

SERMON ON THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION – ST. WALBURGE’S, 7TH DECEMBER 2016
NOVENA



Our Blessed Lady exclaimed in her great canticle of joy, the Magnificat, 'The Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name' (Lk. 1:49). Tomorrow, 8th December, the Church celebrates one of those 'great things' the Lord has done for her, and that is her Immaculate Conception. We believe that from the moment of her conception in her mother's womb, Mary was preserved from the taint of that sin, which we call original, and which the human race has inherited through the fall of Adam and Eve.

God granted this unique privilege to Mary in view of the future redemption which her son, Jesus Christ, Our Saviour, would accomplish for us through his cross, death and resurrection. A title ascribed to Our Lady in the litany of Loretto is 'tabernacle of the most high', in other words she was to be the dwelling-place of God's own Son. It was therefore fitting that such a tabernacle or dwelling-place be pure and spotless, worthy for the King of glory to enter, as the psalmist would say (Ps. 24:9).

This wonderful and very special dignity given by God to Mary was hinted at on the occasion of the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel greeted her as being 'full of grace', or 'favoured one' (Lk.1:28). Already the Virgin from Nazareth was a 'chosen vessel of election', a title of Mary again found in the litany. The Almighty, we might say, had long had his eye on Mary. In the letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul speaks of how God chose us from all eternity to be holy and spotless (Eph.1:4), and this is particularly true of the Virgin Mary. God the Father had long planned to send his Son as our Saviour, and central to that plan and his chosen instrument was Mary.

Our Lady's Immaculate Conception is both an article of our faith and therefore a mystery, a truth quite beyond our understanding. Incidentally, you may remember when she appeared to Bernadette at Lourdes Mary identified herself as 'The Immaculate Conception', something which convinced the local priest and bishop that the Virgin had actually appeared to Bernadette. This exalted state of being conceived sinless and conferred on Mary by almighty God does not mean that she has been put out of range of ordinary believers. We Catholics are familiar with the much-loved invocation to Our Blessed Lady, 'O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.'

Our Lady led a human life of faith, like all of us, notwithstanding being 'full of grace'. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux observed, the world awaited her response, her fiat, to the angel Gabriel's message. She had the generosity of faith to say, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me' (Lk.1:38). We honour Mary on this solemnity of her Immaculate Conception, and marvel at the privileges God bestowed on her. We also turn to her, asking her prayers and intercessions that, like her, we too may be faithful servants of the Lord, both hearers and doers of the word of God. May she pray for us now and at the our of our death. Amen!

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