

FROM FR. CHRIS ALIMAJI'S DESK

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Reflections on the Immaculate Conception

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary has a fixed date on December 8 every year. It is a Holy Day of Obligation. For all Catholics, a holy day of obligation is observed as we would a Sunday. It is a solemn liturgical celebration as Christmas and other especially important solemn feasts of the Church. It just carries that weight. Well-meaning Catholics would not like to miss Mass on such a day; and so, would do everything possible in their power to attend. The very first thing that caught my attention last year as I prayed the Office of the Hours for this solemn day was the hymn, which was the same for all the hours. For lack of space, I will just produce the first stanza, an eight-line stanzas song: "Holy light on earth's horizon, Star of hope to fallen man, Light amid a world of shadows, Dawn of God's redemptive plan. Chosen from eternal ages, Thou alone of all our race, By thy Son's atoning merits, Was conceived in perfect grace." (Morning Prayer). Another aspect that caught my attention was the three antiphons for the Psalms and canticle: Ant. 1: "Behold, the chaste Mother who knew no stain; she was chosen to be the Mother of God." Ant. 2: "Blessed are you, O Virgin Mary, above all women on earth. The Lord God himself has chosen you." Ant. 3: "Fragrant is the scent of your perfume, immaculate Virgin. Let us follow in your footsteps."

What is Immaculate Conception? The word 'immaculate' is an adjective used to describe something that is brilliantly white. A very white shining color that dazzles the eye! This whiteness signifies purity, holiness, perfection, without any stain (in this case, stain of sin), impeccable as it were. Conception is about pregnancy. When a lady conceives, it is always by the assistance of a male partner. Not only a lady, but any kind of pregnancy whatsoever takes place with the mixture of the female and male seeds. I know that in this age of science, females can be impregnated through a distant proximity of the male partner. But it cannot be denied that male seed was involved, no matter the process or technology applied. In the case of the pregnancy of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we are caught up in a mystery of an inexplicable pregnancy that neither St. Joseph, the supposed husband of Mary by proposal, nor science could explain. To preserve the Messiah, Redeemer, Savior from having any stain of sin, his mother who is

our Ark of the Covenant, must also be preserved from original sin. It is not impossible for God to preserve her from the sin of Adam and Eve, “for nothing will be impossible for God.” (Lk. 1:37). Sent by God, the Archangel Gabriel just related the message from God to the virgin daughter of Zion, Mary of Nazareth, that she would conceive and bear a son, whom she must name Jesus. Mary contended that it would not be possible because she had no man yet for such consent because their marriage proposal was still in progress. In accordance with the law, a woman not so fully married could not conceive for a would-be husband without incurring penalty, under pain of death by stoning. It was then that the Angel told her that her conception would be by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the child to be born would be called holy, the Son of God. ...for nothing is impossible with God! ... Let it be done to me as you have said. (cf. Lk. 1:26-38). Thy will be done! O Lord, God Almighty!

Why Immaculate Conception? What is God’s Plan for our Salvation? When did it begin? Immaculate Conception is God’s response to the fallen nature of humanity. God’s plan for our salvation was that he would redeem us by sending his divine Son into the world to conquer Satan. The divine Son of God is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.” (The Nicene Creed). We can trace the beginning of our salvation from the Garden of Eden in the Story of the Fall. It is in our First Reading at this feast: “Then the Lord God said to the serpent: ... I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel.” (Gen. 3:14a, 15). In Genesis 49:10 Jacob predicted that “[t]he scepter shall never depart from Judah.” The Savior would be born from the tribe of Judah. Moses also did predict that God would send another prophet like himself who would deliver Israel from their bondage. One wonders what bondage he was referring to! Coming closer, the prophet Isaiah made several prophecies on the Messiah, many of which we read at Advent Season and at the Lenten Season. Among them is the birth of Immanuel: “The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” Is. 7:14-16). It clearly stated that it would take place only after they had defeated their two kings they dreaded. That showed that it was not going to be an immediate birth of the God-man. The Lord also spoke through the prophet Isaiah: “Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Is. 43:1). From the many other great prophets such as Jeremiah we read of the time of the Messiah and its victorious moment, and God would make a New Covenant with man to become his people and He would become our God, (cf. Jer. 31:31-34). Now, therefore,

it becomes obvious that the offspring of the woman, who would crush the serpent's head (cf. Gen. 3:14-15), cannot have a share in the same yoke of sin that he was coming into the world to overcome. He will come from the stock of God himself, capable of overcoming the devil in order to render Satan powerless.

When did Immaculate Conception begin? The doctrine is that she was conceived in her mother's womb by the special act of God and preserved from original sin, in order to become the mother of the divine Son of God. His birth, therefore, is God-with-us, Immanuel. Some of us may quickly say it was at that moment of the Annunciation, in Nazareth of Galilee. Not really! All the same, yes! Joachim and Anne, parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, may disagree with me but not totally! Yes, our Gospel speaks of the Archangel Gabriel disclosing the message from God to the Virgin Mary of Nazareth, including "for you have found favor with God." (Lk. 1:30). If she had found favor, it could mean that it already happened before the visit. It had taken place in God's own time. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist agreed with the Annunciation by her dialogue, (cf. Lk. 1:39-45); and the Virgin Mother of God agreed by giving us her "Magnificat" (cf. Lk 1:46-55); and finally, Zechariah, father of John the Baptist agreed with his canticle, the Benedictus of Zechariah, (cf. Lk. 1:67-79). All these indicated that God promised and fulfilled it long ago, which was being fulfilled in their time in history for our salvation.

When did Salvation take place? Yes, our salvation took place on the Cross, on Mt. Calvary in Jerusalem. When the Lord Jesus died for our salvation, he atoned for the sins of our first parents, our sins now, and for all humanity in all eternity. He saved us once and for all. And he said: "It is finished." (John 19:30). Saint Paul sees this time of the Messiah as special and blessed God saying: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him." (Eph. 1:3-4). Saint Paul makes known to us that God has adopted us as his sons and daughters in Christ Jesus. We rejoice at this feast because all the predictions are fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Because of the nature of her pregnancy, Mary is believed to be a virgin before the birth of Christ and remained a virgin ever after; hence she is called the Blessed Mary ever virgin. We thought that all of humanity was lost. Now salvation has come upon us when "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (John 1:14). The Blessed Virgin Mary indeed became our Spring of New Hope, and our humanity regained its former glory. (cf. Like Rivers in the

Desert – song). It is said of her: “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” (Lk. 1:42). The Blessed Mother has become indeed the mother of the living, and since she was preserved from sinning, we have every reason to pray: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.” (The Hail Mary). And all say: Amen!

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