

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(Genesis 3:9-15, 20 / Luke 1:26-38)  
08.12.2020

Ever since our first parents gave way to the sin of disobedience – having failed to trust the Lord’s instructions given to them for their good in the Garden of Eden – the Lord held a dream in His heart, a dream rooted in His eternal love. That dream was and will remain until the end of time: a dream to lift up our fallen humanity. The Lord’s desire was and still is to restore fallen humanity to communion with Himself. It was for loving union with the Lord our Creator God that we were made. Thanks to God’s dream, the blessing forfeited by the foolishness of Adam and Eve, was not lost forever. This is because our God is good and His mercies never fail.

God’s dream consisted in Him drawing alongside our wounded humanity; it involved Him espousing the human condition fully, through the incarnation of His Only Begotten Son. To Christ the mission was confided to be our redeemer. In and through Jesus – a name which means *the One who saves*, also called *Emmanuel*, a name which means *God is with us* – the Lord’s dream found fulfilment.

In order to become incarnate, God had to take flesh in the womb of a woman – one of our race. This led the Lord to choose and call one woman out of all time, so that from her the Saviour might be born. To serve God’s design, this woman would serve as the *Ark of the Covenant* for the nine months she bore the Christ-child in her womb. She had to be a *holy temple of the Lord* – a place free from all defilement – to contain the Holy God whom she carried within. The woman God chose was Mary of Nazareth. We hail her today and we salute her, as all generations have done, ever since the Annunciation, echoing the words of greeting addressed to her by the archangel Gabriel; as one *full of grace* and *blessed among all women*.

All that leads me to say that from just after the dawn of time, God already had Mary in view. The Lord conceived Mary in thought before she ever saw the light of day. From the beginning of the ages, Mary was conceived in God’s mind and heart – as we conceive wonderful ideas in our minds and hearts before we realise them by acts of creation. God conceived Mary long before the loving union of her parents, Joachim and Anna, led to her physical conception. When the Lord conceived Mary – imagining her coming into being in His thought, dreaming of her coming into existence in His heart – He had in sight the unique mission He would confide to her. When we think of what I have just said we see that the Lord also had us in mind from the beginning of time, for, by the child Mary bore, He wanted to assure our salvation.

It is the important and, indeed, essential role that Mary would fulfil in regard to each one of us, and in regard to the whole of humanity, that explains the extraordinary privilege accorded to her to have been *immaculately conceived* – that is to say, *conceived without sin*.

Mary’s immaculate conception was so that we might be freed from the grasp and pernicious hold sin has upon our lives. Her immaculate conception – like our being freed from sin – was a grace won for her, as it is for all of us, through the saving action of her Son.

A hymn which is sung in Lourdes (the famous French shrine so closely associated with the mystery of the Immaculate Conception) has us declare that God chose and called Mary from when creation came into being. Some of you will be very familiar with the lyrics of that hymn: *When creation was begun/ God had chosen you to be/ Mother of His blessed Son/ Holy Mary full of grace*. The same hymn goes on to acclaim the wonder of our redemption – the fulfilment of God’s dream in humanity’s regard, extolling Mary’s part in it. It draws to our attention

Mary's place in the story of our salvation, for her role is extremely significant and should not be overlooked. It has us sing: *When creation was restored/ You were there beside You Lord/ Whom you cherished and adored/ Holy Mary, full of grace.*

Even though Mary was accorded the unique privilege of an immaculate conception, it has to be said that she was not dispensed from the need to be saved. Mary, just like every other human being, stood in need of redemption. She had to be redeemed in the same way as every other person descendant of Adam and Eve. The Scriptures are clear. No human person can save him or her self. Salvation is a gift to be received by all – without exception, for, as St Paul reminds us, *we have all fallen short of God's grace.* All! The whole human race! The same Scriptures insist that it is by Christ alone that all are saved. Salvation comes to every human person – Mary included – from what Jesus lived for fallen humanity when He died on Calvary and on the third day rose victorious over the power of sin and death.

If the liturgy expresses the faith of the Church that Mary – like all her brothers and sisters with whom she shared the human condition – was redeemed by Christ's saving action, it also makes the extraordinary claim that for Mary deliverance from sin came about even before the saving event that brought about humanity's deliverance had occurred in time. While we all look back to what Christ has done for us, from the moment of her conception Mary received the grace obtained by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The liturgy employs a special word to express the particular (indeed, quite unique) grace accorded to Mary. It speaks of *prevenient grace* having been accorded to Mary: that's to say, a grace that preceded and prepared her for her extraordinary mission in the Father's plan for humanity through His Divine Son.

It seems to me that one way of speaking of what Mary experienced might be to talk in terms of *God's grace having been at work within her ever before she knew it.* Let's think of the phrase I used there for just one moment: *Grace at work in a person before ever that person knew it.* Fair enough, these words apply to Mary in a unique way, but they are not without significance for each one of us when we think things through. When we consider it, what happened for Mary in a very exceptional way, also happens for each one of us in less extraordinary, but nonetheless marvellous, ways. How often *God works in our lives before ever we know it!* How often the Lord prepares us for what lies ahead of us. Frequently He does this long in advance of something coming about in our lives. If we were to look back upon the way our life stories have unfolded, I expect we would all be led to recognise that all along the way we have walked, God has been there, present and at work in our hearts – *before we were ever knew it.* Frequently it is only with hindsight that we come to see how the Lord prepared us very carefully for what He would ask of us at a later date.

There is a wonderful expression of Kierkegaard that came back to me recently which ties in with what I have been saying this morning about God being at work in our lives before we come to realise to what extent this is true! Kierkegaard writes: *Life can only be understood backwards...* Having said that, he then goes on to remind us *but life must be lived forwards.* Frequently, looking back, we are led to see that God was at work within us, preparing us for what lay ahead of us.

The call that I hear addressed to us today is to move forward believing that the Lord is at work within us – even though we still cannot see to what or where He is leading us. As we celebrate Mary's Immaculate Conception on this Solemnity, giving thanks to God for His preparatory work in her life, let us dare to recognise that even though we cannot see how or why or even for what the Lord is preparing us right now, an invitation is addressed to us to

trust that He is at work in our lives. The Lord sees what lies ahead of each one of us. He prepares us for what He has yet to come about in our lives, for what He will ask of us. It befalls us to be as simple and as confident as Mary is shown to have been in the beautiful Gospel passage we were invited to take to heart this morning. It befalls us to say *Yes* to God, as Mary did. It befalls us to echo the Blessed Virgin's expressed readiness to do whatever God asked of her for the good of His People. May we be as prompt as Mary was to say to the Lord: *Behold, I am Your servant. Be it done to me in accordance with Your word.*

Amen!