

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Genesis 3:9-15.20 / Luke 1:26-38)
08.12.2017

The celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception is truly an Advent feast. Today's Solemnity commemorates the one whom I recall hearing the late pope St John-Paul II refer to as *the Mary of the Advent of Christ*. This feast has us think of how God prepared the woman He had chosen to be the Mother of His Son – even before her birth.

The idea of God preparing and calling people before their birth – for a special mission confided to them in the story of salvation – is one we find in the Bible in both Old and New Testaments. Just think of how Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Baptist were all called by God in their mothers' wombs. From the moment of their conception, God's hand was upon them. Remember too what the Apostle Paul wrote of those who were called to be Christian disciples; he spoke of them having been called *according to God's predetermined plan*.

What is claimed for Mary by the dogma of her Immaculate Conception is that God called and prepared her even before she was ever conceived in her mother's womb.

In the opening chapter of his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul makes the point that we were – all of us – *blessed with all the spiritual blessings in heaven in Christ. Before ever the world began He chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, to live through love in His presence*.

Put simply, that means that the Lord dreamt for us – He still dreams for us – that we would all come into that experience which Mary was privileged to have from all eternity: that of being *without spot or wrinkle, blameless in God's sight*.

It seems to me that the call that comes with today's feast is a call to holiness: not holiness of our own making, but a holiness which is the fruit of God's grace – holiness which is the result of the work of God's sanctifying grace of our lives. By our reflection on the significance of today's commemoration we are called to see that it is God who makes us holy. To see things this way demands of us a radical conversion of mind and heart. It requires of us a deep humility. We would like to be able to make ourselves holy, but we fail miserably in our efforts to this end. We are called to be made holy.

As much as we can do to become holy is to prepare our minds and hearts to receive God's grace by disposing ourselves to the action of His saving love in our favour.

What the Immaculate Conception celebrates is nothing Mary did, but all that God accomplished for her.

The favour accorded to Mary was shown in order for God to be able to work in and through her – for the benefit of others.

Mary's unique privilege was a grace from which the whole world was to profit; a privilege through which the whole human race would be blessed.

The graces we receive are likewise blessings not just for ourselves alone, but for all God's people.

It is important for us to grasp that just as Mary became a channel of blessing for others through the extraordinary grace accorded to her, so too we are all called to become channels of God's blessing for others.

This is something Pope Francis honed in on and made clear in his Angelus Address for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in 2014 when he reminded his listeners: *As we have received freely, so we are called to give freely, imitating Mary, who, immediately upon receiving the angel's announcement, went to share the gift of her fruitfulness with her relative Elizabeth.*

Pope Francis went on to tease out with his listeners in that same Angelus Address the point he was making, the lesson of the Immaculate Conception that he wanted them to grasp, when he explained: *The Spirit is a gift for us, and we, by the power of the Spirit, must be a gift for others and allow the Holy Spirit to turn us into instruments of acceptance, instruments of reconciliation, instruments of forgiveness.*

Another point which it is all important for us to appreciate is that Mary's being preserved from sin did not – does not – distance her from poor sinners (I like the fact that the French say *pauvres pecheurs* in the Hail Mary, *poor sinners*). To the contrary Mary's being free from original sin leaves her free to be close to all and especially to the poor, the sinners we are ... and so we can turn to her confidently, asking that she pray for us now and at the hour of our death, in the assurance that she is and will be close to us.

What holds us apart from others, at a distance from them, is our sin.

Freed from sin we can draw close to others and enjoy true communion with them.

Just as Mary gave the Saviour to the world, so she can help us receive Christ with an open heart. She does that especially by her example.

We are told more than once in Luke's gospel how *Mary treasured all things concerning Christ in her heart*. I expect that she must have gone back over the visit she received from the angel, of which today's gospel speaks, again and again and again. At each step of the way that opened up before her in her vocational from that moment onwards she will have referred back to it. In so doing, I expect that she allowed herself to savour what she calls in her Magnificat *the greatness of the Lord*, marvelling at how *He looked upon her lowliness*.

The liturgy of this day would have us identify with Mary in her attitude of wonder at God's inexplicable love.

Mary evidently didn't fully realise the grace that had been accorded to her even before her conception when the angel first visited her. We are told that she was startled and somewhat baffled by what was said to her. Clearly, she was surprised by grace at that moment. Why else would she have said: *How can what you say come about? I am but a lowly handmaid*. Notice that attitude of service that was immediately awakened within her. We hear how Mary engaged herself to serve God's purpose when she responded: *Let what you have said be done to me*.

Serve is what Mary went on to do. She served those around her. Think of how she set out to offer support to her kinswoman Elizabeth.

The words Mary exclaimed when she encountered Elizabeth bear testimony to how she reacted to God's grace at work in her life: she did so with praise, thanksgiving, wonderment and awe.

The action that accompanied her words – her going to help Elizabeth – showed that she had understood her privilege as Israel had been called to understand its election from the outset: a vocation to service, an honour to be able to be used by God for the good of others.

A prayer used for para-liturgies to be celebrated in the family home as Advent candles are lit captures what I am trying to say this morning – the message which I believe it is vital for all of us to hear as we celebrate this feast and try to discern its significance for our lives. The prayer I refer to has us turn to God thoughtfully using these words:

*God our Father,
the angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary
that she was to be the mother of Your Son.
Though Mary was afraid,
she responded to your call with joy.
Help us, whom you call to serve you,
to share like her in Your great work
of bringing to our world Your love and healing.*

The point which I believe it is so important for us to grasp is that with every privilege accorded to us comes a certain responsibility.

If Mary was honoured to have been called to be *the Mother of the Lord*, she could say to the angel and show to Elizabeth that she was *the Lord's lowly handmaid* and her kinswoman's servant.

Mary's acceptance of the divine plan in and for her life had an immense effect upon the whole of humanity and the future of humankind. We can say – as St Bernard and others have done before us – that everything depended upon Mary's *yes*. Her *yes* changed the face of the world.

Mary's *yes* was *yes* to the coming of the One who was to free human beings from the slavery of sin and win for them a share in the divine life of grace.

If a future of happiness for the universe was made possible by the *yes* from the young woman of Nazareth, so too, by our constantly renewed *yes* to God's will, we, in our turn, can also become for all our brothers and sisters in humanity humble channels of God's blessing, sources of divine grace at work in the world.