

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

I hope you will bear with me if I go into a bit of doctrine in this homily—even more than a bit. First of all, even though the Church has always taught that Mary did not commit any actual sin during the entire course of her life, the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception doesn't directly deal with that teaching but rather with the truth that she, from the first moment of her conception, was preserved from what we traditionally call “original sin.” Furthermore, recall that original sin is sin only in an analogous sense: as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, it is not “an act” but rather “a state,” something “contracted” and not “committed.” Just how this state is contracted has never been defined in any readily explainable way. That same *Catechism* tells us that “the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand,” even though “we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature” and that his sin (and that of his helpmate Eve) “affected *the human nature* that they would then transmit *in a fallen state*” (no. 404).

This assumption that all human beings are descended from simply one pair of first parents—something that is technically called monogenism—was universally held by members of the Abrahamic religions, and by many other persons, for centuries. Indeed, in the middle of the twentieth century Pope Pius XII taught that Catholics ought not accept the opposite position, polygenism, because (in his words) “it is in no way apparent how such an opinion [polygenism] can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin

actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all, and is in everyone as his own” (encyclical *Humani Generis*, no. 37).

It is, however, fortunate that Pope Pius did not go so far as to declare polygenism actually heretical. Church leaders made that kind of mistake more than three centuries earlier in the case of Galileo when, mainly on the strength of a few biblical verses (such as that God had “made the earth firm, never to be moved”), they declared it strictly heretical to claim that the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa. More cautiously and prudently, Pope Pius only said that it was “not apparent” how polygenism could be reconciled with what the Church had always taught about the transmission of original sin from a single pair of first parents. Nowadays, however, it has become incumbent on theologians and bishops to attempt precisely such reconciliation, for studies in the field of population genetics have led the scientific community to recognize that at no point did there exist a single “first man” and a single “first woman” who constituted the first true humans and to whom all lineages of modern humans ultimately converge. If the persons whom we traditionally call Adam and Eve ever existed as distinct historical persons, they were certainly members of a much larger population of the same species, early *homo sapiens*.¹

There is no time here to go into detail about any of the ways in which the traditional doctrine of original sin is now being rethought in the light of these scientific findings, but two very fine Catholic scholars—Daryl Domning, a professor of anatomy at Howard University, and Monica Hellwig, who had served as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America before her death a few years ago—have jointly proposed an approach that in my opinion deserves a very appreciative hearing.² In a nutshell, they propose that what they call the “original selfishness” that characterizes every living organism (and that is not in all respects

reprehensible) can, through the uniquely human trait of free will, be counteracted by freely chosen, conscious acts of altruistic kindness, goodness, compassion, and love.

And what does all this mean for the woman whose feast we celebrate today? Simply this: through the special grace of God, Mary was at all times—indeed, “from the first moment of her conception”—enabled to overcome any and all sinful self-centeredness and so was enabled to serve other persons and her God in a thoroughly holy and sinless way. We don’t have enough material in the New Testament to say that such behavior would be persuasively evident to every reader of the Scriptures, but there is enough there to give us at least some insight into the effect of this fullness of grace in Mary’s life: her readiness to embrace God’s will at the annunciation even though the angelic message surely left her puzzled; her caring visit to Elizabeth to be with her older cousin in the final months of her pregnancy; her concern for the young married couple at the wedding feast at Cana and her confidence that Jesus would act to help them out of their embarrassment at having run out of wine; and her standing firmly at the foot of the cross on Calvary when almost all the rest of the disciples had fled in fear. However, we must admit that even if we had a hundred or a thousand times as many incidents from Mary’s life described in the New Testament, these would not in any sense really prove her preeminence above all other human beings in her utterly immaculate sinlessness. No, this is, in the final analysis, an important part of our Catholic faith—something with a rational and defensible foundation, to be sure, but not something that wordy arguments could strictly demonstrate. Much better for us to do something else: pray to our compassionate and powerful Mother Mary that we, still succumbing all too often to sinful forms of self-centeredness, may be ever more liberated from those shackles and come to live more and more after the model that she and her divine Son have left us. Or, as St. Benedict puts it in his Rule, pray that each of us may pursue not what he

judges better for himself but, instead, what he judges better for someone else (RB 72.7). O

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

¹ For a highly technical account by a leading scientist, see Francisco Ayala, “The Myth of Eve: Molecular Biology and Human Origins,” *Science* 270, no. 5244 (Dec. 22, 1995): 1930-36. This is based on Ayala’s presidential address to the Association for the Advancement of Science.

² Monica Hellwig and Daryl Domning, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006). See also Domning, “Evolution, Evil and Original Sin,” *America*, November 12, 2001, 14-21, and idem, “Teilhard and Natural Selection: A Missed Opportunity?” in *Rediscovering Teilhard’s Fire*, ed. Kathleen Duffy (Philadelphia: St. Joseph’s University Press, 2010), 187-95.