

## DECEMBER 5, 2021: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT



As we continue our celebration of Advent this week, we also celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother. This celebration is a Holy Day of obligation and, like Sunday Mass, we are required to be there. We might wonder why this particular celebration is so important that the Church understands it to be equal to a Sunday celebration. The reason is that Mary was immaculately conceived and she is also the patroness of the United States. Mary, as our patroness, has a special relationship with us—much like Saint Patrick, the patron of Ireland, has with the Irish. Hence, for the United States this feast day is like Saint Patrick's Day in Ireland. It should hold a special place for

us in our worship of God.

More importantly, though, is the theological significance of this day for our celebration of Advent. Advent, of course, is our celebration of the end times; our waiting and watching for the coming of Christ again. As we focus on the first coming of Christ—foretold by the prophets and fulfilled at his birth—we await the fulfillment of his promises to us that He will come again. The hope we have that He will come again is grounded in the promises that were fulfilled by his original coming. We are a people, therefore, who eagerly await with hopeful expectation, and prepare ourselves *daily* for his coming so that we might always be ready.

Whatever we are taught about the Blessed Mother is intended to help us better understand our relationship with Christ. In other words, the teachings and doctrines about Mary are never simply about her. Rather, the extraordinary graces that Mary received in her life will teach us something about what our relationship with Christ should be about, or will be about.

The teaching of the Immaculate Conception of Mary teaches us that through the grace of God she was conceived without original sin and remained sinless throughout her entire life. This means that she always retained the Christian sense of freedom. This sense of freedom does not mean the ability to choose freely what we will for ourselves; instead, this freedom is always about the ability and willingness to choose God's will. Slavery, in this context, is to choose to sin and reject God and our true human nature, which is *always* to abide in God's presence and divine will. Grace was given to Mary so that she could, in complete freedom, say yes to Christ when the Archangel Gabriel came to her. Her words spoken that day, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word," must be our attitude.

What better way to prepare for the coming of Christ than to mirror our Blessed Mother in her response to God in her life. We too must be ready at all times to say yes to God, no matter what we are asked to do. But, like Mary, this is only possible if we are open to God's grace in our life. It is his grace alone that gives us the strength to be ready to always say yes. Hence, Christ offers to us two great gifts that help us discern and carry out his will. The first and most important is the Eucharist which is the gift of his very self. The second is the gift of the forgiveness of sins which we receive through the sacrament of Penance. In both actions we receive the grace that enables us to live our lives more fully in Christ, by humbling ourselves before God and saying yes to his holy will.

This feast day helps us to remember our need for God's grace and what we can accomplish with that grace in our lives. We will never be free of sin in the same way that Mary was: that would be impossible. We are broken vessels hindered by the effects of original sin and our own sinful choices in this world. But, looking to Mary, we discover what is possible with the grace of God, and so we turn to her and seek her intercession. By the grace of God, we try to imitate Mary by rejecting sin and seeking Christ in all that we say and do.

Therefore, is there really a better way to prepare to celebrate Christmas and its true meaning than to celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception? I do not believe so; this feast truly gets to the heart of Advent. And so, we are called to gather in celebration of the tremendous grace that Mary received, and that we may receive as we contemplate her life and relationship with Christ. May we receive the grace to say with Mary, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word."