**Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception**

Gn 3: 9-15, 20; Eph 1: 3-6, 11-12; Lk 1: 26-38

December 7-8, 2018

Toward the end of my first semester as a freshman at St. Mary’s College, I was sitting in a large classroom waiting for Fr. Taylor to begin a lecture on Western Civilization. It was to be one of those days that for whatever reason remains permanently imprinted in my memory. It was December 8, 1973, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. He asked the class, “Today we are celebrating the Immaculate Conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, correct?” I should have known by the look on his face, the fact that he had advanced degrees in theology, and the unusualness of such a question given the class material, that something was up, but I fell for the bait and responded, “Yes it is!” “BONG! Wrong answer!” he said. I had made the same mistake most of us make about this feast day. Most people think the Immaculate Conception is about how Mary became pregnant.

Today, we celebrate not the conception of Jesus in the Mary’s womb (we celebrate that on the Feast of the Annunciation). Rather, we are celebrating the conception of our Blessed Mother in the womb of Anna, her mother, and the doctrine that Christians have always believed that Mary was conceived without the stain or original sin. She had a human father and a human mother, and her birth was like ours in every way, but because God knew from all eternity that Mary would say “yes” to his invitation to become the Mother of God, God granted her a grace only she and only she would receive, the grace of being preserved from original sin so she could be a spotless temple of God’s very presence as he assumed our humanity, a grace won for her by her son Jesus. The Immaculate Conception is all about preparing Mary for the coming of the Son of God into her very being, into her heart, and into her body. It is about preparing Mary to become the Mother of God and a proper dwelling place for God made man. Mary’s vocation was unique, unrepeatable and holy.

Mary’s conception was without sin and she preserved her purity throughout her entire life. She did this even though she was entirely and thoroughly human, and as such, needed to be redeemed like all of us by the Cross and Resurrection of her son. God foresaw it, and willed it for her in a special way.

What a gift she was granted, and what a vocation she lived out! Mary excelled all of us in her holiness and faithfulness, yet she was like us, completely human, and a redeemed member of the Church, and a witness to her son’s life, death, and resurrection. All that happened and was promised to Mary can happen and is promised to us, if we are faithful to God and his plan for our lives.

We too can be freed from sin! We too can be holy in life! We too can say “yes," “Fiat!” to God’s plan for us. We too can bear God into the world, both in our hearts and by our physical presence to those in need by the prayers we say and the good works we do. We too can give birth to new life and love which are gifts of God above. We too are human beings and God has chosen to a special vocation for us and he gives us every grace, perhaps even singular graces, that we need to live our vocations.

Why would anyone doubt the Immaculate Conception? It is completely consistent with God’s love for all of us. God gives to all his children every grace necessary to live out their unique vocations, vocations only they can accomplish, so he gave Mary a singular grace that she needed to become the Mother of God, the grace of freedom from sin from the moment of her conception until the end of her life on earth.

We all have reason today to rejoice in God’s great gifts to us. God’s unique gift to Mary only confirms what is true for us also, that each of us is special and unrepeatable in history. Each of us has special graces and a special call. Each of our lives matter! Each of us is necessary and needed. God loves us all.