

Homily for the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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... the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals, and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." The man called his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. Genesis 3:9-21

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26-38

A seminary professor of mine, Alan Jones, had a particular fascination with an ancient story from Jewish mystical tradition. He told the rather lengthy story like this:

In the beginning, before there were any beginnings and endings, there was no place that was not already God! And we call this unimaginable openness, "Ain Soph" - Being-without end. Then came the urge to give life to our world and to us. But there was no place that was not already God. So "Ain Soph" breathed in to make room, like a father steps back so his child will walk to him. Into the emptiness "Ain Soph" set vessels and began to fill them with divine light, as a mother places bowls in which to pour her delicious soup. As the light poured forth, a perfect world was being created! Think of it! A world without greed and cruelty and violence! But then, something happened. The bowls shattered. No one knows why. Perhaps the bowls were too frail? Perhaps the light too intense? Perhaps "Ain Soph" was learning. After all, no one makes perfect the first time. And with the shattering of the bowls, divine sparks flew everywhere! Some rushing back to "Ain Soph," some falling, falling, trapped in the broken shards to become our world, and us.

You may wonder why I'm sharing this story during a mass in which we are commemorating the Blessed Virgin Mary and in particular contemplating her origins and the theological notion of her 'immaculate conception.'

I suppose the story of *Ein Soph* partly comes to mind due to our first reading from Genesis, the primal biblical account of a world created beautifully and flawless, and then gone wrong due to the cunning of the serpent and the disobedience of Adam and Eve. *Ein Soph* may have arisen in its time and place as a contemplation of the divine purity implicit in the Genesis creation story. *Ein Soph* also addresses the disbelief and the questions that arise as we humans experience a world in which we still catch glimpses of that divine purity, but we never do so completely out of view of all that is broken, fallen and sorrowful.

I am suggesting, I suppose, that, Mary elicits similar responses in many faithful, prayerful Christians. Whether or not we have even heard of or understood the dogma of her immaculate conception, and apart from our conclusions about it, Mary so often seems to connect with the conviction and hope of divine purity in the hearts and imaginations of Christians, particularly those who draw near to Mary in prayer and devotion. She embodies – and that's the right verb for this commemoration – Mary *embodies* our yearning for and our enduring belief in the ultimate, loving, eternally safe and undefiled nature of God.

When we gathered for this commemoration a year ago, Father Lawler preached a fine message in which he intelligently and faithfully waded deep into the longstanding controversies about the Immaculate Conception. As I listened I sought to keep a straight face, but I remember thinking, "Yes! Smart! I agree!"

This evening I propose setting aside the dogma and those questions and any controversy. I don't wish to diminish them. But I do wish to welcome you, as you are able, to see into Mary and through her what she elicits in so many Christians, perhaps including you. We see and seek in her the divine purity that so many others have seen and sought in her, a divine purity that we know to be an essential attribute of God. We of course aspire to that purity ourselves—the recognition of it, the embodying of it, ourselves. Seeing and seeking it in Mary and in our devotion to her, keeps our hope and faith alive.

Thanks be to God. Amen.