

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION 2016

1st Reading: Genesis 3:9-15, 20 - *I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself.*

Responsorial Psalm 98 "Sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous deeds."

2nd Reading: Ephesians 1:3-12 – *God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world*

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38 - *Nothing will be impossible with God.*



If Mary's response to the angel were set to music, it might sound like this:

♪ *I say "Yes" my Lord, in all the good times, through all the bad times.*

I say "Yes" my Lord, to every word you speak.

Digo "Sí," Señor, en tiempos malos, en tiempos Buenos,

Digo "Sí," Señor a todo lo que_hablas. ♪

That was her response not only when Jesus was conceived in her womb, but throughout her life.

It is what we sing as we celebrate the continuing presence of Jesus in our lives.

It is what we sing as we celebrate the death and rising of Christ at Mass.

It is what we sing when we say our own "yes" to God at each particular stage of our lives.

*It is what we sing when we let ourselves be God's instruments, not by our own strength,
but when we allow the breath of the Holy Spirit to move through us
with the same grace given to Mary at her very conception.*

This feast is about the conception of Mary in the womb of her mother, St Ann, - something that was believed since the 7th century, and officially defined in 1854 - but it is about much more than that.

This feast is a celebration of our faith that ***grace is more original than sin***. This feast is a celebration of what Mary received by grace - a gift from the Holy Spirit that preceded even her conception.

We receive that grace though the same Holy Spirit.

The Spirit that overshadows us at Baptism, Confirmation & when we receive communion is the same Spirit that filled Mary from the first moment of her existence.

But the gift of grace needs to be received freely. Mary has some trouble understanding it. "How can this be?" was her first response to the angel. Yet, in spite of the fact that she probably never really understood what happened to her, she received it as a gift.

Adam and Eve - representing the first humans - were given the gift of existence, the gift of life and the gift of God's unconditional love. They resisted that gift, because they wanted to have control of it, to completely understand it.

They committed what we call the original sin, which is described in the first reading. The story is told in poetic terms as eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But what is the meaning for us of eating that fruit? It is much more than eating an apple, or a pomegranate.



To understand what that meant, we need to look at *why* they chose to disobey God's command. They wanted to take, to own, to possess the power to decide for themselves what is good or evil; they wanted to acquire that by their own power. They refused to enter into the mystery of a God who is good & receive that power as a gift.

I once heard a simple story *which* summarizes all of Christ's moral teachings and the entire 10 Commandments. If we would always wait until life was given to us as gift, the way Mary did, as opposed to taking it as by right, seizing it, or exploiting it, we would never break a single commandment & would be living the Sermon on the Mount.

Moreover we would have in our lives the first and most important religious virtue of all, the sense that all is gift, that nothing is owed us by right. In a way, this story is the opposite of the original sin. I first read it in a book by Ronald Rolheiser, *Against an Infinite Horizon*.

It's about refusing to repeat the *original* sin in my own life.



A man was once part of a hunting expedition in Africa. One morning this man left the camp early, by himself, and hiked several miles into the jungle, where he surprised and eventually bagged two wild turkeys. Buckling his catch to his belt, he headed back for camp. At one point, however, he sensed he was being followed.

With his senses sharpened by fright, he stopped, hands on his rifle, and looked around him. His fears were dispelled when he saw who it was. Following him at a distance was a naked and obviously starved adolescent boy. The boy's objective was food, not threat. Seeing this, the man stopped, unbuckled his belt, and, letting the turkeys fall to the ground, backed off and gestured to the boy that he could come and take the birds. [They did not have a common language]

The boy ran up to the two birds but, inexplicably, refused to pick them up. He was, seemingly, still asking for something else. Perplexed, the man tried both by words and by gestures to indicate to the boy that he could have the birds. Still the boy refused to pick them up.

Finally, in desperation, unable to explain what he still wanted, the boy backed off several yards from the dead birds and stood with outstretched and open hands

...waiting, waiting until the man came and placed the birds in his hands. He had, despite hunger, fear, and intense need, refused to **take** the birds. He waited until they were **given** to him; he **received** them as a gift.



When Mary said yes to the angel, she was receiving God's grace as a gift. She was saying something like - "My life is not about me, it is about God, and God is about love."

The Gospel passage for today tells the story of the conception of Jesus in her womb, but the process began before that moment. The feast we celebrate today says that she was being prepared to receive that incredible gift before she was born.

But the process did not begin even then. The Franciscan theologian, John Duns Scotus, fought for the acceptance of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in the 13th century. Thomas Aquinas disagreed with him, but Scotus won the day.

Franciscan theologians were ahead of their time because they believed that God *always* intended to become human in Christ. We might put it in different words today and say that the incarnation began with the Big Bang.

In the letter to the Colossians, Paul sings: *"Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creatures. In Christ everything in heaven and on earth was created.."*

In the second reading today, Paul proclaims that *"God chose us in Christ*

before the foundation of the world, to be holy & without sin before him in love."

That is what we celebrate in this feast. This is what we celebrate at Christmas.

This is what we pray for during
Advent.

Let us sing with Mary, as we prepare for the feast of the birth of her son:

♪ *I say "Yes" my Lord, in all the good times, through all the bad times.
I say "Yes" my Lord, to every word you speak.*

*Digo "Sí," Señor, en tiempos malos, en tiempos Buenos,
Digo "Sí," Señor a todo lo que_hablas. ♪*