

## **The Immaculate Conception**

8<sup>th</sup> December, 1872

My dear Daughters,

This is one of Our Lady's greatest feasts. We who honour her Assumption must remember that the origin of her splendour and glory and marvellous virtues and grace is her Immaculate Conception.

What I have to say today is very practical. At the root of our efforts and our thoughts about perfection there must be the conviction that we were conceived in sin, and to that we must attribute our difficulties, our imperfections and our struggles.

The first man was created in the state of original justice with his inclinations turned towards good. His mind was enlightened and good will was in his heart. It is hard to understand that with so much light and such facility for good Adam can have turned away from God. That is what makes his sin so great. Baptism washes away original sin and frees us from some of its effects, but not from them all. Ignorance remains, and the "roots of sin", or concupiscence. Often think of this. It will be a great help for humility. If man must own his nothingness before God, how much more must the sinner humble himself: ponder on this too.

In dealing with the sisters I often find great indignation in souls when they discover their imperfections.

What struggles, what desolation, what surprise: “What has happened? I never used to be like this! I never had such thoughts. I had so much love of God and so much fervour.” Such admirable dispositions! You see what is lacking is the conviction that they are inclined to evil.

St John of the Cross says that we have within us the germs of the seven capital sins, and to start with a boundless pride, the extent of which we do not at first understand. Our Lord starts by giving the soul graces to draw her to Him. Without such graces and consolations she would not come. But when she begins to give herself to Him, she attributes to herself what He gives gratuitously, his kindness, his choice, his preference. What pride!

An old confessor once said to me, “If you want to catch a wild young horse you give him oats, and while he is eating you slip on the halter.” According to this priest that is what Our Lord does. Perhaps it is not exactly that, but would He have so many servants devoted to Him alone, if He had not drawn them when they were young by consolations, by the joy of a love that is greater than all the joys of this world? God visits the soul with sweetness and He alone does all the work.

However imperfect may be the soul to whom Our Lord comes, He who is our bliss, who is all beauty, all sweetness, all love, she cannot help preferring Him to all things. In her pride she imagines she is doing great things, but in reality she has no possibility of doing otherwise. No,

she is not doing great things, she has no perfections, or virtues. She is just very pleased with herself. If she seems to make progress, in reality Our Lord is carrying her, and the Imitation says "It is not difficult to advance when we are carried by grace."

Our Lord cannot leave a soul in this state of illusion. He will not let her come to the end of her life giving thanks for all her merits when in truth she has none, believing herself to be full of generosity and love, whereas she has nothing. No, after He has carried us in his arms he withdraws to see us taking our little steps as St. Francis of Sales says. What happens then? The soul becomes desperate and falls into discouragement. She sees she is doing nothing for God. Self-love that was her stand-by is upset. She no longer sees any of the virtues she thought she had, and she thinks she is lost. Our Lord is guiding her and wants to lead her into other paths where she will practise more generosity by following Him to Calvary. The way of perfection is not always sweet and easy. It is sometimes hard and dry. This is the story of every soul, and we can all apply it to ourselves.

So much for pride. St. John of the Cross goes on to covetousness. There is such a thing as spiritual covetousness, which makes one attached to one's own merits and less pleased at those of other people. It makes one greedy of consolation, of spiritual good things. I am not speaking of material avarice, that makes us attached to worldly possessions, though saints have had to detach

themselves sometimes from some trifle so as to belong wholly to God.

Next comes lust. I do not mean the gross vice of the flesh, but things like the desire for and the pleasure in the admiration of creatures. We must cure ourselves of that.

Then there is envy. Not the deadly vice of envy, but certain roots of jealousy, a feeling of sadness when we see others better than we are, preferred to us, making more progress than we do, succeeding better and out-doing us. We are not glad that God is being served, and we fail to see that other people's progress does not hinder ours whereas the company of perfect souls can be a great help to us.

And gluttony. There are roots of spiritual gluttony and material gluttony in us. Even more so anger. It is one of the most difficult vices to cure oneself of. At times it causes us indignation, rebellion, irritation, a refusal to endure, instead of bearing everything with patience, patience under all burdens, patience with all characters<sup>1</sup>.

Sloth, too, has roots in us, though not equally in everyone. Still they are there. This universal imperfection has only one exception, that of our Blessed Lady. But we see that it was on the knowledge of their imperfection that the saints built up their perfection. We see their efforts to get rid of the roots of sin, and to acquire humility and self-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jam. 1:4

contempt. St. Chantal says that the saints never despise others, finding enough to despise in themselves.

Honour Our Lady, free from all stain and yet the humblest of the earth. Ask her that we may acquire humility by our imperfections as she acquired it by her perfection. God lavished his graces not on her purity and her other virtues but on her humility. As for ourselves, my daughters, we must try to use our imperfection for the benefit of our humility.

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