

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Readings: Isaiah 9: 1-3, 5-6; Luke 1: 26-38

Here in this Grotto Bernadette put a question to the Lady who appeared to her. She asked with great courtesy: “Mademoiselle, would you be so kind as to tell me who you are, if you please?” The Lady answered: “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

Why did Our Lady choose to describe herself by a title which must have been unfamiliar and puzzling for a young girl who had not much education? Why did she not just say “I am the Mother of God”, or “I am the Blessed Virgin Mary” – something that Bernadette would have understood?



That title helped to convince those to whom she told her story. Bernadette could not have made it up; she did not even know what the words meant. But that was not the reason Mary chose to describe herself in that way. In those words, she pointed to the meaning of this place and the purpose of the pilgrimages that have come here for almost a century and a half.

It was an extraordinary privilege to be free from sin from the first moment of her conception (Cf. PIUS XI, *Ineffabilis Deus*). But it was not just that sin was absent from her life. Even more extraordinary is what was present in her: She was full of grace. She was ‘so highly favoured’; the Lord was with her. Her life was in complete harmony with God. Pope John Paul expressed it like this: “From the first moment of her existence she belonged to Christ,

sharing in... that love which has its beginning in the... Son of the Eternal Father who... became her own Son" (*Redemptoris Mater* 20). Jesus came so that we would have life and have it to the full. That is what the Immaculate Conception means: Mary had life to the full, free from the falsehood and narrowness of sin.

The angel called her "Highly Favoured" as if it were her name, just as Mary herself called herself 'the Immaculate Conception' here in the Grotto. Both titles express the same truth. Mary's life was full of grace. In other words she was completely in tune with God's plan for her and for the world. "Let what you have said be done to me" was not just something she said once in Nazareth; it shaped the whole of her life. That is what being free from sin means – it means that the most fundamental truth of her life is that "I live now, not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

"I am the Immaculate Conception." She was pointing to the desire that should guide our lives – to be united with God and with God's love made visible in her Son. That is the only instruction she is ever recorded as giving. At Cana she told the servants: "Do whatever he tells you." And it was the guiding principle of her own life. She became, as Pope John Paul put it, "the first disciple of her Son" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 20).

That is what she told Bernadette when she described herself as the one who was free from sin from the first moment of her conception. She followed her Son wholeheartedly and without reservations, from the very beginning and even to the foot of the cross. That was the goal of her life, summed up in the Gospel we have just heard: "Let what you have said be done to me."

That is the heart of what our pilgrimage is about. The meaning of life's journey is to travel with Christ towards the new creation where we will be united with him, with his Father and with one another in eternal harmony.

That is the meaning of every prayer we make here. We pray for many things – for the church, for those who suffer, for those who lack basic necessities or who live in areas of conflict, for peace of mind, for health, for the intentions of those we love. But in the end we always pray with Jesus, 'not my will but thine be done'. He taught us to pray: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

The Lady who told Bernadette that she was the Immaculate Conception guides us towards the truth that sets us free. When we ask that God's will be done, when we ask that it should be the guiding light of our lives, we are actually asking for the happiness that our hearts long for, the happiness that eye has not seen nor ear heard, the happiness that can only be expressed by the Holy Spirit within us, in sighs too deep for words (Rom 8:26)..

Sometimes we say, 'not my will but thine be done' as if God's will was something harsh and cruel that we just have to endure. When Mary said at Cana, 'Do whatever he tells you', it turned a moment of deep embarrassment for the newly married couple into an extravagant outpouring of God's generosity – 120 gallons of the finest wine! St Paul tells us what God's will is: "He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:9,10).

We experience many things in life that bring us pain and anxiety and sorrow – illness and bereavement and disappointment and heartbreak. We often feel that we are living in a dark and disheartening world.

Mary was free from sin from the beginning; she was assumed into heaven at the end of her earthly existence. In her womb was conceived the one who is Mighty God and Prince of Peace. Mary, the Immaculate Conception, tells us that the people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light. God has broken the rod of the oppressor and the yoke that weighs us down.

During her life her soul was pierced as Simeon foretold (Lk 2:35); she stood at the foot of her Son's cross. She does not offer us any promise that we will not suffer as she did and as her Son did. But she is the sign that what God's grace offers us is stronger than any suffering or loss.

And by telling Bernadette that she is the Immaculate Conception she pointed out the road towards that fulfilment – be united to him in your heart, in your mind, in your actions; believe in him; let what he has said be done to you; do whatever he tells you. That is the theme of our pilgrimage this year: "Be Reconciled to God". That is what we come here to learn from Mary, God's Mother and ours.

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