through the Liturgical Year*) The first part of Mary’s “Yes” happens even **before** she was born. By the power of heaven, the earth must accept the arrival of grace so that it can really come to earth and carry out its work of liberation.

Today we celebrate the arrival of God’s grace in the person of the mother of our Savior. In so doing, God has surrounded all of humanity with loving fidelity. The gift given to Mary is a gift whose effects are of benefit to all of us. God is faithful. Having given us the beginning; he will bring it to its end. We cannot escape from His fidelity; it has enveloped us. Indeed, our souls proclaim the greatness of God.