

## Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Mother of God



A reflection on the Immaculate Conception of Mary, Mother of God, is impossible without a reflection on sin and its taint on humanity. Mary was chosen by God for the very special role of becoming mother of His Son. God knew he was going to ask this of her and so allowed her to be conceived without Original Sin. That then begs the question, was Mary even subject to the same temptation to sin as are all humans? Did she ever get angry, gossip, neglect her duty? Was she ever tempted to be spiteful, proud, prejudiced or unkind? Was God her first thought in the day, her last at night? We know the answer for it is our tradition that Mary remained sinless. But if, unlike us, she was conceived free from sin what credit is due to her for remaining sinless? In other words,

was Mary, by virtue of her sinlessness, ever subject to temptation?

If Mary never had to overcome the human tendency to sin because God created her as an immaculate being from the moment of conception, then why did he not do the same for us? Does being born without sin mean reduced capacity for temptation to sin, for hatefulness, for War and destruction of the earth? Perhaps the answer lies at least in part in understanding how it could be that Adam and Eve, whose conception was also immaculate (i.e. free from sin), would choose to sin by disobedience. No. I see that Mary was like us and her sinlessness did not protect her from

temptation. Furthermore, we know from the Gospels that even Jesus was tempted in the desert.

Adam and Eve introduced Sin to humanity by their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Does that mean our free will was somehow affected and we have no defense against sin? Often you will have heard it said: "I am only human." A certain helplessness in the face of sin is implied by this statement. You must excuse me, it is just human nature to be a flawed, sinful person. Yes, it is human nature to be frail and subject to our own whims and temptations. But could Mary have had this same frailty? Mary responded to God's call of love at every moment of her existence. Yet, she could have been tempted to doubt God at the point of each trial she faced in life. Mary was a single pregnant woman, almost abandoned by her betrothed. She gave birth in a stable far from home with animals and straw for comfort. A refugee, fleeing persecution of the authorities, she had to abandon family, home, country to save her baby. Twelve years later she was the distraught mother of an adolescent son, lost for three days while on a family trip to the big city, Jerusalem. As the mother of Jesus, she heard his preaching and knew it was bringing him to the attention of the Roman and Jewish authorities. All these she experienced well before she had to walk the via dolorosa of her son's arrest, judgment, crucifixion. Oh, yes. Mary had ample opportunity to doubt God's intention for her and for her son. Yet, she remained steadfast even to the foot of the cross.

We are a Religious Community who reverence Mary's Sacred Heart so much we are named Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The Holy Heart of Mary we reverence also under the title of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Daily we end our communal gatherings and prayers with the aspiration, may the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved! Immaculate Heart of Mary pray for us. Mary's was a pure love with no

counterfeit desires. Pure, absolute, all-consuming love for God was the essence of her life. She loves us with that same love and as such is surely a mother who understands our attraction to sin though never herself succumbing to temptation.

Being immaculate means she was at every moment filled with God's life within her. Grace filled there was no room for taint of any kind. We pray Hail Mary, Full of Grace ... pray for us sinners. What does that mean for us? We greet her every day in this prayer we rattle off so easily. Let us ponder the words in a special way this Advent. Mary, full of grace, full of God's life within her prays for us though we are sinners. Our relationship with Mary now and at the hour of our death is one of trusting she will hear us and help us to the very last moment of our lives. As we prepare for Christmas we are reminded of Mary's choice, her 'Yes' to becoming the mother of God's Son. We wait for Christ to come again and be born anew in our hearts.

The image of Mary as celebrated on December 8<sup>th</sup> is one of a beautiful and powerful woman. Mary, under this title, has come to visit us several times in history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century St. Catherine Laboure described the Miraculous medal of Mary's request. How often have we recited the prayer surrounding the image of our lady etched on this medal:

“Oh Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.” On one side of the medal Mary is standing on the world with rays of light coming to earth from jeweled rings on her fingers. Some of the rays do not reach earth. These, Our Lady said, were the graces we on earth have not yet asked for. That Mary was conceived without sin was also the message given to St. Bernadette at Lourdes when the beautiful lady of the Grotto said she was the Immaculate Conception. Under this title she is the

patroness of the United States and many countries celebrate the 8<sup>th</sup> of December as a Holy Day of Obligation.

We have much to meditate upon this Holy Day of Mary. It is an opportunity to look again at why and what we believe. As the Immaculate Conception can Mary truly understand us, empathize with us, intercede for us. Is our prayer for her intercession no more than an empty gesture of long habit expected of us by the Church? Born without sin ... original sin ... the sin of Adam and Eve! It is a topic that has occupied Theologians for centuries. The Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother gives us food for thought and prayer this Advent. God is not looking for empty gestures but our wholehearted loving response of yes to his action in our lives.

