

## The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Today's celebration recognizes the miraculous way God prepared the world for the miraculous way God redeemed the world—in both instances through a single individual: Mary and then Jesus.

God redeemed the world through the incarnation of Jesus. He entered a human family through the womb of a virgin, showing not just the power of God but that Jesus' own parentage was both divine and human. God prepared the world for this event by granting that same Virgin a prevenient grace—one that took place before the redemption. She was preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception. She never committed personal sin. She therefore bears the title the Immaculate Conception, and she is patron of this cathedral, this diocese, and this country under that name.

With this background, our initial reaction on hearing today's second reading is that the Letter to the Ephesians seems to affirm that belief. It says God "chose us in [Christ], before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him." Indeed, we hold that God chose Mary before the foundation of the world to be holy and without sin throughout her entire life. Some people wrongly take advantageous comfort in this interpretation: They think, "Mary was unique in completely avoiding sin. No one else could do that. So when I sin, I'm just doing what I'm programmed to do." The problem is, of course, that that line from the Letter to the Ephesians does not concern Mary alone. It says God "chose *us* to be holy and without blemish before him." The Immaculate Conception of Mary does not grant the rest of us permission to sin; it sets a model for our behavior.

Almost hypocritically, the people who argue they can't avoid sin because it comes naturally to humans may be the same ones puffed up with pride. They look down on the misbehaviors of others, they consider perfect their own ways of thinking, and consider themselves alone among others "to be holy and without blemish before God." Many of us give ourselves permission to sin while also thinking pridefully we are better than the rest.

If we cannot fully imitate Mary's sinlessness, we can imitate her humility. An angel had revealed her vocation, and she humbly pursued it because she desired not her own will but the will of God.

God introduced the work of redemption through twin miracles for two individuals. We are grateful, but we are rightly challenged by Paul's words to the Ephesians. God has chosen us to be holy and without blemish so that we too can contribute to the salvation of the world. On this day when we celebrate Mary's holiness, let us accept our own call to holiness and seek ways in humility to remove whatever sin may keep us from standing without blemish before the eyes of God.