

The Immaculate Conception: God's Word Through Mary

– Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, CA

Today, December 8th, is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Don't worry. It's all about Jesus. Please read on and I'll explain why.

First of all, we're not talking about the *Virgin Birth*. That refers to the biblical - and historical - truth that Mary was a virgin when her son Jesus was conceived and became one of us. We celebrate this miraculous event on March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation (or of the "Incarnation"). It's immortalized by the Scriptures in Luke 1:31, 35, 38 and Matthew 1:18.

The Virgin Birth of God the Son from Mary was foretold in Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (that is, 'God-with-us'). This Biblical doctrine makes two claims at once: 1) that Mary offered the gift of her entire self, pure and transparent, to God the Father, while God the Spirit poured out His infinite Grace into her virginal soul, and 2) that Jesus, God the Son, was conceived without the intervention of a human father, because He was to make of the human race a New Creation as the Second Adam.

By lending her genetic code and her substance to the Eternal Word so that the Second Person of the Trinity might become man, Mary became, in that sense, the Mother of God. This is as much a statement about who Jesus was from the moment of His conception as it is about His Mother.

Because, as the Eastern churches (Orthodox and Catholic) and the Roman Catholic Church have always taught, everything we discover and profess about Jesus deepens our understanding and appreciation for His Mother.

At the same time, whatever we say about Mary is intended to reflect our understanding and appreciation for Jesus. As our Catechism puts it:

"What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ" (paragraph 487). The doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Immaculate Conception, therefore, are all about Jesus *and* all about Mary.

So what is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception? It is the Church's response to the words of the Angel. Sent to the Virgin from heaven, Gabriel calls her "highly favored", an expression better translated as "full of grace". Then he says, "The Lord is with you", as a statement of fact.

Gabriel also declares, "...you have found favor with God." And when he foretells the miraculous conception in her virginal womb, saying, "the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God," she never protests unworthiness. She only asks how this would be possible, since she had not "known a man" (that is, she'd never had conjugal relations) (Lk 1:34).

When Yahweh called Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, they all claimed to be unworthy or unable. And when Jesus showed Peter the miraculous catch, the future apostle cried out, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8, see also Isaiah 6:5). Even John, the Beloved Disciple, Spirit-filled after the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, fell down as if dead himself when he beheld an angel (Revelation 1:17). So why did Mary, who was still young at the Annunciation, not declare herself unworthy of bearing the Son of the Living God in her womb? Far from that: she sings instead: "...from now on all generations will call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1:48-49).

If God was already "with Mary", and already favored her, and if she was already "full of grace" and not conscious of being unworthy of becoming the mother of God the Son, then how did she get that way? She certainly knew the prophecies concerning the Messiah by heart. She no doubt cried out to God for the Redeemer who would set His people free. But more than that, she must have been prepared from the beginning. If Jeremiah could be known by God "before he was formed", and dedicated from his mother's womb (Jer. 1:5), then why would we think otherwise concerning the Mother of the Redeemer whom the prophet Jeremiah came to foretell?

And if John the Baptist could leap for joy in the womb at the sound of Mary's greeting, and be called no less than the greatest of the prophets by Jesus (in spite of his appearing to have doubted that Jesus was the Messiah - Luke 7:20), then why wouldn't God have anointed from the beginning of her existence the one who would bear His Son in her womb?

And if Enoch and Elijah could be lifted up into heaven without tasting death (Genesis 5:24 and 2 Kings 2:11), because they "walked with God," then why couldn't God do as much for the woman who lent her substance and life so that He, as the Eternal Word, might take His body from hers?

Pope Pius IX proclaimed, in 1854: "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" (CCC 491).

The Catholic Catechism continues: "...The 'splendor of an entirely unique holiness' by which Mary is 'enriched from the first instant of her conception' comes wholly from Christ...The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person 'in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' and chose her 'in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love' (Eph. 1:3-4)." (492)

"...The Fathers of the Eastern tradition call the Mother of God "the All-Holy" (Panagia) and celebrate her as "free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature.' By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long." (par. 493). In fact, even Islam shows this reverence for Mary.

In his study, "The Virgin Mary in the Koran," Giancarlo Finazzo writes: "Among the persons of Sacred History mentioned in the Koran, the Virgin Mary occupies an important position on the historical and dogmatic plane. In addition to being the object of as many as thirty-four direct or indirect references, Mary also gives *Sura XIX* its name and is its central figure as the mother of Jesus..." Later, Finazzo observes: "We know that the Islamic religion ignores the concept of original sin; it attributes to man, however, a natural defectibility which makes him impure and imperfect from birth. Nevertheless, in a famous *Hadith* attributed to the Prophet, it is affirmed that: "Every child is touched by the devil as soon as he is born and this contact makes him cry. Excepted are Mary and her Son". From this *Hadith* and from verses 35-37 of *Sura III*, Moslem commentators have deduced and affirmed the principle of Mary's original purity. God, in fact, according to the Koranic text, granted the wish of Anna who consecrated to him Mary, about to be born, and the One to whom she would give birth (*III*, 37). God predestined Mary and purified her, raising her above all women (*III*, 45)." Finazzo concludes this section thus: "After this premise it is not surprising that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, though only implicitly contained in verses *III*, 31, 37, is univocally recognized by the Islamic religion."

Reader, are you still with me? Even Muslims, who supposedly reject the Messiah, have a higher esteem and reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary than the majority of non-Catholic Christians in the Western World. Why can't those who proclaim Jesus as Lord defend the dignity of his Mother? "But Catholics make of her a god." "No, Catholics venerate her as the Mother of God. As Elizabeth said to Mary in Sacred Scripture, 'How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled' (Luke 42-45)." Yes, Mary *was* blessed, not only by being the Mother of God, but above all by being the perfect disciple (Luke 11:27), and by clinging to the Word of her God.

Jesus said we will know a tree by the fruit it produces (Matthew 7:20). What does the person and character of Jesus, then, say about his Mother?

But since the world-spirit does not want to hear of a perfectly virtuous woman, God intervened in the person of Mary herself to demonstrate that she is, indeed, what Scripture has shown her to be. In 1858, four years after Pope Pius IX's proclamation, she appeared in France. When the peasant girl Bernadette asked the beautiful woman her name, she replied: "I am the Immaculate Conception." Then the heavenly visitor ratified her testimony by opening up a miraculous stream of pure, refreshing water.

To this day, the spring at Lourdes continues to flow, and millions have re-dedicated themselves to Jesus in those waters. Many have been healed.

When Our Lady of Guadalupe first appeared to Juan Diego on December 9th, 1531, she arrived during the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. "Know and understand well, you the most humble of my sons, that I am the ever virgin Holy Mary, Mother of the True God for whom we live, of the Creator of all things, Lord of heaven and the earth. I wish that a temple be erected here quickly, so I may therein exhibit and give all my love, compassion, help, and protection, because I am your merciful mother, to you, and to all the inhabitants on this land and all the rest who love me, invoke and confide in me; listen there to their lamentations, and remedy all their miseries, afflictions and sorrows" (*The Nican Mopohua*).

Yes, dear reader, it all boils down to letting God love you through the Mother of His Son, Who became Love Incarnate through her. If the Holy Spirit could fall in love with Mary, and fill her with Grace to the point of conceiving God the Eternal Word in her womb, why are you so afraid of this woman? If some Christians have erred in the direction of making her statues and images into what appear to be idols, and of treating her like a deity, at least they have erred in the direction of love. Cut them some slack. But don't cut Mary out of your circle of love and devotion. Jesus gave her to us from the cross. He is honored, not angry, when we honor His Mother, because in doing so we fulfill the Fourth Commandment and help Him complete His mission on earth, in which she's His key player.