



Reflections on Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

By David Abele

On December 8th we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Accepted for centuries within the Catholic Church (though not without controversy), the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was formally declared by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854 in the Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* that the most Blessed Virgin Mary “in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” O, Mary conceived without sin! Although sometimes confused with the virgin birth of the baby Jesus, the Immaculate Conception correctly refers to the Virgin Mary, conceived without sin, in the womb of her mother, Saint Anne.

Some confusion between baby Mary’s Immaculate Conception and the virgin birth of the baby Jesus may be understandable. After all, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception occurs at the beginning of Advent, as we prepare for the birth of Christ. And the Gospel reading, Luke 1:26-38, is the same reading we hear on the Solemnity of the Annunciation. The Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and ‘announces’ in verse 31, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.” Thus the Solemnities of the Immaculate Conception (December 8th) and the Annunciation (March 25th) are linked by the Gospel reading.

But it is Gabriel’s first greeting of Mary, in verse 28, “Hail, full of grace” that is important to our celebration of the Immaculate Conception, and the reason we read that same Gospel passage. Jesus, the Savior of the world, could not be born of any ordinary woman. The *Mater Dei* (Mother of God), the womb that would carry the incarnation of God made flesh, this “Ark of the New Covenant,” would have to be most holy, perpetually pure, full of grace.

Indeed, Gabriel’s angelic salutation in Luke 1:28 is the Scriptural confirmation that Mary was not just “highly favored” by God, but that Mary was (and had to be) something much more. In the words of Pope Pius IX, Mary was “... adorned with all gifts of the Holy Spirit... an inexhaustible abyss of these gifts... and was, together with her Son, the only partaker of perpetual benediction.” God endowed Mary with sanctifying grace by which her original sanctity was preserved before original sin

could take root in her soul. In fact, “full of grace” or “highly favored” is translated from the original Greek word “*Kecharitomene*.” That word appears in the Bible only once, in this singular reference to Mary. The weight of the concept so shakes Mary that she asks (v. 29) Gabriel how she can merit so singular an honor. He responds that she is so blessed on account of the one to whom she has been chosen to give birth – Jesus whose name means “God saves.” How fitting that this unique word is used only in reference to a one-of-a-kind woman, immaculately conceived without sin!

And how appropriate too is her cousin Elizabeth’s greeting of Mary in Luke 1:42 “Blessed are you among women!” Certainly blessed because she carries Our Savior, “the fruit of thy womb,” but blessed so much earlier, at the moment of her Immaculate Conception, in anticipation of her role as Mother of God. Still Mary’s uniqueness goes beyond her conception without sin. She was conceived pure, filled with the grace of God, as appropriate to the human woman who would carry God’s only begotten Son. And though immaculately conceived, she was also undoubtedly human. To Complete God’s will, she had to remain pure, resisting human temptations and failings. What unflinching selflessness to understand and willingly accept her role as “handmaid of the Lord.”

My firm belief in the Immaculate Conception comes from official Church teaching, but also from the words of the Blessed Virgin herself, as exclaimed to a 14 year old French girl in 1858. It is another event that inseparably ties the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the Solemnity of the Annunciation. Just over 3 years after Pope Pius IX officially declared the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Lourdes appeared to young Bernadette Soubirous some 16 times. When asked to reveal her name, the Blessed Virgin chose the 14th appearance, on March 25, 1858, to exclaim “I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION.”

So Mary ‘announced’ the truth of the Immaculate Conception on the Solemnity of the Annunciation (the celebration of the day the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the Mother of God). Again, how fitting!

