

The 8th of December we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Its origins date back to the 7th century and the feast of the conception of Mary by Saint Anne. Pope Clement established this solemnity for the entire church in 1708 (Ordo). “Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception” (CCC 491). That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854:

The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.

“To become the mother of the Savior, Mary ‘was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role.’ The angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation salutes her as ‘full of grace.’ In fact, in order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God’s grace” (CCC 490). As God does, we hold Mary in very high esteem.

As we honor Mary, we must not forget how much God loves and esteems each person. We often say that life begins at conception. While this is true, it does not tell the whole story. Saint Paul teaches us that: God chose us “before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him” (Eph 1: 4). Before Adam and Eve, God chose us for eternity. At our conception, we are created in the image and likeness of God. When we are born again to eternal life, God shares his divinity with us enabling us to live forever in his presence.

In love, God the Father sent Jesus as our redeemer. Through our baptism, we receive the promise of eternal life. In love, God destined us for adoption, so we are truly brothers and sisters of Jesus. God created us to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven (Baltimore Catechism). “In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ” (Eph 1:12).

Jesus teaches, “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another” (John 15:16-17). Jesus is the fruit of the womb of Mary. Jesus also wants us to bear fruit, to bring Christ to the world.

To bear fruit most effectively, we can learn from Mary. At the Annunciation, “Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word’” (Luke 1:38). We often speak of vocations. Some are called to be mothers and fathers. Some are called to a consecrated life of virginity. Whether one is married, single, or a religious, each one is called by God to live a life for others. We are most at peace when we are doing what God has planned for our lives. Let us respond like Mary by saying, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”

Mary proclaims the wonders of our redeemer when she teaches us the Magnificat. “His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him” (Lk 1:50). Let us understand fear of God to mean awe, wonder, and piety. The womb of Mary was filled with Jesus, we might say filled with mercy. Created in his likeness and image, we are called to be missionaries of mercy. How wonderful it is when we can forgive others and when we can help others to grow in their love of God because they see the image of God in us and the image of his mercy.

In the Hail Mary, we pray, “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” Let us always follow Mary’s example. Let us pray for each other especially at the hour of death.