

FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION - 2005

“He looks like her.”

The Immaculate Conception is one of the most misunderstood doctrines of the Church. People confuse it with the birth of Jesus, as did a Catholic news commentator on television the other night. It has to do with the birth of Mary, the mother of Jesus. From the first moment of her conception, she was free of original sin. She was not tainted by the sin of Adam as was everyone else, with the exception of Jesus, of course. While the concept of the Immaculate Conception is ancient, celebrated as early as the year 750, it was Pius IX who defined it as an official doctrine of the church in 1854.

Like all the teachings we have on Mary, we find that this one actually points to Jesus and helps us understand his mission to the world. It speaks to power of his redemption, as Mary herself had to be redeemed by the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. As she said in her prayer in praise of God, *“He who is mighty has done great things to me.”* Along with the words, *“Hail, full of grace!”* that's about as close as we can get to a scriptural text that supports this teaching about Mary. But, as we said, there is a lot of evidence from the early church that points in this direction. But, I want to suggest that there is even a greater revealer of the privilege that Mary had in being born without original sin. It is not the scriptures or even tradition. It is Jesus himself. He must have looked like his mother in more ways than the shape of his nose or the way he walked.

As a boy, Jesus grew up like any other boy, in a home under his mother's guiding hand and daily influence. To say that Mary was not influenced by original sin is to say, in a positive way, that she was always

free, totally free, to respond to the power of God at work in her heart. Her goodness was not compromised by those things that drive most mothers bugs, like impatience, a short temper, feelings of self pity when pooped out after a long day. Being open to the guiding influence of divine love in her heart, she raised Jesus in the spirit of that love. And in her dealings with her son, she had no personal baggage to pass on to him. She never taught him to look down on the weak and the poor because she didn't. How could she, she was one of them, socially powerless and poor? But she also treated those of different social standing with respect. It was not her way to embarrass anyone, as we see in the story of the wedding feast of Cana. She rescued the poor inept bridegroom for humiliation. That was her way. And that is the way she raised Jesus. When he looked into her eyes, he must have seen gentle goodness, and it had to influence the way he would look at others, like the sinful woman, the outcast leper, or hungry crowd.

From a purely human point of view, the immaculate heart of Mary had a profound influence on the sacred heart of Jesus. Believing in God was as natural to Jesus as playing with the neighbor children because believing in God was natural to Mary. It was in the air that Jesus breathed. She never turned her face from God, and Jesus noticed. She must have conveyed to her son that life was bigger than herself, and that he was part of that something big as well. She pondered things in her heart, and thus prepared Jesus to be curious about things of faith, which he demonstrated when his parents thought he was lost in the temple.

I think you get the idea. What a wonderful feast to have before Christmas. Mary is held up for us as a mother who not only gave birth, but informed, formed and shaped her son into a man of faith and stature by the

way she lived life day in and day out. That is what being free from sin looks like for a mother and a father, as well, for that matter.

And to think that in just a few minutes as we offer the Eucharist and receive Holy Communion, we will be nourished by that same Jesus who learned so much about life from his mother. Yes, we are blessed indeed.