

+ Immaculate Conception

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
December 8, 2017

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything from the beginning (Wisdom 8).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My Very Dear Sons,

As with every solemnity of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, this one too, feast of the Immaculate Conception, is about God—entirely about God. In His infinite wisdom and goodness God deigned to create a world; to place in it human creatures made in His own image and likeness; and to send a Savior to redeem those same human beings, once through sin they had plunged themselves into spiritual death. The Blessed Virgin Mary is a most holy and beautiful witness to God, a flower growing as it were at the foot of this great work of God in the world.

Better yet, it was *through* Mary that the Father sent His only-begotten Son to carry out the essential work of Redemption, for it was decided in the highest counsel that God would come in Person to earth to see out this difficult task of man's salvation. In the most wonderful way, God decided to appear upon the face of the world here-below in the same manner as all men since Adam, by means of human birth, coming to us as Emmanuel in the form of a baby boy, being delivered from a mother. The Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, far from remaining a mere spectator, thus became an instrument of the Incarnation, a privileged player in the great human and divine drama of the History of the world that had its climax in the fullness of time.

Given the fact that evil had so terribly multiplied on earth from the time of our first parents' expulsion from the Garden of Eden, because corruption and evil had made their way into the heart, mind, and body of mortal man, it did not seem fitting, however, that the Son, God in Person, should be born from just any mother, from a creature tainted with sin like the others. Birth is too intimate and precious a thing. This birth of the God-Man had to be of a very special kind, even while remaining a truly human birth. Thus was Mary chosen from before the creation of the world to be the true Mother of God, the Mother of Jesus. *The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything from the beginning.* By a miracle of grace, a miracle performed in prevision of the work of Redemption to be accomplished later on, she was totally preserved from original sin—even from its slightest touch. She was conceived immaculately. In fact she *is* the Immaculate Conception: that is her name, as she told Saint Bernadette at Lourdes. In order perfectly to conceive the Child of Bethlehem, she herself was conceived in an exceptional manner, under a grace that lifted her up, so to speak, above the contagion of sin that normally would have touched her as it does other children, the sons and daughters of Eve. This is what we ponder each year on the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

But what about the rest of us? In his great commentary on Psalm 118, Saint Augustine ponders over the very first verse: "Blessed are the undefiled, the immaculate, who walk in the law of the Lord." We Christians are, he reasons, those very blessed, those immaculate ones, who walk in the law, and yet we still have sin. How can this be? Perhaps the Immaculate Conception can illumine for us this mystery.

We are, indeed, the grateful beneficiaries of the work of redemption, of the great work of our salvation—a matter of life and death, of deliverance from eternal death. Through the Cross

we were restored to a life without sin: we became immaculate in this sense. For such a gift our gratitude to God and to the Immaculate Mother of God could never be exaggerated. But there is more. As the Lord hung on the Tree of Life, before rendering to God His human soul, referring to His disciple, Saint John, who was standing next to His Mother, He uttered these simple but stunning words: “Woman, behold thy Son.”¹ He then in turn confided Mary to Saint John, who accepted her as his own mother. The consequences of this simple exchange at the foot of the Cross are incalculable. Over the centuries and millennia the Church has come to understand that Saint John not only received Mary as his mother, but that he stood in the place of all us followers of Jesus. We too henceforth have Mary as our mother. But in what exact sense is she our Mother? In what sense do we too, perhaps, benefit from her Immaculate Conception? This touches other mysteries of the Faith and not the least.

When the Pharisee Nicodemus, a leader of the Jewish people, came to see Jesus, he heard from the Lord these words that astounded him: “Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”² Nicodemus asked the Lord in wonder whether a man could enter again into his mother’s womb and be born again. Now, we all know that in Holy Baptism we are born again spiritually through the agency of the Church, our Mother. That is what the Lord meant. But a mother does not only give birth: she first conceives a child and carries it. In this sense, through the agency of Our Mother the Church, we have been given in Holy Baptism a new conception as well as a new birth. We have been spiritually re-conceived, rendered immaculate, not like Our Lady from the first moment, but by virtue of a restoration of our being. Sadly we can lose that holiness given at Baptism, but this state of rebirth into an immaculate life is still the basic fact of Christian life.

The Blessed Virgin is, like us, a member of the Church, but not just any member. She is, as it were, the human face of the Church, its most perfect and beautiful example. She too has, as we mentioned earlier, become our mother. Could it be said that Mary, as our Mother, not only gives birth to us, but also mystically conceives us together with the Church? What a thought! In the end the fact that this perfect woman—the very Immaculate Conception, a title so dear to Saint Maximilian Kolbe, this woman “younger than sin,”³ as the French writer Bernanos famously said—could somehow, in a high spiritual realm, conceive and give birth to us poor sinners for a new life in God is a great thought. It is only made possible by the Precious Blood of Jesus, but there is still this extraordinary spiritual motherhood of the Virgin of Nazareth for the sons and daughters of the Church.

Perhaps such thoughts are too bold. But it was not by being timid and fearful that Saint Bernard became the great cantor of the Blessed Virgin, nor was it in doubt and hesitation that Saint Maximilian Kolbe founded his Militia of the Immaculata in order to counter the great shadows descending upon the modern world. We need, more than ever, the boldness of the saints in order to face the terrible challenges that present themselves to us now, as the Third Millennium of the Christian Faith moves forward through troubled waters.

May we become, more and more each day, “immaculate” in the way as is said in Psalm 118, pilgrims rendered stainless by the grace of God transmitted to us through the immense and perfect motherhood of the Immaculate one. Amen. Alleluia.

¹ Jn. 19:26.

² Jn. 3:3.

³ *The Diary of a Country Priest* (Chicago: McMillan Co., 1937).