

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 4 DECEMBER 2016

This Thursday, 8th December, we celebrate the Solemnity of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception. It's a suitable moment each year to reflect on this great gift and privilege that God gave to our Blessed Mother.

Blessed Pope Pius IX infallibly defined the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of Catholic Faith in the Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of 8th December 1854. After explaining the foundations of the dogma in Scripture and Tradition, in theology and liturgy and previous teachings of the Magisterium, he gives these majestic introductory words to the actual definition:

'By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for the honour of the Holy and undivided Trinity, for the glory and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, for the exaltation of the Catholic Faith, and for the furtherance of the Catholic religion, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority:'

And then come the words of the dogma itself: 'We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.'

And finally he warns of the spiritual dangers if anyone now diverges from the infallible teaching: 'Hence, if anyone shall dare – which God forbid! – to think otherwise than as has been defined by us, let him know and understand that he is condemned by his own judgement; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has separated from the unity of the Church...'

Catholics today sometimes receive the false impression from various sources that we're morally at liberty to accept or reject Church teachings as we please. It's good to be clear that firmly believing all the infallible teachings of faith without exception isn't an optional extra. Accepting everything that God has chosen to reveal to the human race is a very solemn obligation.

Reflecting on the meaning of the dogma, we first go back to what is meant by 'original sin'. If Adam and Eve had remained obedient, by God's plan all human beings would have come into existence 'immaculate' – that is, with the special gift of divine grace already in our souls, as the seed of heavenly life.

The deprivation of this grace in each of us is at the core of 'original sin' that we inherit along with human nature. But – flowing from the divinely foreseen merits of Christ – the unique privilege was given to Mary of never lacking sanctifying grace, never suffering the wound of being out of relationship with the Holy Trinity. Even from her conception, she was redeemed and made holy, so that she would be fitted for her exalted mission.

As immaculate, she is the first and most perfect fruit of Christ's redemption, the perfect realisation of the Church's holiness, and the perfect model of what each of us is meant to become. We can see how Baptism, cleansing each of us from original sin, gives us (in some degree) that grace that Mary received from the very start.

Everything that the Church believes as a teaching of faith is somehow within Scripture or the Apostolic Tradition. The Church can't make up totally new dogmas out of nowhere. True, as

believers, we don't necessarily have to carry out all the theological work ourselves. From the very fact that the Magisterium has defined something as a dogma of faith, we have full confidence that it does in fact have the necessary foundation in Scripture and/or Tradition.

Still, it's interesting for us to look at some of the scriptural basis for this dogma. One important source (though far from our only source) for our knowledge of the Immaculate Conception is the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation: 'Hail, full of grace'. To be 'full of grace', to experience God's grace as completely as possible, suggests that Mary received grace from the very beginning of her existence, and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church's reflection down the centuries increasingly discerned this deep meaning in the angel's words.

Some other translations of Luke's Gospel from the original Greek use a different expression. For example, in the *Jerusalem Bible* that we currently hear at Mass, the angel's words are translated as, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured', which might seem a bit weaker than 'Hail, full of grace'. Really, no translation is perfect. The *New Jerusalem Bible* has a footnote explaining that the literal meaning is more like, 'you who have been and remain filled with the divine favour.' Now, as we come to understand 'divine favour' more deeply, we realise that God's favour isn't simply something external to us: because of God's infinite power, divine favour always transforms us inwardly in some way. So someone who has been and remains 'filled with divine favour', is someone whose whole existence is completely illuminated by God. So the alternative translations, when we look deeply into their meaning, end up pointing to the same thing as the more familiar, 'Hail, full of grace'.

Not everything is based on this single text – there are many other Scripture passages we could speak of, for example from Genesis, the Song of Songs and Revelation, as well as passages from the early Church Fathers. But today we simply reflect how every time we say the 'Hail Mary', (fifty times for example in every Rosary), we shouldn't just race over those words, 'Hail Mary, full of grace'. We should say them with the love and devotion and joy appropriate to proclaiming such a wonderful gift and honour that our Lord has chosen to give to his Mother, to make her the All-Holy one. (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 493)