

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception – December 8, 2025 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 6:30am Mass – 700 words

I love the simplicity, yet the profundity, of this scene in which the Angel Gabriel came and spoke to the Blessed Virgin Mary. “Hail, full of grace!”, he says – and the greeting startles her. “She was greatly troubled, and pondered what sort of greeting this might be”. She had not been accustomed to thinking highly of herself, of comparing herself to others, of wondering if someone had more or less than she did. We know well these temptations, though: from taking pleasure in our own “work well-done”, to seeing ourselves as superior or inferior to others, our concern for our relative level of merit tends to be a thought pattern that haunts us fairly often.

But it goes deeper from there. “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son...”, the angel continues. But she doesn’t fall into any traps of temptation. She does not conclude, “Oh yes, because I’ve never sinned, *I* must be the one indicated to be the mother of the Messiah; yes, that’s why you’re here now”. It’s quite possible that she dares not even conclude she had never sinned. Her heart – her soul – was simply not wired that way. She was not accustomed to any sort of navel-gazing. Her soul was not tainted by Original Sin, and it did not follow the standard paths that ours, deeply wounded by Original Sin, do. Her habitual focus was on God.

The first reading gave us some insight into how Original Sin was transmitted. Adam and Eve, recently created by God, had been in a pristine state – what we call a “preteneratural state”, constituted by God in a privileged and grace-filled relationship of friendship with him. They would have handed this same state on to their children, had they yet used that aspect of their marriage and begun to propagate the human race. But it was still quite early. And then, tragically, they sinned. Adam stood by while his wife began to indulge an unhealthy curiosity – he did not intervene and lead her aright. They both listened to the Evil One. They both disobeyed God.

Then, the passage tells us that Eve “became the mother of all the living”; yes, it was then, only after Adam and Eve had fallen, that they began to build the human race. Thus, Original Sin was transmitted by propagation. And each one of us inherited it. Each of us was conceived in it; each of us was born with that stain on our souls that spiritually separated us from God and cried out for redemption. And even after we received that redemption through Baptism, effects of that fallen state remained: therefore, we have long struggled with comparison, pride, and ambition... in sum, with having distorted concepts of ourselves and thinking less of God than we ought.

Yes, this familiar gospel gives us a glimpse of what life pre-Original Sin was like, based on how Our Lady reacted and spoke to the angel from her place of perfect charity for neighbor and pure contemplation of God. But fast-forward some verses and hear her then saying: “...all generations shall call me blessed. For the Almighty hath done great things for me...”! Had she then become prideful? Was she boasting? Was she comparing? No! Now she understood the truth, thanks to angel’s revelation; she had never dared see in herself the fulfillment of ancient prophecy – but once it was made clear, she was compelled to praise God for all that he had done.

By preserving her from the first moment of her conception from even the smallest trace of Original Sin in her soul, as the dogma we celebrate today teaches us, the Lord was pleased to give us in the Blessed Virgin Mary a new “mother of all the living” – a new Eve, one who would nurture us in the ways of supernatural grace, of everlasting life. Our vision is so clouded by the taint of Original Sin that we can hardly understand what it means to see reality like she did. Yet the grace she obtains for us transforms us; her example inspires us; and gradually, we find ourselves making progress on the spectrum of perfect charity – toward becoming “full of grace”.