

MEDITATION ON THE THEME OF THE YEAR "I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION" – 2/3

"And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her." (Luke 1:38)

With these words spoken by Mary, the dialogue with the angel Gabriel ends. But there is a parallel text to this one reported by the letter to the Hebrews: when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God (Hebrews 10:5-7). This double "yes", from Mary and from Jesus, becomes a single "yes", and, thus, the Word of God becomes flesh in Mary. In this double "yes" the obedience of the Son takes shape; Mary with her "yes" gives him a body. In the "yes" of Mary and Jesus is contained the "yes" of all humanity, it is up to us to embrace it. In Bernadette's "yes", to "come here for a fortnight ..." is contained the "yes" of all pilgrims to Lourdes, it is up to each pilgrim to embrace it.

In Lourdes, on 25th March 1858, the feast of the Annunciation, when the Lady of Massabielle, revealed her name "I am the Immaculate Conception", she revealed her deep identity, as the perfect fruit of the "yes" to the Word of God.

We should not understand the Immaculate Conception only as a person in her moral purity, although we all kneel before the moral purity of Mary.

We should also understand the expression "Immaculate" as the "seizure" of a person by God and at the same time as the acceptance in faith of this person to want to collaborate in this divine project which is gradually revealed to her.

So, it is not so much an adjective but a noun which refers not only to an attribute but to a reality. What reality? That of the initial creation and, even more so, 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 this. She is the most perfect fruit of listening to the Word and putting it into practice. That is why she is the model for all Christian life. This is why Saint Paul gives thanks to God: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ." Eph. 1:3-5)

Therefore, in the person of Mary we contemplate the Covenant that God makes with humanity as a mystery of trust and receptiveness. Mary lived all her life as abandonment to the Word of God. But abandonment does not mean sitting back and doing nothing. Rather, it is about always remaining in a state of receptiveness. "And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."" (Luke 38)

It is Christ who is the Word. It is He who makes us Immaculate in the measure of our receptivity to his Word. And it is this Word that makes a new reality in us.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Also, he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Rev. 21:1-5).

For us, as pilgrims of a Marian shrine desired by the Mother of God, this attitude of receptiveness consists in taking "among us", following the example of Saint John, the one given to us as Mother (John 19: 25). Let us see in this an invitation to conform to Christ by going to the school of Mary. And for the pilgrims of Lourdes, to the school of Bernadette. This school is made up of listening to the Word of God, of prayer, of sharing, of service to the poor and the sick, of popular piety, of the missionary spirit, of the ministry of priests, of concrete experience of the maternal face of the Church, of conversion, of sacramental life, of true joy. It is this school of Mary that must be placed at the centre when we make our pastoral, administrative and financial choices. The "yes" of Mary and of Jesus is one "yes". And Joseph? It is very interesting what Pope Francis tells us about Joseph's "yes", and I invite you to read it:

"As he had done with Mary, God revealed his saving plan to Joseph. He did so by using dreams, which in the Bible and among all ancient peoples, were considered a way for him to make his will known. [13]

Joseph was deeply troubled by Mary's mysterious pregnancy. He did not want to "expose her to public disgrace", [14] so he decided to "dismiss her quietly" (Matt. 1:19).

In the first dream, an angel helps him resolve his grave dilemma: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:20-21). Joseph's response was immediate: "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (Matt. 1:24). Obedience made it possible for him to surmount his difficulties and spare Mary.

In the second dream, the angel tells Joseph: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (Matt. 2:13). Joseph did not hesitate to obey, regardless of the hardship involved: "He got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod" (Matt. 2:14-15).

In Egypt, Joseph awaited with patient trust the angel's notice that he could safely return home. In a third dream, the angel told him that those who sought to kill the child were dead and ordered him to rise, take the child and his mother, and return to the land of Israel (cf. Matt. 2:19-20). Once again, Joseph promptly obeyed. "He got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel" (Matt. 2:21).

During the return journey, "when Joseph heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. After being warned in a dream" – now for the fourth time – "he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth" (Matt. 2:22-23).

The evangelist Luke, for his part, tells us that Joseph undertook the long and difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered in his family's town of origin in the census of the Emperor Caesar Augustus. There Jesus was born (cf. Luke 2:7) and his birth, like that of every other child, was recorded in the registry of the Empire. Saint Luke is especially concerned to tell us that Jesus' parents observed all the prescriptions of the Law: the rites of the circumcision of Jesus, the purification of Mary after childbirth, the offering of the firstborn to God (cf. 2:21-24). [15]

In every situation, Joseph declared his own "fiat", like those of Mary at the Annunciation and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In his role as the head of a family, Joseph taught Jesus to be obedient to his parents (cf. Luke 2:51), in accordance with God's command (cf. Ex. 20:12).

During the hidden years in Nazareth, Jesus learned at the school of Joseph to do the will of the Father. That will was to be his daily food (cf. John 4:34). Even at the most difficult moment of his life, in Gethsemane, Jesus chose to do the Father's will rather than his own,[16] becoming "obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews thus concludes that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8).

All this makes it clear that "Saint Joseph was called by God to serve the person and mission of Jesus directly through the exercise of his fatherhood" and that in this way, "he cooperated in the fullness of time in the great mystery of salvation and is truly a minister of salvation." [17] (Pope Francis. Patris Corde)

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