

Read

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

Psalms 98:1, 2-3, 3-4

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Luke 1:26-38



REFLECTION

How many times in our lives do things feel impossible? We have difficulty at school, problems at home, even bad habits that we can't seem to break. At times it feels easier to just give up and throw in the towel. In our Gospel reading today, Mary is in an impossible situation. She has believed in God her entire life. She knows the Scriptures and remembers God's faithfulness. Yet as God comes to her, she now faces the seemingly impossible. How can she have a baby if she is still a virgin? What will her fiancé think? How could this child be God? Even with all these questions that weigh on her heart, Mary believes. She puts her faith in the God who makes the impossible possible.

How do you face impossible situations? Do you look with fear and doubt or do you, like Mary, place your trust in God? Of course, Mary had questions. She pondered them in her heart, and she also raised them to the Lord. God is big enough for all our questions. When we encounter big questions and impossible situations, we can also bring them to God. They can become moments where Jesus becomes truly present in our lives. Don't be afraid but have faith.

QUESTIONS

- ❖ What do today's readings teach you about the Christian life?
- ❖ What questions and answers do you "ponder" in your heart today?
- ❖ What can you do today to trust in God more deeply?

LIVING THE WORD

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

December 8, 2023

ACTION

Mary is an incredible model of faith. This week, commit to a personal prayer time of at least fifteen minutes a day. Share your challenges and seemingly impossible situations with God. Share with God anything that is on your heart, or just tell God about your day. End your prayer time each day by praying ten Hail Marys (you can find the text of the prayer here: <https://www.usccb.org/prayers/hail-mary>).

🎵 "Square Root of Possible"
—from the movie *Jingle Jangle*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sprcNhZWIU>



December 8, 2023

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

LECTIONARY #689

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

Psalms 98:1, 2-3, 3-4

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Luke 1:26-38

Prepare for the Word

The following elements may be used by the catechist, teacher, or youth minister to prepare to facilitate today's session with teens. You may integrate this information into the reflection and discussion on today's readings.

Leader's Context

The immaculate conception of Mary can be a difficult concept to understand, regardless of whether you're a child, a teen, or an adult. Many people think that this feast is about the conception of Jesus, but since it's only two weeks before Christmas instead of nine months, that math doesn't add up. (We celebrate that on March 25 with the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.) Since the Gospel reading for today is the announcement of the conception of Jesus, not Mary, some confusion is understandable. On this feast, we should turn our attention to the qualities of Mary that were necessary for her to say yes to God's request that she be the mother of Jesus. Because she was saved by God from original sin, her yes is completely free and done in full cooperation with God's will.

Q FOCUS: *Mary gives us an example of faithfulness to emulate in our own lives.*

Liturgical Calendar Connection

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is one of three Marian holy-days of obligation, along with the celebration of Mary, the Holy Mother of God on January 1, and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on August 15. Today's solemnity is also the patronal feast of the

United States, so it is a good opportunity to reflect on how Mary's immaculate conception can teach us about living as good citizens and how we can pray for others and the nation. Next week on December 12 we celebrate another popular Marian feast, Our Lady of Guadalupe, who we honor as the patroness of the Americas (North, Central, and South).

Church Teaching Connection

"For if we carefully and thoroughly consider the matter, we easily perceive that Christ the Lord in a certain most perfect manner really redeemed His mother, since it was by virtue of His merits that she was preserved by God immune from all stain of original sin. Wherefore, the infinite dignity of Jesus Christ and His office of universal redemption is not diminished or lowered by this tenet of doctrine, rather it is greatly increased" (*Fulgens corona*, 14).

Hear the Word

Use this resource, a Lectionary, or a Bible to proclaim the reading. The book should be held reverently or placed on a lectern. If possible, light a candle that is placed near where the Gospel will be proclaimed. Gesture for teens to stand.

Gospel Acclamation

Use the same musical setting that is used in your parish or at school Masses. Teens may help with music and proclaim the Gospel.

Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Luke 1:26-38

Reader: A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke.

All: Glory to you, O Lord.

All make the sign of the cross on their forehead, lips, and heart.

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a

man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Reader: The Gospel of the Lord.

All: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Everyone may be seated.

Reflect on the Word

When beginning the reflection and discussion about today's readings, first refer to the handout for today. Ask teens what they learned about themselves and about Christian discipleship from performing the action for the week and journaling. Ask teens about the readings of the day: What struck them? What do they think the readings mean? How do the readings affect their own lives? Then begin the following reflection:

Although this Gospel might seem to be about the birth of Jesus, the focus of this day is really on Mary. The Catholic Church teaches that even before she was born, Mary was conceived in her mother's womb untouched by the original sin that all people inherit. This is what the name of today's feast, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is referring to. The immaculate conception of Mary happened so that Mary, untouched by sin, could be the mother of God.

So, what is original sin? The Church teaches that it began with Adam and Eve and that it was inherited by all humans who were born after Adam and Eve. And what was their sin? It was disobedience—they acted against what God had specifically asked of them and they chose themselves over God. And so that is the original sin we inherit: an internal posture of being turned away from God and of being inclined to sin, to disobey God. Mary is different from all other people because of her lack of original sin. From the moment of her conception, God saved her from being in this state.

► **What are some of the ways that the Church helps us to overcome our many sins and return to God?**

After hearing the description of original sin, you might be asking yourself, "What about free will? If Mary didn't have this original sin of disobedience, did she have free will?" We do believe in free will; in fact, we believe that is the key to choosing virtue over sin and to loving God. When we live virtuously, we are choosing to live in accordance with God's will. When we sin, we choose against God's intentions in favor of our own desires. Therefore, another way of thinking about sin is to say that we are acting out of order with God's will. The grace in Mary's life is the opposite of this; she had the freedom to live every choice in accordance with God's intention. Her free will wasn't tainted by sin. That isn't to say that she didn't experience fear or questioning. In fact, she questions Gabriel in today's reading, asking how she could become pregnant with Jesus. But when given the choice to accept her motherhood, Mary can say without anything holding her back: "May it be done to me according to your word."

► **What are some things that young people face today that might hold them back from freely choosing to follow God?**

Mary embodies the perfect example of alignment with God's intent which we all should aspire to follow. God blessed us with free will, but our lives are most full of grace when we use that freedom to choose virtue, to choose good. From a Christian perspective, freedom isn't just about doing whatever we want. It is about having the openness to follow God by turning

away from temptation and choosing good, even if it means making sacrifices or taking the harder path.

Wrapping It Up

Consider these points to conclude the discussion and reflection. Integrate the thoughts and ideas that surfaced during the discussion as well as the "Church Teaching Connection" on page 84.

We believe that Mary was conceived without original sin.

We inherited the sin of Adam and Eve when they chose to go against God's intention.

God gave us free will, allowing us to choose to love him and follow the way of virtue.

Act on the Word

Choose God

For this activity, you will need paper or journals and pens. You will also need to coordinate with your pastor to set up time for the sacrament of reconciliation to be celebrated during this group meeting. Alternatively, you can print out the list of times when the parish offers the sacrament.

Share with the teens that they will spend the next several minutes doing an examination of conscience in preparation for them to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. If your group will be celebrating during this time together, explain how the process will work (where is set up and so on). If your group is not able to celebrate at this time, share with them the times when the parish offers the sacrament.

Invite the teens to spread out in the room. Give them paper and pens so that they can journal their thoughts as they are guided through this time of reflection and prayer. Once everyone is settled, remind them that we all have free will and we can choose to follow God or not. It is when we choose not to follow God that we sin. Then share the following reflection, allowing for time for them to journal in between questions. Invite them to write down their reflections, which they can use to make their confession.

"Today we'll reflect on our choices. Think back over the past few weeks and months. First, let's think about your actions at home. What does it look like to choose God at home? Listening to and obeying your parents or guardians, being kind to your siblings, and doing the chores assigned to you are all part of following God's call to respect and honor those around us. When have you not done these things? What happened? Next, we'll think about our actions at school. When have you chosen to follow your own way instead of to follow Jesus' example of kindness and compassion? When have you ignored a teacher or disrespected them, even if it was behind their back? How have you treated classmates? Now, think about other activities you are involved in or your job. How have you treated those around you? What has your attitude been when you were asked to do something for the group?"

If you do have the opportunity to celebrate reconciliation at this time, you might want to play some quiet prayerful music in the background as the teens take turns going. Otherwise, end the activity by reminding them of when the parish offers the sacrament.

Closing Prayer

*Lord of heaven and earth,
you sent your Son into the care of a
woman both humble and courageous.*

*Grant us such faith so that we, too,
may be bravely obedient to your will.*

Through our Lord Jesus

*Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.*

For Next Sunday

To help teens prepare for next Sunday's Mass, print, email, or share on a blog or social media the handout found on the next page. The JPG and PDF files are available at www.ltp.org/lwgr. Encourage teens to attend Mass with family or friends.