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Immaculate Conception of... Mary?? Discovering the True Gift of Mary

BY TROY WOYTEK, CAMPUS MINISTER

*And coming to her,
(the angel Gabriel) said,
"Hail, full of grace!
The Lord is with you."
-Luke 1:28*

As millions of Catholics around the world listen to the Gospel on December 8th every year on the feast of the Immaculate Conception (a Holy Day of Opportunity) I can't help but think to myself how many are wondering if this feast day is about Jesus instead of Mary. I can understand the confusion; after all the Gospel reading on December 8th talks about the conception of Jesus; however



this event is referred to as the Virgin Birth of Jesus. The feast of the Immaculate Conception is about Mary being conceived without the stain of Original Sin (I will address the meaning of Original Sin later). All those who may be confused about this feast day (maybe no one is actually confused and it is just a figment of my imagination, but I will write as if some are) in actuality may not be all that far from the truth. We honor and revere the beauty of Mary's life on this day and we remember the special place Mary has in the faith of our Church, but ultimately the Immaculate Conception of Mary, just like every other Marian feast, points us to the one who brought us salvation, Jesus Christ, son of Mary and son of God.

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Immaculate Conception 101

-Mary conceived by her parents without effects of original sin and therefore born without effects of original sin. This teaching is considered infallible dogma.

- “Hail, full of grace” in Luke’s Gospel is a phrase not used anywhere else in the Bible to honor someone. The phrase indicates that Mary already possesses God’s saving grace, something unique to her in human history.

- The Church teaches that it is fitting that Mary would be without sin and therefore in union with God so as to bring Christ into the world.

It is true that there is no direct scriptural reference to the event of Mary’s Immaculate Conception by her parents Anne and Joachim, but the readings that are used to highlight this feast day accomplish the truth of Mary’s Immaculate Conception: “In him we were also chosen...so that we might exist for the praise of his glory.” It is therefore appropriate on this day, as demonstrated by the wisdom of the Church, to read the Gospel passage about the Annunciation of Christ’s Incarnation into this world through the woman whom we celebrate being immaculately conceived. For what other purpose so great was Mary born but that of to bear the incarnation of God, the human Jesus? What greater destiny was Mary’s life intended for than to be the most sacred vessel, the spotless tabernacle, the holy womb which brought forth the holy of holies, the savior of all humanity, the begotten Son, Jesus the Christ?

Mary’s Gift to Us

What does Mary teach us then? If we look at each of the readings for the Mass of the Immaculate Conception we can unravel this mystery and lesson handed onto us by the hands of Mary. Mary’s life models for us what it means to have her whole life aligned with Christ through her humanity, motherhood, and courageous trust in God.

TRUE HUMANITY

Mary fully embraced her humanity unlike what we read about in the first reading for the Feast of Immaculate Conception (Gn 3:9-15, 20), which sets the stage for salvation and the role of Mary. We read of the sin of Adam and Eve

succumbing to the temptation of rejecting their humanity as good. As a result, Original Sin enters into the story of creation. One way of looking at Original Sin is to say that humanity has rejected the idea that being made in the image and likeness of God is good enough. Adam & Eve’s eating of the apple from the tree of knowledge represents our desire to actually be God rather than settling for the next best thing, which is to be God-like. When we aspire to be more than human, trying to be God, we reject that there is anything worthwhile in ourselves and this rejection is essentially a rejection of God because we are saying the way God created us isn’t good enough for us.

An example might be helpful: When we do everything possible to avoid suffering by ignoring the pain of others, through filling our lives with material things that mask our own pain, by lying, by cheating, by gossiping instead of confronting, we in a sense are rejecting our own mortality, we are saying that we are above the experience of suffering, which is to reject the way God created us. However, Mary gives us a different model to follow. Mary embraced the pain and suffering she would endure to carry Jesus in the womb, raise him, and watch him die. She didn’t try to avoid it as if to deny this common human experience. She didn’t aspire to be God by demanding control of everything in her life. Instead she let go of control as she supported her sons’ calling in this world, even if it meant losing him to the cross. She didn’t grasp for power as a prideful mother of God. Rather, the view of Mary that we get is one of humble servant, prayerful companion, and compassionate love. If we have any questions about what God intended for our humanity to look like than all we need to do is look to the life of Mary and how she points us to the life of Christ.



BLESSED MOTHER

The second reading (*Eph 1:3-6, 11-12*) for Immaculate Conception shows us how Mary takes care of us just as any Mother does. Mary points us in the direction of our best and truest self. In the Ephesians passage it says that we exist for the praise of Christ's glory. Mary is the first disciple to demonstrate an understanding of her role as a human being to serve as

a sign of the glory of God. Saint Irenaeus stated that "The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God." Mary adored Jesus during his lifetime and as stated in the previous section exemplified



humanity. Alone we cannot learn to love as Christ loved and so often it is the love of our mother who first teaches us that type of love. Mary is our spiritual mother in that she loves each of us and demonstrates what love looks like through her own life. We see her love in the nativity scene when she does whatever is possible to provide a safe environment for Jesus to come into the world. We see her love in the way she learns from Christ's teachings. And finally we see her love when she mourns for the loss of her son. When we love as Mary demonstrated we live fully alive glorifying God, and then the work of our holy mother is complete.

COURAGEOUS TRUST

Finally, in the Gospel (Lk 1:26-38) for the Immaculate Conception we are shown a model for putting our life in the hands of the Lord. There are two particular lines in this Gospel passage that get to the heart of Mary's trust in God. First, when the angel Gabriel says to Mary, "The Lord is with you!" we are given a hint of what is to come for Mary. Throughout scripture whenever someone is told "the Lord is with you" a daunting task laid ahead for them. These words accompanied an invitation from God to play a crucial role in his plan for salvation. Upon receiving the message from the angel about her impending pregnancy and motherhood Mary knew

the task that lay ahead would not only be challenging but it was also not completely clear to her as to how she would fulfill her call. Yet she took courage that the Lord would in fact be with her at all times to accompany her. Secondly, with little direction and a sudden change of fate in her life, Mary responds with an amazing acceptance to God's call.

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

There are many ways this challenges our way of life. What would it be like when we encountered the poor if we said "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord" or when we feel God nudging a bit about discerning a religious vocation if we said "may it be done to me according to your word." Mary's witness can challenge us to stay chaste when we are fearing loneliness, temperate when those around us excessively drinking/smoking/doing drugs would ostracize us if we didn't join in, honest when our neck is on the line, faithful when life gets busy with school/work/family, committed even if it means enduring some sacrifices, grateful even when those around us are tearing down the world with their negativity and judgment, and joyous despite those who gossip about us or tempt us to gossip about others. Mary received the grace from God to give her "holy yes" and so she asks us to pray for that same grace so that we may too be made "holy and without blemish before him." (*Eph.1:4*)

Live For Christ As Mary Did

Our north star in Christianity is Jesus, but as a people who will ultimately be judged by Christ how closely we lived according to the Son of God, Mary becomes our telescope to view the north star we are aiming for. St. Paul captures the desire Mary has for us in his letter to the Philippians:

"that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." Phil 1:9-11

Question Box

- 1) How does Mary bring you closer to her Son Jesus the Christ?**
- 2) In what ways do you see yourself rejecting your humanity by trying to be God?**
- 3) What are ways you can be more courageous in your faith and your relationship with God? What fears hold you back?**



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