

Homily for Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

Today we commemorate and celebrate two things:

- first, the conception of Mary in her mother's womb;
- and second, the dogma (officially defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX, after being believed and celebrated by the whole Church for centuries) explaining that that conception was "immaculate", that Mary was protected from the stain and effects of original sin from the very first moment of her existence.

Why did God give Mary such a unique privilege? Because of Christ, and because of us.

First, because of Christ.

In the Old Testament, God commanded Moses to take great pains in the proper construction of the Ark of Covenant, the sacred container in which the people of Israel preserved three things:

- the stone slabs with the Ten Commandments chiseled on them;
- some of the manna that God had miraculously sent from heaven to feed the Israelites during their forty-year sojourn in the desert;
- and the staff of Aaron, Moses' brother, the high priest of Israel.

The Old Covenant was a preparation for the New Covenant.

And so, these items, Israel's most precious possessions, all symbolized Christ.

- Jesus himself is God's Word, more truly and fully than the cold stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.
- His real presence in the Eucharist makes him the real bread from heaven.
- His perfect sacrifice on the cross made him the definitive high priest of human history.

Now if the items inside the Ark of the Covenant foreshadowed Christ, what was foreshadowed by the Ark itself, the container of those items?

It foreshadowed Mary, whose womb became the Ark, the container, of the New Covenant.

And God had commanded the Israelites to give special construction to the Ark of the Old Covenant.

- They had to make it out of acacia [uh-KAY-shuh] wood, which, like cedar wood, doesn't corrupt with age.

- And they also had to cover the entire Ark, inside and out, with gold - the most valuable and stainless metal known to the ancient world.
- These special requirements for the Ark reflected the unique importance of what the Ark contained: the Ark was the sign of God's presence among his people.

When the Old Covenant symbols gave way to the New Covenant reality, God himself prepared the Ark of the New Covenant, Mary, Jesus' Mother, just as carefully as he had commanded the old one to be prepared.

- He allowed her to be conceived in the normal way, but without inheriting the stain or the effects of original sin - pure and sinless, immaculate, like acacia wood and gold.
- This privilege stemmed not from her greatness, but because of the incomparable greatness of what she would contain: Jesus Christ, God himself, our Savior.

That's the first reason for the Immaculate Conception - because of Christ, to give him a fitting mother.

The second reason is because of us.

One of the effects of original sin is to give us a strong tendency to self-centeredness.

We spend our lifetimes battling against this tendency by growing more and more like Christ.

Since Mary was preserved from original sin, she was also preserved from this deep-seated tendency.

- This meant that her heart was completely free from any innate selfishness.
- She, unlike anyone since Adam and Eve, was completely free to love God with an undivided love, to respond to him with her whole heart, mind, soul and strength.
- No internal divisions or weakness inhibited her total self-giving to the Lord.

And because Christ also made her the mother of the Church and all Christians, she has borne that same untrammelled love for each one of Jesus' brothers and sisters - for us.

- She loves each of us with the tenderness and attention of the most devoted mother, but without any of the insecurity or possessiveness that original sin tends to inject into most motherly love.
- Therefore, all her prayers and hopes for us have to do with bringing us into closer communion with her Son, the one Savior, who alone can give happiness and meaning to our lives.
- She doesn't want to bring us closer to herself - she is not egocentric - rather, she wants and works to bring us closer and closer to Christ.

The Immaculate Conception was God's way of giving Jesus a worthy mother on earth, and of giving us a worthy mother in heaven.

We should thank him for this great gift, and the best way to do that is to follow in our mother's footsteps, answering every call that God sends to our hearts and consciences in the same way that Mary answered her call, by saying: "May it be done to me according to your word."