

**December 8 & 9, 2018**  
**Second Sunday of Advent**

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**Reflection on the Immaculate Conception December 8/9 2018**

“How can this be?” This question that Mary asks the angel is key to who she is. And I think this question is a question she had been asking herself since an early age: How Can This Be?

Today I am going to share with you some ideas about the Immaculate Conception. Sounds boring? Even the phrase Immaculate Conception can put us to sleep. The truth is that the Marian Doctrines are time bombs which have been set by the Holy Spirit to explode in our time.

Strictly speaking the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is that Mary was conceived without Original Sin and was Sinless her whole life. At the Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton I received a Masters in all things Marian. I had to think through to their proper conclusion the Marian Doctrines.

Well, first off, The Immaculate Conception is the only feast in the Church Calendar when Catholics celebrate an Act of Sexual Love: the conception of Mary by her parents, traditionally named Ann and Joachim. How might we imagine this? Perhaps the most unselfish sharing of two people totally in love with each other?

For me the phrase Immaculate Conception is too sterile to express the deeper meaning of this mystery. Immaculate just tells us Mary was sinless. That tells us what she doesn't have, not what she does have. So, let us look for another word for this mystery. I like to call it Exuberance. Mary Immaculata is Mary Exuberant. Ex or Out of, uberant or Overflowing. And this is precisely what the Angel Gabriel saw in Mary when he addressed her Full of Grace. The Greek word for Grace is Charis, or Charity: Love. Mary is She who is Overflowing with Love.

Let's reflect on the “Full of Grace” Experience. We know that Mary said to the Angel Gabriel, “How Can This Be?” when she was told she would conceive without involving a man, but I think the question “How Can This Be,” was a lifelong question Mary kept asking herself: How Can This Be that I am so full of love for everybody? How can this be that in this time and place I feel so hopeful about everything? When I look at others around me, they are not so full of love or as hopeful. How can this be, Gratia Pleina, has made me a freak?

Mary isn't freakish, she's fabulous. As Full of Grace, as Exuberant Human, Mary is in the words of the poet, William Wordsworth, 'Our Tainted Nature's Solitary Boast.' If Jesus is Fully Human and Fully Divine, we can say Mary is a Fully Human being fully Human, she is a Genius at being Human. One of the lessons we can learn from meditating on this Fully Human Human is how she approached the Three Fs. Because these Fs shape every human heart in this fallen world.

The Three Fs I am talking about are Failure, Futility, and Finality. We come up against all three however old we are, but there is usually One F that is more pronounced at a certain age.

In our Twenties and Thirties we usually have more fear of Failure. Can I really succeed at this career, in this marriage, with this house mortgage?

By the time we reach our Forties and Fifties we might have succeeded, maybe we did not fail, but now we fear it has all been Futile. Perhaps futility is the substance of the so-called midlife crisis.

And then in our Sixties, Seventies, Eighties and beyond, the F we face is Finality. Or, the fear of Finality.

Here is how, I think Mary, the Fully Human Human, can help us with the Three Fs. All three of them can be flipped by a fourth F, FAITH!!

Courage is another word for Faith, so I often think of Mary as Mother Courage. Where do I see Mother Courage overcome the fear of failure, futility, and finality?

I see her flip all three at the foot of the cross!

Look at the Pieta. In her we see Mary holding in her arms: Failure, Futility, and Finality. In her arms Pieta holds a failed mission, a futile mission, a dead mission. And, again, she asks : How Can This Be? How?

In primary school we learned the five Ws – What, When, Where, Why, Who – and the one H. "How" was the outlier, the oddball, yet often it's the most helpful question to ask.

You see, if you ask the question why, you find a reason; if you ask the question how, you find a way. In Mary's case, The Way.

So, after a lifetime asking "How can this be that I'm Full of Grace?", the answer comes to her in those last words of Jesus: "Consumatum Est, It is Finished!" That's

the Answer!! What is finished? The World's Redemption! The World's Deliverance! Revealing what? Revealing the Graced Way of Living.

At her darkest hour, the light breaks through. And in the depth of her sorrow, at the foot of the cross, she sees the origin of her joy, how she became Full of Grace, and where Grace is leading her.

You see, the Cross is the Hour of Glory, according to John, who was there with Mary. And the Glory of God is Mary full of Grace! The Glory of God is You Fully Alive, You Full of Grace!

Do you remember the old song about Vincent Van Gogh, "This world was never meant for someone as beautiful as you." For Mary and for us, the new song is "This world was waiting for someone as beautiful as You!, and You!, and You!"

In closing let me say this about stories and religion. Andrew Greeley writes: "Doctrine never exhausts the truth and the beauty of story. Thus if I am asked whether I believe in the Christmas story or the Incarnation, my answer is that they are one and I believe in both. The doctrine of God become human is surely true, though it is an abstract statement of the living truth contained in the story about a stable, about angels, shepherds and kings."

Greeley also observed: "Religion has been passed down through the years by stories people tell around the campfire. Stories about God, stories about love. Practically speaking, your religion is the story you tell about your life."

That's not surprising because if asking the question how, helps you find the way; the way always involves stories.

Think about that! The story you tell about your life is your religion. If you were to put together, as Mary did, a rosary of your life, how would that rosary read? What would be your stories? the joyful, the sorrowful, the glorious?

If to every Joy in your life, you ask, "How Can This Be?"

If to every Sorrow in your life, you ask, "How Can This Be?"

You might conclude, "All of it is Grace" Grace out of which comes, Glorious You!

Every Advent our weary world waits for the beautiful baby Jesus. This Advent also consider: our weary world needs, more than ever, folks as beautiful and graceful as You, all of You, All Saints!

Amen.

