

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception  
December 8, 2022

Readings: Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38

It is normal to seek perfection, even if realistically we understand the futility. In MLB baseball a perfect game is achieved when all 27 batters are retired, not even one reaching base. It has only happened 23 times in MLB's 147-year history, with over 235,000 games! And yet, every single Major League pitcher has that as a lifetime goal. Are they crazy?

There are 215 questions on an ACT test that must be completed in less than 3 hours. A perfect score is a 36 (N.B. you can **miss one** math Q!). Only 0.31% score a 36, a **fraction of 1%**. Yet it is the dream of many high schoolers aiming for an elite college. A serious bowler wants to score 300 at least once, and the list goes on. We may never achieve it, but we should at least give it the 'ole college try! Spiritual perfection is different. Because of Original Sin, we have lost before the game even gets started!

It may seem unfair, but it is the human condition after the fall. The Blessed Virgin Mary is a human person, just like you and me. Today's Solemnity does **not** celebrate that Mary achieved spiritual perfection on her own. Rather, we celebrate that God specially selected her, and that by His prevenient grace, preserved her from the stain of original sin. He did this so that she might be that pure vessel through which the Savior of humanity could be born.

The Church Fathers called Mary "new ark of the covenant" and *theotokos*, meaning God-bearer. From these titles, the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception and sinlessness unfolded. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, St. Ephrem the Syrian called Mary "all-pure, all-immaculate, all-stainless, all-undefiled, all-incorrupt, all-inviolable spotless robe of Him Who clothes Himself with light as with a garment."<sup>1</sup>

So, this teaching is not some medieval invention. But neither is it an easy dogma to understand, nor one that was without its difficulties over the centuries. Good and faithful theologians argued about how to articulate Mary's sinlessness. The famous debates between the Dominicans and the

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<sup>1</sup> Ephraim the Syrian, *Precationes ad Deiparam* in *Opp. Graec. Lat.*, III, 524- 37

Franciscans were all attempts to grapple with the common belief that Mary was the same as us, and yet somehow different. We honor her on account of her prevenient grace foreseen by the Lord.

You may ask, “Is one less redeemed, if one has not sinned?” The simple answer is “No,” because like us, Mary was redeemed. As one writer noted, “To be preserved from sin is more splendid, radiant redemption, but still redemption, plain and simple.”<sup>2</sup> Mary did not wish to possess anything that she did not owe to her redeemer; she has received all from the abyss of God’s mysterious and marvelous grace.

Every ounce of righteousness we possess is a gift of God’s grace, which no human can merit, not even Mary. Today’s solemnity states that God’s redemption through Jesus Christ has been realized in Mary in its most perfect and comprehensive way. Her purity serves as a model because we all struggle with our sinful tendencies. But she intercedes, assisting us with her prayers. Even as we fall far short, may we be inspired by her example to lead lives of holiness purity and faith.

It should also be noted that Immaculate Conception always occurs during Advent. No one has waited with more hope than the Blessed Virgin. It is fitting this solemnity comes now, in the still and darkness of December. As the Preacher of the Papal Household reminded us of Mary: “She didn’t celebrate Advent, she lived it in her flesh.”<sup>3</sup> We too embrace our Advent waiting and watching, and through God’s mercy and grace, prepare a place in our hearts for the Lord to dwell.

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, “Mary, Mother of the Lord,” (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), page 75.

<sup>3</sup> Raniero Cantalemesa, Advent reflection, December 6, 2019, adding “Like every mother bearing a child she knows what it means be waiting for somebody and can help us in approaching Christmas with an expectant faith.”