

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF MARY – Homily 01
(Gen 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 99; Eph 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38)

A Jewish American man sent his son to Israel to study Judaism, but he came home a Christian. The father went to consult the local rabbi who told him that he too had sent his son to Jerusalem and he also came home a Christian. They both decided to pray to God for guidance and in the process of praying heard a voice from heaven that said, “Funny you should say that, I too sent my Son to Israel ...”

On this feast that honors Mary, we celebrate being the Church.

There are two aspects to this feast, a spiritual aspect, and a deeply human aspect.

First, Mary’s total openness to God from the moment she was conceived in her mother’s womb has an otherworldly, mystical aspect. At the same time, through her ancestors, and the sexual union of Joachim and Anne, Mary’s being was deeply rooted in the earth. And in Mary, because of God’s special grace, earth was fully accessible to heaven, that is, to divine life.

Years later, because of her grace-filled bodily being, her sinlessness, she had the courage, the freedom, the willingness and the ability to risk giving the full-hearted “Yes” that allowed Divine Love to wed heaven and earth in her womb.

This special grace given to Mary makes her the first disciple to believe in and follow Jesus. Yet she remains fully one of us, which is why the Second Vatican Council placed the document on Mary within *Gaudium et Spes*, the powerful and central document on the Church. Mary is part of the Church, rather than over and above the Church.

Papal preacher Father Cantalamessa, in his book *Mary, Mirror of the Church*, insists on *the priority of imitation of Mary over devotion to her*. The prime thing that we should imitate is her faith and her abandonment to God. Her faith gave birth to love-inspired action, and endured in hope, even at the cross of Jesus and his suffering. All Marian devotion should further, not replace, the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

Catherine von Dougherty, who founded the Marian Workers of Cumbermere, is a good example of someone who understood and lived this mystery well. A crusty character in life, her teachings on Mary continue to inspire her followers to follow Jesus more closely in a Spirit-filled life-style of gospel simplicity.

Mary is also a woman of the Eucharist. The document *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* points out that the Eastern Anaphoras and the Latin Eucharistic Prayers honour Mary, the ever virgin Mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God. In celebrating the sacrifice of the Lamb, we are united to the heavenly liturgy of which Mary is a part.

So as we celebrate this feast of Mary today, let us also deepen our appreciation of who we are as Church, strive to imitate her, and celebrate being Church.