

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Genesis 3:9-15.20 / Luke 1:26-38)
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The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a clear proclamation of the fact that *all is grace*.

Mary did absolutely nothing to merit the free gift God bestowed upon her.

When we think of the mystery of the Immaculate Conception – that very particular grace which Mary did nothing to gain for herself – a whole host of Bible verses come to mind. We recall, for example, what we read in the prophet Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you*. Or, again, we recall what we read in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians: *Before the world was made, He chose you, chose you in Christ. He chose you to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in His presence*. John's insight expressed in his First Letter also comes to mind. You will remember how the Beloved Disciple stated therein: *God first loved us*. To these sample texts a whole host of related Scriptural lines could be added. What all these Scripture verses – and many others besides – point to is something we see so very clearly displayed in the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: the fact that God's love precedes us.

Mary's Immaculate Conception shows us the Lord took the initiative in her regard; His grace preceded her. In the *Prayer Over the Offerings* for this Solemnity we hear an expression which expresses Mary's experience as being the result of God's *prevenient grace*. What is being emphasised by the use of that word *prevenient* is that Mary did absolutely nothing to merit God's having precedently chosen her to be the Mother of His Son.

The other Prayers of the Solemnity speak of how God's mercy set Mary free from sin before even this wound could enter into her heart and divide her innermost being. The special grace God afforded to Mary meant that *the Word* found in her a person of complete integrity – one in whom the Word was able *to take flesh*. As one popular devotional hymn – the more recent *Lourdes Ave* – puts it: *When creation was begun, God had chosen Her to be Mother of His Blessed Son, Holy Mary, full of grace*.

For Mary to be *filled with grace* what was required of her was that she be emptied of herself. Mary needed to be poor and humbly obedient. Her poverty and humble obedience are drawn to our attention strongly in the whole gospel text of the Annunciation and not least by Mary's drawing to the angel's attention the fact of her virginity. When we hear Mary ask Gabriel how what he said to her could come about, stating as she does *I am a virgin*, she is not extolling herself as a woman of great virtue; what she is saying here is that she sees herself as someone who is really poor.

In the Biblical thought of the Old Testament, which surely nourished Mary's faith and gave her a sense of self-understanding, to be a virgin was to be a radically poor person. In biblical thought to really live virginity is to live in an awareness of one's incompleteness, for, as the Genesis story teaches, the human person finds his or her fulfilment, his or her completeness, in a privileged way through union with someone of the opposite sex.

We can imagine that up until the Annunciation – when Mary became conscious of the fact that she had been called and chosen for her specific mission – she must have lived her life in a way not that different from the lives of other young women who were her contemporaries. We know that she had envisaged a normal married life with Joseph. Then, all of a sudden, God intervened and in that single moment all changed for her.

What is sure is that Mary did not imagine that the promise made to her by the Lord could be fulfilled without His intervention. She asked the angel how what he had foretold could come about since she was a virgin only to be told: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you* and bidden to remember that *nothing is impossible to God*.

Mary needed to put her trust in the Lord to do in and through her what she could never have accomplished by herself – and/or even with the help of another person or even several other persons.

Mary grasped that she needed to be open to God's will; she realised that she had to allow the Lord to accomplish His desire and His work in and through her.

Although she could not comprehend how she would conceive the Saviour, nonetheless, Mary responded with humble belief and firm obedience.

She realised that although her calling entailed a great honour for her, it also – and above all – demanded of her that she dare to accept to traverse great suffering – and to begin with the incomprehension of others around her. She would first know the disgrace and embarrassment of an unwed mother – and this to begin with in regard to Joseph, to whom she was betrothed.

Mary must have realised from the outset that her response to God's call would not be easy and yet she responded wholeheartedly. However great the grace she received, the blessing God bestowed upon Mary was to prove itself a *costly grace*.

The fact that Mary was young, poor and female all weighed in the balance to make her position in society – including religious society – a very vulnerable one. Some might have considered what they saw as these inherent weaknesses as disqualifying her from being chosen by God, and yet she was to be proclaimed blessed above all others.

Indeed, when we read the story of the Annunciation, it appears as if Mary's deficiency was exactly what the Lord needed to show forth the mighty power of His arm and to manifest that He was at work within her.

Mary's poverty and weakness were required by God. He wanted these to put at His service – so that it would be evident to all that whatever good she accomplished in her life was not her work alone, but rather, as Paul puts it: *all God's work* within her.

Inviting us to contemplate the outcome of Mary's life, rooted in God's choice of her by an act of *prevenient grace* – in the Church's Liturgy wants us to discern and rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit at work in her life, so that we come to believe that the same Spirit is available to us.

Our consideration of the vocation of Mary has for goal to help us consider our own vocation. It would have us remember that each one of us has been called and chosen... with our poverty, with our weakness, with our incompleteness, with the many deficiencies that are ours... called and chosen to receive His life within us and to bear it to others.

That is a consoling thought, is it not?

May it help us to realise that, just like Mary, we are called to live in a confident awareness of our poverty; called to be animated, at the same time, by a genuine desire to live our neediness as an unfathomable source of riches in life, since it is the privileged way whereby we discover the extent of God's graciousness in our regard.

May today's celebration help us to be firmly and generously committed to live our poverty – not begrudgingly, but rather in a spirit of humble obedience.

If later on in the gospel story, Mary, the *humble servant of the Lord*, His *lowly handmaid*, can say to the servants at Cana in Galilee in their state of neediness *just do whatever He tells you to do* this is because that is exactly what she herself did.

When the Lord asks things of us that can appear at first view to be *marvels beyond us* may we feel encouraged by Mary's example and be led to echo her words with loving trust in God's promises: *Behold I am Your servant. Let it be done to me in accordance with Your word.*