

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Mary, the Best of Us

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is easy to confuse this feast with the Annunciation and the conception of Jesus within Mary through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. And today's gospel reading makes this even more difficult. The gospel reading is the Annunciation. But today's feast is not about the conception of Jesus. It is about the conception of Mary within the womb of her mother, St. Anne.

So why do we have the gospel reading of the Annunciation? That is because of the first words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, "Hail, full of Grace." Mary was full of Grace even before she consented to the Word becoming flesh within her.

But why was she full of Grace, and how did this happen?
These are the questions that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception answers.

In God's plan for our salvation, He decided to send the Second Person to be born as One of Us. The Word would become flesh. But mankind had lost his intimate relationship with God. How could the Holy of Holies enter the womb of a person that was not holy, not in an intimate relationship with God? A person would have to be holy from the first moment of her conception. God can do all things. He made Mary holy at the moment of her conception within Anne. Theologians would call this prevenient grace, grace that anticipated the redemption of man by Jesus. When Joachim, Mary's father, and Anne, her mother, made a new life, this life was made holy by God. That is the Immaculate Conception. That is why the angel said to Mary, "Hail, Full of Grace."

Mary was fully human. She was not a goddess. She was someone who was made holy by the extraordinary grace of God. But she was human. She had the ability to choose God's way or to reject God's way. When she said to the angel, "Be it done to me according to your will," she was acting on the Grace she had received at her conception. This is what we celebrate today.

Many of us wear the miraculous medal. This was the image seen in a vision by St. Catherine LaBoure on Nov 27, 1830. Around the image of Mary are the words, "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee." Because of her holiness, Mary has a special place among our spiritual brothers and sisters in heaven. She is the best of us. She is the one of us who is the closest to God the Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. If we ask her, she will pray to God for us. We do not worship Mary. We celebrate her place in heaven as we ask her to intercede for us.

And so we say the Hail Mary and we pray, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." We are asking Mary to intercede for us with God at all times but particularly at the point of our death. When my mother was drawing her last breath five and a half years ago, I kept telling her to go to Mary. I commended my mother to the loving arms of our mother. I was certain that Mary was there in that

hospice room and that she would take her to her Son and plead with him for her.

We need to trust in Mary to pray for us. We need to trust that she will intercede for us with her Son.

She is one of us. She is the best of us. She is the Immaculately Conceived One, the One who from the first moment of her existence had an intimate relationship with God. We celebrate her today, and we pray that she win for us the Grace to join her before the throne of God.