

## HOMILY

### *The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary*

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American Catholics have always had a special devotion to Mary under the title of the *Immaculate Conception*. The nation was dedicated to Mary under this title in the early days of the country's history. And so today, we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother with special joy and gratitude. In a way, it is *our* feast!

Either because of the gospel that is proclaimed for this solemnity or because of inadequate reflection, many people tend to think the "Immaculate Conception" is about Mary conceiving Jesus miraculously in her womb at the message from the angel Gabriel to whom she gave her unconditional YES!

The feast is not about Mary conceiving Jesus, which is called *Virginal Conception* (conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit) as we profess in the creed. The feast is about St. Anne conceiving her daughter, Mary. Around the 7<sup>th</sup> century, this feast originated as the "Conception of Mary by St. Anne." Pope Clement XI, in his Bull *Commissi Nobis*, established this solemnity for the entire Church in 1708.

Tradition holds that Joachim and Anne were the parents of Mary. They were an ordinary Jewish couple; human persons like any one of us. Anne conceived Mary in the normal way that any woman would conceive a child. There was nothing special or extraordinary about it as in the case of Mary conceiving Jesus. But there was something *supernatural* about it that made the conception *immaculate*.

We Catholics believe that as a consequence of the sin of our first parents, all human persons are born with the blemish of Original Sin. A human person born with the blemish of "Original Sin" could not be mother to the son of God, even in

his human form. She could not be tainted by sin. The fallen human nature needed a correction before it could be assumed by God's son.

In anticipation of the role she would be asked to play as the mother of Jesus, God the Father freed Mary from the effects of original sin from the very first moment of conception. God, in fact, gave her an *anticipatory bail* from original sin. She was bailed out before she was imprisoned by sin. That is the teaching of Pope Pius IX in his encyclical *Ineffabilis Deus*, which declared the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother as a dogma of faith. The Pope defined that:

*The Most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.*

This simply was the first testimony of what the angel would later say to Mary at the Annunciation: “...for nothing will be impossible for God.” He filled her with grace. “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” The Immaculate Conception of Mary is God's work. It is God's way of preparing Mary for her unique place and role in human history. It was God's good pleasure with her. He was not obliged. But it was fitting and so he did it for her and in her alone. The words of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before him,”) tells us the same thing. Romans 9: 29-30 speaks of the same thing. “Those whom God, foreknew, he predestined to share the image of the Son. Those he predestined, he likewise called, those he called he also justified.” She was chosen specially; God prepared her especially for her role in salvation history.

This dogma of faith and our faith in the dogma tells us that God prepares every one of us for what he asks of us to do. Things may seem weird, surprising or even overwhelming; but if they are from God, God has prepared them. God is preparing you and me for his will. Doesn't this thought inspire us to face the challenges of our life as our Blessed Mother faced the consequences of her “yes,” and yet was mysteriously saved from all of them? The social consequences of what happened to her were terrible. She could have been stoned to death at the door of her father's

house! But the same angel who announced the “good news” to Mary also announced that message to Joseph who made her his wife and the “father” of her child.

One might tend to wonder (if not become skeptical) how a 13- or 14-year-old girl could ever have pronounced those words in reply to the angel: “*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be done to me according to your word.*” Mary was made ready to say yes to God’s message. God from the very moment of her conception was getting her ready and helping her to pronounce those words.

The salutation of the angel, “*Hail full of Grace,*” also refers to this ineffable mystery, the incredible preparation that was taking place in her. She was and is full of grace from the very moment of her existence. We therefore have the “back story” of Mary, our mother.

Presence of grace in us makes us handmaids, humble servants of God, ready to say yes to God’s will. Recently, on the billboard in the elevators of Genesys Hospital, I found a writing. It read,

WHEN YOU DO NOT HAVE ANYTHING  
IN PARTICULAR TO PRAY FOR, PRAY:  
“LET GOD’S WILL BE DONE.  
NOTHING LESS, NOTHING ELSE.”

Mary was confused with the greeting of the angel. She didn’t have the wisdom of age. She was too young to say anything remarkable. But grace made her say, “*Thy will be done, nothing less, nothing else.*” May the celebration of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception teach us to say and live the prayer of Our Blessed Mother!

Amen

**Reading I:** Genesis 3:9-15, 20. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, while you strike at his heel.”

**Reading II:** Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12. “...as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before him.”

**Gospel:** Luke 1:26-38. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”