

Homily for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception

December 8 2022

The Instrument of Grace

The early Church Father's made a comparison between Mary the Mother of the Church and Eve the mother of all the living. I want to consider these two people this morning, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Let's go back to that familiar story from the Book of Genesis, our first parents, in a garden where they had free reign to eat of all the trees in all the garden except one. So much emphasis has been placed on the prohibition, the one tree they are not to eat from, that we overlook the permission that they had been given. Enjoy the garden, completely for our God wants us to be fully alive. St. Irenaeus, one of the 2nd century Church Fathers said:

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive”

This garden, this field of the Lord stands for art and literature, science, relationships that are flourishing. All those things that make life rich and meaningful for us.

So what about that prohibition? Why does the Lord say “you must not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.?”

Here is how not to read that prohibition. We hear in the Book of Genesis of the serpent who comes to Adam and Eve and says: “I know why God doesn't want you to eat of that tree. You will be like him, knowing good and evil. In other words, God is jealous of you. He doesn't want you to be fully alive. In fact, he is a rival and if you are like him he will resent it. Therefore you must grasp from the tree, other wise he will dominate you. You must take what God does not want to give to you.

Three musicians can help us here. Daniel Barenboim, one of the greatest pianist of our age, John Coltrane the great jazz musician and Eric Clapton, one of the greatest guitarists in rock and roll. Three very different musicians who said the same thing:

We make the most beautiful music when the instrument plays us.

All three are great masters of their respective instruments. They have done all they can do to master the instrument but at the end of all their practice and striving they allow themselves to be carried. They are taken beyond what they can accomplish and achieve and at that moment the music is the most glorious and beautiful.

Or think of two people in the wonderfully descriptive phrase, “Fall in love”. This involves assessing one another at first, using all their skills and powers. If they are really meant for each other, they fall in love which takes them beyond where they can go on their own. The best things come to us in life, when at the end of our strivings we are ready to receive a gift.

Why does God say you must not eat from that tree? Not because he is keeping something from them, but rather because he wants them to be fully alive. What is the original sin? The original sin is a kind of grasping and from that has come all the suffering in the human race and we lose all that God wants to give us.

Now with this background, let's turn to the story from Luke of the Annunciation where we are given a clear insight into what it means to say Mary is Immaculate. Let's hear part of this story again:

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!"

The essence of this greeting is at the heart of our Hail Mary. For she is full of grace, a word which means a gift freely given. Mary is addressed as someone who is asked to receive gifts and she is someone who is ready to receive. What is the problem with Adam and Eve? They strive after and grasp at God. Whereas Mary is full of grace, she is receptive and ready to receive gifts. The angel tells her you are to be the mother of the Son of God. What is Mary's question then?

And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?"

Is there anything uncurious about Mary? Has she put her mind to rest? Mary is asking a good, curious question. How is this to be? In others words she is lit up, active, engaged and fully alive. God wants us to use our powers of mind, as we see Mary doing here. But then the angel tells her something:

***And the angel said to her,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;***

Here the angel is speaking in the language alluded to earlier in the homily. The Spirit will overshadow you Mary and you will be taken somewhere where you cannot go on your own. God is not trying to put you down and suppress you but he is wanting to take you to a place where you could not go on your own. In the angel's words we hear the language of grace. Mary understood that at the end of the day she needed to allow herself to be carried.

The heart of the Spiritual life is knowing that your life is not about you. Mary is allowing herself to be carried and to entertain that which her own mind cannot grasp on its own. She realized that things that are seemingly impossible are possible through the power of God.

To say Mary is Immaculate, means in part that she had such a passion and longing for the impossibly great things that God wanted to accomplish through us. This is clear by Mary's response:

"Let it be done to me according to thy word"

A response that is so different from our first parents in the Garden. Mary in her immaculate heart is open to God and open to the adventure of going where only he can take her. This is the undoing of Eve, what I would term a joyful surrender to adventure that is at the heart of Mary's Immaculate Conception. She was always willing to be carried by God. May we likewise be open to the Holy Spirit's leading so that instead of striving we discover the freedom that is ours when overshadowed by the Holy Spirit we fall ever more in love with God and allow ourselves to be carried; to so to speak allow God to play us as we say:

I am the servant of the Lord, be it unto me according to your word.