

When I started out working for General Motors, I used to work in the shops and garages as sort of a helper. One of the things I really enjoyed was learning little “insider” tips about cars and engines.

Back in the 1970s, the fuel economy of most cars was about half of what it is today. And knowing that people don’t usually believe what their fuel gauges say, GM had it set so that even when your needle said you were empty, you still had enough fuel to go about 50 miles.

Sometime in the 1990s, that changed.

And so, I was driving a relatively new 1995 car and the needle was on empty. Well, I figured that I had 50 miles to go, when all of a sudden, I ran out of gas. Which means I ended up hoofing it a few miles up the road to borrow a can and some gas, and then back again to get the car running again.

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. As a Solemnity, it brings us up out of our Penitential Advent Season, and brings us a little Easter. We sang the Gloria, and we will recite the Creed.

The Immaculate Conception was the subject of heavy theological argument. So intense were the arguments between the Franciscans and the Dominicans, that at one point in the middle 1400s, Pope Sixtus IV threatened to excommunicate anyone who would argue about it.

Sort of like on a long trip in the car when a Father may find himself saying, “Don’t make me stop this car and come back there” to his kids who are arguing or fighting in the back seat.

Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception a dogma of the Faith in 1850, taking the theological position of the Franciscan ... so it was something like “don’t make me come back there” for 400 years.

In the Gospel, the Angel greets Our Lady with “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.”

The Greek word is *kecharitomene* ... which would be quite a Scrabble score, if you could use Greek words, and use 13 letters. The word means “full of grace now and has been full of grace due to a past action.” That action, being a singular privilege granted to Our Lady in order to be the Mother of God.

So, what does this all mean?

Remember the gas gauge, and the needle on empty?

Well, in terms of grace, at birth, our needles are on empty. Empty because of the misbehavior of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Now, at Baptism, our needle goes to full. And as we go through life, and make bad choices, our needle slowly starts to move towards empty.

Certain things like prayer or reception of the Sacraments can move our needle towards full.

If we do something very serious — like break one of the 10 Commandments — our needle goes immediately down to empty.

The good news is that the Sacrament of Reconciliation not only restores us back to full, it sends us to more than full. That's the power of the graces of that Sacrament.

So, back to Our Lady. She was perfected in grace by a privilege granted by God, that is - the Immaculate Conception; and remained full of grace her entire life - that is, stayed free from sin her entire life. It was nothing she did. It was a gift bestowed on her by God for His own purpose and for His own reasons.

Now, wouldn't that be nice? And for each of us, in some way - we are free from certain sins. What I mean is, different people sin in different ways. Each person has their own strengths and weaknesses. Our natural strengths against certain types of sin are our own privileges. God saves each of us from sins ... it's just that God doesn't save us from ourselves.

But God does give us a way to be saved from sin - and this is through the Sacraments. The Sacraments provide us with the ability to "fill up" as it were. None of us wants to be going around in life "running on empty."

And so today, as we approach this altar to receive the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, let us pray to receive the graces we need to "fill up." And also ask for the graces to get to the Sacramental gas station - Eucharist, Penance - whatever it takes ... whatever we may need ... so that we can assume our proper place in the Kingdom of God ... as daughters and sons of God the Father, redeemed in Jesus Christ, and full of the graces and power of the Holy Spirit.