

Immaculate Conception 2021

Genesis 3:9-15.20; Psalm 97; Eph 1:3-6.11-12; Luke 1:26-38

As we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary we should be linking it with that other great Marian Solemnity which it serves to book-end: The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. The Immaculate Conception is not an event, but a person: Mary who was created able to respond to the Son of God with her whole life. The Assumption of her into heaven is the natural conclusion of such a sanctified life.

These twin feasts offer each of us a fully integrated understanding of our own self-being in the Body of Christ. They reveal the holiness which we are each called to live for ourselves and witness to others, not as an abstract essence but as a real body with a real and active spirit.

Towards the end of her book *Handmaid of the Lord* Elizabeth von Speyr observes that:

‘[Mary’s] whole life’s path has not distanced her one step away from the starting-point. She has realized the whole idea that God had formed for her’.¹

The ‘idea’ that God has formed for Mary, is that Mary should live as ‘the wonderment of faith’.²

Mary is the wonderment of faith because of her response to the Triune God’s promise to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mary does not encroach on Christ’s position as the absolute mediator between man-kind and God; rather she is the first to recognise His absoluteness. The Immaculate Conception is the starting point because Mary ‘*prepares in hearts, in human society as a whole, a place where the Lord can lay his head.*’³

For the Church today, for you and for me, the Immaculate Conception serves as a constant reminder of what a Trinitarian response to the God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit looks like: it looks like Mary. In praying to the ascended Christ one prays filled with the Holy Spirit to the Father. When praying with Mary one prays with the one who responded to and received the fullness of God’s grace. Mary is the foremost to conform to that eternal encounter of truth, beauty and goodness in Christ. She is ‘his [Christ’s] most transparent reflection’.⁴ Eve’s assertive response promises dust, Mary’s selfless response promises restoration with God.

A deep, loving understanding of what the Immaculate Conception means to each individual as a member of the Church creates a model of humility and devotion right in the centre of the Church’s life, which in itself sees Mary in her own reflection.⁵

¹ Von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord* 145.

² *RM* 51.

³ Von Balthasar in Von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source* 144.

⁴ Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Mater*, as RV 16.

⁵ ‘We could once more realise the “archetypal identity” between Mary and the Church and, from time to time at least, drop the “of the” between “Mother” and “Church”. Von Balthazar in Von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source* 143.