

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This Thursday, December 8th, being the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin (a Holy Day of Obligation), we find a most fitting occasion to reflect on a very important, yet often overlooked issue from the Gospel reading for that day.

As we all know, in the account of Jesus' conception, the angel Gabriel came to Mary and stated: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). It is fascinating to note that this is the **only place** in sacred scripture where an angel greets someone with the title of "**full of grace**". What, then, is the significance of these words as applied to the Blessed Virgin?

If we look at the Greek of this verse, "*Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη, ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ,*" we see that the word which we translate as "full of grace", is the Greek word, "*κεχαριτωμένη*" (transliterated as *kecharitomene*). For those of us who are well versed in sacred scripture—as we ALL should be—one might say, "Well wait, what about Acts 6:8, which describes St. Stephen as 'full of grace and power'? Isn't this another instance of the same thing?" Simply put, no. The difference is that the "full of grace" used here is NOT the same term as used in Luke 1:28; for here, we see the Greek words: *πλήρης χάριτος* (transliterated as *pleres charitos*), which simply connote the spiritual state which Stephen was in, at the time of his great deeds and eventual martyrdom. It is also important to note that St. Stephen was neither being spoken to by an angel, nor did the biblical author use *pleres charitos* as a title.

Given this, we must understand that "*kecharitomene*", as a perfect past participle, implies a reference to the **past** and an **action that has completed**. We can therefore assume from the Greek text that Mary was "full of grace" sometime **prior to** the arrival of the angel Gabriel, which therefore meant **Mary's grace preceded her maternal relationship with Christ**. But at what point was Mary graced with such a unique gift? Was it at her own conception, or sometime after?

Being a Thomist theologian myself, I naturally cling to the answers given by St. Thomas Aquinas; but as hard as it is for Thomists to admit, this is the one conclusion of St. Thomas' theology which we know he was wrong about. A reading of his *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 27, a. 1, reply to Objection 3, reveals his thoughts on the matter:

*The Blessed Virgin was sanctified in the womb from original sin, as to the personal stain; but she was not freed from the guilt to which the whole nature is subject, so as to enter into Paradise otherwise than through the Sacrifice of Christ; the same also is to be said of the Holy Fathers who lived before Christ.*

St. Thomas, therefore, argued that Mary was cleansed from Original Sin while in the womb of her mother, but that she had to have been conceived *with* Original Sin. He believed this because of his thoughts on sex. He stated that sex could not take place without some degree of "lust," which would therefore transmit Original Sin to any offspring.

Among the Medieval Scholastic theologians who famously disagreed with Aquinas on this point, was the Franciscan friar, Blessed John Duns Scotus (1266—1308 AD). Scotus argued that it was fitting that Mary be conceived without Original Sin, given that she would be the bearer of the Messiah; for it would have been wholly unfitting for Mary to have been conceived *with* Original Sin, given this fact.

Nevertheless, In contrast to Aquinas, and in agreement with Scotus, on December 8, 1854, in the Papal Bull entitled "*Ineffabilis Deus*", Pope Pius IX declared **Mary was conceived without the stain of Original Sin**, thus naming Mary as the "Immaculate Conception". This was not something new added to Revelation, but was declared based on what was already known and practiced about Mary throughout Church history.

Finally, one of the misconceptions that can still be found among many Christians about the Immaculate Conception—even among many Catholics—is that it refers to *Jesus' conception* in Mary; but, as has already been shown, the name "Immaculate Conception" is assigned **only to The Blessed Virgin Mary**.

***Sancta Dei Genetrix, ora pro nobis!***

In Christ through Mary,  
Mr. Andrew M. Steele