

Homily for The Feast of the Immaculate Conception
December 8th 2017¹

The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception was promulgated on this date in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. Now what is a dogma? I like this simple definition from the 1989 International Theological Commission:

“In the dogma of the Church, one is thus concerned with the correct interpretation of the Scriptures.”

Dogma, then, is the Church’s infallible study of, and explanation of scripture. Some dogmas, like the Virgin Birth, are explicit in Scripture. The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus was born of the Virgin. Other dogmas, like the Immaculate Conception, are implicit. That is, although it is never stated in so many words that Mary was immaculately conceived it is evident in Scripture. The most important verse in this regard is Gabriel’s greeting:

“Hail full of grace, the Lord is with you”.

What a contrast is this greeting to God’s question to Adam:

“Where are you”?

and, his response:

“I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked”.

To speak of Mary’s Immaculate Conception means that her heart was always turned towards God; whereas because, like Adam, we have been infected by original sin, our natural inclination is to turn our hearts away from God and hide from him.

Sin is our refusal of God and our refusals of God. This is manifested in the ease by which we prove ourselves to be unwilling to love. It is in our refusals to love that we see the great indicator of original sin as an oppressive and terrible condition.

Our refusals of God are expressed in the disobedience shown in ignoring the prohibition about eating from the tree of Good and Evil. Our refusal of God is expressed when the Serpent says: We can be like God and therefore don’t need Him. To put it another way, original sin is our natural tendency to reject God, this is our refusal of God. And our disobedience, is our refusals of God.

God has a plan through which he deals with original sin. This plan unfolds in the scriptures and culminates in the revelation of Christ the Lord. When we speak of Christ "saving us" or refer to

¹ Much of this homily is taken from an article entitled: “What the Immaculate Conception Means” by Fr Steve Grunow. <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/what-the-immaculate-conception-means/4584/>

Christ as our redeemer, what he is saving us from and delivering us from is original sin and its effects.

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is part of God's plan. Christ, who receives his human flesh from his mother, receives this flesh from a person who, by a singular gift from God, herself comes into this world without original sin.

This exemption is God's gift to the woman who would freely choose to be his mother. The gift highlights the extraordinary nature of the mission of the Mother of God- no one would ever have the relationship God in Christ has to the Blessed Virgin Mary. No one will ever be the Mother of God except the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Some might be inclined to think that something like the Immaculate Conception made things much easier for the Mother of God, and in this regard, I think such folks would be mistaken. The Immaculate Conception was not a kind of decorative accessory, but a reality that would be essential for the Mother of God to fulfill her mission. It would express itself in a capacity to love that would have far exceeded our own. And this would not have made things easy.

The Mother of God was an Immaculate Conception in a sin-filled world. Those whom she loved suffered from the effects of original sin and her exemption would not have made her cold and aloof, but would have quickened her to life with a deep compassion that would have cut into her heart.

Think for instance of the pain parents who love the Lord experience when they see their teenage and adult children far from him. Perhaps you know first-hand this experience. In this you share in knowing something of Mary's Immaculate heart.

She would have been to this world a sign of contradiction, a stranger, someone who would have always been on the peripheries, deeply in love, but beset with grief at how much God's love is refused in a fallen world.

Whatever we feel at the effects of the world's refusal to love, would have been intensified for Christ's mother. She would know, better than us, humanity's desperate need for a Saviour and the consequences of our refusals of God would have been overwhelming, if not for the grace that she received in her relationship with her Divine Son.

The Immaculate Conception does not mean that Christ's Mother did not need a Savior or that she somehow saved herself. In fact, it means the opposite. Christ saved her in an extraordinary way and gave her a holiness that she did not achieve for herself. He did this for her, for the sake of her mission- a mission that only she would bear. This gift of holiness is what the Immaculate Conception is all about.

The Immaculate Conception is not something easy, it is mysterious and miraculous, but is nevertheless a beautiful and extraordinary gift - a gift through which God in Christ acted to save his Mother, and us from our sins, from all our refusals to love.

