

Immaculate Conception “Wrestling with Dragons”

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I love that many statues of Mary depict her with a serpent being squashed under her foot. Have you seen these statues? I believe this observation is a great way of celebrating Mary’s identity as the Immaculate Conception. This feast day celebrates that Mary was preserved from sin from the moment of her conception by the future merits of her son Jesus. And so, if you are wondering why there is a serpent under her foot in a number of traditional paintings and statues of her, it is linked to the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis. In the story from Genesis, Eve said “no” to God and was thus conquered by the serpent. In our Gospel reading, Mary filled with grace says “yes” to God’s will for her, and the ancient foe is defeated.

It isn’t that simple though, is it? I have shared with you before my opinion that the little snake you see in these statues do not do the serpent justice at all. I am a big Tolkien fan. One of my favorite books as a boy was “the Hobbit”. You may recall that Tolkien was a faithful Catholic and loved to weave Catholic ideas into his stories. You see, from Tolkien’s point of view, the serpent spoken about in the bible is more like the dragon Smaug than the little snake we see in these statues of Mary squishing the snake. I think anyone who has battled with the power of sin or addiction or just to develop better habits in life gets this. The power of sin is more like a fire breathing dragon than a garter snake. The question becomes, how best to overcome evil when we find ourselves battling dragons in the spirit life?

I think Peter Jackson did a great job recreating Middle Earth in his movies. I think the best line from the Hobbit series is probably in the first movie, “An Unexpected Journey.” When asked by Lady Galadriel as to why he recruited Bilbo for this adventure, Gandalf says something profound which, although is not in the book, is actually a direct quote from J.R.R. Tolkien himself when asked in an interview why he picked Bilbo as the hero. Tolkien reportedly responded in that interview, “Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love. Why Bilbo Baggins? I don’t know. Perhaps because I am afraid, and he gives me courage.” Tolkien of course was referring to his fear surrounding World War 2. However, I think Tolkien’s insight is very profound on a spiritual level.

What is the best way to deal with the dragons we wrestle inside of us in life? The answer is: humility, simple acts of kindness, and love, these are what keep the darkness at bay. And this is why I think the statues of Mary squashing the serpent’s head are provocative. This image reminds us the best way to confront the power of sin and death in the world is to follow the example of Mary who, when the future of the universe was set upon her shoulders, humbly and lovingly said “yes” to God’s will for her rather than “no”. When faced with our own challenges in life, especially the ones that seem impossible, I think it is helpful to look upon Mary, the Immaculate Conception and our mother in faith. When we find ourselves confronted with our own dragons, we only need to turn to Mary and her son Jesus. They give us courage and a roadmap to victory.

