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## The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary - 8 December 2022

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## 8 December 2022

### The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Reflection by Angela Marquis

#### Introduction

While the Gospel for this Feast Day is that of the Annunciation, the Immaculate Conception does not refer to the conception of Jesus. The Feast instead celebrates Mary's conception, promulgated as dogma in 1854 by Pius IX to confirm that Mary was born free from original sin.

#### Penitential Act

Use one of the *Roman Missal* texts or this optional litany form:

Lord Jesus, you are the Son of Mary. Lord have mercy.

You are the glory of God. Christ have mercy.

You show us the Father. Lord have mercy.

#### First Reading

##### Genesis 3:9-15, 20

Tempted by the snake, Eve eats the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. After tasting it, she shares the fruit with Adam and their eyes are opened.

#### Responsorial Psalm

##### Psalm 97:1-4. R. v. 1

*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done wonderful deeds.*

The Psalmist sings a song of praise for the salvation of the world. God recalls the house of Israel in truth and love, and the earth is compelled to sing out in joy.

#### Second Reading

##### Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

St Paul reminds us we are all chosen by God. Through Christ we are claimed as God's own, born to praise the power and glory of God's grace.

## Gospel Reading

### Luke 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel is sent by God to Mary, to announce to her that she will conceive through the Holy Spirit and bring forth a child who will rule over Israel forever.

## Reflection

The Immaculate Conception declares that Mary was born free from original sin. Regardless of the intent of this statement of sinlessness, it has always struck me that Mary's worthiness is made clear in Gabriel's words at the Annunciation, do not be afraid, you have won God's favour (Luke 1:28). The Gospel clearly confirms that God sees Mary as worthy to conceive what was in her by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20). As Mary's conception is not found in the Gospel, this reflection will not delve into the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It will instead focus upon the Annunciation from Luke 1 and the account of Original Sin from Genesis 3. Both readings are dense, dramatic and deserve contemplation.

Reflecting upon the Annunciation, I was struck by the number of revelations given by Gabriel to Mary. You will conceive a son and you will name him Jesus (v.31). He will be great and called Son of the Most High (v.32). He will be given the throne from his ancestor David (v.32). He will rule over the house of Jacob forever and his reign will have no end (v.33). Seven prophecies in all. Yet, Mary's response is a simple, how can I possibly be pregnant? (v.34) How often are we given a plethora of information, either in spoken or written form, only to retain or react to, a single word or phrase? Mary's virginity is often the emphasis in this Gospel passage yet, Gabriel's message is not merely the proclamation of a miracle birth. Ought not the focus be on the number and enormity of all the prophecies? Mary will bear a son who will rule over Israel – a King whose reign will never end! This is extraordinary! Perhaps, even more so than a virginal birth!

Looking to Genesis 3, we might reflect upon the same thing. Which verse stands out for the reader? Which phrase or meaning is attributed more importance or becomes the focus of homilies and journal articles? Perhaps it is Adam confessing to God, I was naked and afraid (v.10), or his clarification, the woman that you put me with gave it to me and I ate (v.12). It might instead be the woman explicating, the snake tempted me (v.13), or perhaps, it might even be the silence of the snake once accused. How often do we recall God's punishment of the snake, that it will eat dust all the days of its life (v.14)? Most often, it is that Eve ate first (v.6), and that God punishes Adam for having listened to his wife (v.17)!

Why have these particular readings been chosen for this Feast? If the reason is to express redemption, then Genesis 3 is certainly a necessary precursor for Luke. The sinful and rebellious Eve is redeemed by the submissive purity of Mary who does God's will, mirrored of course by Adam, who brings sin into the world, yet is redeemed by Jesus who dies for all sins. Further, although the well-known pericope, in which God curses the woman with the pangs of childbirth, is omitted (v.16), the curse of enmity between Eve and the snake may be contrasted with the rich prophesy of the conception and life of Jesus.

Redemption compares the snake, condemned to crawl on its belly with its head crushed by humans, with Jesus who will be Son of the Most High and rule over all. In turn, the pain of childbirth for Eve, along with the fear of the snake who will strike at her heel, is redeemed by the [painless?] covering of the Holy Spirit who will come upon Mary. A further juxtaposition is that of Adam naming his wife, Eve, because she would be the mother of all who live (v.20), while Mary mothers Jesus who dies for all of creation. Read with the lens of fulfillment and redemption, Genesis contrasts the mother of all who live in sin, with the portrait in Luke of the mother of Christ the Saviour.

Even if we ignore the blatant patriarchal bias between these stories of redemption, we still fall short of richer possibilities. An exquisite truth is revealed by both scriptures when we remove the lens of redemption and instead, Listen! as Gabriel commands (v.30). These two readings celebrate three diverse experiences of conception, pregnancy, childbearing, and motherhood. In short, they celebrate women. How often does the lectionary allow for this?

When Mary asks, how will this come about? (v.34), Gabriel's response is complex. He clarifies that the Spirit of the Most High will cover Mary and allow her to conceive, then reveals that Elizabeth, her aged cousin, has also conceived. Elizabeth is not virginal – she and Zechariah have tried unsuccessfully for many years to fall pregnant. While Mary's pregnancy is miraculous because of her virginity, Elizabeth's is deemed astonishing despite her lack thereof.

In reality, every conception is miraculous, regardless of its genesis. That life is created through the most extraordinary sequence of events is indeed phenomenal. That infants are nurtured within the bodies of women, regardless of their perceived sinfulness, purity or barrenness, is the point of the readings today. Named as mother of all those who live (v.20), Eve reminds us that every single human who lives has been born of a woman. Mary, young and virginal, and Elizabeth, old and barren, conceive through the power of God, for whom nothing is impossible.

Rather than redemption, the readings of today celebrate the diversity of women, their God given power and grace, and the variability of their experience, whether they have given birth or not. Rather than set Eve against Mary or Elizabeth, the sinner versus the saint, we might instead consider that all three can inspire a thirst for knowledge, and an acceptance of suffering. Along with Kari Børresen,<sup>1</sup> I believe portraying Mary as the new Eve is harmful to Christian women as it ignores “the androcentric convergence of Scripture and tradition” (p. 54). Like Eve, we all search for knowledge (Gen. 3:6) and like Mary, we also question (Luke 1:34). Just as Eve is punished (Gen. 3:16), Elizabeth suffers shame and disgrace (Luke 1:25), and a sword pierces Mary's soul (Luke 2:35), women throughout the world, suffer each day for countless reasons. Who are we to judge whose suffering is worse?

This Feast Day, let us celebrate all those who search and serve, and all those who suffer and share in the sorrow and solace of being woman, born in the image of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Børresen, K. (1983). *Mary in Catholic Theology*. Trans. Ruth Murphy. In Hans Kung and Jürgen Moltmann (Eds), *Mary in the Churches*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd.

# Prayer of the Faithful

## Introduction

As we honour Mary in her Immaculate Conception, let us offer our needs to our Father, who is our Creator.

## Petitions

We pray for Pope Francis and all Church leaders as they move towards the General Synod. Guide them to be leaders of integrity and that they respectfully consider the voices of those they serve as we all walk in synodality.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray that as a Church we will be open to the challenges and opportunities that the Synod this year will present. May the 'God who is, who was and who is to come', live in our hearts throughout this important time of discernment and decision making.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for us all, that in the midst of our nakedness and fragility, we do not hide but are open to listening to your voice.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for all expectant mothers; as Mary was responsive to the calling to be a mother, that they too may be receptive to their calling.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for women who are struggling to have children as did Elizabeth, that their bodies may conceive and give birth to healthy babies.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who are not well, particularly those still affected by the pandemic. May they be strengthened in God, especially when the pain is unbearable, and may their carers show them love and compassion.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for ourselves that she, who is full of grace, may pray with us on our pilgrimage.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

## Conclusion

Father in heaven, hear the prayers we lay before you as we pray with the Immaculate Virgin Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus our Lord.

**Amen.**

## Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva

Title	AOV1	AOVNG	GA	CWB	CWBII	S&S2
Among all		8				
Hail Mary: gentle woman						336
Hail Queen of Heaven			546	702	408	
Holy Virgin, by God's decree				714	410	
Immaculate Mary, we praise God in you			549	723	416	
Joy to you, O Virgin Mary				729		
Magnificat (Tell out my soul)			550		213	
Mary immaculate, star of the morning				744		
My soul rejoices			250		212	
O holy Mary	141				413	
O Mary of graces and Mother of God				769		
O purest of creatures				775		
Sing of Mary, pure and lowly				808		
The Angel Gabriel from heaven came				815	247	
There is nothing told			548		418	

## Psalms Selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

Psalm 97: *Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done wonderful deeds.*

	CWB	GA	JOBF	LPSF
Psalm 97	472	57	pg. 59	pg. 126

## Music selections by Michael Mangan

**Sing new songs of joy** (FWS/CWB II) *based on Ps 97 (98)*

**All the ends of the earth** (LCC) *Ps 97/98 (Chn's Lectionary [Psalm, Gifts]*

**Mary said yes** (TT/SYJ) [CHILDREN: Gathering, Recessional]

**My spirit sings** (FWS/SYJ/CWB II) *Magnificat*

**Waiting for the Child** (TT/SYJ) [Non-Scriptural Reflection]