

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

TIMOTHY CONDON, O.P.



THROUGHOUT the entire Catholic Church, devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, has been forever linked with that tendered her Divine Son. Wherever there has been genuine practise of the faith, together with the honor paid to God there has always been faithful homage paid to Mary.

Because Mary shares with Jesus the glory of our redemption, she shares no less in the love we bear Him out of gratitude and appreciation for that ineffable gift. The Church, ever vigilant in her direction of our hearts to God, has set apart certain days during the year on which she honors, in a special way, our Divine Saviour; and others on which she honors in a special way His Blessed Mother. The feast of Christmas, the birthday of the God-Man, is the object of her special honor at this season of the year. Her children at her bidding are preparing themselves for the special coming of the Christ-Child, the Infant Jesus, into their hearts. Her altars are decorated, Christmas cribs are reverently prepared, to stir in the hearts of the faithful a renewed love for the Babe of Bethlehem.

A short time before this great feast the Church celebrates the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. On that day the Church calls on all the faithful to commemorate the sublime prerogative of the Mother of God; that special privilege of Mary, whereby she was conceived free from original sin and all its attendant evils. The proximity of this feast, Mary's feast, to that of Christmas is full of significance. To the Church, Jesus and Mary are inseparable. His triumph is her triumph; His glory is always her glory as well. Mother and Son are linked by an unbreakable bond.

The sublime privilege of the Immaculate Conception, that prerogative of the Mother of God which we are called upon to honor in a special way, is, next to the divine maternity itself, Mary's greatest glory. We cannot hope to understand the full

significance of this mystery; we cannot hope to fathom the depths of the love of God for His Mother as expressed in this privilege. We can and should, however, try to grasp as much of its meaning as possible. This we can do by examining what the Church teaches regarding the Immaculate Conception.

We are told that by the Immaculate Conception Mary was, through a special privilege and grace of God, in the first instant of her conception, exempted from the common heritage of mankind, the stain of original sin. She alone of all the children of Adam never for an instant had the blot of that sin on her soul. She alone of all mankind was never an enemy of God, never an outcast from God's grace, never a child of Satan. By this same privilege Mary was freed from the effects of original sin; that is, from the weakened will and stunted intellect which cause the rest of mankind to turn aside from God, the final end of all creatures.

On the contrary, by this extraordinary grace of God, original justice and sanctity were conferred on her, so that every weakness essentially deriving from original sin were excluded from her soul. Because of her paramount place in God's plan of redemption as the mother of His Only Begotten Son, she could not even for an instant be under the power of him whose head she came to crush. She was the chosen child of God, a creature of grace, beautiful in God's sight from the first moment of her conception. Yet she was still a creature, still human as every one of us. Sorrow, bodily infirmity, death were not excluded; still a child of Adam, she had to suffer the temporal penalties incurred by his sin.

Such a miracle of grace as this leaves us in wonderment at its meaning. Our first thought is to seek some comparison, some way of measuring this prerogative. We might say that Mary received more grace from God's hand at the first moment of her conception than the greatest saint received throughout an entire lifetime devoted to the practise of heroic virtue. Yet even this comparison fails, for so great was the measure of grace bestowed on Mary at that moment that we cannot gauge it by such standards.

Instead, let us look at the Immaculate Conception from the viewpoint of God's love for Mary, and through Mary, for us. In the Immaculate Conception we have an unmistakable sign of the Holy Trinity's love for Mary and for mankind in general. There is, first of all, the manifestation of the love of God the

Father. To choose one of a race that had willfully fallen from His grace; which, even as He was preparing to redeem it, was turning its back on Him; to choose one of such a people to be the mother of His Only Begotten Son was an unmistakable sign of His love and mercy, an eloquent proof of His infinite love.

God the Father wanted to bring His children back to His love and service, and this by a manifestation of His love which they could not deny. He therefore chose Mary as the mother of His Son, and fitted her for this sublime position by the great privilege of the Immaculate Conception. Thereby He manifests His power, His dominion over all creatures; yet what a sweet power is this which makes a creature the Mother of God!

In sending Jesus to earth through Mary, He causes her to be an effective instrument in our redemption. He gives her the power to concur with Jesus in the work of salvation by making Her the mother from whom His Son will take his corporal life, that same corporal life which His Son will offer on the Cross for the sins of mankind. Such a miracle cannot but convince us of the mercy and love of our heavenly Father Who gives us hope in ourselves through His choice of Mary.

There is also the manifestation of love which the Son showed. As our God and our Redeemer, He loves us with an infinite love, a love that could find no bounds. Heaven itself could not contain His love for us: He had to come to earth to exhibit it in His death on Calvary's hill. But His love for Mary has an exclusiveness about it which makes it unique—so unique that it has no counterpart in heaven or on earth. He wanted His mother to be as beautiful, as pure, as perfect as creature could be. So He sought for some way to express that love. He found it in the privilege of the Immaculate Conception. Here was the first fruit of His Passion and Death. By the anticipated merits of His Redemption, the Son of God freed Mary from the stain of original sin before she could contract it. The Lily of Israel was to be a spotless lily from the very first instant of her entrance into the world. She who was to be the second Eve, the new mother of the redeemed race of man, His own mother, was to be the masterpiece of His hand. No stain, no blemish, no taint was to mar the soul of the greatest triumph of His Passion and Death.

Then there is the manifestation of the love of the Holy Ghost. He it is, our faith tells us, Who confers grace on mankind. Looking on Mary, the chosen mother of the Son, He

pours out on her the superabundance of His graces. He fits her for the exalted position of His spouse by making her a treasure-house of grace. She was, indeed, a miracle of grace. In speaking of Mary's abundance of grace, the Saints and Doctors of the Church are boundless in their praise. St. Bonaventure says: "Such a copiousness of grace abounded in Mary that this gracious virgin can be called in a certain sense 'Grace.'" And St. Bernard, who loves to sound the endless praises of the Virgin, says: "As much grace was given to Mary as it is possible to be given to one pure creature." How great, then, must have been the love of the Holy Ghost for His virgin spouse!

A striking indication of Mary's perfection and plenitude of grace is to be seen in the salutation of the Archangel Gabriel when he announced to her that she was to be the Mother of God. Throughout the Scriptures we read that when the chosen of God are approached by heavenly messengers they are struck with awe at the sight of them; fear and consternation grip their hearts. For example, when David was approached by an angel we read that "he fainted away and laid in consternation." When Gabriel comes to Mary we find that the Virgin was troubled, not because she could not bear the sight of him, but only because of the strangeness of his message. How revealing, too, are the words of salutation: "Hail, full of grace!" Never were more beautiful words addressed to creature than these!

Since the Immaculate Conception was so great a privilege as almost to exhaust the love of the Holy Trinity for Mary; since it raised her so high above every creature that she is worthy to be called the Queen of Heaven and earth, ought we not to glory in that privilege? After all, Mary is still a creature, still one of us. In a way, we share in Mary's glory, for we are her children, descendents of this new Eve. And if we share in her glory, we ought likewise to imitate her as far as we can.

In our consideration of the Immaculate Conception, we ought first of all to consider that we are called to be holy as Mary was holy; not in the same degree, of course, but in our own way. The Immaculate Conception is God's manifestation of His love for Mary, and through Mary, for mankind, and a constant reminder that this love is ever held out to us. We have only to grasp it. Amid the trials and temptations of life, when sin and its allurements endeavor to entice us away from the service and the love of God, a helper, an advocate, a guide is necessary. God gave us such a one in Mary. She is most power-

ful in His presence. She, who is one of us, is willing, ever willing, to help us.

The thought of her holiness is a constant encouragement to us in the great struggle for salvation. She is the perfect creature, the shining example of what God can do for man. What God did to fit her for her exalted position, He can do for us to fit us for our position. Mary is the ideal creature, and yet an ideal that is very close to us. For when Christ gave Mary to St. John on Calvary, He gave her to us too—to be our mother. From her throne in Heaven she looks down on her fellow creatures. She knows their weaknesses, their faults, their failings. In her heart there burns a true mother's love for each and every one of her children. She wants all her children to be friends of God. In what better way can they become His friends than by imitating her? What better model is there to be found than the perfect creature?

Truly, we cannot grasp with our feeble minds the full meaning of Mary's Immaculate Conception. We cannot understand to the full all it entails. But we can praise her, we can honor her. The Church does not exaggerate Mary's excellence when she bids us honor her in a special way on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. As Christmas finds us rejoicing at the birth of the Emmanuel, our "God-with-us," so should the feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception be a time of joy and happiness.