

# Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception 2014

## Introduction

On this patronal feast of Mt. St. Mary's University, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we have gathered for a momentous announcement. No, it's not the name of the new president, the 25th in the history of this University. *That* announcement will be made at the end of Mass by the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Mr. John Coyne.

I'm here to announce God's love for us revealed through the Blessed Virgin Mary. Today we celebrate the truth that God kept Mary free from the stain of original sin. From the first moment of her existence, when God created her great soul and breathed into it immortality, He filled her completely with the grace of the Holy Spirit, that grace Mary's Son, Jesus Christ, would win for the entire human race by His life, His death on the Cross, and his Resurrection from the dead. In her was no shadow of the sin of Adam. So this announcement is not breaking news or the mere assertion of an idea. Today's announcement is that Mary, whom God loved so uniquely, is deeply connected to us and to this University. So what is it that God tells us about ourselves and about our University through Mary?

## What about Original Sin?

Well, let's begin with an admission. Most people, even Catholics, don't really know the Church's teaching on original sin, viz., that loss of trust, abuse of freedom, and disobedience to God's commands that ruptured our relationship with God and others at the dawn of human history. What we do know is this: every human being is prone to sin and the effects of sin are all too evident in our lives and in our world. And the story of human discord in today's reading from Genesis repeats itself over and over again in human history. Even so, we seldom think about what original sin means for us and humanity.

Mary's unique exemption from original sin should make us think twice. The fact that God kept her free from original sin from the instant of her conception should stir up something deep within us and in our memory. It's not an ordinary kind of a memory

because we weren't around when God spared Mary the stain of original sin, rather, Mary opens our eyes to something embedded deeply within our soul, a sort of spiritual DNA that we cannot quite get rid of, even if we try. It's as though we are homesick for a native country we've never visited. We are longing for something better, which we've never fully experienced and which we can't fully describe, even when we stretch and strain our language. St. Paul describes what we long for in today's second reading: 'God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before him...'

Not only were we *not* made for sin including all the unhappiness that sin has introduced into our lives and all the injustice it has introduced into our world, we were *in fact* created by God, *in love for love*. No matter how old we may become, this youthful longing for love never goes away. It is the most fundamental fact of human existence. Without love, St. John Paul II used to say, our lives make no sense.

### **Along Comes Mary**

Mary's freedom from original sin takes us back to the beginnings of human existence. Full of grace, she is, in the words of the writer Bernanos, "younger than sin". Her freedom from sin takes us back to the way God meant things to be, not merely to a time of innocence that has passed us by, but to the designs of God's heart for you, for me, and for the world. Mary reveals for us that homeland of truth, freedom, & love that we desire so deeply, while, in the present moment, she takes us by the hand and leads us to her divine Son Jesus, the Conqueror of sin and death [and she does this] so that we might satisfy our deepest longing for God's friendship that lies hidden, sometimes deeply hidden, in every act of human striving.

Thus did Fr. John DuBois come to this holy mountain in 1808. Thus was the University and the Seminary we cherish so deeply born, and dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God, under the title of her Immaculate Conception. Fr. DuBois began an enterprise that did not seem likely to succeed and indeed it has faced many challenges through the years. Yet, his reason for founding this institution of higher learning still shines brightly: it continues to grow as a place of learning and endeavor, where leaders for church and society are formed in the context of a robust, joyful, invitational, Catholicism. Far from being an obstacle to work of developing one's God-given gifts, the Catholic character of Mt. St. Mary's University

and Seminary bears witness to the true and authentic basis upon which all of us should strive to become the persons God meant us to be. Here we have the opportunity to explore and nurture the desire not merely to *have* more, and to *do* more, but to *be* more. Here, Mary our patron, seeks to guide us through all that this University offers, to cast off the old life of sin and to embrace the new life of grace, in a word, to tap into that source of eternal joy and youthfulness we experience when we allow God's grace and goodness to fill us and to shape our way of life.

Although Mt. St. Mary's Seminary & University is the 2nd oldest in the United States, it can and must remain a vitally young institution... One reason for its youth is that it has the privilege of serving young people with all the vitality, energy, and promise of youth. But the deepest reason for the enduring youthfulness of this University is its vital link with Mary, the Immaculate Conception, with Mary, who is younger than sin and all strife sin brings in its wake. Like institutions of higher learning everywhere, challenges and opportunities abound for our beloved Mt. St. Mary's University— yet the key to renewing the life of this institution lies in keeping true to its deepest identity and mission - an identity and mission to be understood, proclaimed, and lived afresh in every generation.

As we thank Dr. Powell for his splendid leadership of Mt. St. Mary's University and prepare to welcome the announcement of a new President, let us ask the intercession of Mary, the Immaculate Mother of God, for this entire university community and for the University and Seminary as such, that being a community of learners formed in faith, engaged in discovery, and empowered for leadership, we might find proclaim the mighty works of God to His praise and glory.

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee!