

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

REFLECTION: FULL OF GRACE

Three great events took place in the 19th century – all related to Mary's great privilege of her Immaculate Conception. The first of these took place at the Daughters' of Charity Convent, Rue de Bac, Paris, on November 30th 1830. On that day, Our Lady appeared to a humble novice, Sister Catherine Laboure. She asked that she refer to the Church authorities and have a medal struck after a model of a vision, honouring her Immaculate Conception – a medal that, because of the numerous favours received by its wearers, has become known as the Miraculous Medal.

The second event took place in Rome in 1854, when Pope Pius IX (Blessed Pio Nono), solemnly defined on 8th December as a dogma of our Catholic faith, Mary's Immaculate Conception. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception affirms that 'the Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of God and because of the merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour of the human race, free from all stain of original sin'.

The third event happened in Lourdes, France, in 1858. There, Our Lady appeared to a poor peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous eighteen times from February 11th to July 16th. At the Grotto of Masabielle on the banks of the River Gave, Our Lady confirmed that she was indeed that Immaculate Conception, proclaimed solemnly in Rome only four years previously.

These three events carried but one and the same message to the world, which was, that God wanted Mary's great privilege of her Immaculate Conception to be known and to be honoured universally. Mary stands alone 'full of grace' from the moment of her creation and will always remain as Wordsworth so beautifully put it, 'our tainted nature's solitary boast'. I think that we should be careful not to confuse this singular Privilege of Mary with the miraculous conception of Jesus Christ her Son. As far as her body is concerned, Mary was created by the operation of natural laws. Her father was St. Joachim and her mother, St. Anne.

The Immaculate Conception is a spiritual supernatural gift that concerns and touches Mary's soul alone; a gift we know from divine revelation and contained in the Bible and Tradition. The privilege of the

Immaculate Conception was the anticipated fruit of Jesus' sacred passion, death and resurrection. It was fitting that she who was to bear the Saviour of the world should herself be preserved by him from sin and its consequences and so be the first to benefit from what he would win for the whole human race.

Mary had it made we may say – born without sin, always perfect and living in the same house with Jesus. How could we possibly model ourselves after her? Well, we too, after our baptism, were also without sin, so we have the opportunity to start all over again, sinless after each confession and sincere repentance. We ask her help to make the most of our opportunities.