

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION A, B, C – 2011

(Genesis 3: 9-15, 20; Ephesians 1: 3-6, 11-12; Luke 1: 26-38)

Today's gospel (from St. Luke) helps us to see God's plan for Mary and, through her, his plan for the whole human race. Nevertheless, Luke gives us scant information about Mary in this scene. He paints her simply as a young girl making wedding plans; the gospel-writer tells us nothing of her background or genealogy.

Gabriel's greeting that Mary has found favor with God signals to the reader that she is upright and blameless. Because artists throughout history have usually depicted the Annunciation as a romantic scene with Mary as totally serene and joyful, it is easy to overlook her distress and fear which would be natural reactions given the social reality of her situation. That situation is this: Mary lives in a tiny village where everyone knows everyone else and, in fact, many are likely related to each other. Furthermore, everyone knows everyone else's business. Everyone would know that Mary and Joseph are betrothed, but have not yet begun to live together. And everyone knows how to count to nine! So when this special child is born too soon, it is extremely unlikely that the villagers of Nazareth will say: "Oh, it must have been by the Holy Spirit!" In such a situation, Mary would have been subject to gossip and suspicion at best – and to stoning to death at worst. I recite these realities because too often, in our rosy piety, we do not want to face that Mary was a truly vulnerable young woman (as were all maidens of her time). It serves our overly pietistic purposes to forget that Mary was human and had to struggle, like all of us, with the decision to do God's will in an often cruel and unforgiving world.

Of course, Luke goes to great lengths to let the reader know that there is no impropriety on the part of Mary in this unusual conception. All is God's doing and his grace is irresistible. But Mary still has her free will and she freely consents to God's plan – even though she could not possibly see or understand exactly how God would bring about the blessing, joy, and salvation that the angel speaks of in the midst of a messy human situation. Gabriel does give Mary a concrete sign of God's presence – her relative Elizabeth has also conceived a child in her old age. This no doubt helps Mary to see that (as the gospel says) "nothing will be impossible for God" and that God is certainly perfectly capable of doing through Mary what the angel is suggesting. Nonetheless, we must appreciate how hard it was for Mary to assent to Gabriel's proposition – even though she is "full of grace." As Mary agrees to be God's servant, she prefigures her son's mission to serve others rather than be served. And like Jesus, Mary says her famous and holy "yes" even though she does not completely understand how all that is expected of her will unfold. Her trusting faith is a marvelous example for us!

An interesting artist named Frederick Franck (1909-2006) created a seven-foot steel sculpture of Mary entitled "The Original Face." Within the fold of her cloak, she holds a head of Christ. Mary's face has no features. The artist explained, "Her own face is blank because she is potentially every woman, every man."

On this Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we celebrate Mary's freedom from original sin and the blessing of her fullness of grace. Although Mary is unique in being free from sin, she is still one of us human beings. When Mary gave her courageous "yes" to the Incarnation, she was a very young

unmarried woman in a small village where nothing could be kept a secret for long and where people could be very strict and even mean and certainly judgmental.

The world in which Mary gave birth to the Son of God was, like our world today, marred by conflict and division. Having experienced this fallen world, Mary had to summon up heroic faith to believe that God would achieve salvation through her positive response to his plan. She had to overcome anxiety and disbelief at the message that she would give birth to the Son of God.

Like Mary, we too have faced and will face many decisions that require us to take risks in order to give life, healing, peace, and joy to others. We too, by God's grace, are called to make heroic choices that will further the salvation of the world. This is an awesome vocation! We too have had to say (as Mary did): "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." With hearts full of gratitude for the gift of Mary, we treasure the Mother of Christ as one of us. In the middle of this second week of Advent, we commit ourselves to a closer relationship with Mary, the pregnant Blessed Virgin, as she is described in this poem written by St. John of the Cross: "The Virgin, heavy/with the Word of God/Comes along the road. /If only you will shelter her!"

When we give shelter to Mary, we welcome her son as well. As we approach Christmas, may the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception inspire us to reverse the scandal that there was no room in the inn – and let us enlarge our hearts to a size worthy of the Christ Child and his Blessed Mother!