

Dear Beloved,

Today we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God, her preservation from original sin at the moment of her conception, such that she was never stained by inheriting human nature from Adam and Eve, our first parents and the first sinners. Because she had been chosen before time began to bear the Son of God in her womb, the Holy Trinity kept her soul free from all sin, intervening lest she inherit the loss of grace and separation from God that is original sin.

Mary was kept sinless in order to be a fit tabernacle for the Word of God when He took upon Himself a human nature. She is the burning bush: fiery from contact with the divinity, but not destroyed because she was immaculately conceived. She alone can endure such intimacy with God and live, for she alone was prepared for it by the same God who came to dwell in her womb.

But the Immaculate Conception not only prepared Mary for her divine motherhood; it also prepared her to be Mother of the Church. We may think of the sinlessness of the Blessed Virgin as being a hindrance to any real union with her or imitation of her; other saints have some weakness or deficiency of character that appeals to us and makes them approachable, but Mary has no stain, no weakness, no deficiency. She is wholly set apart and therefore she can seem wholly inaccessible.

The key to understanding the significance of the Immaculate Conception for us in the here and now, though, is not about imitating Mary's sinlessness, which we cannot do. It is rather about accepting her as our Mother and trusting her to lead us to her Son with all the tenderness and tenacity that a mother can possess.

In the Gospels, the blessed Virgin is presented as a disciple of Christ and as a model of a holy life, but she is above all presented as a mother. In the Gospel of John, she is known only as the mother of Jesus; it is as if she does not even have a name apart from that of mother. The genius of John's Gospel, or one of them, is that he writes it in such a way that we identify with his person; each of us is the beloved disciple, and at significant moments we are allowed intimate access to Our Lord and Savior. We are also given nearness to the Mother of the Lord. We read, "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, *"Woman, behold, your son!"* Then he said to the disciple, *"Behold, your mother!"* And from that hour the disciple took her as his own." After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, "I thirst."

Jesus knew that His last act before His death was to entrust the Church, in the person of the beloved disciple, to His mother. Once He had done that, John says that all was finished and Jesus could allow Himself to die.

So, the Immaculate Conception has first significance for us in that this mystery, this beautiful and powerful intervention of God, is the means by which God became man. Mary's preservation from sin makes her fit to be the Mother of God. The second significance is that it makes her fit also to be our mother, to be Mother of the Church. Though she is a disciple and a saint, for us she is first mother and we benefit most from her not necessarily in imitating her, for that can be overwhelming to consider, but in allowing her to care for us and fight for us, as any good mother does for her children.

The first Eve, who was called mother of the living by her husband, plunged the world into sin. We all know what it is to have sinful mothers: they comfort, they encourage, they listen, they pray, but they are always limited, they cannot but fail us in some way. Eve began this unavoidable reality of mankind: we are all wounded and therefore even when one heart wants to save another, it can never do enough.

The new Eve, in contrast, is the true mother of the living: it is through her that Grace has entered the world, giving life to souls and raising them from the death of sin, vice, and the despair that follows in their wake. She has given birth to the Savior, and now her entire life is oriented towards reconciling the Savior with those whom He has saved. She wishes nothing but to unite her Son to her children, the Head with the Body, the Lover with the beloved. And it for this that she is sinless: she helps us from her throne of grace, from her place of security;

she had no need to labor at her salvation in the way we do, and so she is able to be immediately attentive to our needs, her children who walk in the valley of tears.

Paul says in the Letter to the Hebrews that Jesus was not as the high priests of old, who need *“to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people.”* Instead He is *“holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”* Mary is the parallel to this; she is the Immaculate Conception, and she is that not for own sake, but for the sake of others, for our sake. She is, like her Son, *“holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”* But her separation from sinners is precisely so she can lead us, without stumbling in any way, to the safe harbor of heaven. She knows grace in its fullness, and so she knows which graces each of us needs to be saved, to join her among the choirs of angels.

With these things in mind, then, let us rejoice on this holy festival. Let us be grateful to God that He has given us such a mother, a perpetual sign that He truly is the lover of mankind and never wished our demise, our collapse back into nothing. Woman, behold your child. Child, behold your mother. Let each one of us cry out to her in the depth of our hearts for the things we need that Christ may live in us. She knows our sadness, our anxiety, our weariness, our lack of faith. But she knows these as the Mother of God, and therefore she has the power to make happen in us what we cannot.

As the hymn for Vespers prays, *“Show thyself a mother to us; He will hear thy prayers, He who was born for our sake and chose thee to be his own. Grant us a pure life, prepare a safe path, that seeing Jesus, we may always rejoice.”* Today, then, may the mystery of the Immaculate Conception be a source of confidence for us; a reminder that no matter how much we fail or how far we seem from God, the Mother of God is fighting for us. She is accompanying us to our heavenly home. We need only recommit ourselves to her and call on her each day to be with us and to guide us, that we may look upon her Son in the glory of heaven, in the world to come, in the New Jerusalem.