

Homily on the Immaculate Conception

The Immaculate Conception. A familiar phrase to many Catholics. A beloved title bestowed upon the patroness of the United States and 11 other countries. And yet despite such prominence, at times this belief is misunderstood, even by Catholics. So, given all this confusion I ask the question, “What exactly are we celebrating today?”

To begin, we turn to the very words of the papal encyclical, which, on December 8, 1854, officially defined the Immaculate Conception as a long-held tenet of faith. In that document Pope Pius IX solemnly affirmed, ““We declare, pronounce and define... the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace...[and] in view of the merits of Jesus Christ...was preserved free from all stain of original sin.”” Wow...that’s a lot. But in short, it says that we believe that Mary was miraculously conceived – free from all sin – by **her** parents, St. Ann and St. Joachim.

But how can this be? How could Mary be without sin? Didn’t we just hear in the first reading from Genesis that Adam and Eve sinned against God by eating from a certain tree in the garden? And as a result of that first act of disobedience, wasn’t our first parents’ perfect relationship with God destroyed?

Therefore, don't we also believe that all of their descendants, including Mary, must inherit Original Sin – that condition of being born into a broken relationship with God? The answer is “yes” and “no”. Yes, you and I, and all other human beings were born with Original Sin, and we continue to sin from time to time. But for Mary, the answer was no. She was not born with Original Sin, nor did she sin during the course of her life.

So this brings us back to the question: “How can this be”? Well, to start, we look back to our Gospel today. Here, St. Luke tells us the story of the Annunciation, where the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, announcing to her God's will that she bear the world's savior. And, as we hear “nothing is impossible for God”!

Now normally when someone wants to get your attention and speak with you, they start off with something like, “Hi, Fr. Marcoe.” Well guess what? When Gabriel appeared to Mary, he didn't shout out, “Greetings Mary. I've got good news for you”. Instead, he said “Hail, you who are full of grace”. What a peculiar title for a person: “full of grace”! Literally, the phrase in Greek is “one having been graced.”

What does all this mean? Well, this title reveals to us that Mary, even **before** Gabriel appeared to her, was already graced by God in some unique way. And, in what kind of way? Well, if we turn to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we see that grace is “the free and undeserved gift that God gives us to respond to our vocation”. And, what was Mary's vocation? To be the mother of Jesus, the Savior of the world, who was “true God and true man.”

When Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity at that moment was conceived in Mary's womb. By the greatest of miracles, the Eternal Word of God took on flesh and became human: He who was God for all eternity, now became man. And where did He get this human flesh from? From Mary. And, since Original Sin is that human condition of a broken relationship with God, how could Jesus become a human who was somehow separated from God at the same time? God can't be separated from Himself. Therefore, it was necessary for Mary, the one giving Jesus His human nature, to be free from Original Sin (and all sin), so that Jesus in His humanity would not inherit this sin. And so God bestowed a special grace upon Mary – all so that she could carry out her true vocation as the Mother of God.

And so, my friends, on this, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we celebrate God's great plan for Mary – how He planned from the beginning of time for Mary to be the mother of His Son. It was His **plan**. She could have said, "no". But, today we celebrate her great "yes" – her yes to God's will to be the Mother of the Savior. Inspired by Mary's yes, let us each pray for the grace to also answer "yes" to God's will in our own lives as we continue our journey this Advent season. God bless you.