

Homily for December 8, 2010 (Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception)  
*Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38*  
St. Joseph Parish, Saginaw, Michigan

Immaculate Conception, Immaculate Reception

One of the first things that a visitor sees after getting off a plane at the Pittsburgh International Airport is a life-size statue of Franco Harris, the running back who was part of the legendary Steeler teams that won four Super Bowls in the 1970's. The statue commemorates one of the most memorable plays in the history of the National Football League.

The date was December 23, 1972. The Pittsburgh Steelers were playing the Oakland Raiders in an AFC playoff game at Riverfront Stadium. The Raiders were winning 7-6, there were 22 seconds left in the game, and the Steelers faced a 4<sup>th</sup> down and 10 on their own 40 yard line with no time outs. Terry Bradshaw, the Steelers' quarterback, threw the ball 25 yards downfield, and it bounced off two colliding players.

Trailing behind on the play, Franco Harris suddenly saw the ball coming back to him. He caught it only inches from the ground, stumbled a bit, and then ran into the end zone for the winning score. Pittsburgh won the game 13-7; but the Steelers lost the next week to the undefeated Miami Dolphins in the AFC Championship game. Despite the loss to the Dolphins, that Steelers victory against Oakland was a turning point in the history of the franchise. They even gave a name to that improbable catch by Franco Harris: the Immaculate Reception.

That's a play on words, of course. It was very recognizable in a heavily Catholic town like Pittsburgh in 1972 and should be pretty obvious today as we join the Church in celebrating the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception: our belief that Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin in order to prepare her for the special role of being the mother of Jesus. In the words of the angel Gabriel in our gospel reading, she was uniquely "full of grace" and the Lord was already with her. To put it yet another way, the Immaculate Conception prepared her for the *original* Immaculate Reception!

But just as we do with every Marian celebration, including the Novena leading to the Feast our Lady of Guadalupe here in Saginaw, we honor Mary for her singular role in salvation history and we hold her up as a model of obedience to God's will and her faithfulness to God's call. That's why she is rightly called not only our Blessed Mother but also the First Disciple.

Mary was also as human as we are. Luke records in his gospel that when the angel first appeared and greeted her, she was "greatly troubled" and

wondered what his greeting meant. Even when Gabriel began to explain what would happen to her and what God wanted of her, she wasn't afraid to ask, "How can this be?" In the end, this troubled and questioning young woman handed her will and her life over to God and said simply, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." *That* was the Immaculate Reception.

What a contrast she was to Adam and Eve. Given a beautiful life by God with very few rules they were still tempted by the idea that they could be like gods, masters of their own destinies, and they chose to disobey God's word and will. Then, when they were "caught with their pants down," they tried to evade responsibility and pointed fingers at others. Eve blamed the serpent who tricked her; and Adam blamed Eve and God himself! In the end both had to bear the consequences of their actions, as well as their descendents.

In we're honest with ourselves, we would probably have to admit that in our best moments we're like the Blessed Mother and in our worst moments we're like Adam and Eve. Sometimes we listen to God's word and heed God's will, carrying it out even though we have struggles and questions; and sometimes, we think we know better than God, live life and do things our own way. Then when we get caught or have to deal with the consequences of our choices, we too often blame other people or things—our parents, spouses, or children; our economic circumstances; our addictions; the government; the devil; even the Church—everyone and everything but ourselves.

St. Juan Diego went through a little bit of this when he was asked by Our Lady to take her message to Bishop Fray Juan Zumarraga of Mexico City. When the bishop and his advisors voiced skepticism about his message and even disdain for him, Juan Diego asked the Blessed Mother to send someone with more status than a poor Indian and recent convert like himself. He even blew her off one day and stayed home to take care of an ailing uncle.

The next day, when he went to get a priest to give his uncle the last rites, Juan Diego even tried to avoid Our Lady by going around the opposite side of Tepeyac Hill. But Mary wouldn't take no for an answer. In the end, he fulfilled the mission she gave him. We know the rest of the story: the healing of his uncle, miracle of the roses in winter, the miraculous image on his *tilma*, and the evangelization of the Mexican people and the building of a cathedral.

Juan Diego, too, had an Immaculate Reception. We can, too. As St. Paul promised in our second reading, God has "blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens." God has chosen us, just as surely as he chose the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Juan Diego, to be holy and to fulfill his purpose in our lives.

The ball is coming to us. Will we catch it and run with it? +