



# Society of Mary

North West Ward of Our Lady of Victories



## Immaculate Mary

8<sup>th</sup> December 2012

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*'Before the world was made, God chose us in  
Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live  
through love in His presence.'*

*(Ephesians 1.)*

I would like to thank Fr Brooks for inviting me to preach on this joyful Feast. I think it is the first time I have preached a sermon on the subject of the Immaculate Conception, and perhaps Father didn't realise he may be taking a risk in asking me! It is fairly well known that I have Eastern Orthodox leanings, and those ancient churches have often been seen as opposed to this dogma. I say 'been seen as' because perhaps there is much more in common between East and West than there is conflict on this issue. But we have to admit that in general Roman Catholics are seen as 'for' the doctrine, Orthodox 'against', with Anglicans (as usual) somewhere in the middle.

In fact, it is far more complex or nuanced than that. Mediaeval Roman Catholic saints such as St Thomas Aquinas and St Bernard

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<sup>1</sup> Preached at St James, Haydock for the Society of Mary (NW Ward)

(who was a great devotee of our Lady) rejected the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, whilst later Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox appear to have accepted it. I'm sure I don't need to tell you what the dogma promulgated in 1854 states, that 'Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin', nor that we must be careful not to confuse it, as many do, with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth or virginal conception of Jesus, which is of course about our Lord being born into this world without having a human father.

When I say that the Eastern Churches are in general opposed to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, it is rather that they have never pronounced on it, and indeed see no need for it. It is not that there is any doubt about the purity and holiness of our Lady – she is called in Orthodoxy spotless, sanctified, all-holy (Panagia) and even immaculate. What is really at issue is the doctrine of the Fall. In western thought the original sin of Adam and Eve caused them to pass to their descendants – all of humankind – the stain and guilt of that sin. By her immaculate conception Mary is delivered from that guilt. In Eastern thought the consequence of what is more often called the ancestral sin is death – the whole of the human race shares in the punishment for that first sin of disobedience rather than the guilt. We are all separated from God, the source of life, and so have to die, and we are separated from Him who is the source of goodness, and so we have an innate tendency to sin.

In Eastern thought, then, Mary is mortal like the rest of us, and the fact that she is sinless is testimony not to a miraculous preservation from it but to the marvellous effect of God's grace and her co-operation with it throughout her life. There is no need for a doctrine of an Immaculate Conception. And as an aside, there is no need either for a doctrine of limbo for children who die before baptism, because they do not carry the stain of sin. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is less dogmatic on this now than was the case in previous generations.<sup>2</sup>

The Eastern view also avoids separating Mary out from the rest of humankind – in its teaching Orthodoxy also includes St John the Baptist and even St Nicholas the Wonderworker among those who like our Lady were sanctified in the womb.

Pope Paul VI came close to an Orthodox viewpoint when he declared, 'Fallen human nature is deprived of the economy of grace which it formerly enjoyed. It is wounded in its natural powers and subjected to the dominion of death which is transmitted to all men.'<sup>3</sup> Both eastern and western Christians can unite in honouring Mary as the one whom God prepared and sanctified 'to the very depths of her being and to her earliest beginnings, in view of her vocation as the Mother of the Holy One'.<sup>4</sup> These are words from the joint statement

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1261

<sup>3</sup> *Credo of the People of God* 1968

<sup>4</sup> ARCIC 2 report *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* 2005

of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*. We can also rejoice together in Mary's complete faithfulness to and union with God through her Son, by which she was able to remain free from all personal sin.

At the very centre, then, of today's Solemnity, are the issues of sin, death and grace. We, like all generations before us, have been born with a predisposition to fall into sin, and we must never downplay the enormity of sin, because in its essence it is separation from the all-Holy God. We need God's grace; we need to be purified, and so the need for our baptism. The grace with which Mary was filled at her conception, that grace to withstand sin, that grace restoring her to unity with God, becomes ours too when we are baptised. Mary truly becomes the Mother who shows us the way to God, who points us to Jesus. She never lost that state of grace, but we do so often, and therefore we need to return time and again to the sacrament of reconciliation, to confession and penance.

We do not have the excuse that Mary is a different being, a special case, a privileged person. She is indeed, as Wordsworth put it, 'our tainted nature's solitary boast', but that is because of her willing and obedient response to God's grace working in her. We also have been chosen by God, as St Paul tells us – chosen us in Christ, before the world was made, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in His presence – and chosen to present His Son to the people of our

day. In baptism we have been given the grace for that task. But we need to ask for God's grace continually if we are to hold Christ in our hearts.

It is providential that this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception occurs during Advent. In this most beautiful of seasons we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, as we celebrate Christmas, as He enters our hearts day by day, as we look to His coming in glory. It is a marvellous opportunity for us to reflect upon Our Lady's holiness and obedience, her unwavering faith and her devotion to her Son, and for us to draw closer to Jesus through confession, prayer and worship.

And so we pray on this joyful Feast: Mary, holy Mother of God, pray for us your sinful children, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Complete text of Wordsworth verse

‘Mother! whose virgin bosom was uncrossed  
With the least shade of thought to sin allied;  
Woman! above all women glorified,  
Our tainted nature's solitary boast;  
Purer than foam on central ocean tost;  
Brighter than eastern skies on daybreak strewn  
With fancied roses, then the unblemished moon  
Before her wane begins on heaven's blue coast;  
Thy image falls to earth. Yet some, I ween  
Not unforgiven the suppliant knee might bend  
As to a visible Power, in which did bend  
All that was mixed and reconciled in Thee  
Of mother's love with maiden purity  
Of high with low, celestial with terrene!’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> W Wordsworth *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*