

The Immaculate Conception of Mary

Grace: Pray for the grace to perceive God's initiative in your life and then for the courage to imitate Mary's total fiat to God's initiatives.

Introduction:

Having reflected upon the various types of responses that are possible to the word of God, it is easy to see that sometimes, despite your best efforts, you can miss the mark. Perhaps your ability to discern God's voice may at times not be the best. As you celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, you can discover God acting in the world in an extraordinary but subtle way. Mary's being born free from original sin could easily go unnoticed. Yet, as you draw closer to God it is clear that something significant is beginning to happen. As the Holy Trinity looks at humanity, perhaps this is the gentle breeze that carried the Lord's words to Elijah the prophet. You can begin to see God's imprint on Mary's life as a preface to the Annunciation. God's touch, similar to the touch of the prophet Isaiah, preserves Mary at the moment of her conception so that sin may never touch her. In this contemplation, you are invited to look toward the Blessed Virgin Mary as an example of what it means to be totally responsive to God's will and direction. Mary "with her most excellent innocence, purity, holiness and freedom from every stain of sin"* was able to draw intimately close to Jesus. How might you be called to draw closer to Jesus?



God's wisdom begins to take a definitive shape. Having reflected on the less than perfect contribution you may have made to the world, on the infidelity of your response to God, and on the ways that you may get off track, God begins to respond. One can see hints of God's activity beginning to work at making things better. Despite human failure, God labors to draw near. Mary "was chosen before the ages, prepared for Himself by the Most High, ... free from every stain of sin, and from all corruption of body, soul, and mind; that she was always united with God and joined to Him by an eternal covenant; that she was never in darkness but always in light; and that, therefore, she was entirely a fit habitation for Christ, not because of the state of her body, but because of her original grace."* Similarly, you can now begin to work towards recognizing and acting upon the ways in which God is preparing you to be a carrier of Jesus as you seek to know Him more intimately, to follow Him more closely and to love Him more dearly. Relying on Mary's intimate connection with Jesus, aim to follow her radiant example trusting that with her motherly affection and "under her guidance, under her patronage, under her kindness and protection, nothing is to be feared; nothing is hopeless." *

Often enough you may find that after having been called upon by God to do something difficult or important, you must draw upon things from your past that you may not have valued much or even been aware of until these elements were called forth from you at just the right time. Mary's freedom to respond totally to what was—humanly speaking—an impossible command resulted from God's providential action in her life from the first moment of her existence. Have you ever found yourself capable of doing something that might have seemed impossible because of something in your

* *Ineffabilis Deus* – Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius IX on the Immaculate Conception (December 8, 1854)

background or history that you had not known was there until you needed it? When faced with a challenging situation, to whom do you turn? How have you found that God has in fact prepared you for a response “full of grace” to various calls in your life to “praise, reverence, and serve” God and to help the people God has put in your life?

Look for the subtle signs that previously may have gone unnoticed but are nonetheless real indications of the beginnings of something truly wonderful. Read the Scripture readings and pray with the one that most speaks to your heart and to your own experience. Is the Lord in the gentle breeze? Is God touching and cleansing your unclean lips? How have you perhaps experienced the re-birth of hope as Elizabeth experiences by conceiving a child in her old age? What grace is coming to life inside of you?

1 Kings 19:3-13 Elijah waiting for the Lord –

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Isaiah 6: 1-8 Call of Isaiah –

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD

Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Luke 1:5-25 Announcement of the Birth of John the Baptist –

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

In these or similar words ... Reflecting on the Scripture passage about the Announcement of John the Baptist's birth, what stands out to me is Zechariah's initial doubting of the news from Gabriel. Because his wife was so old, he doubted that she could actually be given a child as the angel said. Imagining myself in the Scripture passage, I imagine having the exact same reaction to the news as Zechariah, one of doubt. This causes me to reflect on other times in my life when I have doubted God's call to me. One of these times was when I was chosen by my teachers in seventh grade to be the class representative. Not only did I feel undeserving and overwhelmed, but I didn't think I was good enough at public speaking and other things to be qualified enough for it. So instead of being honored and proud of the responsibility, I just complained and worried, thinking they had made a bad decision. It is this exact doubting or questioning that Zechariah demonstrates after learning of his call. But in his case, instead of being deprived of the responsibility of parenthood, he was given it anyway, since God had selected right. In this way, I can easily find comfort knowing that whatever God calls me to be in my life (no matter what vocation), it will be right for me. In this, I find that God is saying to me that vocation may not always feel right or even make sense (as in Zechariah's case), but that no matter what my sins are, God trusts me with the vocation anyway. This makes following Mary's perfect model for responding to one's vocation with grace much more plausible, since God has prepared me to respond to his call by forgiving any sins that would stand in the way (like silencing Zechariah's doubts).

Practicing What You Preach ... To better perceive God's initiative in your life, make a commitment to pray the Rosary and pay special attention to Mary and Jesus' openness to the word of God.



O God, what will you do to conquer the fearful hardness of our hearts?
Lord, you must give us new hearts, tender hearts, sensitive hearts,
to replace hearts that are made of marble and of bronze.
--St. Claude La Columbiere, SJ