

Immaculate Conception Why This Celebration Matters

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My friends, why does the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Matter? To begin with, it is important to understand that every doctrine we have about Mary is really a doctrine about Jesus Christ. Every affirmation we give to Mary is secondary to the affirmation we are saying about Jesus Christ our savior. On this feast day, when we say Mary was immaculately conceived, we are saying that Mary was kept free from original sin at the moment of her conception. Why is this important for our understanding of Jesus?

To answer this, we must go back to the beginning! In our first reading from the Book of Genesis we have a story of the original sin of Adam and Eve. Before this original sin, Adam and Eve lived in a state of holiness and justice. They lived in right relationship with God, with God's creation, and with each other. Why was the forbidden fruit in the garden in the first place? I think the forbidden fruit is symbolic of our ability, being made in the image and likeness of God to be able to have free will, to either obey God or disobey God. Or put, perhaps, in a better way in the form of Christ's greatest commandments. We cannot love God and love others authentically if we do not have the ability and freedom to choose to do otherwise. Love, to be love, must be born out of freedom. Freedom, to be freedom, must include the ability to refuse or reject love. The forbidden fruit can be symbolic of our ability, born of freedom, to live in right relationship with God and others or not.

And we see what happens when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Before, they were in right relationship with God, creation and with each other. After they eat the forbidden fruit, they are embarrassed with the bodies God gave them and they hide from God. When God catches up with them and wonders why they ate the forbidden fruit, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. They are no longer in right relationship with God, creation, or themselves. Original sin, the original rebellion against God, has infected all of creation. Every human being is sacred in the eyes of God, but every human being since Adam and Eve carries this defect of original sin that tempts us to defy God, to sin against God and neighbor.

Sin in our world affects us all whether we like it or not. GK Chesterton suggested that original sin is the one doctrine we have that has empirical evidence. Just open your news sites in the morning and there is sin in all its glory. There is something original about it, basic about it. Original sin is like a cancer of the soul that is passed from generation to generation making us less than God's original vision for humanity.

Consistent with God's love, in the fullness of time, God sends the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, "Hail full of grace! The Lord is with you." Let's stop right there. Notice that the angel Gabriel recognized Mary to be "full of grace" not "half of grace". To have the stain of original sin would deny us some measure of God's grace. The fact that the angel recognizes Mary to be "full of grace" biblically justifies what the Church is saying about Mary being born free of the deficit of original sin.

The Angel continues, “Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall name him Jesus”. I am pressing the pause button again. Do you know what the name Jesus means? The name Jesus literally means “God saves”. Jesus’ very name suggests that the incarnation is a rescue mission to save human souls.

So why was Mary free from original sin at the moment of her conception? Original sin is the cancer of the soul that makes humanity less than human, less than the original vision God created us. Our salvation needs Christ to be fully human; that is to say, a humanity free of the deficit of original sin, if our humanity is to be remade in His image and likeness in baptism and holy Eucharist. Because Jesus received this humanity from his mother Mary, Mary therefore needs to be “fully human” also; that is to say, free of original sin. God created Mary to be an island in the ocean of sin and death where Christ could enter into our midst as a fully human and fully divine person.

Mary is the new Eve by saying “yes” when Eve said “no”. Christ is the new Adam through his obedience to the Father for the salvation of the world. Mary is the mother of the Church in the sense that we have become sisters and brothers with Christ our Lord in baptism, sharing a common Father through the bond of the Holy Spirit. Also wonderful, Mary was the first disciple and model for all disciples, for she was the first to say, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Through Mary we have a glimpse of what it means to be fully human in perfect relationship with God in heaven. Or as St. Anselm articulates beautifully in today’s office of readings, he writes, “Blessed Lady, sky and stars, earth and rivers, day and night...rejoice that through you they are in some sense restored to their lost beauty and are endowed with inexpressible new grace.”

And so, on this feast day, we can ask ourselves: what are the areas in my life that needs grace right now? Think about that. Count all the ways we feel like we desperately need God’s grace. Once we have identified these areas, we are invited to turn our hearts and minds towards Mary who is full of grace. This is because: the closer we are to Mary, the closer we will be to Jesus who is the author of grace. This is because everything about Mary points to Jesus and our hope for salvation. Yes, every doctrine about Mary is in fact an affirmation about Jesus. His mother would not have it any other way.