

Homily based on the readings from December 8, 2025 (Genesis 3.9-15, 20; Ephesians 1.3-6, 11-12; Luke 1.26-38)

*I am the Immaculate Conception.* Many of us will recognize this phrase as being the Blessed Mother's response to Saint Bernadette at the grotto in Lourdes, in the south of France, in March of 1858 – when Bernadette asked the beautiful lady, clad in white and blue, for her name. For many years, I had assumed that Mary's answer was in French, but it was actually in Occitan – the language spoken by the local peasants. In fact, that exact phrase is now inscribed above the grotto, directly below the statue of the Blessed Mother: *Que soy era immaculada councepciou.* It is a powerful statement that the Blessed Mother not only chose to reveal herself to a poor, illiterate peasant – but that she did so in a language which, at the time, was considered beneath the dignity of polite society.

It is often noted that Bernadette's visions occurred less than four years after Pope Blessed Pius IX had officially declared Mary's Immaculate Conception to be a dogma of the Church. Prior to that point, the details

of this doctrine had been debated for centuries – particularly among the Franciscans and the Dominicans. To be clear, nobody within the Church doubted the Blessed Mother’s extraordinary degree of sanctity or her unique role in the history of salvation. Indeed, the angelic salutation – which we heard in today’s Gospel – clearly attests to both: “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” This basic principle – that Mary “far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth” (*LG 53*) – has been continuously reaffirmed since the earliest days of the Church.

As is often the case, the controversy – such as it was – focused mainly on mechanics. There was no disputing the fact that – just like every other descendant of Adam and Eve – Mary was redeemed by the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The question essentially came down to when, with respect to Mary’s own personal timeline, her salvation actually took place. The matter was definitively settled exactly 171 years ago *today*, when Pope Pius solemnly declared that:

[T]he doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in

the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was *preserved free from all stain of original sin*, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.

In other words, knowing in advance the unique role Mary would play in Christ's Incarnation, God chose to implement her redemption at the very moment she came into existence – keeping her totally unsullied from the sins of our forefathers. This is not a theory or a personal speculation – but an eternal, timeless truth that has been entrusted to the Church by God himself.

The technical arguments surrounding this doctrine can be difficult to understand – even for accomplished theologians. To be sure, as with any of the mysteries of our faith, we should all employ whatever intellectual talents God has given us to explore the nuances of this dogma. Nevertheless, we must never fall into the trap of thinking that

our worthiness as Christians depends, in any way, on the depth of our intellect or the level of our education. Christianity is not a collection of philosophical puzzles, but a living relationship with our Risen Lord.

*That*, in fact, is precisely the lesson we should learn from the Blessed Mother's appearance to Saint Bernadette. In contrast to the luminaries of Catholic theology, Bernadette was incapable of reading, debating, or even understanding complex theological arguments. Her faith was simple, direct, and honest. Our Lady presented the dogma of the Immaculate Conception to her – not as a complicated intellectual proposition, but as a personal encounter: *I am the Immaculate Conception*. The Blessed Mother spoke to Bernadette where she was, in language she could understand.

In the end – no matter how much talent, effort, or intellect we invest – we will never be able to grasp the divine through the power of our own abilities. Because of his boundless love, God *himself* reaches down to embrace *us* – unworthy as we are. As he did with the Blessed Mother,

he provides each of us with precisely the graces and the blessings we need to accomplish the tasks he sets before us. As Saint Paul reminds us:

In [Christ] 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.

The only power *we* have is to accept or to reject the specific role God has prepared for us. We can follow the example of Adam and Eve, abandoning God's will in favor of our own, or we can choose to imitate the model of our Blessed Mother. None of us possesses the unparalleled gifts Mary has received, but *we all* have the ability to echo her response of perfect trust, obedience, and gratitude: *May it be done to me according to your word.*