

Immaculate Conception 2011

The splendid new English texts of the Roman Missal which we put into use two weeks ago contain a great deal of theological richness that had been, for reasons one cannot fathom, withheld from the English speaking Church. The formularies for today's Mass are good examples of the depth of meaning which the original Latin texts have wanted us to know about and pray about but which were not previously communicated. Before examining these, I note that the subtitle of the feast given in the priest's edition of the American altar missal. It says, The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, patronal feastday of the United States of America. This is a reminder that our country has been claimed, and long ago, by wise and foreseeing bishops—claimed in being given over to the care of our Lady under this title. Just as She Herself was wrapped in the robe of salvation by the overflowing of God's grace, so we American Catholics are clothed by Her merits and protected by Her intercession.

The One selected to become the Mother of God was given a unique kind of preservative so that She would not be in any way contaminated and thus unfit for Her divine maternity. This intervention of God, this reaching out into history to interrupt the normal flow of the 'bug' of original sin is given its precise theological name in the prayer that I will say after the Offertory; the name for it "prevenient grace." I dare say that the word 'grace' alone is a word that, while common enough in our language, is little understood by the majority of Catholic people. When one adds to that the rare word 'prevenient' many will not have a clue to the meaning. And while this usage of some uncommon terminology was one of the major criticisms of the new English text (it is supposed to be too lofty for the comprehension of the lay people), one cannot on that account omit or dismiss the realities such theological words signify. 'Prevenient grace' is a gift that God gives 'before' or 'in anticipation of' some benefit. In this case, God gave to Mary beforehand the gift of sanctifying grace which was not yet given to the rest of humanity until Christ's redeeming death on the cross. In this Mary was

'ahead' of us all in having this preview of the benefits of redemption. (The astounding thing to think about is that it would be by means of Her own Son, yet to be born, that She already received this gift.) Yet the Virgin Mary was not only the first one to be graced since the original human couple, but She was in a state of grace *always*, even at the instant She was conceived in Her Mother's womb. There is that *prevenient* action of God, withholding the contamination of original sin from touching Her.

She was kept pure for Christ's sake certainly, but also for ours. Other prayers in the missal express that thought. Through the sinlessness of Mary we are helped to be kept from committing sin. Her symbolic robe of purity and grace are placed on us as a protection and also as a gift so that we share in what She had been given. Mary, in other words, is not only a *protective* parent who shields us from dangers but a *provident* parent who shares with us what She had been given by God. She is a distributor of grace, a channel of God's benefits. It's of no concern to us that God might have done without Her mediating role in that regard. God can act upon us without any intermediary. The point is that God did *not* will to deal with us in that direct way. He rather set up various means of go-betweens. The reason for this is that we are not worthy of direct dealings with God (although He has often made exceptions to this) and so He established intervening links in a chain of agencies from Himself down to us as His ordinary manner of communicating with us. For this reason you have priests as middle men between God and yourselves; you have angel messengers performing in a similar capacity; you have sacraments of the Church as things which transmit God's power; you have saints who make special pleadings on your behalf, though you might seem to be perfectly well capable of speaking for yourselves. Mary is one of those divinely made and divinely willed middle agents between God and ourselves. We have no competency or right to discard the ways of God and suggest to Him alternative methods for His dealing with us.

There is another aspect of our celebration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary that needs to be recognized. This is the fact that not only was She protected from sin at the start of Her life (something only God could do for Her) but that She avoided every possible sin that was offered to Her all life long. There is something else to marvel about. Not even a venial sin crept into Her Immaculate Heart. 'Entirely focused,' we might say today, on God. We surely have some experience with that since all of us have, from time to time but not always, refused to commit a sin. On our part however, these refusals often came with a struggle because of the fact that we have an internal disorder that makes us gravitate towards sin. Holy Mary did not have this nagging drive to contend with. This does not mean that She had an easier life than we. Far from it. Her battles were with the archenemy of mankind—the devil—and She, with Her Son, made war on all sin. The proof of Her heroism was Her privileged participation in Christ's passion. Nowhere more than there did She show Her maternal love for us than to consent to the torture and killing of Her own Son. There's a valor in the heart of the Virgin Mary, a strength that is superhuman; it is in fact supernatural; it is the power of grace.

So for us, we need the medicine of God's healing grace while Mary had the preventive medicine of grace all Her life long. She has this healing remedy in Her hands and She is all too happy to distribute it to us for the asking. For this reason we turn to Her today and beg that by Her privileged position and by the merits of Her sinless life She obtain what we need to be saved and to become holy ourselves.

May Holy Mary watch over us, protect us and clean us up as a shining follow-up to Her Immaculate Conception.