

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

When Colin Powell died earlier this year, people remembered his public service, dedication to his country, and competent leadership. They also remembered a speech he gave the United Nations in 2003 defending the war with Iraq, which he later called “painful” and a “blot” on his record. It’s unfortunate because he was a role model in countless ways. We humans sometimes characterize people by one questionable action or trait. We fail to see the whole person. When I did prison ministry years ago in Cameron, Missouri, I learned all the more that no one is the worst thing they’ve done. Every human being has dignity.

To bring us into the mystery of the Immaculate Conception today we hear the account of the first sin from the Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve were people of dignity, but we remember them for the worst thing they did. When God confronted them about the fruit, neither of them denied the action: “I ate it,” they said. But each of them put the blame somewhere else trying to deflect their own guilt. They considered themselves not perpetrators of a crime but victims of someone else’s wiles.

We all have done this—caught in the act of doing something wrong, we blame someone else or try to convince the witnesses that our actions were valorous, not sinful, deeds to be admired, not scorned. We don’t want to be remembered for the worst thing we’ve done.

The story of Adam and Eve shows us that part of being human is being sinful. We see it plainly in others; we see it reluctantly in ourselves. Each of us is saint and sinner.

The exception is Mary. We celebrate today our belief that she never sinned, and, in fact, was without sin from the moment her parents conceived her. It’s an astonishing belief—how God carefully prepared a perfect home for his Son long before Mary came of age herself to conceive.

The Latin language makes a play on words about Mary and Eve: The Latin word for Eve’s name is *Eva*, and the Latin word for “Hail,” Gabriel’s greeting that also starts one of our favorite prayers to Mary, is *Ave*. Both *Eva* and *Ave* have three letters, and each spells the other one backwards. Gabriel’s *Ave* helped undo the sin of *Eva*.

It’s hard enough to encounter our own sin, especially when other people never let us forget about it. It is hard to change a reputation when other people define us by the worst thing we’ve done. But we are who we are in the eyes of God. Even when we sin, even when we try to deflect the blame, even when we try to convince others we aren’t so bad, we have dignity.

God has demonstrated the power of sin and forgiveness in the ministry of Christ, the Son of Mary. As we celebrate her immaculate conception today, let us give thanks to God for the grace that defines who she is and the grace that refines who we are.