

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Immaculate  
Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
December 8, 2017

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In 1854 Pope Pius IX raised belief in the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady to the status of a formal doctrine of the Church. Yet even 160-plus years later many people who otherwise want to believe rightly are confused about the nature of the doctrine. Does the Immaculate Conception refer to the conception of Mary in her own mother's womb, or to the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary?

The official teaching of the Church makes the answer very clear. "The Most Holy Virgin Mary was, in the first moment of her conception, by a unique gift of grace and privilege of almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the redeemer of mankind, preserved free from all stain of original sin." The Immaculate Conception is about Mary.

In everything Mary is connected to her Son. The only reason we know about Mary and care about her, is because of her Son. Just as the only reason we know about Jesus and care about Him is that He is God's Own beloved Son. Our belief in the Immaculate Conception issues directly from, and is the consequence of, the fact that Mary is the Mother of God.

Our religion is not about Mary but about her Son. The *Catechism* says of Christ, "In Him God has said everything." It does not follow that everything is made immediately clear to His Church. The implications of our beliefs, revealed once and for all in His Incarnate Life, can over time become more clarified and spelled out in the minds and hearts of the faithful. Certain truths can be subtly hidden within the revelation for years and become more explicit as the Holy Spirit gives them a season, or prepares the Church for their acceptance. It is the Holy Spirit Who is given to the Church to guide and guard her and lead her into all truth. To understand the Blessed Virgin Mary we first affirm that Christianity is not about her but about her Son. Mary herself shunned the spotlight. "Do whatever He tells you" is what she said at the Cana wedding feast. And so the Church learned only over time to fully appreciate the great significance of Mary's motherhood of God.

There is no Biblical account of the Conception of Mary. But at the Conception of her Son (which we commemorate on the Solemnity of the Annunciation) the angel

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greeting Mary declared she is endued with God's grace. The vulgate says *plena gratia*, "full of grace." And this is a fair translation of the Greek. To be full is to have no room for more of anything. Perhaps you said that on Thanksgiving Day, gratefully pushing back your chair from the table! When the Green Line trolley is full, you cannot get on. If Mary is full of grace there is no room for anything else, and certainly no room for anything contrary to grace! Often missed is when the angel continued he did not say, "The Lord *be* with you" but "The Lord *is* with you." Gabriel had come to declare a fact, not express hope for it.

The Catholic Church rejects the assertion that Mary was made free of all sin only at the Annunciation. That is to subvert the announcement of the archangel. It also implies that *any* girl would do. We do not believe God acts that way. It is not what we believe about Mary. And such an attitude would seem to limit the merits of Christ's saving act. If He can save us at all after we have fallen into sin, He can surely prevent His mother *in advance* from sin. Remember the answer you gave in catechism to the question: "what can God do?" The wrong answer is that God can do anything. The right answer is that God can do all He *wills* to do. And just as Almighty God once created a perfect paradise for Adam and Eve, so too He created a perfect dwelling place for the Second Adam, His Beloved Son. This time the paradise was a girl named Mary. And for our sake and for our salvation, she was always full of grace.