

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

December 8th

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

On this feast day we celebrate the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary was sinless from the first moment of her existence. There is no explicit biblical basis for this belief, which was declared dogma by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854. There are, however, several biblical passages which point in this direction; much like the fact that there is no clear statement about the Trinity in scripture, but nevertheless all Christian churches accept the dogma of the Trinity. She is prophetically foreshadowed in victory over the serpent which is promised to our first parents after their fall into sin (Genesis 3:15, our first reading); she is the virgin who is to conceive and bear a son whose name will be called Emmanuel (Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2-3; Matthew 1:22-23).

From the earliest times the Church formulated in her prayer the essentials of her faith concerning the Mother of Jesus. She was declared the Mother of God by the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. But it took a long time to uncover the wonders of grace contained in these words.

St. Irenaeus, in the 3rd century, foreshadowed Mary's Immaculate Conception by calling her the New Eve. St. Ephraem of Syria (A.D. 306-373), a poet, hymn writer and deacon addressed Christ and Mary this way: "You alone and your mother are in all things fair; for there is no flaw in you and no stain in your mother." St. Ambrose (A.D. 340-397) wrote "Adopt me, however, not from Sarah but from Mary, so that it might be from an incorrupt virgin, virgin by grace, free from all stain of sins." By the 8th century, there was a feast in honor of the Mary's Conception in the Eastern Church. In the 11th century, it appeared in the Western Church and was celebrated in England. Two centuries later in Scotland, the Franciscan John Duns Scotus clarified the distinction of how Mary would be immaculately conceived and still call Jesus her savior: Though Mary deserved original sin like all other humans, she was preserved from it at the moment of conception by a pre-redemption. She was saved from sin by her Son from the moment of her conception.

This feast was included in the calendar of the Universal Church in the 14th century; on December 8, 1661, Pope Alexander VII registered the progress of belief in the Immaculate Conception and it was made a feast of obligation in 1708, with an Opening Prayer that declared: "God prepared a worthy dwelling place for [His] Son through the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, preserving her from all sin in view of the foreseen Death of His Son."

The Immaculate Conception is more than just Mary's preservation from evil. It is her fullness of grace. Mary's soul, at the first moment of its creation and infusion into her body, was clothed in sanctifying grace. The stain of original sin was not removed, but rather was excluded from Mary's soul. Freedom from original sin does not necessarily mean freedom from all defects which came into the world as a punishment for sin. Mary, like Christ Himself, was subject to the general human defects, insofar as these involve no moral imperfection. It would be incompatible with Mary's fullness of grace, her perfect purity and immaculate state to be subject to notions of

inordinate desire. Like her privilege of the Assumption, her Immaculate Conception is based on Mary's divine motherhood; and in both Mary is the anticipated image of the Church without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:27).

The date of December 8 was fixed by the celebration of the Birth of Mary nine months afterwards, on September 8. It is not known why September 8 was selected as the date for the celebration of her birthday.

1st Reading - Genesis 3:9-15, 20

Mary was the only woman who was conceived without sin, but not the only sinless woman. Eve was created without sin, but did not maintain herself in that state. Today we hear of mankind's first opportunity to go to confession and how God in his mercy knows what we need.

After the man, Adam,

This is introductory material, inserted at the beginning of this reading to establish the characters. In the Bible, he is not referred to as "Adam" until after this reading. He is known now simply as "the man". The name "Adam" refers to his origins--Genesis 2:7 says that God formed him from the dust of the ground: *adamah* in Hebrew.

had eaten of the tree,

What tree? The tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). What kind of tree was it? Probably a fig ["and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves"(Genesis 3:7)]. Jewish legend also tells us that the forbidden fruit was a fig. Medieval art uses a play on the Latin word *molum* which means "apple" and also "evil thing".

⁹ The LORD God then called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?"

Isn't God omnipotent? Doesn't He know everything? Yes, of course He does – what He is doing is telling the man that He knows that something is wrong and He is inviting the man to tell Him about it. He is not asking for a physical location, he is asking the man "Where are you in your relationship with Me?" He is inviting the man to take this opportunity to repent of his sin and obtain Divine forgiveness. It is always God who issues the invitation to confess our sins with a little nudge of the conscience. God knows all our sins as soon as we commit them but wants us to verbally confess them so that we are sure that we know what they are. We must name them and claim them.

¹⁰ He answered, "I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid,

The King James Version says "I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid." What was the sound they heard? Psalm 29:3-9 describes the "voice" of the Lord: "*The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness,*

the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forests bare; and in his temple all cry, Glory!" What they have heard is not the rustle of leaves and the gentle snapping of twigs underfoot, they have heard a great and thunderous roar!

because I was naked, so I hid myself."

The man has realized that he was lacking something; not just clothing, they had sewed fig leaves together to solve that problem back in Genesis 2:7. He is missing God's grace.

¹¹ Then he asked, "Who told you that you were naked?"

Since there are only the two humans there, God is pointing out that it is his conscience which has pointed out the consequences of the man's sin. When God, in His mercy, gave the man a free will, He also gave him a conscience. The desire to do what is right is imprinted upon the soul. A free will without a conscience would result in total anarchy.

You have eaten, then, from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!"

God now points out what the result of sin was – he has eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and has the knowledge that he has done evil. He had thought that by eating of the tree he would be able to decide for himself what was good and what was evil, but sin is absolute – it is not relative to the situation and/or the participant.

¹² The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me--she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it."

The man, instead of acknowledging his sinfulness, that he has disobeyed God, tries to shift the blame to the woman and in doing so blames God Himself: If God hadn't given him the woman, this never would have happened. Why does God approach the man first? After all, the woman was the first to eat. Before God made the woman, He had put the man in the garden to till and guard it. He then commanded the man not to eat of the tree. The man has failed in his duty to keep the serpent from influencing his wife and himself. They had only one commandment to obey: "Do not eat of the tree."

¹³ The LORD God then asked the woman, "Why did you do such a thing?" The woman answered, "The serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it."

Not having gotten an admission of sinfulness from the man, God turns to the woman. Asking her to look at the cause of what they have done. The command not to eat had been given to the man before the woman was created. The man had instructed the woman, but she did not heed his direction but chose instead to listen to the serpent. She has chosen the serpent over her husband – a form of adultery. Remember that the Bible is all about covenant (family) relationships. She ate with the serpent rather than with her husband; she had communion with the serpent. Both she and the man have rejected God as the Father of their family by disobeying His command and eating what was forbidden with the serpent.

¹⁴ Then the LORD God said to the serpent:

God does not question the serpent or give it an opportunity to offer a defense. Evil is rejected outright.

"Because you have done this, you shall be banned from all the animals and from all the wild creatures;

The devil will not have influence over any of God's creation except man. The only occasion of demonic possession of an animal is in Matthew 8:32 (Mark 5:13 and Luke 8:33 are parallel texts) and the swine commit suicide rather than be possessed.

On your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life.

There are two images projected here: first, eating dust is a sign of submission (licking the dust off one's boots); and second, since the man was formed "from the dust" (Genesis 2:7), Satan will continue to attack man. Both images are appropriate as the evil one does continue to attack man but has no power over him unless it is given to him by the one he attacks.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers;

Have all women, or men for that matter, had total separation/rejection between them and Satan? Obviously not, but the woman was sinless until this event. There has been sparring between the devil and mankind ever since. Total enmity would occur when another sinless woman came along; a mother whose own Son would refer to her as "woman" as a recognition of her sinless nature.

He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel."

The masculine form in the Hebrew is not necessarily a direct reference to Christ, although He did emerge victorious in His battles with Satan, it is a reference to all the descendants of this first couple, all humanity. All humanity must ward off the temptations of Satan every day.

²⁰ The man called his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all the living.

In Genesis 2:23 the man had named her "Woman" (out of the womb of man, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone) and he now changes her name to "Eve" (mother of all the living). Names in Holy Scripture are important because they describe the characteristics and destiny of the bearer. A name change indicates a change in destiny and this is the first name change recorded.

What we have heard related in this reading is that Eve, created without sin, fell into sin. What we celebrate on this feast day is that the second Eve, conceived without sin, remained sinless throughout her life.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Our second reading comes from the beginning of the book of Ephesians which has been called "the blessing". The blessing echoes phrases from Colossians and announces themes which will be developed in the first half of Ephesians. Scholars teach that Ephesians is considered to expand themes which are first presented in Colossians. God, knowing what we need, although it may not be what we think we want, knew before He made the world that He would send His Son to redeem

us.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens,

This blessing begins with a formula which is known from the Old Testament “Blessed be God who lives forever, because his kingdom lasts for all ages” (Tobit 13:1) and is common in Jewish and early Christian prayers “Blessed be God who has bestowed everything” (1 Peter 1:3). With the addition of Christ, this shows the unity between the Jews and the Gentiles.

“Now God has blessed us not with this or that blessing but with every blessing. It is not as though we all obtain them all at once, but singly we obtain particular ones in due time or some of the whole number. Thereby we possess their fullness through these singular blessings. He speaks not only of earthly blessings but of spiritual – there are indeed earthly blessings, as when someone has children, affluence in riches, the pleasure of honor and health. ... But spiritual blessings are in the heavens because the earth is too small to circumscribe a spiritual blessing.” [Saint Jerome (A.D. 386), *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Ephesians* 1,1,3]

⁴ as he chose us in him,

We are God's chosen people, through the action of Christ.

before the foundation of the world,

Since the beginning of time. The choice is not accidental, but part of God's plan from the beginning.

to be holy and without blemish before him.

This same statement is in Colossians 1:22 and Ephesians 5:27 where it describes the spotless bride of Christ, the Church, cleansed in baptism. Romans 12:1 tells us we are to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. We are to avoid sin and confess it when we do it so we can gain God's forgiveness and be restored to the unblemished state.

In love ⁵ he destined us

Not individual predestination, but mankind as a whole to be saved through Christ.

for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ,

This is covenant language. It is through Christ's sacrifice that we are able to eat the family meal and be a part of God's family (read Romans 8:14-17).

“God in His love has predestined us to adoption through Christ. ... We speak of ourselves as heirs of God the Father and heirs through Christ, being sons through adoption. Christ is His Son, through whom it is brought about that we become sons and fellow heirs in Christ.” [Marius Victorinus (A.D. 356), *Against Arius* 1,2]

in accord with the favor of his will,⁶ for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved.

This is a recurrent theme in Ephesians: That men, understanding God's plan, should praise Him and give Him thanks. In the Old Testament, Israel strives to live for His praise (Isaiah 43:21). The identification of Christ as God's beloved recalls the baptism scene in the Gospels in which the voice from heaven makes the same proclamation (see Mark 1:11).

¹¹ In him we were also chosen,

Both Jew and Gentile are chosen. Saint Paul was a Jew and the apostle to the Gentiles. This summarizes the opening statement that we, God's chosen people, have always been destined to eternal life.

destined in accord with the purpose of the one who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will,¹² so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ.

This phrase refers either to the Jewish people who had hoped in Christ, or to Jewish Christians who had been the first to believe, or to the Gentile converts who were the pioneers in their area, or a combination of all these groups.

“What he means is that God first allotted the task of preaching to those believers in Christ who were from a Jewish background. Therefore no one of Gentile background was chosen to be an apostle. It was fitting that the first preachers should be chosen from those who had previously hoped for the salvation that had been promised to them in Christ.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*, Ephesians 1,12]

Gospel - Luke 1:26-38

We now hear of the Annunciation where the sinless Mary is asked to bear the Son of God. This reading, although it is read on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, is not to be confused with it: the Immaculate Conception is about the sinless conception of Mary and this reading addresses the conception of Jesus in the womb of this sinless woman..

²⁶ [T]he angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,

Gabriel [means El (Elohim) is strong] is not called an archangel in the Bible, but he is one of the 7 archangels in the book of Enoch. He is the same archangel who interpreted Daniel's visions (Daniel 8:16-26; 9:20-27) and announced the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11-20). Nazareth was an obscure town of some 150 people. *Nezer* in Hebrew means "branch" and it is from "branchtown" that the shoot of Jesse comes.

²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

"Joseph" means "may Yahweh add". The Hebrew for "Mary" is Miriam which means "excellence" or "exalted one"). St. Luke twice stresses Mary's virginity. The apocryphal *Gospel of the Birth of Mary*, from which we get the names of Mary's parents, Anna and Joachim, also tells us that she was brought up in the Temple as a consecrated virgin: "[W]hen at length she arrived to her fourteenth year, as the wicked could not lay anything to her charge worthy of reproof, so all good persons, who were acquainted with her, admired her life and conversion. At that time the high priest made a public order. That all the virgins who had public settlements in the temple, and were come to this age, should return home, and, as they were now of a proper maturity, should, according to the custom of their country, endeavor to be married. To which command, though all the other virgins readily yielded obedience, Mary the Virgin of the Lord alone answered that she could not comply with it. Assigning these reasons: that both she and her parents had devoted her to the service of the Lord; and besides, that she had vowed virginity to the Lord, which vow she was resolved never to break through by lying with a man." (*Gospel of the Birth of Mary* 5:3-6).

²⁸ And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace!"

The Greek *chaire kecharitomente* can be translated "full of grace" or "highly favored daughter"; "full of grace" is the more accurate translation. She is the object of God's grace and favor. The way the greeting is applied here, it is almost like a name change; instead of referring to her as "Mary", Gabriel refers to her as "full of grace".

The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

In what way is she highly favored and blessed by God?

³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Imagine how Mary felt, confronted by an angel -- most angels appear in dreams, not while awake.

³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,

Note the parallel with Isaiah 7:14; a parallel which almost certainly was not lost on Mary. Note also the future tense: "will conceive".

and you shall name him Jesus.

Jesus means "Yahweh is salvation" or "God saves". Emmanuel means "God is with us". Since His institution of the Eucharist, Jesus (God) has always been with us not only spiritually but physically as well.

³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,

Mary's future son is described with language ordinarily reserved for God's redeeming presence among His people: "Great" (Psalm 48:2), "Son of the Most High" (Genesis 14:19).

and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,³³ and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Jesus' rule will be eternal.

³⁴ But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

Mary is not asking for a lesson in reproductive biology, she knows full well how babies are made. This question makes no sense at all if she had been planning on raising a family sometime. It does make sense though if she is a consecrated virgin. The angel has not said when she will conceive, only that she will. After all, she is betrothed to Joseph and a child would be the expected issue of the marriage unless a vow of perpetual virginity is involved.

³⁵ And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you,

A pure gift from God through the power of God's Spirit.

and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

This calls to mind the cloud coming down and overshadowing Mount Sinai when God gave the commandments (Exodus 24:15) and the glory cloud which overshadowed and occupied the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and the Temple (1 Kings 8:10).

Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

The Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity, one God. Since Jesus is the Son of God, and as one person of the Trinity is God Himself, then Mary is the Mother of God because she gave birth to one who is fully God and fully man and the two natures can not be separated [Declared by the Council of Ephesus (AD 431)].

³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;

An allusion to the birth of Isaac (Genesis 18:14). St. Luke emphasizes that God creates something out of nothing. This is given to Mary as a sign to confirm the angel's announcement. After all, if a woman past childbearing age could become pregnant, why should there be any doubt about Mary's pregnancy?

³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God."

This is the conclusion to be drawn from the preceding verse.

³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Mary's fiat. In Genesis, woman came from man and sin entered the world. In Luke, man comes

from a woman and forgiveness of sin enters the world. Unlike Eve who turned away from God's will, Mary submits without hesitation. The punishment for the woman in an adulterous relationship was stoning to death and Mary was married to Joseph although they were not yet living under the same roof. If Joseph were to denounce her, she would be stoned. By disobedience Eve lost everything. By her obedience Mary, who risked losing her life, gained eternal life for us all.