

Feast of the Immaculate Conception

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What do you remember about this feast growing up? I think many of us remember having a day off from school during which we might have done some preparations for Christmas, perhaps with our mothers. What I remember is that this day is two days before my birthday! As I reflect, as perhaps you also do on your birthday, I think about my parents. It certainly was no easy life for our mothers to give birth and discover each day the development of her child from infant to adulthood. This was also the journey of Mary. Today we celebrate her Immaculate Conception and struggle with what that really means. Barbara Reid, OP, admits that growing up she had a “milk-bottle theology,” where our souls are white like a bottle of milk, and we get stains that mar that white soul. Mary was born with a clean slate with no sin that was described in the reading from Genesis where the divine-human relationship was fractured. Barbara also describes Mary in a post-Vatican II church as the first disciple who shares the sense of call of other women in scripture as well as prophets who were called in the ordinariness of life. Today, we celebrate Mary’s “yes” and the yes, we are called to each day, in a particular way as we prepare for Chapter.

In the reading from Ephesians, we are reminded that like Mary we are chosen. We are chosen as vowed women and associates who are called to live the liberating mission of Jesus as we come to understand it anew through the mystery of the Sacred Universe. In Paul’s letter, he also shares that being chosen is a call to live the Gospel and share the

Good News with all people, to live in right relationship with the Church and our earth community.

In 2021, Pope Francis called us, as a Church, to be a synodal church. As I reflected in my opening comments to the Coordinating Council, we can look at some disappointing factors: no mention of the role of women or the inclusion of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters and other hoped for outcomes. Yet, I learned in the recent UISG / USG gathering from some of those attending the synod that there are glimmers of hope. In a recent podcast episode of the Francis Effect, the participants reflected on the synod. They cited Cardinal Cupich of Chicago who believes that the outcome of the synod is about process, not product, culture, not content. As I learned a little over a week ago, the content is not what is important but the container, the process, that is critical. I invite us, in Mary's footsteps, to say yes to the process of synodality as we approach Chapter. Looking at the three elements of communion, participation, and mission, what will this mean for us?

Communion: We enter this process of Chapter preparation as sisters and associates, each of us and all of us committed to IHM mission, beliefs, and values. Can we be committed to work across differences to look to the future with hope? All around us, in our church and our world, we live in a place of polarities. Let us model a different way of being as we come together.

Participation: Whether we committed to be delegates, participants, or prayer partners, let us enter fully into our commitment. While some will not be present physically at the Chapter, I hope they can commit themselves to find ways to connect with sisters and associates who will be delegates and participants.

Mission: How will we live the IHM mission during the coming years? At the Assembly, through the panel and the “Ministry Alive” displays we caught a glimpse of how the IHM mission will continue. The reality of our congregation is changing yet the call to mission is alive. How do we articulate that anew as we enter the days of Chapter?

The essence of Pope Francis’ call for the Synod is to discover new ways of being Church. What is the new way of being the IHM community as we live into the next years? The invitation, like that of the synod, is for us as a community to be attentive to the way we walk together to Chapter. A significant change for us is the proposed new governance plan as we continue to recognize the value of voice and participation. The invitation to a change in culture is how will we evolve, given our demographics and realities, to explore new ways of living the IHM mission. Adapting Fr. Timothy Radcliffe’s words in the opening retreat for the Synod, we believe the Chapter will be fruitful if it leads us to deeper relationships with one another. He continues that the relationships are formed by “being truthful about our doubts and questions with one another, the questions to which we have no clear answers.”

Some may view Mary's yes as that of docility, of giving in to the call from God. Rather can we see the response of Mary was that of fierce determination and, as exemplified in the Magnificat, seeing justice for all. Barbara Reid, OP views Mary as an empowered woman who, in freedom, says yes to God's call. The invitation for us is to say yes with our entire being, now and into the coming years. Mary said yes to a future she did not know: Can we do the same? Together with Mary we rely on the gift of the Holy Spirit as we move into the future.

What would the message of Gabriel be for us today?

Hail Mary, full of grace! God is with you as an IHM community. Do not be afraid as you enter the time of Chapter. The Holy Spirit is with you. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of God will overshadow you. Therefore, the Chapter Direction will be called holy. And behold, religious congregations continue to respond to the cry of our world. Holy is our name. For nothing is impossible for God.

May our response be, "Behold we are the carriers of the word of God. May it be done according to your word."