

The Church makes a distinction between original sin and personal sin. Original sin is something we are just born with. It is part of the imperfection that comes with being human. The story of Adam and Eve aims to show how sin got started. Once the first humans sinned, they passed this separation from God onto each succeeding generation. We are not responsible for original sin. It's just something that comes along with our first breath. We don't commit original sin; we contract it.

However we are responsible for personal sin. You could say that the sin described in the Book of Genesis is both original and personal. It's original because it's the first recorded sin in the bible, but it's personal because Adam and Eve chose to do what was wrong. I sometimes hear people today refer to sex outside of marriage as original sin. It's not. It's very much a personal sin; it is a choice.

In the Catholic Church we believe that baptism takes away original sin. It forgives all personal sin, too. But the infants we baptize have not committed any sin. They are human, though, and they contracted original sin. After we are baptized, our sin is forgiven, but you may have noticed we still have a tendency to sin. We have a word for that too. We call it concupiscence – the tendency to do what is wrong. I sometimes hear people say their temptation to commit sin is original sin; it's not. If you have been baptized, original sin is gone for you. But you still have to deal with concupiscence. Because of that we still are tempted to sin, and often we do.

Today we celebrate the Immaculate Conception, a title we give to Mary because we believe that when the angel Gabriel greeted her with the words, "Hail, full of grace," he really meant it: Mary was full of grace from the moment of her conception to the end of her earthly days. God miraculously kept Mary from original sin, and she never committed personal sin throughout her remarkable life.

Under this title, the Immaculate Conception, Mary is the patron of our country and of our diocese. Our cathedral bears this title. Many of the parish churches in the diocese are named for Mary the same way. None of us can live completely free from sin, but we can use Mary as a model. We don't have her advantage; we were not born without original sin. But we have been baptized. Besides, throughout her life Mary had to make good choices to avoid personal sin, and we can too. Concupiscence, our tendency to do the wrong thing, dogs us every day, but we can overcome it by making choices like those made by Mary, whom we honor today as the Immaculate Conception.