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Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

Today the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. We remember that from the first moment of her existence, Mary was without sin. Mary was made holy, and she retained her holiness throughout her life.

I have previously mentioned that Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant, and that there are different names for the Ark besides the Ark of the Covenant. I have mentioned Mary as the living Ark of the New Covenant, and also Mary as the living Ark of the Lord. Another name for the Ark is the Ark of Holiness. The name can be found in the Second Book of Chronicles (35:3) and in some translations of the psalms. Beyond the name, there is no doubt that the Ark of the Old Covenant was holy.

The Ark was holy for three reasons: first, the presence of God dwelt upon it; second, the Ark contained the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, which were holy; third, the Ark was placed in the holiest part of the Temple. The Ark was considered holy, and in fact it was the holiest object in all Israel. No one was allowed to touch the Ark or mishandle it. The Ark communicated to the Israelites the holiness of God Himself.

Mary is the New Ark of Holiness, and she is holy for three reasons as well. First, all the time that she spent in the Lord's presence at their home in Nazareth increased her holiness. Since the Lord Jesus dwelt in the home at Nazareth, there is a way in which the home was a kind of Temple, and Mary dwelt in that home with St. Joseph for many years. After the death of St. Joseph, she alone dwelt with Him at home. If a certain holiness is required to spend time in the Lord's presence here in church, imagine what holiness Mary possessed to be in His presence at home for thirty years or so.

Second, for nine months, Mary carried the Lord in her womb. Just as the old Ark contained the stone tablets, which were sacred, so Mary contained the Word of God within her. However, we also realize that the Lord had consecrated her body and soul from the very beginning, and that as she grew up, she was holy and she had faith. She read the Scriptures and she grew in God's grace and every virtue. So, it was not as if she was unholy before the angel came to her, and then she became holy. She possessed holiness from the beginning, which prepared her to be the Mother of God.

Third, at the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit overshadowed her, and so the Son was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The Lord's Presence rested upon the Ark of the Old Covenant, and sometimes the cloud of the Divine Presence could be seen upon it. Well, the Holy Spirit came upon Mary to rest upon her. Even after the birth of the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit did not just go away, as if to use Mary for a time and then discard her. Before the birth of the Lord Jesus as well, Mary was led by the Holy Spirit. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Mary was preserved from all stain of sin.

Mary was made holy from the very beginning. While we receive the grace of redemption after our birth, the Lord redeemed her by preserving her from inheriting original sin to begin with. The Lord made her holy at that first moment, so that she could learn to live in the Lord's presence for so long a time, and to live in the presence of the source of all holiness. Mary never failed to remain holy her entire life, and at her Assumption into Heaven, she lives in the presence of the All-Holy God.

What does this mean for us? God has given us grace to dwell within our souls. The Lord does not give us sanctifying grace just for a moment. The Lord has given us His grace so that we can be holy throughout our lives. This Solemnity is not just a celebration of the Lord's grace at the beginning of Mary's existence; it is a celebration of the grace which sustained her throughout her life.

We think about how that grace prepared Mary for the incredible task which lay before her when the angel came to announce the Father's plan for her. This plan is something that we might not have wanted to take on. The Lord asks so little of us in comparison, and yet we resist. No doubt that the Lord's grace helped her to say yes to what the Father asked of her. The Lord's grace helped her all along her journey during the Lord's childhood.

Eventually, the Lord Jesus would have to leave home and begin His Public Ministry. The Lord's grace in her gave her the strength to let Him leave and support Him. Eventually His journey would lead to His suffering and death in Jerusalem, and the Lord's grace strengthened her as she watched at the foot of the Cross. Now that grace has blossomed into eternal life.

If we are true to the grace that the Lord has given us in Baptism, we too can find strength in this holiness. This holiness is something that sustains us and gives us strength whenever we need strength. As we approach the altar, we pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us and guide us, so that we will not be afraid to grow in holiness as we imitate Mary, the new Ark of Holiness.