

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle  
St. Anthony of Padua Parish, Effingham, Illinois  
8 December 2005

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception  
of the Blessed Virgin Mary (B)

Today we gather together to celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is Mary, under this title, who is the patroness of our Diocese and so this day holds special importance to us as we honor our heavenly patroness and seek her intercession. We celebrate Mary because, as St. Anthony of Padua teaches, "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" (Third Sunday of Lent, 2.6).

Every sinner who flees to Mary will be safe because through her example of humility and of love, we see the perfection to which we are all destined. In Mary, we see what we all shall be, if we seek the mercy of the Lord and follow in the footsteps of the Son of God. Whenever we flee to Mary and seek her intercession, we cannot help but follow her example and, with her, say, "Yes," to the Lord.

The Liturgy today celebrates the day when Mary was conceived in the womb of Ann, her mother. Without any doubt it was a day of great rejoicing for Ann and for her husband, Joachim, and it should be a day of great rejoicing for us as

well, for today the sin of Eve begins to be undone and the way of the Lord is prepared and our salvation is close at hand.

It was Eve, of course, who was first tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. She listened to his lies when he said to her, "You certainly will not die! No, God knows that at the very moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad" (Genesis 3:4-5). She was not content to live as a servant of her Creator but wanted to be just like the Creator.

Being so deceived by the serpent, she "took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" and together they fell from grace (Genesis 3:6). Because of their sin, the Lord said to them, "Because you have done this, you shall be banned" from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:14). Through their sin, all of us have shared in the stain of Original Sin; all of us, that is, except for Mary whom the Father kept "sinless from the first moment of her conception" because of her unique role in the history of salvation (Collect).

In 1854, Pope Pius IX, at the pronouncement of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, declared

that the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, was, by a unique grace and privilege of Almighty God in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the

Savior of the human race, preserved exempt from all stain of original sin.

No stain of original sin ever touched Mary's soul; she was preserved from the stain through the grace of Jesus Christ because she was to become his Mother, by her own free choice in response to the unique invitation of God.

At the very moment of the Annunciation when Mary was told that she was to conceive the Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, the reversal of the sin of Eve began. Whereas Eve gave a resolute "No" to the will of the Father, Mary, in her humility and trust, said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:).

Through Mary's "Yes" to the will of God, the Son of God was born into the world and all of creation was made new. Before Mary, we were banished from the Kingdom of Heaven because of Original Sin; after Mary, through the death and resurrection of Christ, the gates of heaven are opened to us who follow after and remain with Christ Jesus.

Because of her faithful trust, Gabriel greeted Mary, saying, "Hail, full of grace!" (Luke 1:). Unlike Eve who forfeited the grace of God, through his mercy Mary was filled with his grace. Being full of grace, she provided a holy and fitting throne for the King of Kings in which to rest until his marvelous birth in Bethlehem.

In Mary, we see that a life free from sin is the perfect dwelling place of the Most High God. Through the example of the Blessed Virgin, God calls each of us to grow in holiness and to seek his will for our lives. Let us not say, "No," to him but follow his will in all things. Because of Mary's, "Yes," she gave birth to the Savior and the redemption of mankind was brought to completion. Let us, through the intercession, root out sin in our lives and conform our lives and will ever more closely to that of Jesus Christ.

Truly, we have a great marvel to consider in the life of Mary. Says, St. Anthony of Padua,

The daughter bore the Father! The poor little Virgin bore the Son! O cherubim, seraphim, angels and archangels! Avert your gaze, bow your heads and reverently adore the temple of the Son of God, the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, the blessed womb set about with lilies! (Third Sunday of Lent 2.3).

With Mary, then, who waited for the birth of her Son and waited at the foot of the Cross, let us wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus in joyful and expectant hope. Through our lives of holiness and repentance, may he find us eager to welcome him. Come, Lord Jesus!