

Loose Sandal
Immaculate Conception
(Gn 3:9-15; Eph 1; Lk 1:26-38)

Among the various icons of the Blessed Mother and Jesus is one known as “Our Lady of Perpetual Help.” This icon is distinguished by two angels who hold the Cross and the instruments of Christ’s passion. The child Jesus firmly holds his mother’s hand while looking toward the Cross—an indication not only that she gives him strength and courage to take up the Cross, but that he does so on her behalf. The key detail of the icon, however, is the loose sandal on his foot.

The loose sandal is a reference to the first reading, where God punishes the serpent after the fall: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel”* (Gn 3:15). In his passion and Cross, Christ is both struck by the devil, and conquers the devil. Christ thus “loosens his sandal” in order to crush the head of the serpent.

This icon helps us to contemplate the mystery we celebrate today, the “Immaculate Conception.” It reminds us that Mary figures largely in the passion story. She is the New Eve, and as such is the image of the Church, Christ’s Bride, for whom he died in order to make her “immaculate” (cf. second reading, Eph 1:4, and also Eph 5:25-27).

Unlike the first Eve, who experienced the venom of the serpent as he accosted her, the New Eve enjoys a special grace from God, which is the total “enmity” from the serpent. This means that from the first moment of her conception, to the last moment of her earthly life, neither sin nor death touches her in any way. She is *“full of grace”* (Lk 1:28). Like Mary who first pondered what the greeting of the angel meant (Lk 1:29), the Church has been pondering its meaning for 2000 years. It means that Mary is the “Immaculate Conception,” conceived without Original Sin; and also that she is Assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven, without having experienced the curse of death.

The reason for this special grace is two-fold: first, because Mary is the mother of the Incarnate Word, and the flesh which he took to himself from her is completely sanctified and holy; and second, because she is the image of the Church, which Christ purifies from sin and death by his Passion and Resurrection.

“Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, you preserved the most Blessed Virgin Mary from all stain of original sin, so that in her, endowed with the rich fullness of your grace, you might prepare a worthy Mother for your Son and signify the beginning of the Church, his beautiful Bride without spot or wrinkle” (Preface for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception).