

HOMILY FOR THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Today we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Blessed Mary, Our Mother. Mary, who was to become the mother of the Savior of the whole world, was conceived without the stain of original sin. She was preserved in a particular way to prepare an acceptable place for the Messiah.

The first reading today is the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were created without sin, in what we can call *original innocence*. They were able to give themselves to each other as a *gift* without any kind of hindrance. They had true intimacy with each other. They could see in their bodies and in each other's bodies that they were made to make themselves as a *gift* to each other. They didn't have communication issues; they didn't have concerns about the *intentions* of the other; they didn't have selfish hearts. They could see their bodies, their relationship with each other, and the whole created order as something that was *totally a gift from God*.

When sin enters the picture this relationship between Adam and Eve changed dramatically. We have to admit, even today, we don't see all of our relationships as a gift; we don't see all of our relationship with creation as a gift; we don't see our relationship with God as a *gift*. Even though these relationships can seem amazing, ultimately they can feel burdensome, empty, or shallow because of the wound of sin. The fact that persons are made to give themselves as a gift for others and to receive others as a gift, although not eradicated by sin, is a very veiled reality in our world even among Christians.

Before the fall Adam and Eve could see in their bodies that they were made for giving themselves as a gift. Pope Saint John Paul II calls this the *spousal meaning of their bodies*. He says, "This is the body: a witness to creation as a fundamental gift, and therefore a witness to Love as the source from which this same giving springs (TOB 14.4)." Pope Saint John Paul II is equating the existence of their bodily reality with the fact that they were made for gift. He continues, "The human body, with its sex—its masculinity and femininity—seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and of procreation, as in the whole natural order, but contains "from the beginning" the "spousal" attribute, that is, the power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift and—through this gift—fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence (TOB 15.1)."

Pope Saint John Paul II explains that when sin enters their world, the spousal meaning of their bodies is *corrupted*. That isn't to say that they cannot give themselves as a gift, but that it is harder to recognize the reality of the gift. It becomes more of a chore to love as they were created to.

Mary was preserved from the poison of this sin. She was free, not only of the mark of original sin, but also free of the inclination from sin, but this alone is not what makes Mary special. The Blessed Mother was invited to be a part of God's plan for salvation in a very unique situation. When asked if she would cooperate with God's plan she agreed and surrendered herself. She allowed herself to become fully the vessel of God. She literally became the *God Bearer*, a living, breathing, walking tabernacle. Just as we see the sanctuary light in the Church, which tells us to kneel before the Savior in the tabernacle, we too can and must kneel before the Savior in the womb of the Blessed Mother.

Pope Saint John Paul II calls the kind of love that Mary has in her self-surrender *betrothed love*. He says in *Love and Responsibility*, "decisive character is the giving of one's own person (to another). The essence of betrothed love is self-giving, the surrender of one's 'I'...the fullest, the most uncompromising form of love consists precisely in self-giving, in making one's inalienable and non-transferable 'I' someone else's property (LR 96-97)." The Blessed Mother makes of herself a *perfect gift of self* with the words we heard in today's Gospel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." With these words Mary fulfills the meaning of her own *Immaculate Conception*. The fact that she was conceived without the woundedness of sin finds its completeness in her total self-gift, through which the Holy Spirit over-shadows her and the *Word Became Flesh*.



Mary experienced fully what we receive every time we come to Mass. It is rather preposterous that we can approach the altar time after time to receive the Savior of the world in Holy Communion and probably only a handful of times have experienced the overwhelming power of grace that is available in that sacrament. Sometimes we get bored, or we forget, or we are simply ungrateful when we receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. It is because of the weakness that is present in us because of sin that we do not experience the reality of Holy Communion *every* time we approach this amazing sacrament of God's Love. Mary's reception of Jesus was one that was perfectly received. She knew what it was to give herself as gift and to receive God fully as gift.

The Blessed Mother's *total gift of self* is a model for all of us. She surrenders to God's will with a simple "yes" and Jesus Christ is brought into the world. Think of what good things God can do with our heart-felt "yes." The Lord can do amazing and wonderful things with an open heart. Since Mary was free from the mark of sin, she experienced *in her body* this total gift of self. She could give herself fully to God's plan and through her self-surrender, God becomes flesh.



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