

8 December 2020

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Genesis 3:9-15, 20
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12
Luke 1:26-38

A few years ago, on my pilgrimage to Europe, I visited Lourdes for the first time. Lourdes is in southwestern France, where in 1858, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to a young girl named Bernadette Soubirous in a dirty, damp, and cold cave. They called it the “pigs' shelter” at the time, because it's where the pigs feeding in the area usually took shelter from the cold. After several apparitions to Bernadette, during which a spring of water miraculously appeared from within the cave, Bernadette asked the lady for her name. The lady responded, “I am the Immaculate Conception”. Since then, Lourdes has become one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the world.

And as a side note, the statues to the left of the altar in our chapel are specifically of Our Lady of Lourdes and Saint Bernadette, which come from our original Saint Ann church off Harrowgate.

The day and a half we spent in Lourdes on our pilgrimage was my personal favorite part of the whole trip. I was struck by how the entire shrine seemed to be built up naturally over and around the rock of the grotto, the cave in which Mary appeared. There are beautiful hills, trees, and bodies of water, in and around the shrine, not to mention the beautiful churches and chapels. Many sick and elderly people come every year to wash in the baths from the miraculous water, and I was very moved by how compassionately the workers treated all who came to pray for healing.

The grotto itself has been maintained virtually the same as it was at the time of the apparitions, except that the ground has been covered with slate, there's a plexiglass covering over the spring to protect it, and there's an altar for Mass to be celebrated there.

There's also a statue of Our Lady in the small crevice of the rock in which she appeared, and under it is an inscription of how she identified herself: "I am the Immaculate Conception". What caught my attention when I first saw it was that the words are not in French, or in Spanish. They're in the local dialect that Bernadette and the other poor peasants in the area at the time would have spoken. Just like how Our Lady of Guadalupe spoke to Juan Diego when she appeared to him—she spoke in his native language, not technically Spanish.

Which makes perfect sense: Mary communicated with the people she appeared to in the language they spoke, since many of them were illiterate, so that they could understand her. After all, she was a poor girl from a backwater village herself.

By identifying herself as the Immaculate Conception, Mary at Lourdes confirmed the dogma that was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX just a few years before in 1854, that Mary, at the moment of her conception in her mother, Saint Ann, was preserved from any stain of original sin by the foreseen merits of Jesus Christ in his victory over sin and death on the cross.

This can be a difficult doctrine to wrap our minds around, as it challenges our linear view of time. Remember that Mary did not accomplish this on her own—she needed a savior like all of us. So how could she, at her conception, receive the fruits of her future Son's future victory?

Perhaps it's helpful here to remember that all time, and the entire created universe leads to Jesus Christ. Thus the fruit of his victory over sin and death extends into all time, past, present, and future.

Another way of looking at this doctrine is simply the logical conclusion that God needed to prepare a worthy mother to bring his Son into the world, starting with keeping her from all sin at the very beginning of her existence. Thus this is an act of pure grace, pure gift from God.

So what does this mean for us? Remember that Mary is an image of the Church. She always points us toward her Son, whom she brought into the world through her “yes” to God.

At Vatican II, there was much debate over whether to write a separate document just on Mary. Instead, it was decided to include a chapter on her in the document on the Church. So the final chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church promulgated in 1964, is titled, “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church”. A very important statement here: Mary is meant to be looked at always in the broader picture of the entire Church, not just by herself.

As Mother of the Church, Mary is the model disciple, but also a model of the Church herself. She is the model of what we are called to be: holy, saints of God.

This is what our second reading from Ephesians is alluding to, when it says that God has blessed us in Christ, “with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him.” But this can only be done by being present to God, by accepting and responding to the pure grace and gift that he gives us, as Mary did.

During this Advent season, we're called to reflect on our readiness for the Lord's coming in our lives. We may not be as immaculate as Mary, but with the grace of the sacraments, especially Reconciliation, we can truly “turn back the clock” on our lives and return to that clean slate that we all yearn for. Then we can in turn bring forth Christ into the world in faith, as Mary did.

May Mary, the Immaculate Conception, intercede for us and keep us close to her Son.