

Homily - Immaculate Conception 2023

Today, we celebrate in this Mass the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary - and I think it's fair to say that for as often as Catholics hear this phrase, it's still so often and so easily both misunderstood and underappreciated.

I'll explain what I mean by that.

As far as misunderstandings go, the big one is what it is that we're actually celebrating. So, here's your Catholicism 101 primer on the feast:

Today, we celebrate the Virgin Mary's conception, preserved from the effects of original sin and all the spiritually destructive consequences it brings.

This is NOT about the conception of Jesus in the Annunciation - that's a different feast entirely - but like every Marian celebration in the Catholic Church, it is still fundamentally about Christ at its heart.

How is that? Simply, because the entire purpose of Mary's Immaculate Conception was to prepare her to be a perfect vessel to receive Our Lord in his Incarnation, which we will soon celebrate in a special way in the solemnities of the Christmas season.

Not only was she free from the effects of sin, she also freely chose to conform her will entirely to God's in accepting his plan for salvation, and in bringing his Son into the world.

The reason I would say this feast is underappreciated, however, is because for all the beauty of the Church's belief that Mary was both conceived and lived her life entirely free from sin, we may often feel like that makes her harder to relate to.

Often, after all, we are more likely to identify with someone's flaws and struggles, the things that make their lives seem like attainable models to emulate.

Is it possible, we might ask, to ever really relate to someone who is, in a very real way, the perfect Christian?

The Church would say yes.

Pope Benedict XVI, in the first year of his pontificate, gave a beautiful reflection on how Mary, specifically in how she perfectly followed God's will, helps us undo some of the misconceptions we have about what real freedom actually looks like, and how we can follow her example.

I'd like to offer you just part of his insight here. Pope Benedict writes:

"Dear brothers and sisters, if we sincerely reflect about ourselves and our history, we have to say that with this narrative is described not only the history of the beginning but the history of all times, and that we all carry within us a drop of the poison of that way of thinking, illustrated by the images in the Book of Genesis.

We call this drop of poison "original sin".

Precisely on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we have a lurking suspicion that a person who does not sin must really be basically boring and that something is missing from his life: the dramatic dimension of being autonomous; that the freedom to say no, to descend into the shadows of sin and to want to do things on one's own is part of being truly human; that only then can we make the most of all the vastness and depth of our being men and women, of being truly ourselves; that we should put this freedom to the test, even in opposition to God, in order to become, in reality, fully ourselves.

In a word, we think that evil is basically good, we think that we need it, at least a little, in order to experience the fullness of being...

If we look, however, at the world that surrounds us we can see that this is not so; in other words, that evil is always poisonous, does not uplift human beings but degrades and humiliates them.

It does not make them any the greater, purer or wealthier, but harms and belittles them.

This is something we should indeed learn on the day of the Immaculate Conception: the person who abandons himself totally in God's hands does not become God's puppet, a boring "yes man"; he does not lose his freedom.

Only the person who entrusts himself totally to God finds true freedom, the great, creative immensity of the freedom of good."

I would encourage us all to pray with Pope Benedict's words, and that question of whether we truly know what it means to be free.

If the Lord is inviting us to follow his will, even at great personal sacrifice and cost, it is because he desires us to know that freedom, and all of the joy that comes with being exactly who God has made us to be.

That freedom gives us permission to let go of all the old attachments and things we may wish we could hang on to from the past, the superficial sins and pleasures that imprisoned us and blotted out his divine image in our hearts.

As I and any other confessor can tell you, in truth, it's actually sin that is boring - every sinner digs himself into the same self-centered hole of isolation.

It is the Saints who are the most compelling, most enthralling, most powerful and unrepeatable witnesses to the burning fire of God's merciful love in the world - and he wants to form each of us in that apostolic model given to us in the person of Mary herself.

Today, then, as we celebrate the beautiful gift of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception, we pray as well that through the grace of this Mass, and her intercession, every one of us will live up to her example.