

MEDITATION ON THE THEME OF YEAR "I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION" – 1/3

Mary full of grace

"And the angel came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28)

These are the words with which the Archangel Gabriel addresses Mary. The angel's greeting to Mary is an invitation to joy, to a deep joy, which announces the end of the sadness caused by sin, and of its consequences, suffering, injustice, misery, and death. The list of our defects is long. So, this greeting marks the beginning of the Gospel, of the Good News.

But why is Mary invited to rejoice in this way? The answer is found in the second part of the greeting: "The Lord is with you." In these words, we contemplate the fulfilment of the two promises that God made to his people, Israel, promises which run through all the books of the Old Testament: "God will come as a saviour and will pitch his tent in his people's midst, in the womb of the daughter of Zion (Israel)".

Certainly, in the dialogue between the angel and Mary, this promise is completely fulfilled: Mary is identified with the people espoused by God, she is truly the Daughter of Zion in person; in her the expectation of the final coming of God is fulfilled, in her dwells the living God.

In the angel's greeting, Mary is called "full of grace", in Greek the term "grace", *charis*, has the same linguistic root as the term "joy". For Mary, joy finds its source in grace, that is, it comes from her communion with God, from her living relationship with Him, from being the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Mary lives fully from and in the relationship with the Lord. This relationship also implies being rooted in the faith and hope of one's people. Yes, Mary is the first pilgrim of the holy and faithful people of God. And because she is "full of grace" she is at the heart of "procession". We try to express this, in a belated and imperfect way, in the torchlight procession. This procession illustrates the words of the apostle Paul, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." (Rom. 5:20) This is why the torchlight procession is a "popular" procession, because it expresses the joy and the thanksgiving of the People of God towards this God who has made us the gift of the Immaculate, this woman, mother, full of grace, who is of our race, our time, and our history.

Another aspect, among many others, is to understand that the openness of the soul to God and to his action in faith also includes the element of darkness. The human being's relationship with God does not erase the distance between Creator and his creatures. But those who, like Mary, are completely open to God, succeed in being receptive to God's will. Even if often, this does not correspond to our own will and "a sword must pierce the soul" (Luke 2:35), which was the case with Mary during the presentation of Jesus in the temple. She experiences the joy of the Annunciation but also passes through the darkness of the crucifixion, to reach the light of the Resurrection.

We too, in our journey of faith, encounter moments of light and, at the same time, we experience the absence of God.

And in this same context, Joseph, Mary's husband, is an essential model of the luminous presence of God at the heart of the limitations specific to all human life. Let us listen to what Pope Francis tells us about the person of Joseph. "In Joseph, Jesus saw the tender love of God: "As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him" (Ps. 145:9). The history of salvation is fulfilled by "hoping against all hope" (Rom. 4:18), through our weaknesses. We too often think that God is relying only on our good, appealing side, when in reality most of his purposes are carried out through and despite our weaknesses ... Since this is part of the entire economy of salvation, we must learn to look upon our weaknesses with tender mercy."

The evil one makes us see and condemn our frailty, whereas the Spirit brings it to light with tender love. Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. Pointing fingers and judging others are frequently signs of an inability to accept our own weaknesses, our own frailty. Only tender love will save us from the snares of the accuser (cf. Rev. 12:10). That is why it is so important to encounter God's mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we experience his truth and tenderness.

Paradoxically, the evil one can also speak the truth to us, yet he does so only to condemn us. We know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains, and forgives us. That truth always presents itself to us like the merciful father in Jesus' parable (cf. Luke 15:11-32). It comes out to meet us, restores our dignity, sets us back on our feet and rejoices for us, for, as the father says: "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (v. 24).

"Even through Joseph's fears, God's will, his history and his plan were at work. Joseph, then, teaches us that faith in God includes believing that he can work even through our fears, our frailties, and our weaknesses. He also teaches us that amid the tempests of life, we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course. At times, we want to be in complete control, yet God always sees the bigger picture." (Pope Francis. Apostolic Letter "Patris Corde". 2021).

Dominican Father Guy Touton in his book "Marie au plus près des Ecritures et de la Tradition", speaking of the Mother of God, "the full of grace", "the Immaculate Conception", writes: "Mary, the essence of a being in truth".

In fact, in the person of Mary, "full of grace", we contemplate the victory of God over misery, sin and death. This victory of God, which is for us, is anticipated in the person of Mary. Yes, in Mary we contemplate who we are to God. In her and through the merits of Christ, the promise of God is fulfilled, she is the woman of the Promise, she is the refuge of sinners.

As this meditation is addressed to pilgrimage directors and hospitality presidents who, through their mission, are "immersed in the grace of the pastoral ministry of Lourdes", I will allow myself to draw some pastoral conclusions from what has just been said.

Lourdes is the Sanctuary of the Immaculate. And this presence opens our eyes to the realities at the centre of our faith, sin, and grace. Consider the reality of our societies' misunderstanding and indifference to sin and grace. But these realities are intricately linked to the Immaculate Conception.

First, sin. Sin means missing the mark, failing to live up to our identity as man and woman, living beneath our possibilities. Four "autos" or "selves" can help us understand this reality: self-sufficiency instead of faith in God; self-reliance instead of openness and receptivity to the will of God; self-centredness instead of generosity and giving of oneself; authoritarianism instead of seeking the truth and realising that its true source is in God.

As the Immaculate Conception, Mary is a model of openness to God, of openness to her willingness to give of herself, and of openness to the search for God. She is a compelling model who invites us to conversion.

In a world loved by God and which is focused on the autarky of the absolute secularisation of the individual impervious to the need for Redemption, the presence of a sanctuary of the Immaculate is a great opportunity to rethink the meaning of Redemption.

The Immaculate Conception is a shining example of the redemptive love of God. If we turn away from God, he is the one who turns to us.

In the dialogue between Mary, "the full of grace", and Bernadette, we discover that:

True love is unconditional, stronger than death. That love is freely given, without obligation, goes beyond reason. That love is creator and re-creator. He gives life and restores life. This love makes us vulnerable because it is directed towards others. This faithfulness in love is costly, painful and can be fatal ("he loved them to the end", John 13: 1). This love has revealing power. It is an invitation to speak out, to confide, to give of oneself. This love reconciles and unites. It unites without destroying, releases a reciprocal force. Thus, perfection in love will coincide with the definitive coming of Christ ("the happiness of the other world", 3rd apparition). This happiness is the companion of love. This love is beauty and arouses love ("I saw a young lady enveloped in light who looked at me and smiled... and I looked at her as much as I could", Bernadette)

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