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9 December 2024

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Reflection by Pina Ford

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.

BACKGROUND: *Mary 'full of grace'*

Mary, the New Woman, stands at the side of Christ, the New Man, within whose mystery the mystery of humanity alone finds true light; she is given to it as a pledge and guarantee that God's plan in Christ for the salvation of the whole person has already achieved realization in a creature: # 57
Pope Paul VI, *Marialis cultus*. The document is an Apostolic Exhortation published on 2 Feb 1974

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

Humanity is betrayed and creation's original blessedness is damaged but in a promised time humanity's shame and brokenness will end.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 97(98):1-4

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

God's desire for us is revealed: we have been loved and chosen before the foundation of the world to belong to Christ and to live grace filled lives.

Gospel Reading

Luke 1:26-38

Mary's fullness of graces enables openness for Christ to come to birth in her and reveals to humanity the wholeness that God offers to all through the redeeming work of Christ.

Reflection

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception focuses attention on the beginnings of Mary's life on earth. Hence it is celebrated nine months before the September 8th Feast of Mary's birth which places it in Advent, and very conveniently so because Christ's coming naturally turns our gaze towards Mary his mother. Whenever this happens, and we reflect on the mystery of Mary we also encounter anew the God who longs to be with us. Appropriately then the Gospel for this Feast is the Annunciation, where we see Mary's open-hearted acceptance of the sacred invitation to bring Christ into the world.

Since the 4th Century there has been widespread belief amongst the faithful that Mary was full of grace from the first moment of conception. But it was not until 1854 that Pope Pius IX proclaimed the Immaculate Conception as dogma. There is, however, a foundational part of this Church teaching on Mary's grace-filled beginnings that is sometimes overlooked but makes all the difference. It is not so much that Mary was free of 'original sin' - that condition of diminishment suffered by all humanity, but that she was redeemed from sin from the moment of her existence by the gift of God and the saving work of her Son. (Catechism of the Catholic Church #491). Duns Scotus, the Franciscan 'subtle doctor' of the 13th Century supported belief in the Immaculate Conception and Mary's redemption by her son by reminding us that God's saving work is not governed by linear time.

Mary's beginnings then are both utterly unlike our own, and also identical to them. These two seemingly opposite thoughts always need to be kept in full view whenever we reflect on the mystery of Mary. Luke's portrayal carefully balances Mary's complete ordinariness and at the same time her graced capacity to embrace the most extraordinary divine purpose for her life.

In Mary we can see both who we are, and who in Christ we are becoming. The Immaculate Conception draws us into mystery – not as a puzzle to be solved, but an unfathomable truth that we can question and contemplate, allowing it to enrich and transform us.

While there is no scriptural account for the theology of the Immaculate Conception – the words of favour spoken by Gabriel provide a foundation: 'Rejoice so highly

favoured (or full of grace), the Lord is with you...Mary do not be afraid, you have won God's favour'. We might ask with Mary: Why so? What does this mean? What is the reason for this favour? The answer of course, is one that any child understands: Just because! There is no agenda for the love God pours out on Mary and on us. Having been created is its only proof. But humbly accepting this love whilst knowing we have nothing whatever to bargain for it, is a tall order – and literally humanity's downfall. Mary is aware of her human limitations and of the graciousness of God's love which she receives without resistance. She will later rejoice in the God who has seen her lowliness and done 'great things' for her.

When Thomas Aquinas, building on Augustine, reflected on what we have come to describe as the Fall, he was careful to distinguish between what was lost and what is retained. While the inclination towards good in the human heart was diminished, it was not destroyed, otherwise there could be no ability to distinguish between good and evil, to have remorse or even to be open to goodness and to God (Summa Theologica 1a 2ae Question 85 articles 1&2).

So, in a sense, Mary receives and rejoices on our behalf in the 'favour' God wishes for all humanity. We, like Mary, have no merit we can claim in return for God's graciousness; we like Mary have a place within us, we might call an 'immaculate' place, which sin has not destroyed, that can be open to God. The difference is that what exists in us as a possibility (Augustine's capacity for God, *capax dei*) is Mary's full reality. Mary reveals the shape and purpose of the human soul.

Hence Luke's story of Mary's response to God sharply contrasts to the account in the First Reading. Lavished with everything, our symbolic first parents, like ourselves are seemingly unaware of the fullness of God's love. They are readily seduced into trying to be more, and to be other than themselves. Their attempts like those of all other human beings of course backfire. When plans go awry, when disappointment bites, when people and situations cause pain, our need and vulnerability is exposed, and we feel naked (on the inside). God has only one desire, to be with us, and even more so in our need. But the human tendency is to allow fear and shame to set in, to go into hiding and refuse graciousness.

Mary, a vulnerable human being faced with what is unexpected, unknown and overwhelming, at first responds with fear and distress. But she does not back away or shut down and continues to ask her valid questions. These are received and answered with kindness and enable her to enter into the mystery before her. Mary's fears are embraced and alleviated and so she grows in trust. Here at the core of the Incarnation, we find a beautiful cameo of divine accompaniment. In Mary the veil to human vulnerability is lifted, and in a fellow creature who is 'truly our sister' (*Marialis Cultus* 56) there is complete openness to God's desire to be with us.

The graciousness of God towards Mary and her gracious response foreshadow our own journey. The letter to the Ephesians says that we too have been chosen 'in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love'. This is the mystery that lies underneath the tangle of our lives, and it is made visible to us in Mary.

Prayer of the Faithful

Introduction

As we honour Mary who was conceived to be immaculate, let us offer our needs to our Father, who is our Creator.

Petitions

We pray for Pope Francis and all Church leaders as they work within the Synod. May they be guided to be leaders of integrity and to 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 ongoing challenges and opportunities that the Synod has opened to the people of God. 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 the voice of God.

(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, may 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 suffering ill health in their bodies and minds. May they be strengthened by love, 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	GA	CWB	CWBII
Hail Mary: gentle woman		544		
Hail Queen of Heaven		546	702	408
Holy light on earth's horizon				442
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	
Mary, mother of good counsel				411
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

Title	AOVNG	S&S1	S&S2
All the ends of the earth (Fisher)	5	75	
All the ends of the earth (Canedo)			270
Among all	8		
Hail Mary: gentle woman			336

Psalms selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

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

	CWB	JOBF	LPSF
Psalm 97	472	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]