

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, 2013

I was once driving downtown with some friends who were non-Catholic and not even very knowledgeable about things religious. As we passed the parish of the Immaculate Conception on Eighth Street, one of the women in the car noticed the name of the church and spontaneously laughed. Never before having heard the term, she found it altogether puzzling and even a bit amusing. Even some Catholics confuse it with the quite different doctrine of Christ's virgin birth. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is itself well summed up in today's Opening Prayer, which teaches that God preserved Mary from every stain of sin by virtue of the foreseen death of his Son, Jesus Christ. This utter sinlessness of Mary from the first moment of her existence has led millions of Catholics to have recourse to her when confronted with all sorts of problems and has led to the composition of many prayers such as the *Memorare*, which begins with the beautiful words: "Remember, O most blessed virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided."

There is, of course, the danger that we could set Mary so much upon a pedestal as to make her seem totally unlike us, totally removed from the way we live and think and act, but that would be a great mistake. Look at it this way: When Mary was a girl growing up in Nazareth, or when in later years she was living with Joseph and Jesus in their home in that same town, or when she was living among and being cared for by the other earliest members of the Church after Jesus' death and resurrection, do you think her neighbors and friends ever said: "My goodness, look at Mary. Everything she does is absolutely perfect. She seems never to have committed the slightest sin." I doubt that anyone ever said anything of the kind. The few actions

that are recounted of Mary in the New Testament are indeed ones of kindness and humility, but not utterly extraordinary. I mean such things as her going to visit and help her relative Elizabeth when Elizabeth was in the final months of her pregnancy, or her concern for the guests at the wedding feast at Cana when they were running out of wine. Surely any of us could show similar concern for others in their various needs.

My point is that genuine sanctity need not be unusually flashy or extravagant. In fact, it often is not anything that would come close to making headlines. If the title “first disciple” is one of the most fitting that we could apply to Mary, her way of discipleship was not all that different from the kinds of things we ourselves can do. In fact, the very intent of our school’s service program is to make it possible for the older students to experience firsthand such ways of serving others and so come to know, in the best sense of the word, the satisfaction that comes from helping those who have needs of one sort or another, and it does seem that the program is generally successful in this regard. Here’s the opening paragraph from a short paper recently written by one of the seniors, beginning with something he said at his service site:

“Hey William, I betcha can’t do it without looking,” I teased the diligent student. With a smile gleaming across his face, William wrote a question mark without assistance. Immediately, I started an uproar of applause that became contagious across the entire classroom, causing William to hide his beaming face. William is a Special Education student, meaning that he has been left behind by the public school system and needs extra support to become successful. Every Tuesday morning, it is my job to encourage William and his other classmates to strive for greatness. Working with students individually, I am able to experience the true satisfaction and pleasure of helping actual people. Doing this

on an individual basis is more important to me than trying to change the structures of society as a whole.

Note that the kind of work that that student and his classmates do one morning each week is not generically different from what Mary did at the time of what we call the visitation, her going to help her cousin Elizabeth. It is also inspiring and encouraging for us to know that some people do that kind of service all day long, seven days a week. In our calefactory there is a copy of the current issue of the newspaper published by the Houston Catholic Worker, whose house is named after St. Juan Diego and also dedicated to Mary under her title “Our Lady of Guadalupe.” This most recent issue features a Christmas letter that includes a list of the sorts of things the workers at that house do day in and day out. Most of their tasks are menial, and they are honest enough and humble enough to admit that there are many things over which they have no power at all. It is worth hearing about the way they practice hospitality, not least because hospitality is also one of the most important and traditional Benedictine practices and hence one of the ways in which we, too, can best serve others. Here’s part of that Christmas Letter composed by the directors of that Catholic Worker house, a couple named Mark and Louise Zwick. They write:

Our hardest work remains hospitality. There are always many guests in our various houses of hospitality, and when you house people you house their problems. We are powerless to control [such things as] giving birth, disagreements, broken eardrums, seizures, drinking, and people fainting. Daily and nightly we are at the mercy of the human condition. But hospitality is empowerment, especially for battered women. We even house immigrants, those monumental scapegoats of modern politicians.

We are sitting ducks for agencies, since we don't have a lot of rules for serving the poor,... Hospitals, police, women's shelters, schools, and United Way agencies call us daily to receive immigrants who are homeless and/or battered; people with broken legs, shot in the leg or [with] no legs, people with little babies, pregnant women that nobody wants. Our phone rings off the hook with requests for help with the sick, the injured, the paralyzed, the mentally ill, [or] to help with funeral services for the deceased. The entrance of our house is frequently full of people in wheel chairs....

... We are writing not to brag, but to beg.... Could you help us keep going for another year? We and the poor would be very grateful—and for your prayers, too. May the peace that comes to those who care about children born in stables be yours.¹

What those people are doing is surely exemplary. Mark and Louise are quite well educated, and they use their learning to good purpose, but in fact their work doesn't require a lot of specialized training. The most important point is that they and their co-workers are people who take seriously and put into action what Jesus said about serving him in the least of his brothers and sisters. We may not serve the poor in that kind of full-time way, with the phone always ringing off the hook, but all followers of Christ are called to do their part. To the extent that we do so, we will be helping make up for the various sins and failings of our own past life and so becoming more like the sinless one whose great feast we celebrate today. May Mary inspire us to live lives of genuine, compassionate service. "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you."

¹ Mark and Louise Zwick, "Christmas Letter," *Houston Catholic Worker*, Nov.-Dec. 2013, p. 1.