



**Most Rev. Robert D. Gruss
Bishop of Rapid City**

**Homily for the Solemnity of
The Immaculate Conception**
Our Lady of Perpetual Help Cathedral

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Happy Feast Day to all of you. A beautiful time to honor Our Lady!

The readings from the Mass on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception abound with contrasting images – images of self giving and images of self absorption; images of grace and images of sin.

The contrast between Eve, the “Mother of All the Living” and Mary of Nazareth, the “Mother of the Church” is striking. Both women, created without sin and given the freedom to fully flourish and prosper, come to a point of a most critical choice – critical for themselves and critical for all of humanity forever into the history of the world.

Choices are given to all of us to become all that God created each of us to be. What we choose, using our free will, will always have an impact upon us and those around us, personally and communally. In these particular events of human history, where Eve fails, Mary bears fruit.

Because of Eve’s selfishness, we all are now impacted by original sin and tendencies toward disbelief, self-centeredness, cynicism, pride, fear, false humility, etc. – all of which can cloud our reasoning and make it hard for us to surrender to the Lord and His plan for our lives.

As a consequence of Mary’s grace and surrender, all of us have been chosen by God: “...before the foundation of the world, we have been blessed in Christ, receiving EVERY spiritual blessing in the heavens.....to be holy and without blemish before him.” [Ephesians 1:3-4] In other words, like Mary, great holiness for us is possible.

Adam and Eve, when confronted by God, said, “I heard you in the garden, but I was afraid... so I hid myself.” [Genesis 3:10] Can you imagine? God gave everything possible to Adam and Eve. God had made it clear how much He had invested in them and how much He loved them. They had everything. What went wrong? Temptation became stronger than trust. Self interest became stronger than surrender.

Sin destroyed Adam and Eve’s complete faith, trust and confidence in God. It brought fear and shame into the world, and has destroyed our ability to be the best version of ourselves. Sin teaches us to fear our true and beautiful selves, created in God’s image and likeness.

Then we have the image of Mary, who is the perfect expression of both the simplicity and complexity of our human response. Unlike Eve, she chooses to cooperate with God’s “plan” but not without question. “How can this be?” she says. [Luke 1:34]

Mary’s choice is one of trust in the Lord of her faith tradition. But it was not a “blind” trust. Rather her question demonstrated that Mary clearly used her human reason as well as her faith to know

and follow what God was asking of her, her vocation. Mary was free from the impediments and hindrances that can keep us from saying “yes” to the Lord because her life’s focus was doing the will of God and responding to God’s grace. “*Hail, full of grace [favored one]. The Lord is with you,*” we heard the angel Gabriel saying. [Luke 1:28]

I recall back when I was the vocation director for the Davenport Diocese I went to speak to a class of high school Confirmation students about vocations. I asked one young woman, “If God were asking you to be a sister in a religious order would you do it?” She was very honest and said, “No.” Unfortunately I didn’t find her response too unusual. Most high school girls would probably say the same thing. But I was a bit saddened by her answer. Then I asked, “Would you answer another question for me?” “Yes,” she said. I asked, “Why not?” Her answer: “I am afraid that I won’t like it.”

Think about her answer. **I – am afraid** – that **I – won’t** like it. The words – **I** and **afraid**.

This girl’s response implied that her happiness was dependent upon herself and not upon God. Her answer implied that her fulfillment in life was dependent upon herself and not upon God.

In a sense, it was the same response as Adam and Eve. They couldn’t have what they wanted, so they took it. They were tempted to find their fulfillment in themselves, in their own wants and needs, and not in what God wanted to provide for them.

But we all do it. We approach life so often as if our happiness depended upon us. Instead of taking the posture of Mary, we often take the posture of Eve.

Yes, Mary was conceived without sin and from the very moment of her birth her heart’s desire was for God. But even on a human level, a heart that is focused on God will remain free from sin. We should never be afraid of what God might have in store for us or ask of us. Never!

Like Mary, you and I have been chosen in a special way to bring forth Christ into the world in our own way. God’s plan for us is just as fantastic as His plan was for Mary. Even though we were not conceived without sin, it has not barred us from the glory of heaven that Mary is experiencing right now, nor from the holiness which she experienced here on earth.

Nor does it mean that we have to wait for our final salvation before we begin enjoying the adventure God wants to give us. It is there that we will experience the graces that God has for us – in doing His will. Like Mary, “*He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. We have received every spiritual blessing in the heavens....*” [Ephesians 1:3] Again, like Mary, great holiness for us is possible. But we must take Mary’s posture toward God.

The holiness of Mary can be ours if we seek God with our whole hearts; if we seek a life of conversion; if we seek and respond to God’s grace wherever it leads us. All the Spiritual blessings that we have received in the heavens, which St. Paul speaks about to us, will then immerge. “*In God we were chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of His will...*” [Ephesians 1:4-5]

The problem in our world is that we are so often indifferent to this reality or we don’t trust in this reality, so we do not respond because our fear is greater than our desire to surrender. Remember the girl’s response, “I am afraid that I won’t like it.” Or we can add our own reason. “I am afraid that I can’t do it.” “I am afraid that I am not qualified.” “I am afraid that I don’t know how.” “I am afraid of failing.”

All God has ever wanted for each of us is that we would be His children, desiring everything He wants to give us. Our willingness to cooperate expresses our faith and trust even when we do not know all of the answers. Our quiet reflection during Advent will lead us to the answers and show us our calling as we welcome Jesus more deeply into our hearts.

When we truly believe like Mary, “NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD,” then we too will always say with Mary, “*I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*” [Luke 1:38]

“O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.”