

Feast of the Immaculate Conception 2020, Middleburgh

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 has blessed us who first hoped in Christ*

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

[Introduction to the Mass]

This feast of the Immaculate Conception is about the conception of **Mary**, conceived without sin in the womb of her mother, St Anna. It was believed since the early days of the Church, & officially defined in 1854. It was unanimously declared the patronal feast of the U.S. in 1856.

But it is about much more than a dogma & a devotion. This feast is a celebration of our faith that **grace is more original than sin**. This feast is a celebration that what Mary received by grace - a gift that preceded even her conception - **we** receive 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.

Homily

♪ *D Gentle woman, quiet light, morning star so strong and bright,
Gentle Mother, peaceful dove, teach us wisdom, teach us love.* ♪

Today we remember the gift of Grace that prepared Mary to say "Yes" to the angel Gabriel. Today's Gospel describes the moment of the conception of **Jesus** in Mary's womb. When we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception, we are going back in time to the beginning of **Mary's** life - to her conception in the womb of her mother, Anna. We are remembering the grace given to Mary when God called her before she was born to be the sinless mother of Jesus. That gift, that grace is the same one we receive when we are baptized.



The prayer of consecration to Mary which was led by the Bishop today in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Albany, & which we are invited to pray today after Communion, begins with these words, "I, a repentant sinner, renew & ratify today ... the vows of my **Baptism**. I renounce Satan and resolve to follow Jesus Christ even more closely than before." This renewal of our vows gives those

of us who were baptized as infants a chance to choose for ourselves to live our Baptism as followers of Christ.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, which we heard as the 2nd reading today, Paul writes: "God chose **us** in Christ to live a pure and holy life, to be full of love... the Father chose us to be adopted sons & daughters... By Christ's blood we were redeemed, our sins forgiven through extravagant love, so immeasurably generous is God's favor to us."

God's plan is & always was the opposite of the consequences of the story in the 1st reading, from *Genesis*. Notice how Adam separates himself from Eve, blaming her for the problem. Then Eve separates herself from creation itself, blaming the snake. And both of them separate themselves from God & their own true identity as beloved children of God by refusing to do what God commanded them, pretending that they had control, the power to define good and evil.

We have all done similar things & we suffer to this day from those three areas of separation. But God wants to reveal our deep connection with Christ, with each other and with the earth itself.



To understand that story from *Genesis*, I find it helps to understand sin as singular as well as plural. Mary was preserved from **sin** from her conception. Richard Rohr gave me a good explanation: *"the real evil in the world is not primarily the personal sins that you and I commit. Rather, it is a whole climate that envelops us. The Scriptures often speak of sin in the singular, not in the plural. Sin is a total reality that we get trapped in."*

We are set free from sin in that sense when we are baptized. For those who were baptized as infants, most of us, it happened before we could be guilty of personal sins. Again, the deep message of this feast is that **Grace is more original than sin**. Or, as St. Paul writes to the Romans, *"Despite the increase of sin, grace has far surpassed it."*

I often think of original sin as a kind of spiritual air pollution that makes it difficult to breathe. Difficult to breathe in the grace and love of God. I see evidence of that pollution in the culture of deceit that can deny the enormity of the pandemic so many suffer from. A culture that can accept lies as reality & deny facts that are obvious.

In the history of the Church, I see signs of original sin in the attempts to earn salvation by doing religious things, in the abuse of boys & girls, women & men too often overlooked by religious leaders & in the attempts to force people to deny the truth or join the institution by torture or condemnation.

Baptism, the more we live it, gives us the ability to breathe under water - to accept life as a gift & hear the call to love and to do the will of God even when the systems of our world tempt us to act like we are in control. At the end of the consecration prayer after Communion we will be invited to say the words, *"With you, O Immaculate Mother, -- you who **always do the will of God** - I unite myself to the perfect consecration of Jesus as he offers himself in the Spirit to the Father for the life of the world."*

Baptism is both a gift and a call. How many of you are baptized? If you are, you don't have a choice about being an evangelist, only the way you will do it. You and I are **all** called to be evangelists.

In an article in the Evangelist, the former bishop of Albany wrote that *"the essential mission of the Church [is] the mission of evangelization."* He goes on to say that *"each of us ... individually and collectively ... must do our part both by word and example to spread the message of God's healing, reconciling and redemptive love made known in the person of Jesus Christ."* Sr. Anna has often told me that when she was looking for a way to explain the word **Evangelization** to the people & priests of the Diocese she thought, "What would I say to 1st graders." What she came up with was this:

To evangelize is to make a v.e.r.b of the "**Good News**" That's what an evangelist is -- someone who "**GOODNEWS-ES**" others ~who spreads the Gospel by living the way Jesus did. **Mary** was an **evangelist** by the way she lived her life. Her response to Gabriel, "May it be done to me according to your word," became an invitation to all of us at the Marriage Feast of Cana, "Do whatever he tells you." Those two phrases sum up the whole spiritual life - Receiving grace as a gift we did not earn and can't control and doing what Christ calls us to do.

St. Francis wrote to the laymen and women who were trying to follow the Gospel as members of his 3rd order, now called Secular Franciscans. In his Letter to all the Faithful, he wrote, *"We are all called to be mothers of Christ by giving birth to him in the world by our way of living and loving."*

Many others have echoed the same thought. Inspired by the words of St. Francis, I often pray the Hail Mary as if it were addressed to me. After praying it in the traditional way, I hear an angel saying, *"Hail, Peter, rejoice, full of grace through God's gift, the Lord is with you. Blest are you among women and men, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy disciple, bearer of God, pray for all sinners now, and at the hour of our death."*

We hear words at every Mass that **command** us to give birth to Christ in our world,

The priest says, or sings, "**Do this in memory of me**" Those words don't just mean to celebrate Mass again. They are a call to all of us:

Love one another as I have loved you - do **THIS** in memory of me.

Forgive one another as I forgive you- do **THIS** in memory of me.

Give peace and healing to one another as I have given them to you...

Do THIS in memory of me.



Video of Readings & homily for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception

<https://youtu.be/Ym-8TCyad I?t=157>

[Fr. Peter] Today the sisters in Sr. Anna's congregation, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, renew their vows as they celebrate the 175th anniversary of their founding. Will you join me in witnessing Sr. Anna's renewal of her vows as a religious sister?

Video of Anna renewing her vows <https://youtu.be/Tto15sltXVM>

[Sr. Anna] A 15-yr-old girl is **Time Magazine's** first 'young-person-of-the-year' because of the scientific discoveries she made & implemented. It made me remember that, in **1957**, as a 15-yr-old, I went to the convent to live out my baptism as a religious for the rest of my life. In **1960** I became a Sister (**Gerard** was my religious name then) & in **2020** I'm **still** renewing my intention to live my baptismal vows as a professed religious – as a Sister, Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

Renewal of Vows



*Today, I Sister Anna Tantsits, renew my vows of chastity, poverty & obedience.
At my profession, I made a lifelong commitment to this IHM community of disciples.
Together we search for prophetic ways to live our vowed life
in a world hungering for justice & meaning.
Our lives are rooted in God & in the gospel & steeped in prayer & contemplation.
We search constantly for ever deeper & more meaningful ways to live our vowed life.
We desire to encourage others to join us in proclaiming God's universal,
redeeming love for this beautiful yet wounded world & its people.*

Thank you for witnessing my vows this year.

Now we invite **you** to renew your own baptismal vows by answering "**I do**" to the version of the Creed that Catholics use at Baptisms & at the Easter Vigil every year.

Renewal of Baptismal Vows

Do you reject sin, so as to live in the freedom of the children of God? **[I do]**

Do you reject the glamor & attraction of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?

Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?

Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead, and is seated as judge at the right hand of the Father?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?