Homily: The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Marist School Mass – December 8, 2023

Footnotes are for the reader's benefit.

Today, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. This Solemnity, along with the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity, is among the most challenging for us priests to preach on. Add to that preaching to over a thousand teenagers and adults representing different Christian churches, ecclesial communions, and religious traditions. That means I have my work cut out for me. Of course, there are also time limitations, so pray for me.

Some ask why God did not do for me what God did for Mary in the Immaculate Conception. Before I answer that question, let's review what the Catholic Church teaches. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary teaches that God spared Mary from being conceived with original sin and its effects, leaving her full of grace and immune to personal sin. Mary still needed to be saved by Christ's death and resurrection. However, the future merits of Christ's saving act were applied at her conception. This special grace was given to her in light of her role in salvation history. She was to be the mother of Jesus, the new Adam, from whom he would receive his human nature. This required that it be without any taint of sin. Just as Eve's human nature was created without sin, Mary, the new Eve, should also be without sin. Hence, the Immaculate Conception.

Now, it is true that Mary had no attraction to sin. You and I, on the other hand, know well what St. Paul described when he said, "What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. " (Romans 7: 15) That would not apply to Mary and certainly not to Jesus, though we know the devil tempted him. Fr. Mike Schmitz, a Catholic evangelist, speaker, author, and the director of youth and young adult ministries in the Diocese of Duluth, Minnesota, responded to those who ask, "Why couldn't God do for me what God did for Mary?" Fr. Schmitz says, "Remember, God always gives us the graces we need for the role we are to play in salvation history. Mary's role was unique. Therefore, the graces she received were unique to her role." However, some still may not find this explanation satisfactory.

Let's look at what it was like for Mary to be without sin. I agree with Fr. Schmitz that there's never been a person who's ever walked this earth after Jesus who had to walk a lonelier road than Mary. During her whole life, she never compromised with sin while walking amid a broken world filled with people who did that routinely. That is a very lonely walk.

Some of you may have walked that walk and know what I am talking about. Think about those times when you resisted the temptation of your peers to compromise your values. You may have stood alone and had to absorb taunts from your best friends, pressuring you to give in "this one time." That can help you to identify with the profound loneliness of Mary, who had to absorb the taunts and criticisms directed at her son, including the gossip about Jesus' birth directed at her. The seven sorrowful mysteries of the sosary attest to Mary's suffering. Being full of grace brought struggles of its own.

There is another side to this coin that we need to look at; it is the profound moral strength of Mary. Nowhere was her resolve put to the test more than when she stood under her son's cross. We can imagine her being tempted to despair but quickly rejecting that thought and not giving it a chance to do any damage. We, however, are tempted and entertain sinful thoughts, which lead to sinful actions.

We become like Mary, full of grace[1] at Baptism.[2] However, our will remains weakened, and our desires are disordered, often leading us to what is sinful rather than what is good. Why does God permit this? Why do we have to struggle with sin and temptation? Fr. Schmitz reminds us that God did not ask for our cooperation when we were born. However, God does ask for our cooperation in the work of our redemption. God also gives us the graces we need for the role we are to play in salvation history. I will leave it at that.

After Mary learned of her cousin's pregnancy, she went in haste to support Elizabeth. I would add that Mary also needed Elizabeth to stand with and support her. Both became pregnant because of a miracle. Mary and Elizabeth could not talk about this with just anyone. Using today's parlance, only someone who has walked the walk can talk the talk.

What does the Immaculate Conception of Mary mean for us? Here are two takeaways. First, there will be times when Marist students will walk in Mary's footsteps, leading them to stand up for what is right and having to stand alone.

The second takeaway is this. Marist students who do what is right should never stand alone when their peers pressure them to do what is wrong. If you see that happening, come in haste to their aid. Say something supportive, such as, "I agree with her/him," or say, "What you are doing is wrong, and *we* don't want to be a part of it."

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[1] This greeting from the Archangel Gabriel is the biblical justification for the Catholic teaching about the Immaculate Conception. This expression signifies that Mary was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus and was endowed with special graces and virtues[1]. The term "full of grace" (kecharitoméne) indicates that Mary was in a state of sanctifying grace, free from sin, and completely receptive to God's will [1]. This greeting highlights Mary's unique role in salvation history and her exceptional holiness [1]. It emphasizes that Mary was chosen by God to participate in His divine plan and to bring forth the Savior into the world [1]. The angel's greeting to Mary as "full of grace" reveals her special relationship with God and her extraordinary spiritual qualities [1] https://www.magisterium.com/search/7f0b8eb1-589c-4179-b559-492a710c1bc7?document=2f6fd0c7-953f-46bb-a458-462147552749&ref=8.

[2] In the rite of baptism, the priest prays the following Prayer of Exorcism: Almighty and ever-living God, you sent your only Son into the world to cast out the power of Satan, spirit of evil, to rescue man from the kingdom of darkness, and bring him into the splendor of your kingdom of light. We pray for this child: set him (her) free from original sin, make him (her) a temple of your glory, and send your Holy Spirit to dwell with him (her). We ask this through Christ our Lord. All: Amen.

The Prayer of Exorcism at baptism is a prayer that is pronounced over the candidate to invoke liberation from sin and from everything that separates us from Christ and prevents intimate union with Him. It is a prayer that seeks victory over Satan, the devil, and the power of darkness. The exorcism is done in the ordinary form in the rite of baptism, and it signifies the Church's authority in the name of Jesus to protect the person or object from the power of the Evil One and withdraw them from his dominion[123]. The Prayer of Exorcism is an integral part of the baptismal ritual, whether it is for adults or infants[3]. It is important to note that the prayer of exorcism is not a magical formula but a prayer that invokes the power of the Holy Spirit to enable the baptized person to fight against the spirit of evil and to live in communion with God[43]. The baptismal water is consecrated by a prayer of epiclesis, where the Church asks God to send the power of the Holy Spirit upon the water so that those who will be baptized in it may be "born of water and the Spirit"[5]. https://www.magisterium.com/search/7f0b8eb1-589c-4179-b559-492a710c1bc7.

The mother of Jesus had her struggles. We have ours. While God did not ask for our cooperation when we were born, he does ask for our cooperation in the work of our redemption. That is what we pledge to do when we renew our baptismal promises before receiving the sacrament of confirmation and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Remember, God gives us the graces we need for the role we are to play in salvation history. God waits to see if we will be like Mary and cooperate with him. In a sinful and fallen world, that means we will struggle with sin and temptation. It is the way of the cross, which Jesus commands those who would be his disciples to take up daily and follow him.

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.