

## FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

12.8.25 – IHM, Monroe

Genesis 3:9-15, 20/ Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12/

Luke 1:26-38

### GRACE BEFORE US, GRACE WITHIN US, GRACE AHEAD OF US

Perhaps no feast asks more of our theological imagination than the Immaculate Conception. This doctrine is often reduced to a claim about Mary's "purity," as though God were principally interested in moral hygiene. But that was never its heart. At its core, the Immaculate Conception is a feast of **God's initiative**, not Mary's exemption. Mary is "one of us," not separate from or above us. Two questions frame our feast today: God's question to Adam and Eve in the creation narrative—"**Where are you?**"—and Mary's question to God's messenger—"**How can this be?**" These two questions can guide our Advent prayer and illuminate the significance of your renewal of vows on your patronal feast.

#### **Where are you?**

Hebrew has two words for "where"—one (*eyphoh*) refers to physical location, the other (*ayyeh*) expresses an expectation rooted in relationship. God is not asking Adam for coordinates but for **connection**: "*Why are you not where I hoped you would be—near Me?*" One preacher paraphrased God's question: "Why are you where you are?" Why indeed?

We often imagine our search for God as the primary movement: *O God, You are my God; I search for You like dry, weary land without water*. But Genesis 3 is not simply the tale of the origin of sin—It's a story of fear, hiding, and alienation on the human side, and **relentless seeking** on God's

side. From the beginning, God desires communion. Like the woman in Luke's parable who loses a coin and searches every corner with lamp and broom, God looks for us with a tender, painstaking persistence—and rejoices when we are found.

The destiny of the world is communion, not fragmentation. **God seeks before we respond. God desires the world before we offer ourselves to it. God prepares the way before we take a single step.** Your vowed life is never a personal achievement; it's a lifelong response to an already-given grace. In Mary's Immaculate Heart, God has etched the contours of your charism— a heart transparent to God's desire for the world, a heart freed for mission, a heart spacious enough to gather the world into prayer and service.

#### **How can this be?**

This second scriptural question—Mary's question, your question— carries the same honesty as Thomas Merton's prayer: "*My God, I have no idea where I am going... I cannot know for certain where it will end.*" Mary's unburdened Yes does not bypass the question. Her wonder— *How can I entrust my whole life?* is the threshold through which grace enters. Religious life often feels like saying "yes" to impossibility— and discovering the grace that makes a way. We live in a fractured world marked by fear, scarcity, and suspicion— a world struggling to believe in God's cosmic dream of flourishing, peace, reconciliation, compassion, and mercy. Your 180 years of ministry speak of a long, faithful, embodied "yes" to that dream. The Spirit has overshadowed you, too.

As you renew your vows today, you do not stand before God as women who have escaped the world's complexity. You stand as women in whom grace has been working for decades—stretching, clarifying, freeing. Mary's conception is the beginning of God's restoration; your vowed life participates in that same restoration. "Be it done unto me" is not passivity. It's the fullest expression of human freedom. And so it is for you—vows spoken by women whose lives hold both frailty and extraordinary strength. Your hearts have been shaped by grace from the very beginning.

### ***The Heart of the Feast***

Here is where the Letter to the Ephesians gives us the deepest lens for understanding today: **"God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world."** Before Mary was conceived, before *you* were born, before the world had shape—grace was already at work. The Immaculate Conception is not an isolated privilege; It's the **first flowering** of God's universal intention. Mary is not what humanity is *not*; she is what humanity is *for*. She's not the exception to our story; she's its **prototype**—a preview of the communion God desires for every creature, a revelation of what God's grace can do when it meets human freedom.

To say Mary was "full of grace" is to say that God's dream for creation—a world reconciled in Christ, a humanity transparent to love—begins to show itself in her. And through your vowed life, it begins to show itself through you. Ephesians invites you to locate your vows not merely in biography or ministry but in the **eternal intention of God**:

that you, too, were chosen to "live for the praise of God's glory," to reveal, in the particular contours of your charism, what humanity looks like when grace is allowed full access. Renewing your vows today is not returning to a moment in the past. It is stepping once more into a choice God made **before time**, a choice that has been unfolding in you year after year.

I'll close with an excerpt from Denise Levertov's tender poem *Annunciation*:

***Called to a destiny more momentous  
than any in all of Time,  
she did not quail,***

***only asked  
a simple, 'How can this be?'  
and gravely, courteously,  
took to heart the angel's reply,  
the astounding ministry she was  
offered...***

***She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not  
worthy,'***

***Nor, 'I have not the strength.'***

***She did not submit with gritted teeth,  
raging, coerced.***

***Bravest of all humans,  
consent illumined her.***

***The room filled with its light,  
the lily glowed in it,  
and the iridescent wings.***

***Consent,  
courage unparalleled,  
opened her utterly.***

May the renewal of your vows on this patronal feast *open you utterly* again—that your consent to God's "momentous destiny" may deepen your faith, strengthen your courage, and energize your work for justice and peace.

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