

Immaculate Conception December 8, 2016

One of the most revered saints of our Catholic faith is that of the Mary, the Blessed Virgin Mother of Jesus, the Mother of God, and the Mother of the Church. Every Catholic Church building has a statue or image of her. In many of these representations of Mary she is portrayed as having a serpent beneath her feet. The serpent represents the devil who tempted the first humans Adam and Eve, who succumbed and sinned against God.

Our first reading, from the Book of Genesis, describes the consequences of this Original Sin but with the promise of God to them: “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.” This passage is often called the first hint of the Gospel, the Good News that the offspring of a woman would conquer the evil one. The woman is Mary and her offspring is Jesus the Christ, the Savior and conqueror of sin and eternal death.

To prepare for the coming of Jesus, God prepared a worthy mother to bear him as human. Thus Mary was preserved from the taint of sin, even the effects of the Original Sin of Adam and Eve from her conception in the womb of her mother, Ann. This is the solemnity we celebrate today, Mary’s Immaculate Conception.

Mary’s conception is sinless, not because of her natural goodness or holiness, but only by the Lord’s pre-applying the merits of Jesus’ redeeming sacrifice to her. Jesus saves all from sin and for eternal union with God, including his own mother. Mary is not only the mother of the Redeemer, but she is also the first redeemed.

Today’s Gospel narrates the annunciation to Mary that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Most High God. The angel Gabriel addresses her as “full of grace” and “the Lord is with you.” Mary’s response is a model for all of Jesus’ disciples: “behold, I am the handmaiden (servant) of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”

Although belief in Mary’s Immaculate Conception goes back to the early days of the Church, it was only defined as a dogma of faith in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. The Pope promulgated this dogma after consulting the bishops of the world.

Shortly thereafter in 1858, in a small French town near the Spanish border a young girl was favored with an apparition of a mysterious woman. When the girl asked the woman who she was, the woman answered, "I am the Immaculate Conception." It was the Blessed Virgin Mary. The young peasant girl was puzzled because she was not familiar with this title for Mary. The small town has become the site of a great shrine, Lourdes, and the young girl eventually became Saint Bernadette.

The sinless Mary was chosen to bear God's Son and for this reason she is often referred to as the tabernacle of the Lord. Although we are not sinless, we too bear God's Son in our hearts and bodies every time we hear his Word and receive him in Holy Communion. We are Jesus' tabernacles too!

As we honor Mary, under her title of her Immaculate Conception, may we imitate her response to God. We pray that she may help us crush the temptations to sin that we face. Despite our sins, may we also be eager to be the Lord's servants, bear him in our lives, and share him generously.