

## **Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8, 2004)**

The Immaculate Conception is the feast of Mary's sinlessness, the Catholic belief that at no time in her life was she ever subject to the power that sin has over the rest of us. Both she and Eve figure prominently in today's readings. The first reading speaks of the results of the first sin: an on-going struggle and entanglement between humans, the children of Eve and evil, the seed of the serpent. There is a note of hope, however, in Eve's name. She will be the mother of the living as God's creative plan continues.

In the Gospel the grace-filled spirit of Mary, the new Eve, is reflected in her generous "yes" to God which supplants the "no" of Adam and Eve, and this begins the process of redemption as a child, the Son of God, is conceived.

The letter to the Ephesians reminds us that neither Mary's lot nor ours is unforeseen. It is an expression of the eternal design now made manifest in time.

Mary has always played a prominent role in Catholic belief and practice. And in spite of the post-conciliar predictions of some doomsayers, there is really no great evidence that her place in the lives of the faithful has diminished. Certainly there is better focus today than in the past. Ecumenical dialogue has brought a sounder balance to our presentation of Mary and her prerogatives. Our better understanding of Scripture has had a positive influence. There are fewer fanciful attempts to fill in the gaps in her story that are not present in the Gospels. But her place in faith is secure. She continues to be central to much of Christian prayer and devotion. In the words of the poet, she is "our tainted nature's solitary boast."

Today's feast focuses on one of the honors accorded Mary. There are others: the divine maternity, the assumption, the Mother of the Church. But none of them says as much as the lessons taught in today's scripture. Mary is the model believer. We can all look to her for inspiration. She gave her unqualified consent to God and no prerogative can overshadow that. There is a story in the Gospel telling about a woman in the crowd who wanted to single out Mary's motherhood to honor her. "Blessed is the

womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you,” she said. But Jesus gave her a gentle rebuff in what almost sounds like a “put down” of his mother. “Rather”, he says, “Blessed are those that hear the word of God and keep it.” Now this story is found only in Luke who gave us today’s Gospel. Mary was preeminently the hearer and keeper of God’s word. Acceptance of God’s word in total obedience is the heart of discipleship and so Mary was the first disciple.

Elizabeth Johnson, writing in *America* magazine a few years ago, provocatively suggests that in spite of improvements in our way of presenting Mary today, Christian tradition has robbed her of her Jewishness, both racially and religiously. In our religious art we have turned her into an Anglo-Saxon, blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty. And religiously we have turned her into a latter-day Christian, even a Roman Catholic. Johnson suggests that a much more accurate picture would be that of a Jewish village woman of faith, a friend of God.

A Jewish woman of faith: she had been nurtured by the Law and the Prophets, the same as any other good and pious Jew of her time. She heard the exhortations to care for the poor, the orphans, and the aliens. I can easily imagine her passing her deep religious piety on to her son and so enabling him to preach and to teach much of what he did from his own knowledge of their scriptures. Jesus’ obvious acquaintance with current Jewish customs must have been learned from his Mother. Together they lit the Sabbath candles and celebrated the great feast days.

She lived in a rural village whose population consisted largely of peasants working the land and craftsmen who served their basic needs. Her husband, Joseph, was one of those craftsmen. Under Roman dominance times were tough; revolutionary resistance made the atmosphere tense; violence and poverty prevailed.

A number of women religious writers of the third world have noticed the similarities between Mary’s life and the life of so many poor women even today: giving birth in a homeless situation; fleeing as a refugee with your baby to a strange land to escape being killed by military action; losing a child to unjust execution by the state. We see images of this daily in our news media. Think especially today of Iraq and Afghanistan and the Sudan. Mary is sister to the marginalized women who live difficult lives in our

world today.

And so on this Feast of the Immaculate Conception, even though we have not been immaculately conceived, we can still be and do what it is that made Mary blessed in the eyes of her son. We, too, can be hearers and doers of the word of God.