

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (December 8)

Mary, a sign of victory over the serpent



Introducción

There is a way to present the figure of Mary that discourages instead of animating. She is referred to as the absolutely exceptional woman, exempted from original sin and its tragic consequences—and that's not because of her own merit, but for a unique divine privilege—confirmed in grace, preserved from making mistakes, blessed in all her works.... We wonder what this wonderful woman has in common with us. We, the poor descendants of Adam, forced to endure, through no fault, a punishment of sin that we have not committed. We feel envy of her but hardly love. She is too far away from our condition; she is not our traveling companion in the journey of faith that, with hard work, we tread. She does not share with us doubts, uncertainties, and also moments of bewilderment before the will of God. This image of the mother of Jesus—derived from affection rather than from the profound meditation of sacred texts—divides the brothers and sisters of faith, instead of uniting them. It is a source of friction in the ecumenical dialogue, especially with the Protestants and the Orthodox.

Today's feast offers us an opportunity to approach the authentic figure of Mary. She clearly shines in the Gospel accounts, free from fouling of a not always healthy devotion that gave rise also to several

misunderstandings.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception—defined by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854—has been formulated with a language linked to the philosophical and theological categories of time, a difficult to understand language for the twenty-first-century man and woman. If the dogma wants to have something to say to us today, we must re-read it in the light of biblical revelation.

The Mary of the Gospel is very close to us: a girl born in the mountains of Lower Galilee, in love with the young Joseph with whom she designed a family according to the tradition of her people. Then she is a mother, woman of faith, who each day had to confront difficulties and temptations similar to ours. She is not an exception but a particular person in whom God has found the full availability to realize his plan of salvation.

God does not bestow his gifts to arouse in the favored one the narcissistic pleasure of feeling privileged, but to give her a mission to carry out. Mary was filled with grace because we had to become rich in grace. In her, the Lord has manifested his good will because he wanted to fill us with every blessing.

She is perfectly inserted in this design. She used all the gifts she has freely received from God so that we might attain salvation. She gladly accepted the word of the Lord and accomplished her difficult vocation. The Gospels remind us of her doubts, questions, and moving journey of faith. Like us, like her son, she has been tried, but at all times she has been able to always say, like Jesus (2 Cor 1:19), “yes” to God.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“You were not different from us, Sister Mary. You are blessed because you believed and you remained faithful.”

-----1° Lectura | 2° Lectura | Evangelio-----

First Reading: Genesis 3:9-15,20

Mary “was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” So spoke Pius IX when he formulated the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Like all of his time, this pope believed that the story of the “original sin” referred to the unfortunate story of two individuals—Mr. Adam and Mrs. Eve. He was convinced that their transgression had had dramatic consequences for their descendants to whom it was transmitted.

Bible studies have now established, beyond doubt, that this passage from Genesis is not an account of something that happened at the beginning of the world, but a page of theology, drawn up in response, with images and mythical language, to man’s most disturbing of puzzles: why does evil exist in the world?

It does not tell the story of the sin of a certain Adam and a certain Eve, but it explains the dynamics that, always, people come to reject God, to commit evil and to decree their own downfall.

We are not the unfortunate descendants of Adam and Eve—forced to carry the consequences of the sin of our first parents—but we are the Adam and Eve, placed before God and the responsibility for the choices we are called to do in life. If this is the interpretation of the Genesis account, even the truth contained in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception requires to be studied deeply and to be understood in a new way. God had created all things good; the world came out “good” from his hands. Seven times the sacred author repeats like a refrain: “And God saw that it was good” the work he had done.

There was harmony between man and God, harmony represented in the book of Genesis by the exquisite image of the Lord and man strolling in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8). There was harmony between people and nature: the world was loved, respected and cared for like a garden. There was harmony between man and woman: no dominion, no oppression, no selfish manipulation, only the joy of feeling each a gift for the other.

It is at this point that—since the beginning of the world—the serpent enters. It convinces man to break the limits imposed by his condition as a creature, to put aside the plan of the Creator and to replace it with his own project, to follow his whims and wiles, alluding himself of achieving full self-fulfillment and happiness.

Who is the serpent? Let's try to decode this mythical figure. Contrary to what we might think, throughout the Old Testament, this mysterious character no longer appears. Only at the time of Jesus the Jewish authors, influenced by Persian and Hellenistic thought, began to see in the serpent, the devil. However, the text of Genesis does not point to this explanation, rather declares that the snake is “the most cunning” of God's creatures.

Who can it be? We scroll through the first two chapters of Genesis. We browse on the living beings created by God and we shall come to the conclusion: it is man, he is the smartest and no other. Yes, the snake is man himself who, seized by a mad delirium of omnipotence, thinks of being able to replace God and proclaims his autonomy in deciding what is good and what is bad.

This temptation of self-sufficiency subtly seduces, imperceptibly penetrates, treacherous as a serpent, in the mind and heart of man and induces him to make death choices. Sin causes the breaking of all the harmonies and the passage proposed in today's reading presents, with images, the dramatic consequences.

The one who lets himself be seduced by the “serpent” that is in him ends up out of place. God seeks him, calls him: “Where are you?” but does not find him (vv. 8-10), because he is no longer where he should be. As a father, the Lord is grieved of the evil that the son did. He is concerned, and to find him, he invites him to be conscious of what happened.

“Where are you?” means: “Where have you ended up? What have you done with your life? How did you bring yourself down acting on your own?” Man's response: “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and so I hid” (v. 10).

It is the rejection of God's presence, no longer regarded as a friend but as an opponent to be avoided, as a tyrant who threatens the independence and takes freedom away. Hiding oneself from the Lord means to abandon prayer, ignore the listening to God's word, distance oneself from the life of one's own community in order not to be called into question, not to feel hampered in one's choices. Man is afraid of God because he fears that God will deprive him of happiness. In fact, the one who gets tired of God falls into the abyss of a complete confusion.

The second consequence of the decision to distance oneself from God in moral choices is the estrangement from the brothers and sisters (vv. 12:16). Adam accuses Eve, who in turn blames the serpent. Both reproach to God to have created a wrong world. You were the one—Adam insinuates—to put me next to a person who, instead of bringing me to you, has distracted me from your project. I trusted her because you had placed her at my side.

This reaction is an attempt to shift the blame of evil committed on scapegoats who can be the family in which one is born, society, the education received and, ultimately, God who has willed that man could only be realized in the encounter with his own kind, which, however, often instead of lifting him up, they drag him down.

The woman, when questioned in turn, blamed the serpent. Since the serpent is none other than the other side of our humanity, her words constitute a new accusation against God: You made things wrongly by creating man as such, capable of committing follies and crimes. Why did you not make him different, perfect? Why is this insidious serpent that injects deadly poison in him?

After addressing the man and woman, we would expect God to interrogate the serpent. He, instead, does not because the serpent is not a creature distinct from man, but is the counterpart of man, that which is opposed to God. Will the serpent—the evil that is in man—always have the upper hand?

From our point of view, the human condition seems hopeless and Paul describes it in dramatic tones: “I cannot explain what is happening to me because I do not do what I want but on the contrary the very things I hate. So I am not the one striving towards evil, but it is sin, living in me. In fact, I do not do the good I want but the evil I hate. I am an unfortunate man! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:15-24).

Will man's defeat, therefore, be definitive? In the last part of the passage (vv. 14-15), God responds to this troubling question. The struggle between “the serpent” and the man will continue until the end of the world, but the outcome of the confrontation is anticipated. The “serpent” is declared cursed, that is, devoid of supernatural strength and therefore not irresistible; it can be won and, in fact, it will be.

Using vivid and effective images, God assures that it will lick the dust, will face a humiliating defeat (Ps 72:9), will crawl on the ground, as the defeated enemies are forced to do before the victors (Ps 72:11), will have its head crushed and, although, until the end, it will try to implement its mortal dangers, it will not get its way.

It is the promise of universal salvation. In light of this reading, the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of Mary acquires a clear, new and stimulating meaning. It is an invitation to turn our gaze to the one who, from her conception, has achieved the perfect harmony that God had dreamed at the

first morning of the world.

She is immaculate from her conception, that is, in the totality of her existence. In her, the victory over the serpent was complete because in her the divine Spirit that animated his son has been able to work its wonders. It is the clearest sign of the triumph of God over evil.

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:3-6,11-12

Is today's feast only an invitation to contemplate the Immaculate, to rejoice at the wonders wrought in her or does God somehow want to involve us in his bright story?

The passage proposed to us in the reading responds to the question. It is a moving hymn, bursting forth from the heart of an Asia Minor Christian. It is sung during liturgical celebrations of the communities of the first century and conserved for us by the author of the Letter to the Ephesians.

He exhorts with a blessing of God, who is no longer called "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," but the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 3). He is blessed because, having incorporated us into Christ, he made us sharers of every spiritual blessing.

The promised blessings to the patriarchs were material blessings. God showed himself kind to his people when he gave abundant harvests, multiplied flocks and herds, raised children like olive plants and made the daughters as beautiful "as corner pillars" (Ps 144:12). Now, he fills us with spiritual blessings, which are not in opposition to those materials, but they constitute a new reality, an offer of imperishable goods, of a life that goes beyond the horizons of this world.

After this joyous exclamation, the hymn has, in the first stanza, the plan of love created by God (vv. 4-6). He reveals the surprise that God had reserved for us even before the creation of the world: he has chosen us to be holy and blameless.

It is an unexpected message. We believed that only Mary was holy and immaculate, however, Paul assures us that this is the vocation to which we are all called. Even in us, evil is bound to suffer the defeat that was recorded totally in Mary. The Lord realizes this marvelous work "predestining us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ." The fate that awaits all of humanity is not, therefore, the ruin, but the joy without end, to the praise of his glorious grace.

At this point, the hymn introduces a statement full of meaning and that, unfortunately, our translation does not render it: "grace that he gave us—gratuitously—in his beloved Son." The original text uses here the Greek verb 'kharitoo' that means "to fill gratuitously of every gift." In his beloved Son, God has filled us freely, without any merit on our part, of his gifts.

Now, the amazing thing is that this verb is used only once in the Bible. It recurs in the announcement that Gabriel addresses to Mary: "Rejoice o filled by God of his every gift. The Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28).

It was believed that in this angel's greeting contains the biblical proof of Mary's fullness of grace. It is true: in Mary, none of the gifts she was filled with was lost. The hymn of the Letter to the Ephesians, however, announces the good news to us: God has filled us also of all his gifts and invites us to dispose ourselves to welcome them and let them bear fruit on the example of Mary.

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

Many painters have depicted this scene for which it is almost inevitable to display it. Someone tries to complete it even resorting—as did many artists—to legendary traits handed down by the apocryphal gospels.

The emotions evoked by this passage from Luke can help to approach the mystery, on condition that one goes just beyond, understands the literary genre used by the evangelist and manages to grasp the message it wants to communicate.

If one interprets it in a superficial way, the spell ends soon because questions arise of which no answer is found or they do not make sense. One wonders why nothing is told where Mary was, what she was doing, what were the reasons for her trouble (if she was married to have children, why did she wonder about the announced maternity?), what was the angel's appearance, how was he introduced in the Virgin's house, where was Joseph, why was he not immediately informed and above all, why did God want so much to complicate the story, to the point of jeopardizing the integrity of Mary.

Whoever poses these questions does not understand that we are not faced with a detailed, faithful account, but a written page of theology by a very prepared biblical scholar, with deep knowledge of the Old Testament, the oracles of the prophets, the images and the literary forms used in the Bible.

We will never know if the Annunciation was a verifiable material event or an inner revelation that happened to Mary. We will never know how and when Mary became aware of her mission as mother of the Messiah. We are interested in this but not the evangelist whose pursuit is to make the readers understand who is Mary's son and what has the moment when the human life of God's Son blossomed in Mary's womb meant for the history of humanity.

Having done this premise we come to the Gospel text. The setting (vv. 26-27) of the mysterious event of the incarnation is very realistic. The place is mentioned; it is Nazareth, a tiny village of Galilee, so insignificant as not even being mentioned in the Old Testament; inhabited by simple people of little education. To Philip who excitedly declared his admiration for Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael answered mockingly: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46). The entire Galilee was considered an unfaithful region, semi-pagan, far from the pure religious practice of Judea.

After the reference to the site, a virgin married to Joseph of the dynasty of David is presented on the scene. Finally, the girl is named, the name she is known to all; at Nazareth, she is called Mary, which means "the exalted one, the one who is high up." Again the evangelist, in remembering her name, designates her as "virgin."

Why such insistence? Virginity for us is a sign of dignity and great honor but in Israel, it was appreciated before marriage, not after. For a girl, it was a disgrace to remain a virgin for life. It was an indication of her inability to draw to herself to attract a man. The childless woman was a dry tree that bore no fruit. A derogatory connotation was tied to the term virgin: no life, no future, no posterity. In the most dramatic moments of her history, Jerusalem was a defeated and humiliated virgin named Zion (Jer 31:4; 14:13) because everything ended in her lifetime—she was unable to generate.

Mary's virginity should not be understood only in the biological sense—as the church teaches—but above all in the biblical sense. Luke wants to present her as the virgin Zion, which becomes fruitful because her husband, the Lord, filled her with love. In her song, Mary will be well aware of her “virginity” when she declares: “He has looked upon the lowliness (the ‘tapinità’—says the Greek text) of his servant” (Lk 1:48).

It is not the admiration for her moral integrity that the evangelist wants to inspire in the Christians of his community, but to let them contemplate the “great things” that in her—poor and devoid of any merit—one who is “Powerful” and “holy is his name” has operated (Lk 1:49).

Anyone who considers the wonders done by the Lord in “his servant” can no longer fall for his own unworthiness, in fact, all are called to become, in the hands of God, masterpieces of his grace.

Luke opened his gospel with a diptych, with two announcements. In the first panel, he presented the old and sterile Elizabeth (image of the bride-Israel incapable of generating and of the condition of humanity devoid of life's perspectives). In the second panel, he introduced a young “virgin,” a barren personification of Zion, but with a womb ready to welcome life.

Making fruitful the barren Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary, the Lord has shown that there is no condition of death that cannot be filled with life. Like the desert, he decided to transform even the arid hearts into lush gardens, irrigated by water of his Spirit; the gardens will become forests (Is 32:15). After examining the two introductory verses, we analyze the central part of the passage.

Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you (v. 28).

This is the heavenly messenger's greeting to Mary. This is not a formal and polite expression that people who meet for the first time usually address each other. It is not the same as “Hello, I salute you Mary” and is not even the usual “Shalom.” It is a solemn expression, composed with care. To any Israelite, it immediately recalls some texts of the Old Testament.

Rejoice is the well-known invitation to joy and jubilation that the prophets have addressed to the virgin Zion or to the Daughter of Zion—the poorest district of Jerusalem, the most dilapidated area where migrants and displaced persons resided.

In this desperate city, Zephaniah and Zechariah announced a message of consolation: “Cry out with joy, O daughter of Zion; rejoice greatly, daughter of Jerusalem.... The Lord is in your midst, you will not see misfortune ... Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for I am about to come” (Zep 3:14-18; Zec 9:9-10; 2:14).

Resuming these oracles, the heavenly messenger shows to address his greeting not only to Mary as a person but to all Israel, indeed, the whole of humanity, inviting her to rejoice, not to agonize for her own misery and unworthiness. The Lord is going to come to her.

O beloved by God.

If we run through the Bible, we see that when God speaks to someone, usually he calls the person by name. In our story, Mary's name is replaced by an epithet: Beloved by God. It is the second name given to the Virgin in our story.

"Mary" was the name by which she was known in Nazareth. "Beloved by God" is that with which she is known in heaven—it is her true identity. Her mission in the world is contained in this name: through her, God will manifest all his love for people. "Beloved by God" is not only Mary's heavenly name; it is that of all humanity.

The Lord is with you.

When God gives someone an important and difficult mission, the person is seized with fear and tries to escape. Moses must free the people; he feels inadequate and parries; the Lord reassures him: "I will be with you" (Ex 3:12); Joshua is commissioned to introduce Israel into the promised land and God encourages him: "I will be with you as I was with Moses" (Jos 1:5); Gideon must save his people from their oppressors and the angel says: "The Lord will be with you" (Jdg 6:12).

The task of Mary—and the virgin-Israel that she depicts—is more extraordinary than all those that have been entrusted to the servants of God that preceded her. Gabriel encourages her with words well known to her: "The Lord is with you."

Mary's trouble allows the angel to clarify the mystery that is about to be realized in her: in her womb, the Almighty is about to take on human form; the eternal is about to enter into our time; the Creator of the universe is going to be a creature.

The child that will be born to her—says the angel—"will be great and shall rightly be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the kingdom of David, his ancestor; he will rule over the people of Jacob forever, and his reign will have no end" (vv. 32-33).

Each of these words—which are not a verbatim report, but a post-paschal theological composition, put by Luke on the angel's mouth—alludes to Old Testament texts. They are a reminder of the prophecy of Isaiah: "For a child is born to us.... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. To the increase of his powerful rule in peace, there will be no end; he will reign on David's throne and over all his kingdom" (Is 9:5-6) and especially the oracle of Nathan: "He shall build a house... I will firmly establish his kingship forever. He shall be my son. Your house and your reign shall last forever" (2 Sam 7:12-17).

With these references the evangelist wanted to present to his readers the true identity of the son of Mary. It's an identity that is difficult to grasp: in fact, it has remained always hidden from the eyes of the powerful, the rich, the wise and intelligent (Mt 11:25) who are used to judge the value of people

with the criteria of this world, not with those of God.

Making use of references to the Scriptures, Luke has shown to his readers the discovery that Mary and the disciples had in the light of Easter: although conceived in total anonymity from a village in Galilee of the Gentiles (Mt 4:15), Jesus was not just any child. He was the expected messiah destined to rule forever. In him, all the prophecies were fulfilled.

The story continues with the question of Mary: “How can this be?” She does not ask how it is possible for this to happen nor intend to put obstacles. She just wants to know what will be her task, how will she behave so that the designs of God are realized in her.

Man cannot give up his own intelligence. The adherence to God in faith never demands the renunciation of reasonableness. The “yes” said to God, to be truly human, must be weighted and responsible.

Luke presents Mary as a model of authentic human response—which must be free and informed—to the call of the Lord. The clarification requested is given with a language that Mary and the Israelites understood well, that of the biblical images.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (v. 35). It is first of all drawn to the presence of God’s Spirit, the spirit that at the beginning of the world hovered over the waters is remembered (Gen 1:2). Now the Spirit is again recalled because God is going to do a new creative act in Mary’s womb.

Then the shadow and the cloud: they are signs of the divine presence in the Old Testament. During the Exodus, the Lord went before his people in a pillar of cloud (Ex 13:21), a cloud covered the tent where Moses went to meet God (Ex 40:34-35) and, when the Lord came down on Sinai to speak to Moses, the mountain was covered by a thick cloud (Ex 19:16).

Stating that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed her, Luke declares that the same Lord is made present in her. We are faced with this evangelist’s profession of faith in the divinity of Mary’s son.

The angel concludes his discourse by recalling the effectiveness guaranteed by every word from the mouth of the Lord. He does it with the same words that one of the three angels addressed to Sarah and Abraham, disbelieving the announcement of Isaac’s birth: Nothing is impossible with God (Gen 18:14).

I am the handmaid of the Lord (v. 38a).

In the short Gospel account we are examining, there appear three names of the Virgin: in Nazareth, they called her “Mary”; in Heaven, she was known as the “Beloved of God”. Here is the third name, which the Christian community identified her with: the “Servant of the Lord”.

In our text, it is Mary who attributed this name to herself, but it is unlikely. This title does not mean—as someone translates—“humble servant,” but it is a title of supreme honor that the Old Testament

reserves to the great men faithful to God (never to a woman). Samuel, David, the prophets, the priests in the temple who night and day bless God (Ps 134:1-2) are called “servants of the Lord”. When it mentions the name of Moses, the sacred author often feels the need to add “servant of the Lord.”

It is unlikely that Mary was less modest to attribute to herself such a high title, though no one more than her deserved it certainly. It is more likely that the primitive community—among whom she lived in prayer (Acts 1:14)—having contemplated in her the model of the faithful disciple, chose this biblical title to qualify her and has put it on her lips.

Let it be done to me as you have said (v. 38b)

In many paintings, the surprise and, at times, almost her dismay appears in the Virgin’s face to which the acceptance of God’s will always follow. However, let it be done does not at all mean resigned consent. The Greek verb ‘genoito’ is an optative and expresses a joyful desire. On the lips of Mary, it reveals her anxiety to see the desire of the Lord realized in her.

Where God enters, there joy always comes. The story, beginning with “the rejoice”, ends with the joyful exclamation of the Virgin’s “let it be done”. No one had understood God’s plan; David, Nathan, Solomon, the kings of Israel had not understood it. All had posed their dreams against it and they expected from him to fulfill them. Mary did not behave like them; she has not put any of her projects against God. She only asked him to clearly show the role he intends to entrust her. After having understood, she joyfully welcomed his will.

Fr. Fernando Armellini - <http://bibleclaret.org>