

Today is the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Our Lady, under this title, is the patroness of the United States; and as such, the National Basilica in Washington, D.C., is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.

The feast was celebrated in the Eastern Church from the 6th century. It came into the Western Church by way of southern Italy in the 9th century, and England in the 11th century. From there, it spread to France in the 12th century, and Germany in the 13th century.

While there was no dispute regarding the sinlessness of the Blessed Mother – rather, there was dispute on just how it happened. Did it happen at her conception or at a later point before she was born?

A Franciscan theologian in the 14th century, William of Ware, stated it in this way:

*What [God] could do,
it was fitting that He should do so
and from this it follows that He did do it;
for the Son should honor the Mother*

His student, the theologian John Duns Scotus, built on this teaching. Scotus argued the same premise, but from the side of God's sovereignty:

grace is the equivalent to [righteousness], so . . . original sin does not reside in a soul that has grace. God could have conferred as much grace on her in the first moment of her soul's existence as He does on another soul at . . . baptism . . . then, the soul would not have had original sin, as it would not have [sin after baptism].

In other words, God supplied the supernatural graces of Baptism to Our Lady – before there ever was Christian Baptism.

So, which came first? the chicken or the egg? That is, how can Mary be redeemed before Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross?

An explanation would be that God, who exists outside of time and dwells in Eternity, can apply the merits of Christ outside of time as He sees fit.

Pope Pius IX (the ninth) declared on December 8, 1854,

that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of . . . Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of [the world], was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin.

We share in these graces through Baptism – whether we receive them as an infant or later in life. Our Lady was granted these graces from the moment she existed.

This is played out in the word translated in the Gospel as “*full of grace.*” The Greek word is *κεχαριτωμένη* (*ke-char-i-tō-me-nē*).

This word exists only once in the entire Bible. It’s what is known as a *hapax legomenon* – which means, in Greek, something said only once. In its unique form, it is a feminine present perfect passive voice participle of a verb.

This same verb – but in a different tense, number, person, aspect, mood, and voice – shows up throughout St. Paul’s letters where it always refers to the grace of God bestowed on us through Christ’s saving act on the Cross.

But the word used for Mary by the Angel Gabriel in Luke’s Gospel is unique. It could be translated as “*she who has been made and endowed with saving grace.*” And so it would seem that, even in Scripture, there is a particular word for this unique privilege, that privilege which we commemorate today in honoring the Immaculate Conception.

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, let us pray to become more attuned to the saving graces we have all received through our Baptism. And may the Eucharist we receive today fill us with God’s saving grace, so that we might persevere in grace . . . the grace that pours forth from the One Sacrifice of Christ . . . which saves us all from sin.