

Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 8)

On December 8th 1854, Pope Pius IX solemnly declared the following statement about Mary to be part of the traditional faith of the church (see Catholic Catechism, n. 491): 'From the first moment of her conception, the most blessed virgin Mary was preserved immune from all stain of Original Sin by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race'(Ineffabilis Deus).

To get some understanding of what might be meant by this statement we need to reflect on the theology of Original Sin. Theology has been defined as faith seeking understanding. We cannot expect complete understanding of the sacred mysteries of our faith, but it is important that what we do understand points us in the right direction. Misunderstandings get in the way of authentic faith. So what do we understand by Original Sin?

The most common word used for sin in the Greek New Testament is *hamartia* – a word which means 'missing the mark'. If we think in terms of archery, we think of an archer attempting to hit a mark but missing it. If we think of bushwalking, we think of someone who has gone off the beaten track and lost his or her way. When we sin we miss the mark. We want to be loving but, for one reason or another, we end up having an argument. We want to apologise but we are too proud to admit our error. We want to pray, but we are too undisciplined. We miss the mark in our relationships with each other, and we miss the mark in our relationship with God. We can be insensitive, we can misunderstand, we can make wrong judgments, and we can be irresponsible. We sin.

This is not because God wills us to be this way. This is the key point of the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis, part of which we read in the **First Reading**. They represent everyman and everywoman. The state of original innocence in the garden of Eden represents the way God wants us to be. The way we are is the result of sin. As Saint Paul says: 'As sin came into the world through one man, and death [that is separation from God] came through sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned'(Romans 5:12).

Adam and Eve represent us all. 'All have sinned'. Sometimes we sin through our own fault. We could have hit the mark but we neglected to do so. This is personal sin for which we are rightly held responsible, and if we experience guilt when we sin in this way, so much the better. It means that we are still sufficiently sensitive to recognise our responsibility and our failure to carry it out. Specific sinful actions have led to habits that shackle our freedom. We must accept real, though limited, responsibility for the way we have chosen to respond to the opportunities offered to us.

Sin also affects others, and it is here that the teaching on Original Sin has its place. It reminds us that the whole weight of personal sin cannot be laid on the shoulders of the sinner. Sometimes we are not responsible at all. We miss the mark all right, but it is because we have never been shown how to hit it, or because our circumstances are such that we are given no chance to hit it. We influence our environment, but we are also influenced by it: we are dependent on it, weakened by it, unable to control it.

Hereditary factors play a part here as do environmental factors. Inherited characteristics,

parental training, social environment, external circumstances, especially in childhood, but throughout our life – all these limit our freedom and make it sometimes difficult to hit the mark. Original Sin, as the name implies, speaks of the sin in our lives that comes from our origins. It is the human condition in which we find ourselves. It is not one thing. It varies from person to person, but we all have to live within the limits of the real situation in which we find ourselves. We are like fish born into a polluted river. We are born innocent of personal sin, of course. But we are born into a world that the sins of others have polluted, and every time we commit personal sin we add to the pollution in the river and make life harder for others.

Let us now look at what our faith tells us about **Baptism**. The Catholic Catechism states that ‘by imparting the life of Christ’s grace, baptism erases Original Sin and turns us back to God’(n. 405). This cannot mean that the pollution goes away. Jesus had to live his life in an environment polluted by sin, and so do we. All we have to do is look at Calvary and we see the terrible way in which sin affected him (see Romans 8:3; 2Corinthians 5:21). Jesus had to live in the same sinful world as his contemporaries. The wonder of Jesus is that ‘though tested in every way that we are, he did not sin’(Hebrews 4:15). Original Sin, the sins of the world, affected him terribly, but it did not stain him.

What baptism does is to offer us an alternative way of living. The love which Jesus enjoyed with God his Father, the love of the Holy Spirit, is poured into our souls. A pure spring of living water wells up from within to carry us into the heart of God. We are still in a polluted river, as it were, but we are no longer trapped in it. In baptism we are surrounded by love and by grace. We are taken into the arms of the Christian community and offered a way of life that includes the sacraments. Jesus gives himself to us as our light and our life and he shares with us his Spirit. We have a choice, and the more we choose to live his life the more pure we become and the less we are influenced by the sin that we inherited or the sin that surrounds us. Augustine likens us to the wounded man in the parable of the Prodigal Son. We are convalescing in the inn of the Church.

In the **Second Reading** Paul describes in lyrical terms God’s purpose for us all: ‘He chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in God’s presence’(Ephesians1:4). Please God we will come to that purity. The saints encourage us to open ourselves more and more to the purifying love of God’s Holy Spirit, God’s flame of love. They show us what we are called to be, and, often, through their journey from sin to holiness, they also show us a way to journey. Some of the saints were wonderfully pure at quite a young age. When we speak of the immaculate conception of Mary we are using the language of poetry. We are singing of Mary in the best words we know. We are saying that from the very first moment of her life, sin never stained her soul. She was surrounded by it, but it did not take hold. She was free of it. From the very first in all her conscious moments she responded to God with a willing Yes. She responded with love. The doctrine of the immaculate conception is a poetic way of highlighting our recognition of what was said of her in the **Gospel** chosen for today: ‘You are full of grace!’

We have to thank Mary for the heroic decisions that we know are required to live such a holy life. The teaching of the Immaculate Conception, however, makes sure that we go beyond Mary and look with gratitude to God, the source of all grace. The initiative for holiness always comes from God’s Word, the Word to whom she always responded with perfect love. It was her perfect

response that made it possible for God to love her with that special intimacy that enabled God's Word to become incarnate in her womb.