

FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

8th December 2015

“And the Lord God ... cast out Adam; and placed before the paradise of pleasure Cherubims, and a flaming sword, turning every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.”

– *Genesis 3:23-24.*



What if we could go back? The health crazes and anti-aging remedies of our times might make us think that a desire to turn back our physical clock was a typical modern obsession, but then we remember the Spanish explorers in search of the Fountain of Youth or the Egyptian pharaohs who were buried with all the food and treasures they thought they would be able to use in the afterlife: this quest is a tale as old as time. *But what if we could go back spiritually?* In this world of ours – which we call a *lacrimarum valle*, “a valley of tears,” not to be pessimistic but because we know we were made for something better – we all experience a certain indescribable nostalgia. This is a Greek word that literally means “homesickness,” and we are not surprised that so many ancient peoples have a myth of a lost Golden Age.

The revealed truths of our faith give concrete form to this general human yearning: the doctrine of original sin teaches us that our first parents Adam and Eve sinned through pride and forfeited for all of us the grace that would otherwise have been the connatural condition of the human race. “For behold I was conceived in iniquities; and in sins did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 50:7). We know that we cannot go back to paradise, but we also know that sin did not have the last word.

For God, whose providence “reacheth from end to end mightily, and ordereth all things sweetly” (Wisdom 8:1), there is no need for a rewind button and there is no such thing as a Plan B. We often wish to “take back” our mistakes, but God does not need to take anything back, since for God there is strictly speaking no remembering, nor for that matter even any foreseeing. God knows all things in one pure act of knowing. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). God allows evil to come only in order that he might use it as an occasion to bring about a greater good. The Incarnation of Christ is not merely a plaster to cover the foreseen wound of Adam, nor is the institution of the Church simply a second best to replace unfaithful Israel. Christ, the Church, the heavenly Jerusalem: God desires all of this from all eternity. When God “created man to his own image” (Genesis 1:27), he was in a very real sense already thinking of Christ, whom St.

Paul calls “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature” (Colossians 1:15).

In that same divine decree by which God has willed to put into effect “the mystery which hath been hidden from eternity in God” (Ephesians 3:9), he has willed not only the Incarnation of Christ but also the privileges of the woman who would bring him into the world. With reason, then, the Church places on Mary’s lips in today’s Epistle the words of divine Wisdom: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made any thing from the beginning. I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived” (Proverbs 8:22-24).

The innocence of paradise, the insouciant joy of humanity’s playground, has been lost. The long centuries have shown man the folly of his choice. Though God promised after the fall that he would send the Woman and her Son who would overcome the Serpent, he did not do so immediately. St. Thomas explains that God wisely waited, if we can put it that way, “on account of the manner of man’s sin, which had come of pride; hence man was to be liberated in such a manner that he might be humbled, and see how he stood in need of a deliverer” (III, Q. 1., art. 5). In explaining this fullness of time, he draws on St. Augustine, who says that the Saviour came in the last age of history when the world was “like the old age of an old man” (*On Genesis against the Manichees*, I, 23). The state of humanity awaiting its Redeemer is thus compared to the decrepitude of old age. This is the backdrop to the Immaculate Conception. We can understand what the French novelist Bernanos meant when he has one of his characters say that Mary has “something that makes her younger than sin, younger than the race from which she sprang” (*Diary of a Country Priest*).

For my part, I can hardly think of words more beautiful to describe the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. Our mother Eve thousands of years long since had returned to the dust, and yet her daughter Mary is “younger than sin”! Born from the loins of Ann and Joachim at the term of age-worn humanity’s senescence, the Lord already possessed her in the beginning of his ways, “before he made any thing from the beginning.” In that first paradise there was a man and a woman. How could anyone believe we could have a second Adam without a second Eve?

At the heart of the Christian faith is our belief that “there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a redemption for all” (I Timothy 2:5). The Immaculate Conception means that Mary, the New Eve, came into this world in the state of grace – that is, free from the original sin that the rest of us inherit. But this does not mean that Mary needed not be redeemed by Christ. No! It means that she was redeemed

all the more perfectly, by being *preserved* from sin whereas we are *purified* from it. The Immaculate Conception is not an exception to the Redemption; it is Redemption's greatest triumph.

Remember: God doesn't need to change his plans or to hit "rewind." Outside of time, God could apply to Mary at the instant of her conception the grace that Christ won on the Cross: from all eternity he loved that Woman whom he was to promise us in the garden when the first sin came to destroy our peace. It was a tragedy that to us may have seemed like the disastrous conclusion to a too-brief golden age but that was in reality merely the first act of the loving plan that God initiated, knowing all in advance, when he drew Adam from the slime of the earth and Eve from his side, looking forward to the consummation of the ages when "he might present to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy, and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27).

Mary Immaculate is the perfect image and anticipation of this glorious Church. Christ is the first fruits of them that died, but as God incarnate, he could never be the first fruits of the redeemed, the creature world restored to friendship with its Creator. It is Mary Immaculate who is the first fruits of the redeemed. In those desolate hours on the cross, as he paid the wages of Adam's sin – and ours – Christ could look with joy at his Mother and see the victory that his cross had already won. "Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in thee" (Canticle 4:7). Even had no one else profited by his blood – which, thank God, we know to be false – Christ could still have said, "it is worth it," when he looked upon his Mother, daughter of Eve and yet younger than sin. There is no extravagance in thinking that the Immaculate Conception was the consolation which enabled Our Lord to endure in peace those moments of desolation. It is the Immaculate Conception which allows Christ to look at the triumph of grace in his Mother, seeing already the fulfilled promise of a redeemed humanity, and to say, as tears of agony mingle with those of joy, "Behold, I make all things new" (Apocalypse 21:5).

