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### Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (Innocence)

This day the Church remembers the Virgin Mary in her Immaculate Conception. This is a day to remember that the Virgin Mary is the New Eve. Mary's role as the New Eve extended from the first moment of her existence, her conception, and continues until the end of the world, and perhaps beyond that, into eternity.

Another way that the Virgin Mary is the New Eve has to do with innocence. Whenever we experience innocence in children, we are taken back to the beginning of mankind, back to a time whenever things were simpler. This is not just fanciful; it has meaning. We should keep in mind the importance of this innocence. Pope St. Pius X, in his encyclical *Quam Singulari*, decided that the age of children to receive First Communion is the age of reason, around 7 or 8 years old (in the United States, this is usually taken as second grade).

In some countries, children were not receiving Communion for the first time until their mid-to-late teenage years. Pope St. Pius X wished that children would receive First Communion at an earlier age, because he wanted children to grow up with the graces of Communion in their souls. He did not want children growing up without the graces and only receiving help in their spiritual lives after they had developed sinful habits. He was very concerned about children losing that initial innocence because of temptations to sin. He recognized the importance of that witness that we find in the innocence of children.

If the innocence of children takes us back to the beginning of humanity, back to Eden before Adam and Eve were corrupted, certainly the Virgin Mary takes us back to the beginning, in an even more eminent way. In her Immaculate Conception, Mary is conceived without original sin. She is conceived with the graces of her Son, which prevent her soul from receiving original sin. It is not only her own innocence and purity that is preserved, but her soul gives us some glimpse of Eden.

To be sure, the Virgin Mary's soul is not exactly like Eve's soul was in the beginning. Eve's soul was created free from all corruption and evil. Eve's soul was created with a kind of primordial grace. The Virgin Mary's soul would have inherited original sin, if God had not intervened. The Virgin Mary's soul is filled not with a kind of primordial grace, but with the grace of her Son. In the Magnificat, Mary rejoices in God *her Savior*. Yet the Virgin Mary's soul gives us some glimpse into Eden, into the place where God dwelt.

In the Gospel, we hear the angel address Mary as “full of grace.” Mary received the fullness of grace at her conception. There was no trace of original sin. This fullness of grace was in preparation for her role as the Mother of God, so that she had the freedom from sin to say yes to her role. In taking on such a monumental task, in becoming the Mother of God’s Only-Begotten Son, she had to trust in God completely. Whenever sin entered the world, so did a certain kind of fear, and a tendency to not trust God. The Virgin Mary, free from sin, trusted God completely. She responded to God’s plan, “I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me as you have said.”

The Virgin Mary was and is the Lord’s handmaid, and the Lord’s pre-eminent disciple. The grace that she received blossomed into eternal life. Not only does the Virgin Mary’s soul, free from original sin, give us a glimpse into Eden, but her soul also gives us a glimpse into Heaven. Her soul gives us a glimpse into what was, but also what will be. Now that the Virgin Mary has been taken into Heaven, she foreshadows what is coming in Heaven.

We think about some words we might use to describe Heaven: peaceful, filled with light, joyful, warm, radiant, happy. These words can also describe the Virgin Mary now. Her soul is filled with peace, filled with joy, filled with supreme happiness. Her soul and even her body are radiant with light. We also know that God will be with us in Heaven, and it is God who is the source of all the light and joy and all good things in her soul and in her body.

We too are looking to find perfect joy and happiness in Heaven. We would like our souls to be joyful, and happy, peaceful even now. We must wait for our bodies to be radiant and light, but we can enjoy some slice of Heaven even during our time on earth. The Lord has promised us that we can enjoy a part of His life, and we can spend eternity with Him in Heaven, but we must obey Him and follow His commands. We must be open to what He wishes to teach us.

This is not easy, but we have someone who will help us. As the Virgin Mary was pure and incorrupt at the first moment of her existence, she can help us to be pure and faithful throughout our lives. We can retain the goodness that the Lord has given us from the beginning of our faith, just as the Mother of God did. We can retain and develop a child-like trust in the Lord, just as the Mother of God did.

As we approach the altar, we ask the Lord to help us keep goodness and purity and faith, and to develop these in a deep way. The Mother of God learned many things throughout her life, without losing these things, and she can help us to develop them too.