

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
St. Anthony of Padua Church, Effingham, Illinois
8 December 2008

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

What is the meaning and purpose of life? This question has confounded men and women for millennia. This question lies at the root of all of the unhappiness and misery that we experience.

The answer to the question is really quite simple. Saint Paul tells us that we were chosen in Christ "so that we might exist for the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:12).

If we understood this reality - and if we truly lived focused on the praise of the glory of God - how much more at peace we would be!

Our first parents, Adam and Eve, considered this very question, though they answered it wrongly. Created by the very hand of God and placed in the Garden of Eden - in Paradise - they walked with God in the cool of the evening. Their relationship with God was so intimate, yet they failed to trust him. They viewed the Lord not as their loving Creator who created them in love and for love, but as a rival to be opposed.

Eve first - and then Adam - set herself against her Creator and fell from grace. And with them, so have we all fallen from grace. How often do we fail to praise the glory of God and seek to praise ourselves instead! Too often we refuse to recognize

the Creator and seek to see ourselves as the author of our lives.

It is because we deny - or, at best, ignore - this fundamental reality of our existence that our lives are so marked with sin. Failing to serve and praise the Lord alone, we serve and praise ourselves falling farther and farther from grace and growing in unhappiness, misery and even despair.

But even when first we fell, the Lord in his mercy did not abandon us to ourselves but promised the serpent who continues to lie to humanity: "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" (Genesis 3:15).

Whereas Eve began mankind's fall from grace, so Mary cooperated with the Lord to bring about its redemption. For this reason, the Archangel Gabriel greeted her, "Hail, full of grace" (Luke 1:28)! She was given this grace because she, unlike Eve, recognized the truth of her existence, that her happiness would be found in praising God with every aspect of her life.

The Lord gave Eve to Adam because "it is not good for the man to be alone," but she proved to be an untrustworthy companion for him (Genesis 2:18). It was Eve who gave the fruit of death to her husband and from her hand he ate of it and so fell from grace with her.

As he hung upon the cross - the true tree of life - the Lord Jesus said to the Beloved Disciple, John, and to each of us, "Behold, your Mother" (John 19:27). Whereas the Lord gave Eve to Adam to be his companion and wife, so he gives Mary to us to be our companion and Mother. Mary leads us not away from grace, but to grace, to her Son who is the true food of life.

It is for this reason that Saint Anthony of Padua said of Our Lady: "The name of our Lady is a strong tower. The sinner who flees to her will be safe. It is a sweet name, a name to comfort sinners, a name of blessed hope."¹ We will be safe under the mantle of her protection because she will show us how to live for her Son; she will show us how to find true and lasting happiness in him.

¹ Saint Anthony of Padua, Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent, 2.6.