

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception – December 8, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 6:30pm Mass – 875 words

In the history of the Church, the Franciscans were perhaps the greatest promoters of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, and in the 13th century Franciscan theologians proposed a concise and understandable way to describe why God preserved Mary from all sin from the first moment of her conception. They said, quite simply: God could do it, it was fitting, and so he did it. God is capable of all things, and he always does what it is fitting to do; considering, therefore, the possibilities for the mother of his only Son, the most fitting thing was that she herself should be sinless from the first moment of her existence. Therefore, God created Mary immaculate.

But it did not take until the 13th century for this doctrine to be formulated; no, it was something that Christians believed from the very beginning, even if the words used to describe it were not exactly the same as today. From the beginning, the great commentators on Sacred Scripture understood Mary to be the “New Eve” – the reversal of the First Eve, who had sinned and handed on that state of sin to all humanity. To be born with Original Sin is to be born deprived of God's grace: in other words, the person stained by Original Sin is alive on the natural level, but not on the supernatural level. The first reading said that Eve “became the mother of all the living”; in this respect we could say that she became the mother of all those who were alive on the natural level. Mary, the New Eve, the one who is “full of grace”, becomes the mother of all those who are alive supernaturally; that is, all those who, through baptism, are given the grace of God in their souls.

We recall that grace is the life of God in us. It is supernatural life in our souls. More than that, it is God's special help so that we can live the way he commands, which is certainly beyond our natural abilities. The Blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her existence, was “full of grace”; she was absolutely full of God's divine life, and that divine life was never diminished or eradicated in her through sin. Mary was always alive to God; she never once sinned, even in the smallest way.

Our second reading helps us to focus our consideration of the Immaculate Conception down to the level of practical living. In other words, what does it mean for you and for me? St. Paul says that “[God] chose us in [Christ], before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him”. The phrase “without blemish” means nothing more and nothing less than “immaculate”. God chose us from all eternity and has called us to be immaculate. We know well that this is an ongoing process. It began with our baptism, when the stain of Original Sin was cleansed from our souls – when we began being alive to God, full of his grace. But that grace in us has fluctuated over the years: there are times when it was diminished due to venial sin; other times it grew due to our virtuous deeds; sometimes, perhaps, it was completely wiped out, due to mortal sin, but later restored thanks to a good confession. God's grace in us has fluctuated, but the goal ultimately is for us to become “full of grace”. Another way of saying it is, the goal is for us to become holy – to be saints.

And so we conclude by considering a saint: Saint Bernadette. Our Lady appeared to her – a young, uneducated peasant girl living in rural Lourdes, France – in 1858, and she said to her, “I am the Immaculate Conception”. Our Lady appeared to Bernadette in what was basically the town dump, where Bernadette had gone to collect whatever kindling she could find. Since then, that town dump has evolved into a beautiful Basilica, a gorgeous and edifying place of pilgrimage to which millions of people travel each year.

An analogous change will take place in our souls also, if only we let our Blessed Mother in. Let's face it: our souls tend to have a certain “dumpy” quality about them; we are all

struggling with sin and its effects; we all have wounds. But if we allow her more fully into our lives, she can transform us: by her prayers; by her maternal guidance; by her powerful protection. And our souls will become something like a beautiful basilica as well: a place where Christ dwells in his fullness. Our calling – given to us by God from all eternity – is to become “holy and without blemish before him”.

Our Lady is not afraid to get dirty. Just because she is immaculate doesn't mean that she dwells far removed from us. If it was not beneath her to appear to an uneducated peasant girl in a town dump, surely she will help us also. Let us, therefore, turn to her with great confidence, today and always. God could do it; it was fitting; and so he did it. And he did do it – that is, he created Mary immaculate – not only for his Son, but for us as well.