

Immaculate Conception

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Through the centuries, the Church has become even more aware that Our Lady "Full of grace," through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854: "The Most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all the stain of original sin." This means that the splendor of an entirely unique holiness by which our lady is enriched from the first instant of her conception comes wholly from Christ: "She is redeemed, in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her son." (as *Lument Gentium* puts it.)

In today's gospel at the announcement that she would give birth to "the Son of the Most High: without any human intervention, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, Our Lady responded with the obedience of faith, "Behold! I am the handmaid of the Lord." St. Irenaeus says that, "Being obedient, she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race." Hence, not a few of the early Fathers gladly assert that the Knot of Eve's disobedience, as the first reading tells us, was untied by Mary's obedience; what the Virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, the Virgin Mary loosened by her faith. Death through Eve, life through Mary." The long familiar typology of Eve and Mary provided a paradigm: The one was the handmaid of seduction, the other of propitiation. The one gave birth to lies, the other brought redemption. Mary's trust in the angel was compared with Eve's confidence in the serpent, and Eve's offspring who murdered his brother with Mary's son, who saved Israel, his brother in the flesh.

In the second reading, St. Paul blessed God the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the formation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. This passage is perfectly fulfilled in the Blessed Virgin Mary to the highest degree even beyond the greatest saint, because God the Father blessed the Virgin Mary more than any other created being in Christ, with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places and chose her in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before Him in love. The Church has never ceased to proclaim Mary's unique and universal mission in the work of our salvation. There is not one single movement in the whole scheme of Redemption in which the Virgin Mary does not have a part after Christ Jesus and with Him. Such is the unchangeable will of God who has willed that we should have everything through Mary, as St. Bernard puts it.

It is true to say that, no one has penetrated the mystery of Christ in all its profundity more than

Our Lady. St. John and St. Mary Magdalene did see very far into this mystery and St. Paul often speaks of the "knowledge" he had received of it, yet all of the saints dwell in shadows compared with Our Lady's light! The secret that she kept and pondered in her heart is unspeakable; no tongue can tell it, no pen can express it. The Blessed Virgin Mary is a perfect paradigm of discipleship, who never withdrew her commitment to God. Therefore, if we want to have a human union with her, we have to enter into the fidelity of her "yes" to the Father: "Behold, be it done according to thy word."

In all the Holy Gospels, we find her words a mere seven times. Many times did she ponder in her heart, but seldom did she speak. We read that she spoke twice to the angels, twice to Elizabeth, twice to her Son, and once to the servants at the wedding. In Our Lady, we contemplate the ideal of the religious life lived to perfection. Her example inspires us to follow her footsteps. She best exemplifies contemplative life in the Church. Finally, in the words of St. Aelred: "the monk who follows Mary will recover paradise, which here on earth is the peace of the cloister."

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