

Arbitrary Obligation or Appropriate Celebration?

Holy days of obligation are an enigma to many Catholics. It's understood that one must attend Mass, but what exactly is being celebrated on the particular holy day escapes not a few. Unfortunately, then, the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of that feast and its relation to one's own personal faith is missed. The obligation to attend Mass becomes another item on a checklist or a reason to grumble about Church "rules". The feast of the Immaculate Conception, celebrated on December 8th, is among the perplexing holy days of obligation. The need to understand and appreciate the significance of this feast is particularly important, since it is intimately connected with Advent – even being the source of Advent- and is the foundation of our Eucharistic, Catholic faith.

Who was immaculately conceived? Most Catholics will answer, "Jesus", but in fact, the term "immaculate conception" refers to the conception of His Mother, our Blessed Mother. By the grace and will of God, Mary was conceived *without original sin*, unlike the rest of humanity. This means that from the moment of her conception, she was sharing in the life of God and did not possess the inclination to sin. What we acquire at Baptism, she had at conception: a sharing in the life of the Trinity. What we battle against our whole lives, she never experienced: the inclination to sin. This singular blessing that was bestowed on her was not merited by her nor was it given to her capriciously; she was granted this privilege in virtue of her calling to be the Mother of God, Christ's partner in redemption.

In the beginning of the gospel of Luke, we see how important Mary's role is in the coming and saving work of Christ. Jesus did not descend from the clouds, nor did He rise up from the ground. God the Father chose to send us His Son *through* Mary, by her motherhood. In other words, it was pleasing to God to *rely* on Mary's humble obedience in carrying out His plan of redemption, the sending of His Son. Indeed, her reply, "let it be done to me according to thy word," precedes the Incarnation. Before God could become man in her womb, Mary was called to give her "yes" to God's plan that would be carried out in and through her. She had to say "yes" to being the chosen channel of grace. But a "yes" of this importance and magnitude, in which she lovingly assented to devoting her entire life and being to the unfolding of the Incarnation, could only be given by one who was not influenced by sin: by someone immaculately conceived. Even the holiest people, the saintliest of saints, have rejected God, in small and large ways, in their faith journeys. They, of all people, know that even their "yes" to the will of God carries some hesitation and doubt, and this is so because of the stain of sin. But she whose flesh the Son of God would take as His own flesh, and she who was called to be Christ's partner in redemption, had to give an unbridled, totally free "yes" to God. In order to give this kind of reply, she had to be free from any burden of sin.

Therefore, Mary's Immaculate Conception prepared her to give that perfect "yes" to God and to be the mother of His Son. And, it is because of her perfect "yes" to the coming of Christ into her life, into her very womb, that we can prepare for the coming of Christ and celebrate His birth on Christmas. A mother is the one who brings her child into the world, and Mary, as God's mother, is no different. She has brought her Son, who is the Son of God, into the world; she has given the world its Savior. How appropriate it is that we celebrate her Immaculate Conception during Advent! We can also honor her and her Immaculate Conception in our hearts at every Mass, because in giving us Jesus, she has given us the Eucharist, Who is Jesus.

On Christmas morning, before opening the gifts and sharing in a family meal, remember and give thanks to her who first said "yes" to the coming of Jesus. Learn from Mary how to welcome the Savior.

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Jordan Docken