

“Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

In Nomine+

A couple of weeks ago, when George asked me if I would be the homilist for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, my immediate response was, “No! You are asking the wrong guy!” His repeat request an hour later led to my saying, reluctantly, “Well, alright. But, remember, you asked for it”

That may seem like a confusing exchange, but it is founded in some sound and very important theological principles. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception is not, I repeat, is not an Anglican or Episcopal feast, nor is it an Orthodox Feast, nor is it a Coptic feast, nor is it found anywhere in the Protestant world. It is a Roman Catholic feast that stands alone without any accommodation or acceptance in the larger Christian world, that is the whole Church, catholic.

Even in the Roman world, it is a relative late comer. It was not declared dogma until 1854, by Pope Pius IX, *ex cathedra*, meaning that its authenticity is based in the related dogma of Papal Infallibility, and reads as follows:

“We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.”

It is not clear what motivated Pope Pius IX to issue this decree, but there was, at the time, certainly, plenty of popular sentiment among western Catholics to support it. Marian devotion had been on the rise since the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent. And, given the time period, one cannot discount the threat to traditional beliefs that many tradition-bound Christians feared by the specter of Darwinism coupled with the new field of biblical scholarship which seemed to challenge the very credibility of the scriptures. All over the Christian world, conservative voices raised calls for deeper devotion to traditional tenets of faith and doctrine, and total rejection of modern ideas.

The propagation of this doctrine has opened the door to a whole array of troublesome assertions about Mary: Not only was her conception sinless, but her whole life was sinless (Pope Pius XII, 1942), and from that, a veritable open season of new titles became attached to her, the most disturbing of which is “co-redemptrix.”

Looking back to the church fathers, we find that such luminaries as Bernard of Clairvaux, Saint Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, all raised cautionary warnings about the appropriateness and authenticity of a doctrine of Immaculate Conception for Mary. Their concerns, like those of most non-Roman Catholic believers were that claims for Mary’s sinlessness and purity had profound implications for the doctrine of the Incarnation, which itself hangs on the principle that Jesus Christ the Son of God was simultaneously son of Mary, or in more recognizable

terms Son of Man, or fully and completely human in every way. Jesus' humanity depends entirely on Mary's humanity. That is to say, if Mary isn't fully human in every way, then Jesus' link, connection, relationship to you and me is broken. Can a person, set aside at conception for a specified task, with no experience of human sin, with divinely limited possibilities be said to be truly human, or has she become de-humanized by her quasi-divine, albeit grace-filled state?

I grew up in a Protestant culture. Mary was Jesus' mother and was important at Christmas time, but after that event, she was simply a mother, who cared for her child, worried about the choices he made, and stuck by him to the bitter end. In the 1960's when I became an Episcopalian, I began to take Mary much more seriously, but retained some reformed aversion to too much veneration. One day, at St. James' Cathedral, I had the opportunity to converse with a visiting Franciscan Friar and the subject of the importance of Mary in our religion came up, and he said to me the singular comment that has guided my thinking and my devotion ever since. He said, "You understand, don't you, that we are only related to Jesus on his mother's side?" Of such innocuous comments are great spiritual transformations made! Of course, I thought. It's Jesus's humanity which comes from Mary that makes him MY SAVIOR! It is Jesus' humanity that opens me to a familiar relationship with God, the Father Almighty as promised in the Gospels!

Now that may seem like it's a pretty basic revelation, and I'll admit that it is. But add to it many years of theological speculation and elaboration, and you arrive at a concept of Mary with which I am quite comfortable, today. This Mary is not some frail, protected, purpose driven robot whose purpose and trajectory is preplanned and pre ordered. This Mary, my Mary, the Mary of my devotion is a healthy, vibrant, robust and decisive young woman, who when confronted with a strange and one might even say, bizarre proposition, pondered and questioned its validity, and then made a decision which changed the world. "Fiat," the vulgate says. "Let it be done!" and salvation history took a giant leap forward and the world changed forever.

Most of Christianity says that Mary's engrafted life began at that cataclysmic moment, not at her conception, nor at her nativity, nor at her presentation in the Temple, nor at any other of her life events, but with her "Fiat," and I am fully and completely in accord with that.

Over all, I don't think we give Mary her full due as a human being. She was not a mindless vessel who merely walked through the paces. From the moment of the Annunciation, she undertook an arduous journey from Nazareth to Ein Karim to confirm what had been given to her as a sign, that her cousin Elizabeth, long infertile, was six months pregnant with John the Baptist. She attempted forcefully to intervene in her son's determination to proclaim the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, when she feared for his safety. She continued in her support and prayer through his trial and execution and even as a valued member to the post-resurrection community and from her exalted place as Queen of Heaven and First among the Saints, et today, she continues to stand as the perfect model and exemplar of a holy and grace-filled life, an inspiration to ordinary Christians, everywhere.

So, let's be clear, I'm all for celebrating Mary whenever we can, at her conception, at her nativity, at her presentation. But let us keep our theological priorities well-ordered. Her importance to us, today, is a consequence of her own powerful and unequivocal response to Gabriel: Fiat!

Alleluia!

Amen.