



PASTORAL THEME
I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION





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"I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION"

This year's suggested theme takes the last words that Mary spoke to Bernadette, thus drawing to an end her conversation with the girl who wanted to know who she was, "I am the Immaculate Conception".

In planning this theme, Father Cabes and those with whom he worked did not intend it be a treatise on Marian theology, but rather a unique opportunity for each pilgrim to find that original innocence, beyond their sin. Additionally, the reconciliation aspect is at the heart of the Sanctuary's pastoral work. Yes, in this "wonderful and dramatic" world as Paul VI said, not everything is murky, lost, or rotten. It is possible for us to have hope. This hope is an experience that we constantly renew: an experience of the gift freely given and of the encounter, an experience of the truth that is possible in our lives when we sit in front of the Grotto without fear of being judged but, on the contrary, being welcomed as we are, an experience of Life stronger than anything and which constantly invites us to be reborn.



Mary, the Immaculate, is a woman completely open to the action of God in her. Conceived without sin, she presents no obstacle to the transforming power of Love. She is thus our mother but also our sister on this sometimes-harsh path of humanity, our model in listening to the Word made flesh. Thus, the Immaculate Conception is both a name and a mission: to transmit to the world, without impediment, the love of God for everyone.

We receive this mission in the grace of baptism and you feel that this theme, that will nourish our pilgrimages throughout 2020, has a lot to do with baptismal grace. God offers us salvation, the object of his promise. And God keeps his promises. We experience this in the Church. Pilgrimages are great experiences of the Church. This theme allows us once again to grasp its beauty and its richness. I am sure you will read with interest and will gain from everything that has been prepared for you to help your pilgrims to experience a true spiritual adventure with Mary.

Bishop Olivier Ribadeau Dumas
Rector of the Sanctuary of Lourde

I

Lourdes – the beating heart of Mary

"I am the Immaculate Conception"



IN SUMMARY

Three different perspectives are suggested, along with concrete actions for their implementation:

1 - THE FACE OF MARY, THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

A being, not a goddess, nor an intermediary between God and man. A woman completely open, from start to finish, from her conception until her death. She was conceived without sin, without obstacles to love, Immaculate: otherwise God would have stayed knocking on her door. Love was able to take flesh in her, so as not to remain just an empty word. She conceived the gift of God, her Son, her Only-Begotten, her All. She signs up for this mission: the conception of the Son of God. On 25th March after three weeks of Apparitions and three weeks of silence, she declared to Bernadette, "I AM the Immaculate Conception." That is why the Christian people love to be close to Mary, our beautiful Mother. In our communities, her image is venerated. We invite you to bring your images of her to Lourdes, as a sign of joy and gratitude.

*We bring our images of
Mary to Lourdes.*

2 - THE APPARITION THAT CAME AFTER THE ONE ON 25TH MARCH OCCURRED ON EASTER WEDNESDAY, 7TH APRIL.

Bernadette, after a while, ended up no longer holding in her hands the wax but the flame of the candle. She became the paschal candle, the burning bush, the sign of the burning presence of this Love that wants to fill us completely. Each one of us was chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and immaculate in the presence of God in love. It is Mary's privilege to tell us what we are, and our vocation.

Each of us receives a white pebble and a new name, the secret of our heart in the very heart of God: a name and a mission. We receive this in the grace of our baptism: "You are my beloved child. You are a marvel!" And the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation brings us back to the joy of our new birth in God. We have an instinctive appetite for sin, but Mary gives us an appetite for God, an appetite

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for adoration, for listening to her Word, an appetite for a life wholly given to us.

*I receive a white pebble
on which I write the name
received during a time of
prayer and sharing.*

3 - THE CHURCH IS THIS FAMILY

this maternal place where we are reconciled to God, where we find our brothers and sisters with whom we share the gift of God. An isolated Christian is a Christian in danger! Mary, the Mother, wants us to be together, with Jesus our elder brother.

We also come to realise that an untold crowd of witnesses has gone before us, all of whom have welcomed the light into their lives. These are the saints, and we can choose the one who we feel will help us especially on our path of faith.

We carry to Lourdes many intentions that have been entrusted to us. We come back from Lourdes rich with a new commitment: perhaps water from the Grotto, memories ... We might also have found

the grace of a Christian fraternity, a prayer group, a service, an action. In addition, so that we remain in the grace of Mary's meeting with Bernadette, we might receive the scapular of the **Family of Our Lady of Lourdes**. There is a monthly newsletter for reflection, with others if possible, so that we form small Cenacles, homes of missionary disciples, apostles of a new Pentecost. In Lourdes, we would like to mark the Marian feasts, the month of Mary, and to make the sanctuary and places that are connected with her "**schools of the Immaculate**", always reminding us that Mary leads us to Christ. It is he who gives her to us: "Here is your Mother!" And she keeps us alert: "Do whatever he tells you."

*I choose or I receive the name
of a saint who will support me.*

*We make an act of trust or
consecration to Mary,
the Immaculate Conception.*



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PRAYER OF CONSECRATION TO MARY

St L-M Grignon de Montfort

In the presence of all
the heavenly court
I choose thee this day
for my Mother and Mistress.
I deliver and consecrate
to thee as Thy slave,
my body and soul,
my goods, both interior
and exterior,
and even the value of all my
good actions,
past present and future;
leaving to you the entire
and full right of disposing of me,
and of all that belongs to me,
without exception,
according to Thy good pleasure
to the greatest glory of God,
in time and in eternity.

ACT OF TRUST IN MARY

Family of Our Lady of Lourdes

Blessed be God, our Father
for having created Mary
so beautiful
and for having given her to us
as Mother
at the foot of the Cross of Jesus.
Blessed are You for having called us,
like Bernadette,
to see Mary in Your light
and to drink from the wellspring
of Your Heart.
Mary, you know the misery
and the sin of our lives and the life of
the world.
We want to trust ourselves
to You today,
totally and without reserve.
From you we will be reborn
each day
by the power of the Spirit.
We will live the life of Jesus as little
servants of our brothers.
Teach us, Mary,
to bear the life of the Lord.
Teach us the "yes" of your heart.

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Act of consecration to the Immaculate of St Maximilian Marie Kolbe

Allow me to praise you, O blessed Virgin,
O Immaculate, Queen of heaven and earth,
Refuge of sinners and our most loving Mother,
God has willed to entrust the entire order of mercy to You,
I, an unworthy sinner,
cast myself at Your feet,
humbly imploring You to take me with all that I am and have,
wholly to Yourself as Your possession and property.
Please make of me, of all my powers of soul and body,
of my whole life, death, and eternity, whatever pleases You.
If it pleases You, use all that I am and have without reserve,
wholly to accomplish what has been said of You:
"She will crush your head",
And
"You alone have destroyed all heresies in the whole world."
Let me be a fit instrument
in Your immaculate and most merciful hands
for introducing and increasing Your glory to the maximum
in all the many strayed and indifferent souls,
and thus help extend as far as possible
the blessed Kingdom of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.
For, wherever You enter,
You obtain the grace of conversion and sanctification,
since it is through Your hands that all graces come to us
from the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In a field in the village of San Miguel Los Lotes, Guatemala, a small plant emerges from the earth covered with ash after the eruption of the Fuego Volcano.

Life is stronger than death!



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REFLECTION ON THE THEME

1 - "HAIL MARY ..."

a) The grace of an encounter, in the shadow of the Cross

Here we are at the Grotto, with Bernadette, to encounter Mary. In fact, during the Apparitions, nobody saw Mary, but they wanted to see Bernadette: it was she, the little girl spurned in Lourdes, who was found in the Light. She is the one we wanted to get to know in 2019, for the double anniversary of her birth and death.

In the year 2020, we would like to bring in the mystery of this face that reflected a brightness from the other world. Perhaps firstly, to follow the path that the Lady has shown to her, in answer to the question asked on 18th February, *"Madam, would you be kind enough to put your name in writing?"* "It is not necessary," she replied with a smile, and using the same courteous phrasing used by Bernadette, she sought her commitment in a promise: "Will you do me the honour of coming here for a fortnight?" I cannot give my name in the way that we might give a label, an official document, but I will open my heart to you, and that requires you to open yours ... Do you want to engage in this exchange?

This is a time of familiarisation, a mutual revelation. No advertising material would have the power to make us enter this free exchange, this communion of grace. For it is not a question of taking, but of giving, of giving oneself, knowing that only by doing so will we enter into the grace of existing as a person. The bodies, the minds, the hearts



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of other people so easily become commodities to be exploited.

We are invited to visit, to discover, to trigger this Mystery revealed in confidence at the Encounter. To want to know Mary's name is to be willing to listen to her heartbeat, to be silent enough to make room for the breath that she wants to transmit to us, to come to see little by little where she dwells, to dwell there too, in union with her inclinations, her ways of thinking, to return to our beginnings to be reborn in our turn to a new life, to a shared existence.

Bernadette, from the first moment when she was surprised to see the light in the Grotto, had already been led to put the encounter in context with a sign that was quite normal for her, a sign which should be treated with the respect it deserves: the Sign of the Cross: "In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit". In the Name of a God in three Persons who reveals himself on the Cross, the Cross of suffering, the Cross desired by a Love that gives meaning even to suffering and death. The Cross that reveals the Mystery of God, a relationship of Eternal love, one who would be willing to die for the one he loves.

This is where we will always have someone waiting for us. Bernadette knows this, even at the moment of her death she has the Crucifix attached to her heart: she exists, too, to love. "I will not live for a moment unless I can spend it loving." At the Grotto, Bernadette experienced an ordinary meeting, yet at the same time it was unlike any other: "She looked at me like someone talking to another person." If the expression is taken literally, it implies an infinite respect for the unique mystery with which all human beings are invested, but which they themselves do not understand. Human beings are not objects, or animals guided by their instincts, they are these unique beings with whom God wants to enter into a relationship. One freedom speaks to another freedom, in the breath of the Spirit of Love.

We will probably get a better understanding of this meeting if we include the beginning and the end of the Gospel, the way in which Mary was addressed by the angel Gabriel sent from God (Lk 1, 28), and the way Jesus addressed the women who found the empty tomb, "Greetings" (Mt 28:9). This is the respectful approach of God who addresses the freedom of his creature so that

he can entrust her with a mission: to give birth to Christ, to give birth to the Church, to give birth to the new world. Women are thus called to enter into the very thoughts of God, to create life.

b) "Who are you, Immaculate Conception?"

Mary is none other than the perfect solution finally given to God's desire, and by her offering she is united with the joy of eternal Love. In this humble woman of Nazareth, the Father recognises the being who trusts him; with no reserve, the Son is given over as a small embryo in the womb of his mother, like the child totally dependent on the good will of his parents. She is thus the Temple, the icon, "the Bride" of the Holy Spirit, to use images loved by the Second Vatican Council, by Popes and by saints.¹

"Who are you, Immaculate Conception? This was the question that Father Kolbe posed during his pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1930. It was still the subject of his medi-

tation on the day of his arrest on 17th February 1941, while he was being taken to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. He then relived the wonder of the angel Gabriel, contemplating in this little unknown house in Nazareth the mystery adored in heaven: the birth of the Only-begotten Son. In her body, a woman carries the life of God who gives himself. She is the perfect echo of God's eternal "Yes", which from then on resonates throughout the history of the world.

The Spirit of trust and love was driven out of paradise by the sin of man, and earth became



¹ - Mary is named by the Council as "Mother of the Son of God, and therefore beloved daughter of the Father and Temple of the Holy Spirit". Her quality as wife of the Holy Spirit should not be placed on the same level as her mission of Mother of Jesus but it is an image loved by Francis of Assisi in his Marian antiphon, by Father Kolbe, used by Paul VI in his Exhortation *Mariæ Cultus* 26 and by John-Paul II in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* 26.

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a hell; the Spirit then approached some privileged people, patriarchs, prophets or kings, who welcomed it, but also proved to be unfaithful; now the Spirit lives among us: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you", for you are the tabernacle, the tent where the gift of God comes to dwell.

God reveals himself by making himself human. He recognises himself in his created being, who is totally open to and reflecting of his Love. And Mary, who does not take pleasure in this incredible beauty she possesses, lets the God who humbles himself, sing through her: she is his humble servant, they are alike. And she is invited in her turn to cast her gaze on a humble girl from a small village in the Pyrenees, a contemporary Nazareth, this Bernadette who looks like her. She will recognise and awaken in her the same openness, the same availability to her mission, which is to give birth to Christ in souls.

Pilgrimages are thus invited to bring about the communion of people around Mary and Bernadette: to illuminate the faces of our brothers and sisters, the face of the world, the face of God. It would be lovely for each group to bring to Lourdes

an image of Mary venerated in their diocese, or in their country. It could be carried with the banners during the Torchlight procession indicating the presence on our paths of this Mother who brings the life of God to birth in us. We show her all our affection, guided by the Lord himself, when we say, "Hail, Mary ..."

2 - "YOUNGER THAN SIN"

a) God gives himself as a little child

On 25th March 1858, Bernadette finally knew that the Lady of the Grotto, Aquero, is none other than Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The name she gave herself, however, may surprise us. It evokes the dogma defined by Pope Pius IX four years previously on 8th December 1854: Mary was conceived without original sin. But in Lourdes, it was no longer simply about recalling a quality already recognised in the prayer of the miraculous Medal: "O Mary conceived without sin, ..." It was Mary saying who she is, revealing the secret from her heart. She joined her hands and looked up to heaven, saying, "I am the Immaculate Conception." We might think that she meant she was absolute Purity, but conception is not a quality, it is an action. The 25th

March, nine months before Christmas, marks the conception of Jesus. Mary's whole being is thus connected to her mission, of conceiving for the world a little being, barely formed in her womb, the Son of God: she has no existence other than this maternity, shown here in its very root, the conception of the child. If she was conceived without sin, it is not so that we stop and admire her, it is rather so that we can follow the example of her "yes", her acceptance of the gift of God. "I AM," she tells us, completely caught up in this madness of love that leads God to give himself to us as a little child.

Father Kolbe attempted to explain this further: In God, the Father is the one who conceives, the Son is the one who is conceived, the Spirit is the conception, the shared love of the Father and the Son.² And God wants to offer the earth this love: for that reason, he has lovingly created the heart of his being to receive his Spirit without reserve. If she had not said yes, he would not have been able to force the door open, he would have remained knocking. But he knew how to find this humble woman of Nazareth, totally unhindered by any notion of

self, by any claim to an autonomous existence: she is full of grace, filled with the Holy Spirit; she shines very brightly.

b) The success of God

For God, nothing is ever lost. Sin does not have the last word in history. We are rooted in a Love which bears us always, and which sin has failed to erase from the depths of our hearts. In the hollow of our history, under all the layers of violence and mud, more true than all our defilements, there is this song of spring rising from Mary's heart, there is this "yes", this "Fiat" which is said in the light, and frees us from the night of nothingness.

When the Lord wanted to create the world, he knew that he could simply say, "Fiat Lux," "Let there be light," because he already knew what his creation would answer: "Fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum", "Let it be done to me according to your Word ". He hears the heartbeat of those who allow his creative Word to take flesh in them. Existence is not imposed on us. It is up to each one of us to let this Marian part of our being rise in us, to dare to say

2 - Maximilien Kolbe, *Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit*, texts translated by J.-F. Villepelée, Paris, 1974, p. 47-51.

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“yes”. “Blessed are you, Lord, for having created me” was the prayer of Saint Claire, and it is ours, too, when we free ourselves from our pride or our fears, and we open ourselves to Life.

The “Fiat”, the “Yes” of Mary is the “yes” of a freedom that brings us back to the origins of Grace. Eve let the Serpent instil suspicion in her, whereas Mary saw the trust of Him who would give His life in his fidelity to the Father. Mary lives by obedience to Jesus. In our earthly chronology, she existed before Jesus her Child, but in the heart of God, she was always the first disciple of the Word, “Daughter of her Son”.³

From her own experience, little Therese of the Child Jesus can also help us understand Mary’s dependence on her Son, possibly better than great theologians. She was aware that, without the action of God who preserves her, she would be the greatest sinner: “I recognise that without Him, I could have fallen as low as Mary Magdalen [...] but I also know that Jesus has given me more than he gave to Mary Magdalen, since he gave it to me in advance, preventing me from falling. (Manus-



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cript A, 38 v.) Holiness is the fruit of an ever-present Mercy, it is not a quality of which a person can boast.

Mary, being conceived without original sin, seemed to theologians to be an exception to universal redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ. She would not have needed to be redeemed. But she is most perfectly redeemed, not in retrospect, as if God could only

3 - Dante Alighieri, cited by John-Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* 10.

4 - Paul Claudel, *La Vierge à midi*, *Œuvre poétique*, Poèmes de guerre 1914-1915, La Pléiade, Gallimard, 1957.

repair what he had created once it was damaged, but from the beginning, she is "the Woman in Grace finally restored, ... the being that emanates from God in the dawning of her original splendour."⁴

"Duns Scotus⁵, to enable our understanding of this retention of original sin, developed an argument which would subsequently be adopted also by Pope Pius IX in 1854, when he solemnly defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. And this argument is that of "Preventive Redemption", according to which the Immaculate Conception represents the masterpiece of the Christ's Redemption, because by the power of his love and his mediation, he enabled his Mother to be preserved from original sin. Mary is therefore totally redeemed by Christ, even before her conception ... "⁶

c) A hidden source, a new hope

It was neither the magisterium of the Church nor theologians who came up with this doctrine. "Theologians of great value such as Duns Scot, with regard to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception have,



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with the contribution of their unique ideas, enriched what the People of God already spontaneously believed about the Blessed Virgin, and manifested in acts of piety, in artistic expressions and, in general, in Christian experience. Thus, faith in both the Immaculate Conception and the Corporal Assumption of the Virgin was already present among the People of God, while theology had not yet found the key to interpreting it in the totality of the doctrine of faith. The People of God thus precede theologians, thanks to the supernatural "sensus fidei", that is to say, the capacity bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit, which makes it possible to embrace the reality of the faith, with our humble hearts and minds.

5 - This Franciscan theologian of the XVIII century was officially recognised as "Blessed" by John Paul II in 1993. His Marian doctrine, centred on the power of Christ's redemption, marked out his religious family, who honour their patron and their queen in the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

6 - Benedict XVI, General audience of 7th July 2010

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In this sense, the People of God is a “magisterium which precedes”, and which must then be deepened and intellectually supported by theology. May theologians constantly listen to this source of faith and retain the humility and simplicity of the little ones!”⁷

The people would not have been able intellectually to develop the doctrine of original sin: what they saw was the certainty of a maternal presence, the tenderness of a love, from which true life springs, not stained or condemned, but pure and beautiful for always and forever. This is what faith teaches us: faith, that is, **the original confidence** that draws us from nothingness, and makes us open to do God’s work.

Mary conceived without sin lacks nothing; she is not less human than sinners. On the contrary, she is the being who does not flee from the hands of God, but who remains obedient to grace. She is always ready to listen, and therefore free from the prisons of selfishness, pride, or fear. Empty of all the clutter of an ego, concentrated on itself, she absorbs the love offered, and is able to carry

it to the world.

Mary, an exception in our humanity? Statistically, but the truth cannot be found in statistics. Mary is true humanity and she testifies at the heart of our history that God is always accessible. And in Lourdes, with Bernadette, she draws us to him. She allows us to discover who we are in the heart of God. It is true that we exist through the look that shows we are alive. I do not give myself life, I receive it and transmit it, I live through and in an exchange of love.

It is therefore we who are the exception, we who feel this complicity with evil, fear, suspicion, and who try to escape into artificial paradises. But in Jesus Christ, his firstborn Son, God enables us to be born again as his children. “He chose us, in Christ, before the foundation of the world, to be holy, immaculate before him, in love.” (Eph. 1:4) He brings us to rebirth in his Church family: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any

7 - Benoît XVI, Audience générale du 7 juillet 2010.

other blemish, but holy and blameless." (Eph. 5:25-27)⁸

Let us then take on the trustful humility of Mary, and the simplicity of Bernadette who thwarts the traps that were set for her. Let us welcome this child whom God gives us, "younger than sin, younger than the race from which she springs, and although Mother by grace, Mother of graces, the youngest of the human race".⁹

"She had blue eyes," the colour of birth. This is how Bernadette concluded her narrative of the Apparitions¹⁰.

3 - "HERE IS YOUR MOTHER"

a) *A new name, a new birth*

All privilege in God is made to be shared. Mary does not come to be admired by Bernadette, she gives her a mission, that of offering a sinful world this proclamation: "I AM

the Immaculate Conception." Bernadette does not just repeat this statement, she appropriates it and makes it her own. Thus "the priests" to whom she is sent will know that in their turn they must "build a chapel", God's dwelling among men, but beyond already known paths, as in the desert. Something new is about to be born, people are summoned to a virgin land to receive the grace of a new creation.

The Pharisee Nicodemus will ask Jesus the same question that Mary had asked the angel Gabriel when he told her that she would be the mother of the Messiah: "How can this be?" (John 3) Can a man who has grown old again enter his mother's womb to be reborn? This is exactly what it is about. Our birth on earth opens up a space that gives us the memory and taste of another world. We are made for the happiness of another world, not to escape from the one we inhabit,

8 - I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God's people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence. We might call them "the middle class of holiness". (Pope Francis, Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* § 7). Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church (§ 9). We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves (§ 14). Do not be afraid to set your sights higher, to allow yourself to be loved and liberated by God. Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace. For in the words of León Bloy, when all is said and done, "the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint" (§ 34).

9 - G. Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, in *OEuvres romanesques*, La Pléiade, 1961, p.1194.

10 - R. Laurentin, *The Life of Bernadette*, DDB, 1978, p.187.

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but to awaken in us an openness to grace. "Master, where do you live?" two of John the Baptist's disciples ask Jesus: they discover the beloved Son who lives in the bosom of his Father (John 1: 38-39).

We have in Mary the model of the chapel to be built, the house in Nazareth and the Cenacle, the house inhabited by prayer and open to the gift of the Spirit. The Cachot in the Rue des Petits-Fosses can show us the way. Prayer and family love, that was Bernadette's food every day. Love of God and service of the poor would be her vocation among the Sisters of Charity in Nevers. Burning with a flame sprung from the tomb on Easter morning, Bernadette would reflect the smile, the light of Mary's gaze and heart. She carried out her mission, not as a postman who is ignorant of the content of the message, but in the same way as the first witnesses of the Good News, who were themselves transfigured by it.

Bernadette, coming out of her ecstasy, could not explain the meaning

of the lady's statement, but she welcomed it as a seed in her heart: "I AM the Immaculate Conception". Mary was thus the first to be admitted to the family of God. Not by nature, but by grace, by the work of the Holy Spirit in her, she participated in the birth of the Son of God. Bernadette would also take on this mission. We mentioned this in 2019 when we saw her teaching the Charity of God to one of the young girls who entered the convent in Nevers but did not feel able to look at the repulsive wound of a sick sister.¹¹

"I AM the Immaculate Conception." I let myself be burned by the flame of the candle, and I become the burning bush: I am nothing by myself but a poor thorny plant, but a manifestation of love enlightens me from within and spreads through me.¹²

No, Bernadette, you are not "good for nothing", you are a marvel, and you will bring to birth in your fellow pilgrims, the desire to find the forgotten source of their conception in the very heart of God, the source of their vocation as children of God.

11 - "One day Bernadette asked me to walk with Mother Anne-Marie Lescure, who was blind. She said to me: -Take care of her as if she was God Himself I answered:- Ah, but there's a difference. I asked her why this sister was not wearing her habit. She said to me:- You'll see this evening. So, I went back, and I saw the sister's wound crawling with worms which Bernadette was collecting in a dish. I couldn't bear to look. Bernadette said to me:- What kind of Sister of Charity will you be! You have little faith!" (Testimony of Sister Julie Garros, in R. Laurentin, *The Life of Bernadette*, DDB, 1978, p. 185)

12 - This is the meaning of the miracle of the candle, on Easter Wednesday, 7th April 1858.

b) The name and mission of the Church

The name of Mary is the mission of the Church, not simply one of its many activities, but a mission that defines it, which gives it its name. She welcomes in, she bears, she gives birth to the Only-begotten Son, the perfect expression of the Father's Love. "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it." (Ap 2:17) It would be lovely if, during your pilgrimage, each participant could receive a white stone on which they could write the mission entrusted to them, a unique mission that they engage with fully and for always. I think of this sister who, on the day she took on her habit, received the name of "shared joy": without being aware of it, she radiated in a whole host of circumstances a joy on which others could feed.

"I AM the Immaculate Conception." The Lord is not possessive of his privileges, he gives up everything for us, even the life of his Son, his only

one, the one he cherishes (Gen 22: 2). Unlike Abraham who retrieved his son, Isaac, and was exempt from the sacrifice, the Father follows his offering to its conclusion, and Mary, the Mother, plays a part in it. We are then shown that this Love can cross the abyss of rejection, suffering and death, finally to bring about a "yes" from the being who recognises it: God shows that he can turn sinners into pilgrims reconciled to the life he gives us.

Let us enter this dialogue that gives birth to the Church in the garden of the empty tomb. The woman was still crying. She hears someone calling her, "Mary!" and she recognises the speaker: "Rabbouni!" (John 20:16) Jesus, in a way, "immaculises" the Magdalene, giving her the name of the one who no longer has a name, since in the Gospel of John she is simply called "the Mother of God". The nameless one of the 4th Gospel exists only through the grace that fills her, and the mission entrusted to her: she is open to God's grace, and she radiates it with the same magnitude at which it is given to her, that is, totally. Mary Magdalen, given the title "Apostle of the Apostles", is also part of the Church's mission, she

I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

"exists to evangelise¹³". Finally, the humble fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee are transformed completely into "fishermen of men". They will carry Christ as a mother carries her child. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you," cries St. Paul in his Letter to the Galatians, just after confessing the Mystery: "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born from a woman... that we might receive the adoption as sons." (Ga 4, 4:19). The Church must regain her name and mission, she must constantly resist the temptation to be her own reference, to set herself up as independent to become a system of thought, a humanitarian organisation, one religion among others: she is the place of a shared life, the very life of God who ignites it. Her only security is in her God who says again, "I called you by your name, you are mine" (Is. 43:1), "I have engraved your name on the palm of my hand" (Is. 49:6), "You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord shall name" (Is. 62:2). "Then you shall say in your heart, "Who bore these for me, since I have lost my child-



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ren and am barren, a captive and a wanderer? And who has brought these up? I was left alone; from where did these come?" (Is. 49:21)

Before this great mystery of the free choice of God, of the salvation offered and the mission entrusted to us, you will then be able to cry out with gratitude to the One who loves you: "You, Lord, are our Father,

13 - Paul VI, Exhortation apostolique Evangelii Nuntiandi (8 décembre 1975), § 14.

our Redeemer from of old is your name" (Is. 63:16). You understand that if you are adopted, favoured, chosen, it is so that all might understand that they, too, are wanted, loved, chosen through you; if you have been able to be led by the Lord despite your offences and your prostitution, as the Holy History of the Jewish people and the first Church testify, there must be room for the sick and the sinners, the prostitutes, the publicans, in the Kingdom of heaven.

Thus, we see the Church, our Mother, in the image of Mary, participating in the birth of the children of God. The Church is not an association that we create, she is a family that welcomes and supports us. Mary, her model, is also her mother, in the sense that the Church lives by the faith of her immaculate heart, totally open to the gift of God. Mary adds nothing to the work of salvation, yet she contributes in welcoming it in a perfect way, allowing nothing of it to be lost, while left on our own we flee, and we leave Jesus alone. But "the Mother of Jesus was there," at Cana and at the foot of the Cross, at the "beginning of the signs," and when Jesus finally says, "All is accomplished."



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I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

c) Children of Mary, missionaries of the Gospel

In Lourdes, with Bernadette, we can take Mary **"unto our own"**, to experience more fully the grace of our baptism, to let us be reborn through this accepting heart that carried Jesus: thus, Bernadette was received as a Child of Mary on 8th September 1858. We can we, too, enter the Family of Our Lady of Lourdes, and come to know the joy of the Apparitions. We then receive the blue scapular of Mary and Bernadette: with them, we are "clothed with Christ" (Gal 3:27).

With our white stone, blue scapular, we become other Christs in the heart of Mary, missionary-disciples of the Spirit of life, at the service of a society of Love. Such is the Mission of the Immaculate: Mary Immaculate, the one who is "full of grace", is the way through whom Jesus, who in her, assumed our humanity, still comes today, into the heart of every person. As a result, she is also the path by which everyone comes to her son and, through him, to the Father. Saint Maximilian-Marie Kolbe guides us on the path already followed by Saint Louis-Marie Grignion

de Montfort: "If then we are establishing sound devotion to our Blessed Lady, it is only in order to establish devotion to our Lord more perfectly, by providing a smooth but certain way of reaching Jesus Christ. If devotion to our Lady distracted us from our Lord, we would have to reject it as an illusion of the devil. But this is far from being the case. As I have already shown and will show again later on, this devotion is necessary, simply and solely because it is a way of reaching Jesus perfectly, loving him tenderly, and serving him faithfully." (Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin n ° 62)

We would have to go back to Chapter VIII of the conciliar Constitution on the Church, to rediscover that by ourselves, we seek Jesus by following the meanderings of our reasoning, our inadequate feelings, very quickly diverted from the good intentions or good resolutions that we make. Only Mary, by her pure faith, leads us on a direct path to the heart of God. Therefore, "the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men... in no way does it impede, but rather does it foster the immediate union of the faithful with Christ¹⁴." Thus, Mary is a

14 - Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 60.

mediator, a “maternal mediation¹⁵”, like a matrix who shapes us and brings us to birth in the image of our elder brother. And this is where Marian prayer takes root, it brings us to the Magnificat of Mary, to the foot of Calvary, to the paths of the Church, among people of all times, all places, in the breath of the Spirit of Jesus given on the Cross for a new Pentecost. Bernadette recognised him in front of the Grotto of Massabielle. So, we now need to welcome him as

well, and to enter into the grace of the gift that is given to us.

“The future of Lourdes is the Immaculate Conception,” said Father Duboe, one of the first chaplains, at the time of the inauguration of worship at the Grotto in 1866. We might also add, from 2008: “The future of humanity is the Immaculate Conception,” it is the joy of birth and a new beginning¹⁶.

Father André Cabes



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15 - This is the title of the third part of the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*.

16 - Father Régis-Marie de La Teyssonnière, citing Paul Duboe summarises his comments by saying, “Lourdes is [for] sinners”, that is, for everyone. See the Lourdes Conference 2005, p. 151, and the 2008 Conference in which Father Brito concluded, p.44: “In all human beings, however disfigured they might be by their sin, the mark of God is always present. This is why no one should have reason to despair, of themselves or of their fellow man. Thus, in the person of Mary, a great hope opens up for the whole world.”



Some pastoral thoughts on the theme for 2020

**At the heart of Lourdes' message:
"I am the Immaculate Conception"**

SOME PASTORAL APPROACHES FOR PILGRIMAGE DIRECTORS AND ANYONE SERVING IN THE SANCTUARY.

Dear Friends, this year, the sanctuary of Lourdes is suggesting as a pastoral theme, the words that the Lady of Massabielle spoke to Bernadette Soubirous during the 16th Apparition on 25th March 1858, "I am the Immaculate Conception".

What is the purpose of a pastoral theme?

There are several possible responses to this; here are just three:

1. To know about, to delve deeper into and to own Bernadette's experience. We call this experience the "Message of Lourdes" or the "Grace of Lourdes" or even "The Grace specific to the Sanctuary".
2. From the account of the Apparitions, which is a personal account, we are invited to find links with the great accounts of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the teaching of the Church.
3. A theme of the year also aims to be a pastoral tool for all those who are responsible for leading a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

A small team of chaplains (Father Horacio Brito (Missionary of the Immaculate Conception), Father Krzysztof Zielenda (Oblate of Mary Immaculate), Father Alexius Igbozurike (Oblate of Mary Immaculate) and Father Maxime Kouassi, Eudist) who serve at the Sanctuary of Lourdes , and at the request of the Rector, is happy to be able to share their reflections with you; reflections which, we hope, will be a tool to help you serve your pilgrims.



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PRELIMINARIES

THE DOGMA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION DEFINED BY POPE PIUS IX (1854).

In 1858, Bernadette did not have the faintest idea about the catechism. The name of the Lady certainly did not mean anything to her. However, for most Christians the words "I am the Immaculate Conception" refer to the dogma defined by Pope Pius IX in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, of 8th December 1854.

"We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful."

If the definition of the dogma is relatively recent, devotion to the Immaculate Conception is much older. A long controversy delayed the definition of the dogma. Some theo-

logians argued that, since original sin affected humanity in its entirety, there could be no exceptions. Consequently, the Virgin Mary would also have been stained by original sin, then immediately purified in the womb of her mother; thus, she would have been born immaculate.

In the 13th century, following Saint Anselm and the Franciscan school, Jean Duns Scot said simply that God has two ways of showing mercy:

The first is curative, the second is preventative.

To all of humanity, Mary being the exception to this common rule, God shows a curative mercy. Thus, God responds to original sin with his curative mercy in the sacrament of baptism. And God responds to daily sin with the sacrament of reconciliation, which has been and always will be the expression of his curative mercy.

But God can also show preventative mercy. In this case, it is no longer a question of washing away sin, but of being preserved from it. God can therefore preserve Mary from

the moment of her conception, having mercy on her before she is conceived.

Preserved from all sin from her conception, not only was the Virgin Mary not exempt from universal Redemption by the Cross of her Son Jesus Christ, but also, she was its most perfect beneficiary.

In Mary, Salvation appeared immediately in its fullness. Mary is the

most perfect fruit of the cross of Christ.

“Like all dogmas, that of the Immaculate Conception is a joy and a blessing for the Church, since a dogma reveals truths contained in or linked to divine Revelation” (Father Régis-Marie de la Teyssonnière, Lourdes, les Mots de Marie, p.228-230)



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ACCOUNT OF THE 16th APPARITION, THURSDAY 25th MARCH 1858

It had been 21 days since Bernadette had seen the Lady. But then, in the middle of the night, on 25th March 1858, Bernadette woke up and exclaimed in her hoarse voice which echoed in the cachot: I must go to the Grotto. So, before 5 am, Bernadette was already at the meeting place, this time, accompanied by the youngest of her aunts, Lucille Castérot. As soon as the first decade of the rosary had been said, the Lady joined her. At the end of the prayer, as usual, the Lady signalled that Bernadette should enter the Grotto. It was in this same place that, on 18th February, the Lady had responded with nothing more than a smile to Bernadette's request to say her name. But today, Bernadette felt particularly brave. So, she dared to ask the lady, *"Would you be so kind as to tell me your name?"* The Lady smiled again. Bernadette addressed her a second time and the Lady smiled again.

Finally, at Bernadette's fourth request, the Lady transferred her rosary to her right arm, unclasped her hands and extended them towards the ground. Then, in the same movement, she joined her hands at chest height, raised her eyes to

heaven and said, *"Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou"*. It was an immense joy for Bernadette to finally know the Lady's name! Above all, she thought it would please Monsieur le Curé. Following the request for the construction of a chapel and immediately aware of the costs that this could generate, Father Peyramale had demanded to know the identity of the person who was visiting Bernadette.

Before going to the Curé, Bernadette left her candle on the ground in the Grotto, to express her joy, her thanksgiving, her thank you. On the way back, she never stopped repeating in a low voice these demanding, incomprehensible words: *"Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou ... Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou ... Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou ..."* Ursula Nicolau approached her and asked, *"Do you know something?"* Bernadette laughed. She beamed with happiness and replied, *"Do not tell anyone, she said to me: Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou"*. Ursula stood frozen to the spot and began to cry.

Bernadette arrived at the presbytery, went in without knocking and

immediately shouted to Monsieur le Curé, who was standing in front of her, "*Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou*". Faced with his bewilderment, Bernadette continued:

"The Lady told me: Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou". "A lady cannot be called like that", Monsieur le Curé replied immediately and he added, "You are mistaken, you do not know what that means!" Bernadette did not answer. But the Curé added, "How can you say things that you don't understand?!" "I repeated them all the way back," said Bernadette. This was too much. Monsieur le Curé could no longer contain himself. He was ready to cry. He was so moved by such innocence and such great grace in Bernadette's words that he had to work hard to contain his emotion. So, he dismissed the girl bluntly, "Go home! I'll see you another day!" The priest fell on his knees and began to cry.

Bernadette left the presbytery and went to her confessor, Father Bernard-Marie Pomian. It was to him that, two days after the event, she had recounted her first meeting with the Lady, which took place towards midday on 11th February. Now she could give him the lady's

name. Since she had repeated this difficult name over and over, no one attributed any mysterious meaning to it. Neither Monsieur le Curé nor Father Pomian told her who the Lady called by that name was. Bernadette herself did not ask them anything because it did not worry her very much. Indeed, it was not the name of the Lady that interested Bernadette but being with her. For Bernadette, this name did not refer to a dogma, but to a person whom she loved and with whom she felt loved.

(Father Horacio Brito, Novena to Notre-Dame de Lourdes, NDL Edition 2008, p. 45-46).



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WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS ACCOUNT?

A gesture and a word

Bernadette received two special charisms, two graces linked to her experience at the Grotto of Lourdes, and therefore to the mission of transmitting the Message.

The first of these graces is that of "making the sign of the cross well". For that, she just had to look at the Lady and do as she did.

The sign of the cross made by Bernadette went straight to people's hearts and made her testimony credible. It was in itself like a silent catechesis.

"I do not know if we make the sign of the cross in heaven, but if we do, surely we do it like Bernadette", testified Jean-Baptiste Estrade, the tax collector.

A sister of Nevers, a contemporary of Bernadette, testified, *"Her way of making the sign of the Cross touched me deeply."*

The second grace, the second charism, that Bernadette received was that of saying the name of the Lady: *"I am the Immaculate Conception."*

Anyone who saw her and heard her convey the gesture and the name of the Lady was deeply moved.

The bishop of Tarbes, Mgr. Laurence, experienced this himself. After seeing and hearing Bernadette say the words, *"I am the Immaculate Conception"*, the Bishop, with tears in his eyes said to his neighbour, *"Did you see this child ?!"*

On 8th July 1866, in Nevers, when Bernadette, who had arrived the day before from Lourdes, testified to the Apparitions before her religious sisters, they were all deeply moved when she revealed the name of the Lady.

During the beatification process, among the sisters who testified were many who had also been present on 8th July 1866. When the name of the Lady was mentioned, which was a distant memory for them, all of them began to cry, as they relived what they had experienced decades before.

There were many other testimonies, not forgetting, of course, that of the parish priest of Lourdes, Father Peyramale who, when he heard the Lady's name from Bernadette's own lips, fell to his knees and began to cry.

While the words that were spoken to Bernadette at the Grotto of Lourdes allude obviously to the

dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the words were themselves accompanied by a gesture.

As we have heard, at Bernadette's fourth request, the Lady's smiling face became serious. She unclasped her hands and extended her arms towards the ground. With the same movement, she joined her hands at chest height, raised her eyes to heaven, while saying, "*Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou, I am the Immaculate Conception*".

In the way that the gesture is described, we understand that Mary extended her hands and arms in a broad, wide gesture, that was also easy to make since it was very natural. This was the gesture that we perform as a sign of welcome. But it can also be a gesture that reminds us all of our crucifixes: Christ on the Cross has his arms outstretched and his hands, cruelly nailed down, are extended forever.

When Mary looked up to heaven, she turned to the Father as the one who is the source of all perfect gifts. The last element is movement. The gesture that Mary made when she said, "*I am the Immaculate Conception*" was an energetic gesture and of a certain fullness. Because of its energy, this gesture can therefore suggest a transition, like the sign of the

Cross which represents the Paschal mystery." (Father Régis-Marie de la Teyssonniere, "Lourdes, les mots de Marie ", CLD éditions. 2008).

The fact that the graces received by Bernadette were linked firstly to the sign of the Cross, and secondly to the "sign of the Immaculate Conception" only serves to highlight the link that exists between these two signs, themselves reflections of the link that the Immaculate Conception has to the mystery of the Cross, according to the teaching of the Church.

When Mary extended her arms, she evoked the Cross of Christ. It is by Christ's Cross that we are saved. And the first to benefit from God's salvation was the one who was able to say, "*I am the Immaculate Conception*".

But Christ's Cross is inseparable from the mystery of the Trinity, indeed, when we make the sign of the Cross, we accompany this gesture with the words, "*In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*". Thus, in Lourdes, Mary, by making the sign of the Cross during the first Apparition and by letting us glimpse it during the Sixteenth Apparition, shows us that she is completely in God, of God and through God.

WHAT DO THESE MYSTERIOUS WORDS THAT MARY SPOKE TO BERNADETTE MEAN?

Throughout the Gospel, Mary is never presented as either the owner or the main protagonist of history. In her answer to the Angel Gabriel, she presents herself as the "servant": *"I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word."* (Luke 1:38). In other words, Mary is always at the service of the covenant that God sealed with our humanity in the person of her Son, Christ. And, it is precisely the reality of this alliance which is at the very heart of the name that she revealed to us at the Grotto of Massabielle.

So, in the words spoken during the 16th Apparition, what are we looking at?

1. "I am".

The Alliance as a mystery of anticipation.

By saying *"I am"*; Mary spoke in the same way as her Son. In the Gospels, the Lord tells us, *"I am the truth"*, *"I am the way"*, *"I am the life"*, *"I am the Resurrection"* (for a Christian, the Resurrection is not a state of life, it is a person)...

It is characteristic of God to say, "I am Who I am" (Ex. 3:14), this was the experience of Moses and of so many other characters from the Old Testament. And Jesus spoke in the same way as his Father. In God, everything is transparent, nothing is off kilter, quite simply, *"it is"*.

Mary does not speak in God's place. She speaks like her Son, quite simply because, in her humanity redeemed in fullness by the merits of her Son, she corresponds perfectly to the plan of God. Mary is fully in the image and likeness of God. The Dominican Father, Guy Touton, in his book *"Marie au plus près des Écritures et de la tradition"* tells us, "Mary's love is perfect in her freedom to choose."

Thus, in this "I am" spoken by Mary, we contemplate the Covenant that God has sealed with humanity as a mystery of anticipation. God's final victory over misery, sin and death is anticipated in the person of Mary.

Christians, through the sacrament of baptism, also anticipate this victory over death. But we could also say

this about each of the sacraments that we celebrate throughout our lives. For Bernadette and for us, as pilgrims, this "I am" of Mary in the Grotto is *"the happiness of the other world"*. It is this "other world" which Christians anticipate when we take concrete actions of peace, justice, forgiveness and charity.

So, it is in this sense that we suggest a little celebration of the "water gesture". You can adapt this according to your needs and context. At the base of this rock, steeped in humanity, there is a spring of water that reminds us of the gaze with which God looks at each of us. A different look. Mary is not the Spring, but she shows us the Spring, Mary is not the Spring, but She is the most precious fruit of the Spring.

2. "the Immaculate"

The Alliance as a mystery of trust and openness.

We should not think of the Immaculate Conception solely in terms of a person in their moral purity, although we all bow before Mary's moral purity.

We can also understand the expression "Immaculate" as the "catching" of a person by God and at the same time as this person's

willingness through faith to collaborate in this divine project which is gradually revealed to them.

So, it is not so much an adjective but a name which refers not only to an attribute but to a truth, that of the first creation and even more so to that of the ultimate creation. With the Immaculate, it is the fulfilment of our humanity that is revealed to us because Mary is the first sign of it. This is why Saint Paul gives thanks to God: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself" (Eph. 1:3-5).

In the person of Mary, we also contemplate the Covenant that God makes with humanity as a mystery of trust and openness. Mary lived her whole life as an abandonment to the Word of God. But abandonment does not mean indifference. It is rather about always remaining in a state of openness: "Mary said then: I am the handmaid of the Lord:

let it be done to me according to your Word.” (Luke 1:36)

Christ is the Word. It is He who makes us Immaculate in the extent of our openness to his Word. And it is the Word that makes a new reality in us: And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven

saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write, for these words are true and faithful.” (Rev. 21:1-5)



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For us as pilgrims in a sanctuary like that of Lourdes, this attitude of openness means, like Saint John, always taking into our hearts, She who is given to us as Mother (John 19:25). Let us find here an invitation to follow Christ by making ourselves students in the school of his Mother. And for us, pilgrims in Lourdes, in the school of Bernadette.

It is in this sense of confidence and openness that we might share a few thoughts on "the light". For the Lourdes pilgrim, like Bernadette, the processional candle is an invitation to expose our lives to the light of the Word of God, to the light of the Church.

So, accompanied by Mary and Bernadette, let us enter in this Alliance of trust and openness.

3. "Conception"

The Alliance as a mystery of hope and fruitfulness.

Conception is linked to life. It is, in fact, the fact of receiving life by being conceived. It is also about transmitting life by conceiving. Conception is both a fruit received, and a fruit given. It is a fruit that gives fruit. Strictly speaking, when the Virgin says, "I am the Immaculate Conception", we also hear, "Because

I am Immaculate (fruit received), I am Conception (fruit given)."

In receiving God, She gives God. Her existence is not enslaved by the flesh, it is a continual victory of the Spirit over the flesh. The first of all believers, Mary fully and perfectly participates in this redemption of the human race, by her union with the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. She is the pure reflection of this redemption. In this way, She is the image of the Church and of all the baptised.

And because She shows us this anticipation of victory over Evil, of the faithful Love of God and of the fruitfulness of God in our lives, Mary, also presents herself as the woman of promise. And every promise opens us to Hope. In the person of Mary, we contemplate the Alliance as a mystery of hope and fruitfulness.

It is in this sense that we might also share some thoughts on forgiveness. Forgiveness is always an open door to fertility. It repairs, restores, shares, heals, welcomes, consoles, listens, waits, supports, etc. These are many gestures that are possible in an attitude of forgiveness.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MARY IMMACULATE, THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIAN LIFE.

Father Horacio Brito

"Jesus founded the Church, and we are founded in the Church. Jesus established the Church and we are established in the Church. Mary begets us and takes care of us, and the Church does too. Mary makes us grow, and so does the Church. And at the hour of our death, the priest accompanies us in the name of the Church, and places us in the arms of Mary. It is the Church and Mary that the faithful revere. So, when we talk about the Church, we have to feel the same devotion as we do for the Virgin Mary. However, the mystery of the Church is intimately linked to the mystery of Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church." (C.M. Galli. "La mariología del Papa Francisco. Cristo, María y los Pueblos" p.75).

In the 16th century, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, when he spoke of the Church, said, "Our Holy Mother the hierarchical Church". In this expression we find three interdependent concepts:

**that of holiness,
that of fertility,
that of discipline.**

Holiness

Through baptism, we are born into a holy body. That of our Holy Mother the Church. And it is in keeping ourselves firmly inside this body that our vocation to be "holy and blameless before her" plays out, as well as our spiritual fruitfulness.

The holiness of the Church, her private life, is made up of prayer, listening to the Word, the teaching of the Apostles and fraternal love. But this holiness only makes sense if it becomes a witness and a conversion.

This holiness is not naive, because the Christian Church knows that it is a People of God immersed in the world, often tempted and which always needs to hear the wonders of God proclaimed in order to convert. It is a People which feels the need to be continually called together by God and united by Him.

The holiness of the Church is reflected in the face of Mary Immaculate, the one who is sinless, pure and spotless, but who does not forget that she gathers within her

the children of Eve, mother of sinful humankind.

This can sometimes explain the fact that the harsh criticism of the Church, the pain felt in the face of its many sins, the despair that arises around it, all these stem from the fact that we do not nourish ourselves sufficiently from this proximity to the holiness. The holiness of the Church is the fruit of God's visit to his people.

Fertility

Talking about the Holy Mother the Church evokes fertility. But it is a somewhat paradoxical fertility that follows the Gospel paths. It is in the image and likeness of the One who is both "Virgin and Mother".

The Church is a mother, it begets children with the Deposit of faith. It is the depository of the Good News to be announced. The promise, the teaching of the Apostles, the Word of life, the sources of grace, all that has been entrusted to her. It is a treasure that she cherishes dearly (Virgin), not to hide it but to communicate it (Mother), that is to say to give birth to it. We see this in Bernadette's life; she cherished dearly the treasure that she received at the Grotto, but at the

same time she gave it away. Bernadette's fertility was the birth of the Sanctuary! But this also applies to the Sanctuary and to every Christian today.

We must love the Church's mystery of fertility as we love the mystery of Mary, Virgin and mother. Wanting to bear fruit is a legitimate desire, but on the condition that we jealously defend our status of simple workers, that we seek to balance our commitment with our worthlessness, that we admit that we are called to sow, and that irrigation and harvest are graces that belong to the Lord.

Discipline

Our love for Mary and the Church is a love of union with one Body, and this requires a certain discipline. It means "love filled with discernment". For a Christian, not to be disciplined is to show indiscretion, that is, to lack judgment, and indiscretion is always a lack of love.

Discreet love helps us grow by showing that we belong to a large community that neither space nor time can limit. The root of our discipline appears in the fact that: "No evangeliser is the absolute master of his evangelising action, with a

discretionary power to carry it out in accordance with individualistic criteria and perspectives; he acts in communion with the Church and her pastors" (E:N:60)

Therefore, our membership of the Kingdom "cannot remain abstract and disembodied, but is concretely revealed by a palpable, visible entry into a community of the faithful".

In the person of Mary Immaculate we contemplate these three aspects of the Church and the crucial link is made between these three truths in the fervent proclamation of the Gospel. May Our Lady of Lourdes, the Immaculate Virgin, obtain for us from the Lord a holy, fruitful and disciplined love for the Church!



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AND BERNADETTE?

We are in the presence of a witness, Bernadette, who passed on the Message received from the Virgin Mary, thus returning us to the Word of God. "That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1 John 1:1-4).

Bernadette not only passed on these mysterious words, but also testified to a presence that dwelt within them. So, this name does not refer to a dogma of the Church but to a person. For the child, this name was very important for two reasons: First, it was the condition required by the Priest to build "the chapel" requested during the 13th. Apparition. And then, because it was the name of the person with whom she

had established a deep friendship. Thus, she passed on this name not because of the understanding that it might bring her, but because of the joy it gave her and which she radiated, thus communicating something of its substance. Lovers recognise this; those for whom the meaning of words is not based on ideas, but rather on the experience to which they refer.

All the baptised, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelisation... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary-disciples" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* n° 120).

A MARIAN STYLE OF EVANGELISM

"There is a Marian "style" to the Church's work of evangelization. Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* n° 288).

So, Bernadette radiated this presence in two ways: in her humanity and her femininity.

Human like this presence of Christ's humanity, the "Word made Flesh", which is so close and so intimate to us. It was He, the Christ, who came



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among us (to do good). It was He who opened his heart to enter into intimacy with his beloved: the sick and the sinners. And it is Mary, the renowned daughter of the Father, who is most intimate with the person of Christ.

“As a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles, and she constantly surrounds us with

God’s love... In these many shrines, we can see how Mary brings together her children who with great effort come as pilgrims to see her and to be seen by her. Here they find strength from God to bear the weariness and the suffering in their lives” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* n° 286).

Feminine, which is its characteristic. It is the pinnacle of the admirable and unrecognised mission given by God to women, closer to life than men who are distanced by their desire to control and govern it from the outside.

“Mary was able to turn a stable into a home for Jesus, with poor swaddling clothes and an abundance of love. She is the handmaid of the Father who sings his praises. She is the friend who is ever concerned that wine should not be lacking in our lives. She is the woman whose heart was pierced by a sword and who understands all our pain. As mother of all, she is a sign of hope for peoples suffering the birth pangs of justice. She is the missionary who draws near to us and accompanies us throughout life, opening our hearts to faith by her maternal love.” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* n° 286).



Three celebrations on the theme of the year

THE WATER GESTURE

Father Horacio Brito, Missionary of the Immaculate Conception, chaplain of Lourdes

At the Grotto of Lourdes there is a before and after the discovery of the spring. This dirty, muddy place had a reputation for being rarely visited. But the uncovering of the spring by Bernadette, in response to the words of the Virgin "go drink at the spring and wash yourself there" would trigger a rapid and spectacular transformation. Because of the spring, the Grotto was indeed becoming the centre of increasing attention. Now, we are drawn to the Grotto by the spring. So, we come to see it, we come to draw water from it, we come to drink and wash there. And when we leave the Grotto, we also take some of the spring water home. We thus keep the best of the Grotto with us, so that we can share it and continue to have access to it.

But what did Mary want to show us by asking Bernadette to reveal the spring at the Grotto?

First, the depths of the heart of Christ, his mercy: *"But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a*

spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." (John.19:33-35). In the heart of this crucified man was contained all the mercy of God signified by the water flowing from his side.

And then the water from the Grotto takes us back to our own hearts. God, by creating man and woman in his image, placed in us a particle of eternity. Cut off from God by sin, man no longer has access to this spring which is now sealed off. This is what the Son of God came to set free.

Through baptism, Christ gives us access to the spring of life placed deep in our hearts. "The water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life," said Jesus to the Samaritan woman (John 4:14). Thus, for all those who have been baptised, there is also a before and after the discovery of the spring. This discovery can be made for the first time during a pilgrimage, a key moment, an encounter. But we have to continually remake this discovery. For this, the role of Mary in all Christian life is crucial. As a disciple, it is about ta-

king Mary with us (John 19:27) and, like Bernadette, of living with her. Mary shows us the spring, leads us there, gives it to us. Let us ask the Immaculate Virgin to help us

discover the spring of charity that is already within us and to share it with our brothers and sisters. We all thirst for the charity of our brothers and sisters.

Water Gesture Celebration

(The celebration which is outlined here is purely a suggestion. It can be done individually or in community. Each pilgrimage can adapt it and enrich it with songs and prayers. You could add a reading and, if there is a Minister, an element of teaching. You should provide a few containers with water from the Grotto and also drinking cups for each of the participants.)

Guide. In the presence of Our Lady of Lourdes and Saint Bernadette, let's make the Sign of the Cross together.

**In the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen!**

G. Let's come together in God's presence (brief moment of silence...)

G. On 25th February 1858, during the ninth apparition, Our Lady of Lourdes spoke these words to Bernadette Soubirous:

"Go to the spring, drink and wash yourself there".

G. In Bernadette's footsteps, and those of so many other pilgrims from around the world, we are here to make this same gesture.

"Hail Mary...." (all say the Hail Mary together)

G. The "spring", is God the Father who gives us his Son, Jesus Christ: *"For God so loved the world that he gives his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not be lost, but obtain eternal life" (John 3:16)*

G. The "spring" is the person of Jesus Christ: *"If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink" (John 7:37)*

G. The "spring" is the person of the Holy Spirit: *"Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:14).*

All say together, "Hail Mary ..."

G. When we drink the water from the Grotto and wash there,

THREE CELEBRATIONS ON THE THEME OF THE YEAR

we let the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit come to meet us.

G. When we drink the water from the Grotto and wash there, we ask the Lord to make us receptive to his Word and his Sacraments which are springs of new life.

G. When drink the water from the Grotto and wash there we are transformed by the grace of conversion and are reconciled with God and our brothers and sisters.

All say together, "Hail Mary..."

G. Let us make Bernadette's prayer our prayer, too: (the guide reads the prayer slowly ..., and participants can be invited to close their eyes and bow their heads)

**"O Jesus, give me I pray ...
the bread of humility, the bread of obedience, the bread of charity,
the bread of strength to break my will, and make it one with yours,
the bread of patience to bear the pain my heart endures,
the bread to see you and you alone in all things and always!"
Jesus, Mary, the Cross, I want no other friends than these!
Amen."**

(Each participant has a cup with a little Lourdes water. Plan for everyone to have their cup filled at the start of the celebration).

Everyone drinks from the palm of their hand and puts water on their face.

While we make the gesture, we can sing the Lourdes Hymn.

**G. Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us!
O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us!
Saint Bernadette, pray for us!
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen!**



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THE CANDLE GESTURE

P. Régis-Marie de La Teyssonnière

"Mary is a being of light, because of her union with her son, Jesus Christ. United with Christ, Mary never knew sin, because, through grace, she was saved from it. Immaculate, Mary reflects Christ. This is Mary's favour. This is her openness.

During the first apparition, Bernadette said, "I saw a little lady enveloped in light" and it would be the same, during each of the 18 apparitions. Firstly, she would always be elated by the light she saw. Secondly, for those who did not see the apparition, the reflection of this light on her own face would be the sign that she was seeing the lady.

She saw with her eyes, and her face was illuminated, but at the same time it was her heart that lit up. The light at which she gazed and which she received revealed her own darkness and dissipated it. This was how, from the start of her meeting with the Virgin Mary, Bernadette would become aware of her sin. This is why she went to confession for the very first time in her life, three days after the first apparition.

The candle that Bernadette carried from the third apparition had a two-fold purpose. First to help her to see and, for the others, to find out if she was seeing. But this candle helped her above all to pray because this candle was a reminder of the baptismal candle which, after being lit from the paschal candle is given to the godparents of the baptised. This light is received "yet never dimmed by sharing of its light" as the liturgy of the Church sings on Easter night.

From the start, light has played an important role in the Grotto. Indeed, we spontaneously imitate Bernadette by coming like her with a candle. But we imitate Bernadette particularly on a spiritual level. Many people come to the Grotto to ask for a light in their lives or more simply to seek the light which they do not yet see.

In Lourdes, each day ends with the Marian torchlight procession, where we are truly bathed in light. When the crowds sing the "Ave Maria" or the "Glory be to the Father", each

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person raises their candle. In this simple gesture, heaven and earth seem united, resembling perhaps the night of the Nativity.

This gesture makes visible what is happening in the heart that is so

well reported by the apostle Paul: *"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves"* (Col. 1:13). (P. R.M. de la Teyssonnière. "The Grotto of Lourdes a Gospel Path" p. 197-200) C



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Celebration of the Candle Gesture, the Light.

(Notes for preparing a celebration or a catechesis).

Light is at the heart of Bernadette's experience

⊗ From 11th February 1858, the light:

- Preceded the Apparition
- Was present during the entire Apparition
- Remained a few moments after the Apparition

⊗ Bernadette carried a lighted candle

In her left hand during 15 of the 18 apparitions (from the 3rd. to the 17th. inclusive)

⊗ This candle

- Reminded Bernadette of her baptismal candle
- Had a story: the story of all baptised people

During the joyful mysteries of the apparitions (from the 1st. to the 7th.)

This candle represented Bernadette radiating Joy in the presence of the "Lady". It is the candle that every Christian receives at their baptism by receiving the mission and the grace to become a "light for the world" following Christ who said, "I am the light of the world"

During the sorrowful mysteries of the apparitions (from the 8th. to the 11th.)

So that she could make the penitential gestures relating to Christ's Passion, Bernadette entrusted her candle to another person. She thus showed that: By delivering his life for us, Christ who said, "I am the light of the world" Sinks into the darkness of sin and death.

During the glorious mysteries of the apparitions (from the 12th. to the 18th.)

Bernadette's relationship with her candle changed: she became, in a way, the candle she carried.

Thus, on the day of the 17th apparition, the flame of her candle licked her fingers for a very long time without them being burned, much like in the desert, the bush that Moses gazed at burned without being consumed.

During the 18th and final apparition, Bernadette no longer had a candle. She then saw the Blessed Virgin more beautiful than ever. She then became a little like her. Like every baptised person who is called to see Christ in Heaven as he is, when he becomes like him.

CELEBRATION OF FORGIVENESS

P.Horacio Brito

(Some ideas for creating a celebration around the theme of forgiveness. You are encouraged to add to it to with songs, texts from Scripture, etc.)

In connection with the pastoral theme, "I am the Immaculate Conception", here are some suggestions for reflecting on the theme of forgiveness or to prepare for a celebration.

Why this theme? As we said, when presenting the theme for the year, the presence of the Immaculate opens human hearts to fruitfulness and hope. And the forgiveness granted or received always produces fruit and opens human life to the hope of a future.

Are we as humans truly we able to forgive our brothers and sisters? On a human level, no. Extreme suffering, the fear of trivialising horror, of negotiating with evil, the confusion between forgetting and forgiveness, the imperative need for justice to be done, often prevent access to the gesture of forgiveness.

On the other hand, it is clear that forgiveness as Jesus Christ embodies it in word and in deed is not on a human scale. It is perhaps one of the most touching and heart-rending

revelations of God's mercy. When he first appeared to his disciples, the risen Christ greeted them by saying to them, "*Peace be with you.*" And, at the same time, he gave them the spiritual and creative power to forgive. "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*" (John 20:23)

This is how, on Easter morning, forgiveness becomes possible and the Church receives the mission of reconciliation. Forgiveness is a creative and liberating gesture for the offender and the offended. The offender is released from confinement to his past. The offended, from being locked into resentment. The desire for revenge paralyzes us and destroys our personal and social peace. Forgiveness is always an act of hope. To forgive is to say to one who is paralysed in their past, "*Get up and walk. You are more than your sin. You still have a future. Love and be free.*"

So, in these few lines, I offer some thoughts that I hope will help you to reflect on forgiveness given and received and perhaps to create a celebration.

Some ways to build a celebration around forgiveness

Following the first apparition, Bernadette said, "I saw a young lady wrapped in light who looked at me and smiled." Shortly afterwards, she said, "And I gazed at her as much as I could."

The Gospels twice mention the significance of Mary's gaze: firstly, in the Magnificat, when she says, "He looked on his servant in her lowliness." (Luke 1:48). Then we are told, when at the foot of the cross, "Jesus saw his mother there ..." (John 19:26).

Therefore, in Mary's gaze, we find the continuity of this merciful gaze of the Father and the Son. And it's this experience that Bernadette shared with us when she said, "I was gazing at her as much as I could."

So, what does Mary's gaze convey to us?

First a presence which translates into an "I am here. Do not be afraid!" The point of every human is to exist. But we only exist through others, and Mary's gaze made Bernadette exist. So much so that she said, "She speaks to me like one person speaking to another person."

Mary's gaze was also a welcoming gaze: "Will you do me the favour of

coming here for fifteen days?" So, Mary invited Bernadette to meet her and also to let herself be met.

Mary's gaze also speaks to us of an acceptance full of promise. That is to say, it did not stop at the outside, at the surface, at what is seen. But it was a look that knew how to see God's creation in the other person. "I do not promise you the happiness of this world but of the other."

Marie's gaze was also a gaze of support, friendship, fraternity, hospitality: "Do me the favour, have the kindness to." At the same time, the relationship was demanding, "Go and drink, go and tell!" This implied a conversion.

Finally, it was a positive gaze: "Pray to God for sinners."

So, through these few points, we could offer pilgrims a celebration of forgiveness around Mary's gaze, a gaze always open to hope and fruitfulness. Here are some ideas:

Let's ask Mary to look on us!

To look at ourselves and learn to discover the good that the Lord has given us and to share it with others ...

Mary, look on us and teach us to forgive!

To look at the people who don't love us, the ones who have hurt

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us, lied to us, betrayed us, disappointed us, humiliated us...

Mary, look on us and teach us to forgive!

To look at the people we don't like, the ones we have despised, put aside, humiliated, upset, ignored ...

Mary, look on us and teach us to forgive!

To look at the people we find it hard to look at, the sick, the elderly who can be burdensome, those who don't think like us, the young people who unnerve us, the poor, the migrants ...

Mary, look on us!

To look at our Holy Mother the Church, our diocesan Church, our parish, our communities of life.

Mary, look on us!

At the times of darkness, futility, sin, abandonment, when we forget to be merciful.

Mary, look on us!

At the time of revenge, resentment, coldness, when we forget to be tender.

Mary, look on us!

Gather us all under your gaze, in the tenderness of true love in which the human family can rebuild itself. Holy Immaculate Mother, we pray to you!



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ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation, and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bride adorned with her jewels.

COLLECT

O God, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin prepared a worthy dwelling for your Son, grant, we pray, that, as you preserved her from every stain by virtue of the Death of your Son, which you foresaw, so, through her intercession, we, too, may be cleansed and admitted to your presence. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

FIRST READING

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him.

In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved. In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us.

In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.

In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ.

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy Spirit, which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God's possession, to the praise of his glory.

The Word of the Lord

CANTICLE (Is 61, 10-11 & 62, 2-4)

R/ *God has filled me with endless joy, Alleluia !
He has clothed my soul with holiness, Alleluia !*

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.

No longer are you to be named « Forsaken »,
nor your land « Abandoned »,
but you shall be called « My Delight »
and your land « The Wedded ».

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION Hail, Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.

GOSPEL

A reading from the Gospel according to Saint Luke

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

Then the angel departed from her.

- The Gospel of the Lord

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

Graciously accept the saving sacrifice which we offer you, o lord, on the solemnity of the immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin mary, and grant that, as we profess her, on account of your prevenient grace, to be untouched by any stain of sin, so, through her intercession, we may be delivered from all our faults. Through Christ our lord.

PREFACE

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.

For you preserved the most Blessed Virgin Mary from all stain of original sin, so that in her, endowed with the rich fullness of your grace, you might prepare a worthy mother for your Son and signify the beginning of the Church, his beautiful Bride without spot or wrinkle. She, the most pure Virgin, was to bring forth a Son, the innocent Lamb who would wipe away our offenses.

You placed her above all others to be for your people an advocate of grace and a model of holiness.

And so, in company with the choirs of angels, we praise you, and with joy we proclaim: holy, holy, holy lord God of hosts . . .

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Glorious things are spoken of you, O Mary, for from you arose the sun of justice, Christ our God.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

O God, Your Word took flesh and became man through the Blessed Virgin Mary. As we receive nourishment from His body and blood, may this spiritual food lead us to share in the divine life of our Savior. Through Christ our Lord.



QUE SOY
ERA
ADA COUNCECUIU

